

<Practical Studies>

Developing Communicative Writing Skills through Reading Activities:

Noticing Social and Linguistic Contexts

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1. Introduction

Secondary school English learners in Japan are generally educated to be intensive readers and writers. Traditional attention to decontextualized grammar in textbooks, classrooms, and exams has often led teachers and students to focus rather narrowly on isolated linguistic trees rather than on the larger social and linguistic forest. Reading exercises may be designed to provide an environment in which to highlight grammar and vocabulary, while writing assignments may function as opportunities for production of those same grammar points and vocabulary words. Although such a focus may be important for second language learning, university students, especially students of education faculties, must also develop their higher order thinking skills (HOTS) in order to become effective communicators.

Reading and writing are the input and output skills related to the written form of language, so literacy skills are sometimes understood simply as the “encoding and decoding tradition” (Byrnes, 2010, p. 27) of a language without much attention being given to the fact that texts have readers. Students often tell me they cannot write well because they lack grammatical knowledge or vocabulary breadth and depth; however, I have never heard students mention their ability to understand and address the social situations and linguistic expectations of their readers effectively as factors of writing proficiency. While it is true that students at the university level increasingly recognize the importance of communication in English classes, they may limit their definition of communication to oral communication. As one example, at the end of a recent class for English Education majors that focused on junior high school lesson planning that emphasizes communication in both listening/speaking lessons and reading/writing lessons, one student commented, “I have never thought about writing as communication.” For her and probably others, writing was a record of speech or an exercise in encoding.

This short paper will look briefly at trends in second language writing instruction and suggest the need to emphasize reading and writing as communicative and interactive processes in order to help students use their language knowledge effectively. A reading task designed to make students analyze a “model” text in order to understand why it fails to communicate a coherent and relevant message

despite grammatical correctness will be presented as an example. While a positive model may also have a place in writing instruction, a negative model, I believe, demands more engagement from students and consequently offers more benefits.

2. Second language writing instruction

According to Matsuda (2003), writing instruction has long been a “neglected” area of second language studies. In the late 19th century, early applied linguists like Henry Sweet and Paul Passy emphasized phonetics and spoken language, perhaps as a reaction against the writing-based method of Latin teaching and also “because writing was defined merely as an orthographic representation of speech” and “letter writing was considered to be the highest literacy need for most people” (Matsuda, 2003, p.15). Later, in the middle of the twentieth century, the audiolingual approach gained prominence, further decreasing interest in writing instruction.

When writing instruction did become an area of interest later in the twentieth century, the approach adopted was similar to that of the audiolingual approach in that it emphasized following patterns and using models. This traditional writing instruction approach focuses primarily on *product*, on constructing grammatically correct sentences and short texts that follow clear patterns, with students often involved in word replacement activities. This approach has been subject to much criticism from those who argue that using a model results in mere imitation or in grammar practice rather than in communication.

Eventually developments in writing instruction for native speakers together with research in second language studies led to the development of another approach to both L1 and L2 writing instruction, namely *process* writing, an approach which emphasizes the importance of stages like brainstorming, drafting, and editing. Process writing has been embraced and promoted since around the turn of the century; however, it too has been the object of criticism. While process writing is better suited for the development of important higher order thinking skills (HOTS) which, using Bloom’s (1956) revised taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001), include analyzing, evaluating, and creating; it has been criticized for failing to teach students basic points about text forms. When used exclusively, process writing runs the risk of promoting creativity and discovery without addressing text features systematically in a way that can significantly improve student reading and writing skills. Hyland (2003) clearly articulates three major weaknesses of this approach: decontextualization or lack of attention to context, ambiguity of the role of the teacher, and absence of clear learning goals (p. 18-19) which result in disadvantaging students, including English language learners, who have limited exposure to written text forms. In addition, when considered from the point of view of foreign language learning, this approach may be considered too individualized for some cultural contexts.

Genre pedagogy is a newer approach related to the interest in English for Special Purposes (ESP), including Academic English, which has grown with the spread of English as an international

language and which highlights context – both social and linguistic – and purposefulness of writing. Hyland (2003) suggests that “Genre is, in part, a social response to process” (p. 27). Since written texts have the possibility of being read by anyone with access to the text, writers in general presume to know less about their audience than speakers in daily conversation. (This difference has, of course, been changing with the advance of technology.) Nevertheless, authentic texts are usually written with a discourse community in mind.

In ESP, teachers choose specific text types that particular students may encounter in the future and help students become aware of the relationship between form and meaning, of *how* texts mean, and, as writers, think explicitly about their expected readers. A genre approach overlooks neither product nor process, but the ultimate goal is effective communication. Referencing Halliday’s (1985/1994) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), Byrnes, Maxim, and Norris (2010) suggest that the focus on language as meaning expressed through forms rather than as forms used to express meaning “can address a central concern of a writing theory and of the writer – namely, how to relate intended meanings to forms and, simultaneously, how to revisit written form choices in terms of their meaning consequences” (p.55). Writing according to this approach, then, is neither completely an imitation task nor completely a creative task but requires a product/process balancing act around a meaning pivot.

In order for this approach to be embraced, students must feel themselves a part of a discourse community. Classroom teaching according to the genre approach, then, requires teachers to promote interaction among students and foster an awareness of shared goals. Individual readers will always have their strengths and weaknesses as well as their own interests, but for the genre approach to work well, students must develop common expectations and engage in purposeful reading as well as purposeful writing.

3. A Negative Model

Traditional model texts are generally positive examples of what a particular writing task product should look like. In my experience, students are generally happy to have examples and often lift sections out of the models and include them in their own compositions. While I do not believe it is necessarily negative for students to pick up some language directly, as some structures and words do occur with great frequency in certain kinds of texts, students do not necessarily understand deeply what they have lifted and may not be able to match the language or register in all sections of their papers. Yet without a model, students may be at a loss.

In order to address this problem, I suggest the use of a negative model. Negative evidence is sometimes used in the teaching of grammar, for example highlighting sentence patterns that do not work in L2 or asking students to correct mistakes involving certain targeted grammar points. Extending the idea of a negative model to cover social and linguistic contexts results in critical thinking

tasks. Thus negative models have the benefits of preventing lifting and also of encouraging critical thinking. A concrete example of how a negative model has worked in a university writing class is given in the next section.

4. Japanese Gardens

In a second-year education faculty class, students were given the task of writing an informative essay. Students were told to choose a rather narrow topic about which they are mini-experts and were given time to brainstorm using graphic organizers with classmates. They were specifically told that the audience for their papers was their classmates. Although I would be reading their papers, the papers should be planned and written with attention to content and English in order to teach something to their classmates. While this artificial situation of writing in English for Japanese peers may not be useful in a direct way, it is an effective starting place to help students begin to notice and consider seriously the role of context in written communication.

In terms of organization, students were instructed to write a five-paragraph essay in which each paragraph had a clear purpose. For example, the introduction was supposed to attract attention, introduce the main topic, and offer a plan or blueprint of the whole essay by using keywords. As a final evaluation point (in addition to audience, content, organization, and English), students were given instruction about visual reader-friendliness in relation to a typed paper. The information about fonts, font sizes, margins, spacing, etc. was collectively referred to as format. A model essay was shown in order to illustrate specific features, but the lesson activity was constructed around the negative model reproduced below. Students were informed at the beginning of the activity that the model essay was a five-paragraph essay without grammar or spelling mistakes but was not an effective essay. They were asked to evaluate the essay in terms of audience, content, organization, English and format.

Japanese Gardens

Sue Fraser Tetsufumi Osada

Japanese gardens are very different from western gardens. Let me explain how they are different from western gardens.

There are not as many flowers as in western gardens, the rocks are used in an effective way. On rainy days, they look more beautiful. In winter, they look beautiful too. Cherry blossoms in April make the gardens more beautiful.

They look especially beautiful in autumn. Japanese maple trees are red or yellow. Lots of people visit and admire Japanese maples. There are lots of Japanese maples which grow up in the mountains too. There are places which lots of people visit to see them in autumn. Nikko, for example, is one such place. On sunny weekends, the roads are congested by many cars.

In Kyoto and Nara there are many temples which have beautiful Japanese gardens. There are many people who visit such temples. Many of them are from abroad. They like Japanese gardens.

These are the reasons why people in western countries love Japanese gardens.

The use of this negative model in several different class sections, composed of either upper- or middle-level English learners, showed two clear positive outcomes. First, this activity promoted motivation in ways that a positive model did not. While students underlined parts of the positive model when asked to identify specific features in the essay, they showed relatively little interest in the task, as they had little to do except confirm. In contrast, when asked to read the negative model and identify what did not work, they tended to approach the task more actively and with more interest. Because the task was more demanding and required that students create their own answers rather than simply agree on the single correct answer, students had to use HOTS. Their involvement in the task likely helped them internalize the composition points that were being taught. A large group discussion during which students explained their analysis also provided an opportunity for in-class language use.

Second, students offered, in their own words, many helpful comments about the negative example, touching on all five points of audience, content, organization, English, and format. Although some aspects of the particular text form that was being taught were new for them, they were able to use critical skills effectively. A positive model, like a completed jigsaw puzzle, may receive nods or may be photographed for later use, but one that has missing or misplaced pieces demands comment. As the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001) argues, “learners will only learn what they consciously attend to in the input” (Ellis, 2015, p. 973).

Relevant to the present discussion are student comments connected to the social and linguistic contexts of the paper. About the appropriateness of the paper for its intended audience, students noted that although the paper presented itself as a comparison, the focus was really on Japanese gardens. The title and the specific information contained in the paper seemed to assume a Western audience rather than a Japanese one. The paper therefore had little to share with our particular class. In terms of the linguistic context, students first commented on specific missing pieces. For example, the introduction lacks both an effort to get attention and also a blueprint of the whole paper. They also quite quickly noticed the lack of coherence. While the introduction suggests that the paper is a comparison, the paper concludes by affirming success in demonstrating why Westerners like Japanese gardens. Only the second paragraph includes comparative information. In addition, students recognized the lack of flow between the body paragraphs, both in terms of content and markers of cohesion. In paragraph 3, for instance, students questioned the inclusion of information about traffic and generally expressed confusion about how individual short sentences were connected to each other.

While using transition words may be difficult for some students as writers, this reading activity helped students realize their importance.

5. Conclusion

University students never stop learning new vocabulary and new sentence structures, but in order to become effective communicators, they have to develop larger communication strategies that allow them to use what they know to help them express themselves more successfully. Well-known communication strategies for speech include circumlocution, asking for help, and non-linguistic communication like the use of gestures. Communication strategies for written language, including attention to the social situations and linguistic expectations of readers, are less familiar but no less important. To become more effective written communicators, students should use the planning, research, and thought time generally available for written assignments to access and use what they know about both language and life.

In university writing classes, an emphasis on meaning can push students to notice the role of social and linguistic contexts in written communication and can encourage them to use new knowledge together with what they already know in more creative ways. The construction of negative models within classroom discourse communities can help students actually experience how meaning is always interactive. Additionally, negative models prevent imitation without understanding and promote analyzing and creating skills, skills being highlighted by the Ministry of Education (MEXT). In a statement recognizing Japan's strong international performance in math and science, MEXT (2016) emphasized the importance of "solid academic ability" in children, affirming the importance of "the balance between students' knowledge and skills" and "their ability to think, make decisions, and express themselves." These critical thinking skills, which are of great importance to all students and especially to future educators, can be developed effectively through reading and writing instruction in the foreign language classroom.

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