Writing Instruction for ESL College Slow Starters: The Authentic Voice in Written English Communication

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Abstract

This article presents a teaching principle on how less-motivated ESL learners get ready to participate in a writing project. The discussion focuses those who tend to be silenced by poor performing English skills. Considered under the perspective of Faulkner's notion on language, "meager and fragile," the teaching procedures in class are shown and the results are analyzed for a future study in written communication.

Keywords

written communication
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the essence on language / thought and language
a vital voice

Introduction

In written English communication we depend on the act of writing that will help us to express our thoughts, feelings, wants, etc. It is however a difficult task for poor-performing ESL students to write in English and send their message with it. Suppose that some do not have much knowledge of English vocabulary, usage, and grammar, they will in the worst case resign themselves to being silence. And yet considering the merits of written English, writing will be more flexible than speaking. For those who desperately seek a vital interaction with English in spite of poor skills, writing is more controllable. They can check the vocabulary, usage, and grammar if necessary. Furthermore they can organize their thoughts, emotions, and ideas through prewriting, writing and revising before communication. In this respect, writing has more impact on practical communication especially for poor-performing ESL college students who have given up expressing their ideas. This paper will therefore focus on the very first step of writing instructions about how the least-motivated or silenced will recover their authentic voice and get ready to participate in writing activities. First, I will discuss how language plays an essential role as a mediating tool, being closely connected with thought. Then, I will introduce brief procedures performed in my writing class and present a student’s example of how he starts freeing himself in expressing his own emotions and thought.

I “Meager and Fragile Language” of the Silenced Learners

In Japan a basic composition course is
introduced in junior high school and is expected to build up the skills of English writing. And yet the traditional grammar-oriented teaching method has not necessarily born fruit. According to a large nationwide survey conducted to examine Japanese college English teachers’ views on English language education, the activity of “free composition” in writing class was only 17% compared to structures and expression (30.7%), translation from Japanese to English (30.2%), reproduction and précis writing (6.4%) and others (12.6%). English writing has become “a service activity” to teach grammar and vocabulary. (Hirose 35) That is, there is a growing concern that English writing is not functioning well as a means of communication in some colleges.

As is the case with my students and their low level of motivation, it has been a hard task to teach English writing as a living tool. As Crick R.D. defines the less-motivated students as “dependent and fragile learners” (141), they are more easily discouraged when they encounter obstacles or make mistakes. ¹ Some are too much obsessed with grammar rules in writing or distracted by failing experiences of grammar acquisition, and they sit in class without any participation.

Then how can we change their learning attitudes with the idea of written English as a communication tool? Probably the traditional grammar-oriented class will not work out because they are indeed fed up with it. In consideration of their mental age, they are no more innocent learners or fresh starters. They are critical of mechanical English tasks, and their interests are not on a pretended communication in an artificial context. They also feel uneasy with the discrepancy between what is in their mind and what they can write with their unskilled English. As the result, some students freeze in that gap and passively accept their own silence.

Under such circumstances, my focus is on these students who have lost voice in writing. Their silence has truly come from their own passivity, but what is happening to them, inside of themselves? M. M. Bakhtin articulates the very concept of human existence with having a voice through which we can communicate with others. He says, “The very being of man (both external and internal) is the deepest communion. To be means to communicate.” (287) That is, the silenced students are totally shut out from the others in class, and are puzzled and threatened by their loss of voice. Understanding that we are all born to seek a means of self-expression to interact with the world outside ourselves, we can see each student struggling to realize an active and responsible self in some way or other.

To help them recover their voice in writing, more emphasis should be put of the essence on language. William Faulkner, a Southern American writer has shown its essence in Absalom, Absalom! Mr Compson, representing Faulkner’s voice, says:

…the language that meager and fragile thread, Grand-father said, by which the little surface corners and edges of men’s secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant how and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either ...(313-314)

For Faulkner, language is like a fine but easily snapped cord. This “thread” is indeed powerful and effective at stitching together and pulling up the voice of the very being of man. And yet, as he emphasizes its delicate and feeble function, it is “meager and fragile” by itself. Unless we, the hearers, carefully pay attention to the bits of the buried or silenced voice, their voice will soon disappear or be ready to be ignored. Understanding Faulkner’s notion on language, we as English educators need to understand the essence of language and confront “meager and fragile language” of the silenced learners.
Scoring Distribution (The 3rd grade test of JEA)

Figure 1

Preliminary Inquiries before Taking Writing Course

Figure 2
II The Present Conditions of Slow Starters

(1) Student English Competence

In spite of studying English from junior high school to high school, some students have failed to acquire Basic English and thus shut the door for English study. See Figure 1, the distribution of my students' scores in the third grade test of Japanese English Association. Figure 2 shows the characteristics of my students. They took composition class but rarely did paragraph writing. As for grammar, they are very worried about their poor grammar. An interesting response is that all students agreed that English should be introduced as a required subject in college. This was a surprise because I had assumed that students would wish to avoid the study of English that presents a challenge to them. It suggests that they do realize the advantage and even the necessity of studying English.

(2) Composition Skills of Native Language

Here is one of my student's writing samples. (Example 1) I required him to write his self-introduction and define himself through one item that he really cares most about in his life. Then he wrote one sentence, "I like basketball," but stumbled over making another sentence. He kept silent and did nothing. So I started giving questions in Japanese and led him to write down what was in his mind. Example 1 shows his Japanese description: he is not good at controlling words even in his native language. The fragmented sentences are connected with commas, not with periods, which is typical in the texting generation.

Under the present conditions, we can learn from the stages of children's language acquisition. We know that it takes time for them to make language meaningful from the whole body of enigmatic sounds. When they do not know words or pronunciations, they will simply make a sound or a cry. When they do not know how to make a full sentence, they will speak fragmented phrases or sentences. The same thing can be applied to the unskilled students' writing. What is important here is how we carefully read the fragmented phrases or sentences as vital a voice as children's. The incomplete statements do give us the clue to reveal their key message. In other words, if we are able to encourage the poor performing college students to produce bits and pieces of their thoughts and emotions, their fragmented sentences will develop much deeper and broader meaning to us. Furthermore, once they find their messages understood, they will surely get more confident in writing, and that will eventually lead to active written communication.

III Procedure & Results
The followings are the basic steps introduced for the 30 minutes of project writing.

1. Buzz session in Japanese to understand the topic of the subject.
2. Support: questioning, brainstorming, and clustering.
3. Drafts not restricted to English.
4. Use easier and simpler expressions: paraphrase long Japanese sentences into short ones for translation.
5. Choose familiar wording in case of finding a word in the dictionary.
6. No erasers in correcting and leave the corrections.
7. Have them check their own work against the checklist: students are the active agents in improving the paper.
8. Peer reading.

One example of a student’s work is shown in the following. He participated in six writing projects including the final essay writing. It is obvious from his first self-introduction that he had not learned paragraph writing. On the 7th of October he learned about paragraphs and revised his writing on sports.

**Student Writing: Example 2 (9/16 ~ 11/25)**

I’m powerful men.

Because, I play hand ball every day.
Hand ball use jump, run, throw.
Hand ball is total sport.
My foot is stronger.
My arm is strong.
I’m powerful men...
But, I’m no girlfriend.
This is week point.
I want to girlfriend!! WHY?

Sport is good for your body.
My best sport is hand ball.
I play hand ball every day, so I’m powerful men.
Because, hand ball use jump and run and throw.
What sport do you do?
Fall is the best season for sport now.
You should find sport to match you.
Sport is nutrition for your body.
Sport is good partner for yourself.

Sport is good for your body. My best sport is hand ball.
I play hand ball every day, so I’m powerful men. Because, hand ball use jumping and running and throwing. What sport do you do? Fall is the best season for sport now. You should find sport to match you. Sport is nutrition for your body.
Sport is good partner for yourself.

Notes: 9/16 Self-introduction, 10/7 Paragraph writing, 10/21 Description: describing a friend, 11/11 Definition: about love, 11/25 Opinion: about a part-time job
12/16 Essay writing

I feel that being a writer is an act of self-expression. The reason why some people rush to write is that it is a way to make sense of their experiences. In other words, Santa Claus is inspiring. It is my experience to write now. When I was in the second year of junior high school of story, I was handball club. I liked playing handball. I did an exercise day after day, because I wanted to win the championship at the meeting of the summer. I was excited. I could not sleep on the day before a meeting. When I think now, it was a cause. The day of the meeting... I forgot shoes! Oh my God! Ultimately, the meeting of the summer became it after all. A meeting was over. I was anxiously get angry at a supervisor. I was weep. In this case, I should have put shoes in a bag on the day before. I understand. Prevention is better than cure!

Another is that when I was in the third year of junior high school of story. The story of the summer vacation. I went to Minami Chita beach. Yo-ho! I was walking on air and hatoo in the sea. I don’t remember how long I swam. The pleasant evening passed without notice. I was before hand in return making up your mind. When I think now, it was a cause. Oh! I returned from Minami Chita beach! Ouch! I forgot a swimsuit! Though it was a new swimsuit, I understand prevention is better than cure.

It is important to classify sense into sense before hand and to be careful not to fail. Are you publishing Santa Claus? I make use of conventional experience. I am cured Santa Claus.

Notes: the proper paragraph form has not been adopted, and the usage of conjunctions, such as when, has not been mastered.

Student Writing: Example 3
(1/20 Part of the final term exams)

Notes: the proper paragraph form has not been adopted, and the usage of conjunctions, such as when, has not been mastered.
Among what was found from my students’ works, as had been expected due to direct translation from Japanese to English, some grammar and usage problems such as lack of agreement, incorrect subordinate clause, unclear reference of pronoun, sentence fragment, run-on sentence, and incorrect tense or verb form. However, the very first step to voicing has been successful. Their vocabulary was broadened and the number of words and sentences were increased. Among those improvements, their higher writing motivation was significant. Their works show that the communicative development is clearer and more able to send the writer’s idea. The second step is therefore to provide those students with more opportunities outside the classroom to practice written English communication and overcome the weak grammar and usages with the joy of accomplishment.

Conclusion
In the course outline I told my students that they would participate in essay writing at the end of the semester, and then some students started shouting, “Impossible!” and others retreated in fear that they might not get a credit. But all the students actively challenged the writing project, struggled to make each sentence, and devoted themselves on a work of “in context” drawing out of their experiences.

Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist, viewed language as a most critical psychological tool. Thinking, comprehending, and producing language are all processes that affect individual perceptions of their social worlds. He says in Thought and Language,

> The meaning of a word represents such a close amalgam of thought and language that it is hard to tell whether it is a phenomenon of speech or a phenomenon of the thought. A word without meaning is an empty sound: meaning, therefore, is a criterion of “word,” its indispensable component. (120)

Whether we utter a voice or write a word, its meaning is composed with intellectual processes and represents a complete combination of thought and language, a single entity. From this psychological perspective writing a word is founded on an act of thought.

From this perspective I put a great emphasis on how students get ready to express their thoughts and feelings under mentally unrestricted conditions. To set them free from their silence, I let them write with whatever language is less stressful. The originality, their genuine piece of their emotional and living expressions, was encouraged to increase their self-esteem. My efforts were directed to have them think their fragmented phrases and sentences worthy as the essential part of their message. The incomplete usages and grammatical mistakes were more or less overlooked but the message in words that they intended to convey was more taken into consideration, assuring that thought can cast light on its word. Special attention was paid not to block the mentally stimulating processes in writing, especially for those who were silenced due to poor performing English skills.

My writing instruction is rooted in Faulkner’s notion of language, which helped me to change students’ negative attitudes into positive voicing. People used to say “Our society is one where we could communicate without words in perfect timing of collaboration.” But nowadays in the globally interacting world we need to share the diversity of different values with words. To stand its trials the competence of communicative written English must be an indispensable tool for not only the beginners but also the advanced learners.
Notes

1. As for those students who cannot manage to repair their own emotional mood of frustration and disappointment, they tend to be less self-aware and confuse self-awareness with self-consciousness. (Crick 142)

2. The third grade test of JEA is set up around junior high level based on the benchmark of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology for junior high school graduates.

Works Cited


