An Alternative Technique for Teaching Writing To Low-English Proficiency Students

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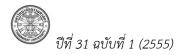*Language Institute, Thammasat University*

ABSTRACT

This article aims to share a technique to reduce students' writing anxiety (apprehension) and to encourage collaborative learning for low-English proficiency students. "Collaborative Writing" and "Process Approach Writing" are utilized with the lower-English proficiency students who have difficulty expressing themselves well in English can be scaffolded by their higher-English proficiency counterparts.

Keywords: *Collaborative writing, process approach writing, writing technique*

RATIONALE

Compared to other English language skills, writing is rather sophisticated and difficult to master, especially for foreign language learners. It requires more efforts to excel in this skill (Shawish, 2009). To be able to write well is a wish for everyone; however, not everyone can write well.

According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, **writing** is the representation of language in a textual medium through the use of a set of signs or symbols (known as a writing system). That means a writer is the source of the message, and he/she has certain ideas and thoughts he/she wishes to communicate. In encoding or expressing these, the information is transformed into graphic symbols. In so doing, the writer brings to the writing task all his/her encoding habits -- the product of his/her accumulated knowledge and experience, knowledge of the world and knowledge of the language (Anderson, 1982).

When considered in one sense, the above definition of writing theoretically sounds simple and easy for any writer to perform; however, in reality it turns out to be the opposite.

As an English teacher, having taught a writing course to low-English proficiency graduate students for the past twenty-five years, more often than not I have made observations both in class and from the students' writing assignments and have found that a number of the students, probably the majority, feel uncomfortable when they are individually assigned to write paragraphs. This feeling lasts through the last week of teaching with quite a large number of the students ending up with no improvements in their writing skills.

Curious enough, I took on the challenge to root out the causes of the students' failure. Informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with about ten students who were told that the purpose of the interviews was to improve their writing skills, which seemed to make them considerably relieved.

The result of the interviews showed that the majority of the interviewed students felt apprehensive about writing English mainly due to a lack of sufficient syntactic, semantic and rhetorical knowledge. In addition, they lacked confidence in expressing themselves in English individually. These were the primary causes of my students' writing difficulties.

At this point, the notions of "motivation and attitude" swiftly come to mind. That is, when students lack motivation and positive attitudes, they find it difficult to learn. When it comes to apprehension or anxiety of the subjects or contents they are required to take, the situation will be even worse. It is distressing to consider how frustrated and suppressed the students must feel in coping with this uncomfortable situation throughout the semester. Not only do they feel frustrated, but they also believe they cannot improve themselves academically, which is likely to cause them to "burn out" in their efforts to acquire an adequate proficiency in writing English.

HOW TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS

The underlying problems revealed in the interviews can be categorized into two parts: linguistic and psychological.

To minimize the linguistic problems, I have been trying to activate the students' background knowledge during the brainstorming stage, trying to recall and refresh their semantic and syntactic stores, mainly those points relevant to the target context. Word games and synonym exercises are carefully employed to cultivate their vocabulary knowledge, and particular points of grammatical structures are introduced both deductively and inductively to ensure they will be able to apply them in their writing processes. In so doing, this has a positive impact on their linguistic performance.

To lessen their psychological difficulties, classroom management is carefully thought about and implemented in the second week after the diagnostic writing assignment is done in the first week. The result of the diagnostic writing assignment helps me group the students based on their writing ability into two groups: those with "better and the lower" writing abilities.

Assuming the "better" writing ability group to be less apprehensive and more proficient in writing English, and the "lower" writing ability group to be more apprehensive, I have carefully thought of balancing the students' apprehension by way of **pairing** them to work on their writing assignments on the grounds those who are more proficient in English writing may possibly help the lower proficient ones. According to Strauss (Strauss & U, 2007), not only will this technique lessen the students' apprehension, but encouraging the students to work in pairs or groups is reported to have several other benefits as well.

The reason for the above is obvious. That is, lower-English proficiency students who have difficulty expressing themselves well in English can be scaffolded by their higher-English proficiency counterparts. They can get involved in collaborative learning with one assisting the other to complete their writing tasks, which is a good way to develop their employability skills. According to Mirel (Mirel and Spika, 2002), in the professional workplace, people are found writing together collaboratively. Besides,

this technique can promote the students' interaction as well (Ferris and Hedgcock, 1998). Therefore, it is reasonable to assign students to learn collaboratively in writing classes.

However, pairing or pair-writing tasks in this article refers to the pairing of a better English writing ability student with a lower English writing ability one. Unlike Topping (1995), paired writing is a system for peer or parent tutoring (or co-composition) of any sort of writing (creative or technical) in any language.

HOW TO TEACH

In fact, there are eleven possible writing techniques to employ to improve the students' writing ability (Graham and Perin, 2007) :

1. Writing Strategies
2. Summarization
3. Collaborative Writing
4. Specific Product Goals
5. Word Processing
6. Sentence-Combining
7. Prewriting
8. Inquiry Activities
9. Process Writing Approach
10. Study of Models
11. Writing for Content learning

From these eleven writing techniques, "**Collaborative Writing**" and "**Process Approach Writing**" attract my interest the most. Therefore, I have decided to combine the two techniques to teach my students. My teaching technique is to teach my students using these two techniques as the main teaching task. Here is the procedure I have framed for my teaching:

1. In the first class meeting, diagnose students' writing ability, assigning all students to write about themselves (My favorite hobby, my favorite sport,

or my favorite movie). The topics given should be about something really close to the students' background knowledge or schema.

2. Based on the students writing ability, group them roughly into the better and the lower writing ability categories.

3. Pair the better with the lower and inform them that they are paired throughout the course. That is, they have to work closely together from the first stage of doing writing assignment until the last stage.

4. Prepare lesson plans using the Process Writing Approach to teach the whole course.

The process involves at least four distinct steps: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing (Writing and Humanistic Studies , MIT, 2012).
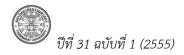
5. The teacher teaches the class using lesson plans for the Process Writing Approach as follows:

Stage 1: Prewriting

Prewriting is anything students do before they write. The focus is thinking, taking notes, talking to others, brainstorming, outlining, and gathering information. It is the first activity the students engage in, and an activity that occurs throughout the writing process. Activities in this stage include free writing, clustering, spidergram, scaffolding or even question-answer. In this stage, the teacher tries to encourage the students to express their idea, literally in English as much as possible. Participation of the whole class is highly recommended.

Stage 2: Drafting

Drafting occurs when students put their ideas into sentences and paragraphs. Here they focus on explaining and supporting their ideas and connecting ideas. At this stage, the students express themselves in writing what they know and think about the topic. The teacher moves around to supervise and assist the students in case they need some help. During the

first week, the teacher may be required to have more interactions with students, especially when some pairs are not harmoniously agreeable to complete their drafting. However, from the second week onwards, the teacher has to fade out and let students work on their own more freely. The teacher then acts as the students' facilitator, encouraging them to get fully involved in drafting tasks.

Stage 3:   Revising

This stage is the key to effective documents. Here the teacher should emphasize the organizational pattern of the paragraph by providing a very well organized sample paragraph so that they can refine their drafting, making each sentence as concise and accurate as possible, making connections between ideas explicit and clear, and eventually having a well-organized paragraph.

Stage 4:   Editing

The last stage involves such things as grammar, mechanics, and spelling. Apart from activating some certain grammatical points used in each lesson, the teacher has to provide the students grammar reference handouts which the students can consult when working on editing. The students should be told not to edit their writing until the other steps in the writing process are complete. After finishing their editing, each pair of the students is asked to exchange their writing work for peer editing before submitting them to the teacher. Peer editing serves as proofreading from which the students can learn how to write. Please note that when marking the students' writing, the teacher my use only the "Praise" compliments first before he/she may add some other comments later. This is because the students will feel more motivated to write if they are motivated positively.

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