English Writing in Korea: Purposes, Personae, and Perspectives

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1. Introduction

A first concern in EFL contexts is, as Grabe and Kaplan (1996) point out, whether writing is sufficiently important for learners that it is taught explicitly in terms of their purposes on a large scale. Learners in many EFL contexts may need various types of writing instruction ranging from the basic English skills needed to sit national examinations to the sophisticated writing skills needed to be placed on training courses for academic writers or skilled professionals. Until recently, there has been scarcely any research which investigated the purposes of Korean students on EFL writing courses at university.

Clark and Ivanic (1997) distinguish between the macro-purposes that writing serves in society at large, and the more specific, micro-purposes of achieving different kinds of social action that drive people to write in specific situations. The motivations that drive people to write are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context in which they live, part of which is their own personal or group life story and cultural patrimony. Clark and Ivanic’s views about purposes for writing can be linked to ESP which is seen as an “approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning” (p.19). The central importance of ESP goes to “the learners and their attitudes to learning” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987:8).

What Clark and Ivanic propose is applicable to helping non-native English students who normally do not use English outside their classrooms to become successful writers and to fulfill their needs for writing in English. It enables us to apply the perspectives on purposes for writing to their educational and social context within an EFL setting. In the Korean context, writing in English is often seen as a means of practising the grammar, vocabulary, and discourse structures of the target language, since English is not the medium of instruction in the education system or in higher education (Lee, 2003). This study aims to investigate teachers’ and students’ views on the purposes for English writing and explore the most useful types of writing for university students.

2. The Study

Quantitative and qualitative frameworks were adopted for this study: questionnaire for quantitative mode and interviews for qualitative approach. Questionnaires were randomly circulated to teachers who had taught or were teaching writing in order to examine their views on the purposes for writing in English. I did not seek to test hypotheses through the findings even though this method involved a quantitative approach (Holliday, 2002): rather I used the questionnaires to investigate the nature of the pedagogical phenomena in EFL writing in Korea. Participants for the interviews were eight students who volunteered for this study at a Korean university. They came from a variety of disciplines, background, writing experience, and age levels of 20-27. Without attempting to test out any presuppositions, I explored students' purposes for writing in English, adopting Spradley’s (1999) comments on ethnographic interviews which draw attention to the researcher’s need to maintain the rapport with the informants. There were 16 interviews from the eight students. In doing this, I used techniques for systematic elicitation as noted by Ryan and Bernard (2000).

In order to handle the questionnaires, a computer-based software package, SPSS 10.1 for Windows, was used. The vital role of the computer software was to collect, summarize, and interpret the data obtained from 43 teachers. It particularly dealt with the simultaneous analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, because the
questionnaire included open-ended questions, i.e. ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions, as well as closed questions.

3. Findings and Discussion

1. Teachers' purposes for teaching writing

All the 43 teachers agreed that Korean university/college students should learn writing in English. They responded that the teaching of writing in English was essential for students who would engage in jobs related to English and for those who wished to improve their general English proficiency. They added ‘an understanding of the linguistic and cultural differences’ as another main purpose for the teaching of writing. This indicates that the teachers believed that writing in English could provide knowledge of linguistic and cultural differences.

With respect to kinds of writing, the respondents chose reports/proposals, job applications, letters, memos, and essays. They emphasized the importance of reports/proposals. These findings indicate that writing in English at university serves a unique function in relation to what Clark and Ivanic (1997) call “meaning-making” (p.109), because writing allows to shape ideas and help students clarify their thinking throughout their work at tertiary level.

2. Students' general purposes for learning writing

According to Lee (2012), it would be easy to get the impression that writing in English for Koreans in general occurs at a basic level rather than involving sophisticated types of writing. The general purposes for students' writing may be situated in a broader context than those of Koreans in general, spanning both the school context and other contexts together.

To learn English effectively

Six students out of the eight said that writing in English should be taught to Korean students so that they can learn English more effectively and systematically as part of an integral way of learning a foreign language. Student A emphasized the logical thinking involved in writing in English. Student B responded that some students might not need to learn writing in English unless they had specific purposes for it. The six students’ views on the purposes for English writing drew the same picture, i.e. ‘for studying English more effectively’, as the ‘micro-purpose’, as shown in the following comments:

Writing in English is desperately needed. The really necessary thing is not speaking which comes from memory but making sentences I want to express in English. Writing should be taught from the beginning of learning English, because learning a language in a real sense means to learn the four skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing together.

(Interview with Student A)

Real English proficiency is obtained from writing. English education in Korea mainly focuses on reading. The entrance exam is an example of this. Writing has both reading and speaking in it. It would be the best way to learn English is to start writing as early as possible.

(Interview with Student B)

The above comments reflect that writing is surely an integral part of the process of learning English that will go beyond the specific skills of speaking, listening or reading: for communication with others world-wide, for thinking, for studying their disciplines, or, in a broad sense, for preparing their future. When writing is included in ELT in