

Emphasizing Content in the English Composition Classroom in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to briefly explain why an overemphasis of grammar and vocabulary in the writing classroom is ineffective at building ESL students' writing abilities beyond the basic level and how an emphasis on content can help to improve these writing abilities. Several exercises taken from an actual English writing textbook used in Japanese high schools will be used to 1) demonstrate how grammar and vocabulary is the predominant focus in the English composition classroom in Japan, and 2) how easily an instructor might integrate content into the writing exercises without needing to make large changes or restructure the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Most educators would agree the best way to learn how to write is to write; however, in order to enable students to get to a point where they can write, teachers must first prepare students by helping them gain a strong understanding of grammar and a large repository of vocabulary. English education in Japan has done an excellent job at accomplishing this task; unfortunately, students are rarely encouraged to apply this knowledge in a meaningful way and write for a purpose beyond the lexical and grammatical. As a result, many Japanese students struggle with creating cohesive English text.

Many suggestions have been proposed on how to improve textual flow in ESL students' writing; however, perhaps one of the most effective ways is to emphasize content in students' writing rather than focusing solely on grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. This is because the process of learning to write begins with fluency, i.e., the ability to fill a page with text (Green, 1998). Once students have a grasp on the basics of English grammar and vocabulary, students should not focus so much on the conventions of written English, but on what they are writing about, i.e., content. By stressing content, educators help build a sense of comfort, confidence, and control in their students, and with comfort, confidence and control comes better writing.

For such an approach to be taken in the English composition classroom in Japan, a shift from grammar and vocabulary focused instruction to grammar and vocabulary instruction with an emphasis on content would need to occur. This, however, is not nearly as difficult as some may think. In fact, it would only require a few minor adjustments to the material that is already in place. Therefore, this paper is not an attempt to present new pedagogy, but rather the objective of this study is to demonstrate how the preexisting

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grammar-and-vocabulary-focused instruction can successfully be paired with an emphasis on content in an effort to improve Japanese ESL/EFL students' English-writing abilities. Together these two approaches can help generate an understanding among the students of textual flow.

CREATING STRUCTURE IN THE FUNCTION

The importance of grammar and vocabulary should not be disregarded; nevertheless, grammar and vocabulary alone will not suffice because the ability to write clear, concise, logical, and convincing paragraphs and essays requires more than just the ability to write a grammatical sentence (Taylor, 1976). If, however, content is emphasized alongside grammar and vocabulary, textual flow among Japanese ESL/EFL students could be greatly improved. Paul Kei Matsuda (personal communication, October 4, 2010) explains the shift that needs to occur: "Structure for structure's sake is out. Structure in service of function is better. Structure in the function is even better."

Students need to learn how linguistic elements such as grammar and vocabulary create structure between sentences and ideas, and how this structure lends itself to creating textual flow. By emphasizing content with grammar and vocabulary, teachers will be able to move from a "structure for structure's sake" instruction to the use of structure in the function of writing.

One of the major problems in the Japanese ESL/EFL writing classroom is students are not encouraged to write for real purposes (Matsuda, 1997). Most writing exercises are assigned exclusively for grammar practice and vocabulary building. This most likely is due to the fact that teachers' primary goal of language learning is to help their students pass university entrance exams, and these exams generally focus on grammatical and lexicon knowledge. Nevertheless, we must remember "writing should not only be used to demonstrate knowledge but to create it" (Hirsch & DeLuca, 2003). Educators need to understand when assignments' objectives are intended solely as a means to assess learners' comprehension students are unable to see beyond the "busy-work" to the true purpose of the actual writing. This is the situation in which many Japanese learners find themselves.

To demonstrate this, let us examine several exercises taken from an English writing textbook that is currently being used in Japanese high schools. These exercises will not only exemplify the grammar and vocabulary focus prominent in English composition instruction in Japan, but will also provide an opportunity to demonstrate how an instructor might incorporate content-driven objectives into writing tasks provided by preexisting curriculum.

Writing Exercises

Exercise I

In this first exercise sample (see Appendix A), students are instructed to reply to an American friend's email and discuss their school life. This would be a perfect opportunity to introduce meaningful purpose into the class as well as different varieties of writing styles. The assignment would also give students the chance to practice writing at a multi-sentence level. Unfortunately, as it is this exercise gives no attention to the type or style of writing, nor offers instruction on how to write an effective email. The students are instructed to write only according to the information provided. In other words, the content of their writing is carefully controlled and monitored in this exercise. The sample email provided is written in

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the form of a list—divided into three sections and numbered (1), (2), and (3). As a result, the format of this sample email could give students the impression that they too should write in such a way.

Exercise II

In this next exercise (see Appendix B), students are instructed to pair up and discuss, in English, the topic of health with one another. It is encouraging to see multiple language skills being incorporated into the writing class; however, this assignment misses an ideal opportunity. After students are done with their discussions, they are told to write what they learned, but they are not told to write a paragraph or even a sentence. They are instructed to describe their conversation with their partner in *kajogaki* (listing). This is extremely unfortunate seeing how the exercise could easily lend itself to meaningful paragraph-style writing.

Exercise III

The last exercise (see Appendix C) that we will look at is in fact the final writing task of the textbook. Therefore, we can assume that more is expected from the students in this assignment than from the previous two exercises looked at thus far. And, in some ways, it is more challenging. In this exercise, students must read the short newspaper article provided and summarize what they have read in forty to fifty words. In this case, the exercise in itself is not shortcoming. In fact, it appears to facilitate practice in creating coherence, brevity, and clarity between multiple sentences—all important elements of a good paragraph (Kimura and Kondo, 2004). The trouble, however, lies in the way teachers assess the assignment.

Minoru Iriyama, a Japanese public high school teacher, explains that teachers tend to emphasize grammar and vocabulary when assessing students' writing. "This is how we have been taught, and this was how our teachers were taught," explains Iriyama (personal communication, October, 6, 2010). It is not that Japanese English teachers are incapable of assessing content and other components, but it is certainly easier to focus on the linguistic elements because these components have clear correct and incorrect answers (Canning, 2005; Matsuda, 1997). As a result, when assessing any assignment, including the one listed above, teachers tend to focus only on the grammar and vocabulary used in the writing. This causes students to become too concerned with surface-level errors and, as a result, turns writing into a task rather than a function in which grammar and vocabulary operate.

EMPHASIZING CONTENT

Though all three writing tasks examined thus far clearly demonstrate a tendency towards emphasizing grammar over content, this can be fairly easy to rectify. With just a few small changes to the exercises, an emphasis on content could be implemented into the preexisting tasks with relative ease.

Content Emphasis in Exercise I

In Exercise I (see Appendix A), students do not need to be so narrowly instructed on what to write about. The provided topic "school life" is sufficient. Beyond that, students should be given the freedom to write about anything they want within that topic. Students

need flexibility in their writing if they are to effectively express themselves. Japanese students want the opportunity to express their ideas, opinions, and feelings (Canning, 2005). As Charles Canning (2005) explains, “All Japanese students really need in order to develop fluency in their writing is to be taught basic forms and then given plenty of meaningful practice.”

Content Emphasis in Exercise II

Exercise II has many good components. The incorporation of speaking and listening skills in this exercise is a plus. The problem is that the assignment abruptly ends after students make a list detailing their conversation with their partner. If, however, teachers consider the exercise as prewriting practice to expand on, the assignment could prove to be very beneficial. After students create their list, organization and structural patterns of a typical English paragraph could be presented. Students should then organize their thoughts according to the patterns they learned. After this, teachers could introduce various cohesive devices such as discourse connectors, ellipsis, and conjunctions and provide examples to how these devices can help create links between sentences and ideas. Once all of these elements have been taught and understood, the students should be instructed to write a paragraph incorporating the organizational patterns and cohesive devices they have learned.

Content Emphasis in Exercise III

In the final exercise (Exercise III), there appears to be nothing wrong with the assignment in itself. As mentioned above, it is how teachers evaluate this assignment that eliminates the content component of the exercise. This, however, can easily be rectified. When evaluating these paragraphs teachers just need to remember to not only focus on the grammar and vocabulary, but consider the content and how well the students created flow within their writing. Grammar really should only be a factor if it interferes with the overall meaning (Malia, 2006). This is because “writing is not entirely linguistic” (Taylor, 1976). Therefore, when evaluating students’ writing assignments, teachers should not overlook the value and importance of content.

CONCLUSION

While grammar and vocabulary building is an essential part of the language-learning process, it is important to remember that writing is not entirely linguistic in nature (Spack, 1985). Therefore, rather than focusing explicitly on correctness, ESL/EFL teachers’ need to also concern themselves with helping their students to develop, express, and organize ideas in English. This can be accomplished by providing students with the opportunity to write for meaningful purposes and emphasizing what the student is writing about rather than the writing itself, i.e., grammar and vocabulary.

It is important to realize, however, that grammar and vocabulary instruction is necessary. Rather than simply abandoning grammar and vocabulary instruction, teachers should incorporate content into the preexisting curriculum. When students are provided with reasons to write beyond the grammatical and lexical, an understanding that content, grammar, and vocabulary work together to create written discourse is formed. And it is only by this understanding that their writing skills will improve.

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APPENDIX A

All sample exercises used were taken from *Practical English Writing* (Aoki, 2008). The original Japanese directions are included; however, English translation (translated by the author) is provided.

Sample Exercise I (Aoki, 2008)

*アメリカの友人が Eメールを送ってきました。この①、②、③にならって、あなたの学校生活を紹介する文を書きなさい。

Hi Satomi,

Nice to hear from you. I'll be glad to tell you about our school.

① Our school is in the suburbs of Boston. It is a rather small school with 360 students, and it is 30 years old.

② I'm a senior and studying English, algebra, chemistry, American history, home economics, Spanish and P.E.

③ School is over at 2:30, and we have club activities after school.

I belong to the music club and play the trumpet in our school band.

Jenny

Translation:

*You have received an Email from your American friend. Write about your school life as illustrated below.

APPENDIX B

Sample Exercise II (Aoki, 2008)

*ペアをつくり、「健康」をテーマにして質問したり答えたりしなさい。

次に、話し合った内容を箇条書きにまとめて発表しなさい。

(例) ふだんの生活で気をつけていること/家族が行っている健康法/風邪を引いたときの民間療法、など。

Translation:

*Get into pairs and discuss the theme “health” with one another. Next, write down what you discussed in a list and tell the class.

(Example) Things you usually do to stay healthy/Health routines you and your family follow/Remedies you use when catch a cold/etc.

APPENDIX C

Sample Exercise III (Aoki, 2008)

*次の文はある新聞に載った青年海外協力隊 (JOCV) に関するコラムの、英訳の一部です。要旨を40～50語の英文にまとめなさい。

The JOCV (Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers) has published a collection of reports from its volunteers who have served abroad.

Reports of successful missions mingle with cases where young people struggling in lands with different cultures ended up confused and frustrated. We can see that even those who did well scored their success after overcoming a variety of their own mistakes.

The JOCV offers opportunities for members to change themselves through contact with different cultures while also lending a helping hand in developing countries. The cooperation corps, which was started in 1965, has sent about 26,000 people on overseas mission (sic) so far.

Translation:

*The following passage is part of a column from a newspaper about Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV). In English, write a 40-50-word summary of the passage.