

Improving English Communication Skills through Writing

ライティングを通じてのコミュニケーションスキル改善の試み

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Abstract

Tokai University Hokkaido Campus introduced English Writing classes to its 2008 curriculum. The goals, syllabus and students' experiences in the writing class are described. Finally, how writing classes also use the skills of reading, listening and speaking thus increasing the students' overall ability to express themselves in English as a second language is discussed.

要 旨

2008年度より東海大学北海道キャンパスの英語カリキュラムに「英語コミュニケーション：ライティング」が導入された。この報告ではカリキュラム改正に伴うライティングという新しいスキルクラスの導入の様子を説明している。クラスの目標、シラバスの説明と同時に学生の新しいクラスでの様子を観察し、報告している。最後に、ライティングのクラスが、ライティングのみではなくリーディング、リスニング、スピーキングという学生の英語力全体に影響しており、どのように学生の自己表現能力を伸ばしているかを論じている。

Keywords: English Communication, Writing, Speaking, Improving Skills

キーワード：英語コミュニケーション、ライティング、スピーキング、スキルの上達

1. Introduction

In the spring semester of 2008 the English department at Tokai University Hokkaido Campus added an English Writing course to its curriculum. Previously students had been required to take one semester of English Speaking and one semester of English Reading. In the new curriculum the students would have four classes of English over four semesters: Speaking and Writing with a native English teacher; Listening and Reading with a Japanese instructor. This provided an opportunity for the teacher to present English in two different mediums of study to the students. I was excited by the opportunity of being able to teach the students by a different approach. I felt that the shyness of the students to express themselves in spoken English might be overcome in a written environment. For often my students have expressed to me that for them writing came easier than speaking. The other native English

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teachers and I hoped that a semester of writing together might enable the students to lose some of their inhibitions and therefore do better in the following speaking course.

2. Procedure

As it was a first time to plan a writing class for all involved, all three writing teachers decided to use the same text book and report back to each other on our experiences, what we found that worked, and what didn't. The textbook was "*Get Ready to Write*" (Blanchard and Root, 2006). We chose this book because it allows for the students to learn various grammar structures through real life writing tasks, moving from sentence composition to paragraph organization.

In the syllabus that I created for the students I explained the goals that I had for the class, that it is a beginning level English writing course that would focus on creating well written sentences and paragraphs in English for academic and personal purposes. The aim of this course was to increase the international communication skills of the students through writing. Students would learn the necessary vocabulary and phrases so that they will be able to express their ideas and opinions in writing. By sharing their writing with other students they will also reinforce their speaking skills by having to explain their ideas to their partner and asking questions of their partner's writing in turn. Lessons would include structured writing drills to increase basic grammar skills as well as guided free writing to encourage students' creativity and independent expression of thought. To pass the course the students would have to demonstrate their understanding of the lesson material in their writing. During the semester the students would compose up to 10 essays using Microsoft Word application software. The titles of the essays are shown in Appendix A. To this end, half of the classes would take place in the computer lab room. The students would learn to create Word documents in English and would also learn how to use the editing tools of Spell and Grammar Check. The significant benefit for non-native writers from the attributes of word processing and the conditions surrounding its use in composition instruction is discussed in Pennington (1993). The final written examination would evaluate how well the students have mastered the English writing skills that were taught throughout the course.

3. Findings

Over the course of the semester the students wrote essays of increasing length, with themes based on the work of different chapters in the textbook. For example, writing about themselves and another classmate, their personal heroes, their daily activities, as well as describing their room and city, creating a narrative about a past memory experience, expressing their opinions about the environment and other social issues, and finally contemplating their future dreams and life philosophy. Other similar methods that can be used to encourage ESL writers were described in Roman-Perez (2003). By the end of the semester the students had a collection of essays compiled in their personalized portfolio. The students and I were surprised at the amount of progress they had accomplished, not only in the length

of their final essays, but also by the increased originality of their content. A bridge had been crossed.

In the following semester, familiarity with each other and their teacher gave the students more confidence in the speaking class. Other writing teachers also commented on the students' willingness to be very open and personal in their writing, laying a foundation for more open communication in speaking situations.

4. Discussion

One of the greatest problems for students of English as a foreign language is their confidence in their ability to use English, that is, their belief that they can express themselves in understandable English. By reinforcing commonly used vocabulary, sentence structures and phrases the students were able to build their confidence through familiarity and repetition with the written word that will then lend itself to the spoken situation. The kinds of writing situations and tasks most helpful for moving ESL students toward increasingly more fluent and coherent expression of their ideas, experiences, and feelings were reviewed in Peyton *et al.* (1990).

In a writing class there are many opportunities for the students to use their speaking skills as they discuss with the teacher and each other about what they will write and what they have written. These class exercises also provide an environment for the students to increase their listening and reading skills as well, as they talk with each other in the prewriting process and review each others' written work in the editing process.

Some techniques that were used in the Writing class to encourage speaking were (1) in pairs or small groups students did prewriting exercises then reported their answers in English back to class, (2) brainstorming ideas and sentences in small groups then reporting back to class, (3) classmate interviews were done to generate sentences to be used for paragraph writing in the third person, and (4) finally, reading, commentating and questioning other classmates' written essays in the editing stage.

5. Conclusion

The students' experience in the writing course demonstrates how any English class no matter what its theme, reading, writing, listening or speaking naturally incorporates all skills essential to mastering the language within the class experience. In studying a second language, rather than isolating the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, through careful planning and execution the teacher has the opportunity to present a cohesive method of learning a language which gives the students many chances to learn and practice the four skills in various settings. By reinforcing and repeating the material through different mediums and situations the students have a higher chance of retaining the material and improving their English skills and building their confidence in their ability to use a foreign language.

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Appendix A: Essay Titles

1. Introductions: Self and Classmate
2. My Heroes: Living and Past
3. A Day In the Life
4. My Room
5. A Letter About My Hometown
6. How to Save the Environment and Why
7. My Memory Story
8. My Life, My Future, and My Philosophy
9. My Opinions
10. Final Writing Test