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Do Composition Classes have to be Boring?

Some Suggestions on Integrating the Writing Skill

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Why did I write? What sin to me unknown
Dipped me in ink, my parents', or my own?
- Alexander Pope

Introduction

At the beginning of a writing course, I often read comments from students such as, "I don't like writing, but I'll do my best", or "Writing is boring, but I know that it is important." Many university students of English come to the writing classroom with negative experiences, and expect to spend a bleak ninety minutes with their heads down, practising colourless sentences, paragraphs, and short assignments.

This does not, by any means, have to be the case. It is true that the act of writing is usually carried out alone, but it serves a communicative purpose, which can be recreated in the classroom. Students can write letters, postcards, even poems to one another, and then respond to one another's work. Moreover, there are a whole range of techniques which are familiar to every teacher who adopts a communicative approach to speaking and listening classes, which can easily be applied to the teaching of writing.

Educators are sometimes ill-served by the curriculum within which they work. Typically, courses will be given titles such as "Speaking II", "Reading B", "Listening 3", and "Writing 4A", implying that the skills must be taught in isolation. However, a class in oral communication may include listening activities as a model for speaking tasks, reading activities as a source of material for discussion, and note-taking as a means of focus for the speaking task. There is absolutely no reason why a similar approach may not be adopted in a writing class. As Raimes (1983 : 68) points out:

> If we want our language learning classes to come as close as possible to real-life communicative situations, then we have to organize activities that let students use all of the language skills.

This point is reiterated by Harmer (1983:47), and by Brookes and Grundy (1990), who remind us that "in the real world we are rarely exercising only one skill at a time", and stress the importance of an integrated approach to writing. Many of the activities that Raimes suggests are what might be termed "pre-writing" tasks. That is to say, the

speaking and/or listening, and/or reading tasks will help prepare for a successful written output at the end of the class. Examples of such tasks include brainstorming, discussion and reading, which she sees as forming a part of the process approach to writing (Raimes, 1983 : 10). Indeed, with this in mind, there is no reason why all English Language classes should not involve a variety of skills. Whereas, in the writing class the output will be in written form, in a speaking class reading and listening tasks will serve as input and models to a successful spoken output, with writing serving the purpose of facilitating or reinforcing that output. Similarly, in a listening class, a speaking, writing or reading activity can serve as a prediction activity to stimulate the production of some of the ideas or lexis which will turn up in the listening task, thus improving the likelihood of successful accomplishment of the task.

Example activities in this paper employ a variety of tasks, mostly involving oral communication, which contribute to a more successful eventual accomplishment of writing assignments. They are taken from courses I am currently conducting with second- and third year English majors in the Faculty of Education at Nagasaki University. Both classes take place during fifth period at the end of a hard day for the students in question, when to subject them to ninety minutes of heads-down writing would seem cruel, as well as inappropriate. Several of the tasks were also carried out in workshops by Japanese Teachers of English, as part of a summer intensive programme organized by Nagasaki Board of Education.

Dictation

One of the simplest and most traditional writing activities (and which involves two skills) is the dictation. Old-fashioned as it may seem, dictation still can have a place in the contemporary ELT classroom. In the real world, we often have to listen and write what we hear, especially on the phone. However, it can be frustrating for students, when they have written down what their teacher has dictated if they have no means of checking the accuracy of their own version. Of course they can check in pairs, but this might only bring further questions. One way around this is to dictate part of a worksheet to be then given to students, or from a text that they already have. This is especially useful if the chosen extract includes some of the target language of the class, or a previous one, thus introducing or reinforcing key language. There are variations on the standard dictation. If the language to be dictated to students is fairly familiar (for example, a review of the previous class), it can be read out while the students keep their pens down. At the end, they take up their pens, and try to reconstruct the text. This activity, which Raimes (1983 : 77) refers to as a "dicto-comp", may seem like a rather pointless memory test, but if students are encouraged to remember key words, they then bring into play their own knowledge of English in rebuilding the text from what they remember. Naturally, this

second stage can be done in pairs.

Running Dictation

As it stands, however, it has to be said that dictation is somewhat teacher-centred. The teacher chooses the text, and controls the speed of the delivery, as well as the number of repetitions. One way around this is to create a running dictation. For example, in a lesson focusing on formal letter writing, the teacher takes a short formal letter, ideally including several key phrases that students will be required to use in their own work. This letter is then cut into strips, sentence by sentence, and stuck around the room, and students are instructed to work in pairs. Student A finds a fragment of the letter, memorises it, returns to the desk, and dictates it to Student B. Student B listens and writes, then goes to find another piece of the puzzle to dictate to Student A. When all of the pieces have been collected, the students work together to put the letter in the correct order, and get the layout correct. It is easy to check the activity by getting the students to use the original strips to reassemble the letter on the whiteboard.

Note, also, that this activity involves all four skills. Student A is reading and speaking, and Student B is listening and writing, after which the roles are reversed. Students are learning the language of writing (in this case, formal letter-writing), but they are learning it while practising reading, listening and speaking. Furthermore, the re-assembling stage of the activity engages the students cognitively, making them focus on the meaning of each phrase. Unlike a standard dictation exercise, in which learners may achieve a perfect version of the text they hear, without having the faintest idea of its meaning, this version of the running dictation involves them in deciphering the meaning as well, often encouraging them to pick up clues from cohesive devices within the text. The necessity of bringing to bear students' own knowledge, and engaging cognitive processes creates what Hidi and Anderson (1992) describe as "situational interest". It is a problem to be solved; it seems like a game, thus increasing motivation no end.

The variations on this are endless. For example, instead of a letter, a recipe can be cut into strips for dictation purposes, giving the students the follow-up task of ordering the parts, perhaps combining it with cohesive devices such as, "First", "Next", "After that", and so on. Again it can lead naturally into a more speaking-rich activity, serving as a model for students to teach their own favourite recipes to one another in groups.

I have also used the technique in an academic writing context to teach the use of facts to support opinions. Students are given five opinions, (for example "Japanese society is becoming more dangerous", and encouraged to think of facts which might support this opinion. The running dictation consists of 10 facts, two each to support each opinion.

Student A reads, remembers and speaks; student B listens, thinks and writes the fact under the opinion it supports. This is followed by work on cohesion and paragraph formation, and eventually, in combination with other such activities, to students writing their own discursive composition, in which they are invited to find relevant data to support their own opinions.

In a creative writing or fluency writing class, students can be given the first lines of a selection of English haiku. Having first discussed how the haiku might continue, they then carry out a running dictation to complete each one. A similar activity can be created using the words to a popular song. Again they need to use context, content, grammatical structure and cohesive devices to achieve this. They thus practice reading, writing, listening, speaking, and, importantly, thinking.

Dictation Gap

Another variation on the dictation exercise, in which it is combined with a pairwork information gap, is what I term the "dictation gap". It works best when practising language in which sentences can be easily split into two, using cohesive devices. I have used this activity successfully to practise and reinforce the language of cause and effect, which is a logical next stage from the describe and draw activity used to describe graphs below. Student A has the beginning part of five sentences, and the end of five others. Student B has the corresponding beginnings and ends, but not in the same order. Student A reads one half sentence (for example, "International flights decreased sharply"), Student B listens, chooses, and reads out the most suitable ending (for example, "as a result of the outbreak of war"). Both students write down what they have heard to complete their sentences. Then Student B starts the next sentence, and Student A completes it. As in many of the activities described, students are obliged to focus on meaning as well as form. Despite the fact that it is very controlled, students enjoy it, and the content of some of the sentences can be made a little less dry (for example, "I left my boyfriend because of his obsession with pachinko and video games").

Brainstorming

The logical next stage to a running dictation such as the ones described above is to have students create a similar text themselves. In the case of, for example, a formal letter, the text in the activity will serve as a model for their own work. In the case of a creative writing class, however, it can be somewhat daunting for students to be told to write a song or a poem. In order to avoid them being obliged to tackle the task "cold" it is often useful to use brainstorming, usually of relevant lexis, as a pre-writing activity. In the case of haiku, for example, students may be given two minutes to think of words or phrases

related to spring. They then dictate their list to their partner, and add to their own from their partner's dictation. This is repeated with summer, autumn and winter. It is even worth dividing the board into four, giving a piece of chalk to the student at the front of each line of seats, and having them fill the board. It can even be made into a "chalk race", with the first line to reach the back (or return to the front) being declared the winner. However it is handled, the outcome is that the students have a large body of "inspiration" for their own efforts.

Describe and Draw

The technique of "describe and draw" is one familiar to users of communicative methodology. It usually involves one student describing some kind of picture or other visual, while his or her partner listens to the description, and attempts to draw what is being described. Any class on report writing may well include a section on describing graphs and charts, as this kind of writing is frequently found in both academic and business reports, and uses a relatively limited range of language, making it a fruitful area to teach. Having input the language of, for example, describing change, it can easily be practiced using a "describe and draw" activity. Student A describes one chart, while student B listens and fills in the data, after which the roles are reversed, then the two worksheets compared to check that the activity has been successfully carried out. Grellet (1996) refers to this type of activity as "transcoding", meaning that language is used to cross between different media of communication. By comparing their charts at the end of the activity students can check they have used the target language effectively. A further chart can be given as a writing activity, either in the same class or as homework.

It is worth mentioning at this point a word of caution. Many of the speaking activities in writing classes such as these practice the language of writing, meaning that the students are employing lexis and grammatical structure of a far more formal nature than we would normally encourage them to use in a speaking class. It is a good idea to make this explicit to students, reminding that, for example, "There was a sharp decline in student numbers in 2003" is hardly the kind of sentence we would use in a typical conversation. Nevertheless, not only is it helping students to internalize language typically used in written English, it is also in many cases useful in making formal presentations. Indeed, academic or report writing and presentation skills can be fruitfully taught together. The structure of a report is often similar to a presentation, much of the language used is similar, and the process used to organize it largely the same. Moreover, by presenting what they have written (or are in the process of writing) to their classmates, students are reinforcing their knowledge of the language in question, as well as practicing a useful speaking sub-skill.

Review Writing

Writing and reading activities can be integrated by having students write book reviews. Many university departments (my own included) offer extensive reading programs, often using graded readers, as a means of improving reading fluency. It is common to have students write book reports to check that they have read the book. Ur (1996 : 164) points out that this can be a fairly boring task, and suggests book reviews as being a more interesting and communicative task. The two can easily be combined. Indeed, most published book reviews start by briefly describing the content, before going on to offer an opinion. Russo (1987 : 83) reminds us that "our writing improves as we respond to the reaction of others". By making all book reviews available to students, we make the writer aware that she is writing to an audience, in this case an audience of peers. Rivers (1987 : 12) feels that learners might be bolder in expressing their feelings and opinions, where the interaction is not face-to-face. Furthermore, it is not a great leap of imagination to design speaking activities, based on these reviews, in which students describe and recommend their favourite graded readers to their classmates. In this case, the writing task will help supply students with the basis on which to express themselves more articulately than might be the case if they were asked to carry out the speaking task unprepared.

Conclusion

In the end, we cannot avoid having our students get down to the hard work of writing assignments. No amount of pre-writing or post-writing communicative activities will completely replace the act of sitting down and writing something. Furthermore, there is a sense of accomplishment in handing in a completed piece of written work, and practice does also bring about improvement. There is no reason, however, why some of the preparation for those assignments, or follow-up activities based upon them, should not be fun, stimulating, and most of all, communicative.

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