Nurturing Classroom Writing Activities Through Experiential Learning

経験的学習におけるライティングクラスの構築

Robert J. McClung

　大学生への認識および受容の観点から行った考察に基づき、生徒主体の学習法である経験的学習を通し、創造性の助力あるいは望ましい結果が期待できるライティングクラスの構築のための4段階授業法、実践的指導案について取り上げる。

教師がこの4ステップを用いることで生徒のライティングスキルおよび自己研鑽に対するモチベーションの向上を促すとともに、教師はその生徒の明確な弱点を理解し適格な上達方法を提示することができる。実践的アプローチによるアカデミックライティング能力の向上、そして大学生のライティング能力向上のための手段として経験的学習を有効利用していただきたい。

Introduction

Success in learning English should be no different than other goals in a student's life. However, as a teacher I feel that some students do not take their language courses as seriously as their other classes. All too often university students come to an English class and decide that it is time to sleep, rather than viewing it as an opportunity to focus on bettering their language skills. Changing this lack of motivation and focus is the challenge I wish to take up. I do not believe students want to fail as I truly feel they want to do their best. Perhaps we as teachers do not always want to admit that our students' lack of enthusiasm or poor grades might be as a result of our own teaching abilities.

Writing, like any other language skill must be nurtured. Frequently, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers become quite adept at creating novel speaking activities or technologically advanced listening tasks. However, when it comes to writing classes, they are often at a loss as to where to begin or more importantly how to have a logical flow in their lessons. In short, teachers are less able to motivate their students in a writing course. At Kansai university there is no overall theory supporting writing classes. I would therefore utilize a constructivist theory to balance the needs of the learners with the course criteria. The constructivist paradigm is ideal for writing classes because writing itself is quite a lonely task so to produce

better writers it is important to encourage group work and cognitive tasks that utilize the student's current and prior knowledge and experience (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The reason I chose this theory is because I believe Kolb and Kolb's experiential learning model best explains the process needed for students to grasp writing as a skill set (Appendix A). Experiential learning is based on a four-stage learning cycle in which the learner goes through a sequence of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and finally acting as part of the learning process. In a broad learning environment, experiential learning activities include "cooperative and education placements, practicum experiences, and classroom-based hands-on laboratory activities" (Cantor, 1997, p. 3). I will use the experiential learning model because it is the one theory that best represents student-centered learning in ESL writing classes. The goal is to help students become not only more accurate and efficient, but also more motivated writers by giving them a structure using four key in-class management techniques: timed writing, connected exercises, peer editing and supportive feedback.

Timed Writing

The key to helping students with their writing is simply to get them writing. The goal of this exercise is to focus on the number of words written. A good number to start with is to have students write 100 words in 10 minutes. The reasons are twofold. Firstly, with consistent practice students are able to judge quickly how much they have written without having to count each and every word. Secondly, this prepares those students who may be planning to take written exams such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Internet Based Test of English as a Foreign Language (iBT TOEFL), both of which have unique and challenging writing tasks. In the classroom, lower level students should be told the point of the exercise is not to worry about grammatical accuracy, but instead to focus on speed. Some advanced classes should also focus on counting the number of errors made so they are then able to reflect on their writing speed as well as grammatical structures. In order to clearly judge their weekly progress, students should be asked to keep a log of the topic, as well as the number of words that they are able to write in the time allocated. Instructors should collect each student's weekly word count and show the class progress at different times throughout the semester.

Connected Exercises

Setting a clear class schedule that can be replicated on a weekly basis is essential in establishing writing proficiency. Designing activities that are clearly connected to the learning objectives of the course and sequencing these activities helps students attain skills that they can build on incrementally. Students will find that they are able to refine their writing if they can see the process's methodology; while sequencing allows the instructor to provide more efficient feedback. As an example, start with short, simple writing tasks that focus on structure such as the topic sentence for one paragraph, and then repeat it for each subsequent paragraph. The next step could then focus on the thesis statement before moving on to more complex essay styles. Textbooks often concentrate on grammar skills that can be very useful for lower level students, but at times, they do not motivate more proficient writers. By using a novel or graded reader it can provide a clear focal point for students to model and develop crucial writer skillsets.

Peer Editing

There are three sound reasons for using peer editing in EFL writing classes. First, it allows the instructor to highlight common mistakes by allowing students to analyze writing at a similar level to their own. Secondly, it creates a new role for the student in a predominantly teacher centered environment in which students are able to make their own decisions which consequently leads to more individual creativity. Thirdly, if students are able to use their second language (L2) when giving feedback to their peers, then the task is not just on finding writing mistakes but permitting multiple language skills and critical thinking to be used (Min, 2005, 2006; Lam 2012; Rothman 2015). Although peer editing has been used in EFL classrooms since the early 1980's it "does not miraculously change student into good writers" (Hafernik, 1984). This is why it is important to use peer editing and feedback as a tool rather than as the sole method of correction in an EFL writing class. Although peer editing takes individual teaching out of the instructor's hands, it does not mean that students should not have specific tasks set to know what should be edited (Hafernik, 1984; Rothman, 2015). By having students take an active role in looking at and commenting on both strengths and weaknesses of a paper, they will be much more inclined to view their own papers in a similar light.

Teacher Feedback

Feedback is one of the most important aspects to get right. Correction should be specific to the goals of the task or essay. Timson, Grow, and Matsuoka (1999) are in favor of this and found that "error correction is necessary and desirable in order to increase second language fluency" (p. 145). Nevertheless, some teachers argue that it is important not to edit every single mistake. Teachers are not usually professional editors, and should not fill theirs students' papers with more red ink than type faced print. It is more practical to use a feedback form (Appendix B), which will enable the students to clearly see the strengths and areas needed for improvement. Teachers may print the forms out or attach them with their electronic feedback enabling instructors to keep a clear record of their students' abilities from one assignment to the next. It is therefore arguable that feedback should not be given as a writer, but as a reader. Providing support for students is an essential element when learning writing skills. In order to be inspired to learn students need support and encouragement as well as numerous opportunities to improve (Good & Brophy, 1994). If we use the experiential learning theory students will benefit from reviewing past mistakes which will then improve future writing tasks.

Improving Practice

Writing can and will only improve if we give students the tools to succeed and allow them the time to write in a meaningful and connected way as opposed to just randomly teaching ideas in an unsystematic manner and hoping they will be able to improve. Utilizing these tools in a four-stage learning cycle will provide a clear map for teachers to use in their classroom making it much easier for students to follow. In general terms, it will give students not only an outline but also promote a better dialogue with the teacher as it relates to students' weak areas in their writing. Specifically, by using the writing process (Appendix A), it will first increase students' writing speed and highlight areas where students have a difficult time in writing quickly. Secondly, it will create better lesson flow in the classroom through the use of connected exercises making the point of each task clearer to both the instructor and the students. Thirdly, peer editing can be used as a tool to reinforce those areas that some students are excelling in and provide a more student centered approach in helping weaker students. Finally, clear, constructive feedback will a) create a paper trail that can be referred to in subsequent assignments and b) emphasize consistent student weaknesses. This teaching plan could prove to be important for students, teachers and the Kansai University writing programs

as a whole by providing insight into students' feelings about their English study and high-lighting why some students may lack motivation to improve their written English despite coming from a strong English background.
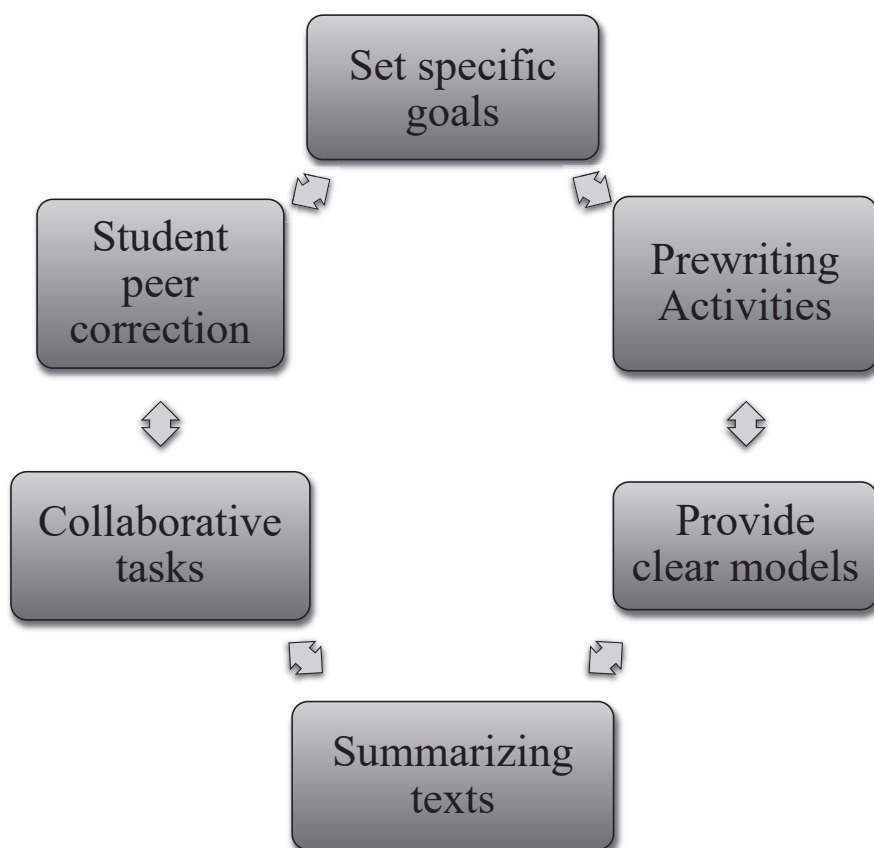
Conclusion

Producing competent creative writers is a noble goal for all teachers and so having a structured lesson format for writing classes is essential. Connected exercises that build on students' skill sets has been found as an effective way of improving student writing and student motivation. According to Dörnyei (2001) when teachers look at trying to implement a new technique in the classroom what they really want to know is ".... what they can actually do to motivate learners" (p. 116). It is clear that students respond better to specific feedback that does not overwhelm their writing capability. Teachers who can constructively highlight areas students have performed well in as well as areas for further study will improve the overall ability of students in their writing classes. Wurdinger and Carlson (2009) argue that student-centered lessons such as problem solving case studies, addressing real world issues, student interaction and engaging in direct experience where the instructor facilitates learning can be classified under experiential learning. This coincides with Fenwick's (2003) analysis on the role of educators in which the goal of instructors is to create a "community of practice" (cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 169). In my opinion, experiential learning theory is the best learning theory as part of the constructivist paradigm because it balances the needs of a wide range of learners with a variety of writing requirements that are used in a global context.

References

Cantor, J. A. (1997). *Experiential learning in higher education: Linking classroom and community*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED404948)

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Teaching and researching motivation. Applied linguistics in action*. Edinburgh Gate, U.K.: Pearson Education Limited.

Good, T. L., & Brophy, J. E, (1994). *Looking in classrooms* (6th ed.). New York: Harper Collins.

Hafernik, J. J. (1983). The how and why of peer editing in the ESL writing class. Paper presented at the State Meeting of the California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Los Angeles, CA. ERIC_NO: ED253064

Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *4*, 193-212. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40214287

Lam, R. (2010). A peer review training workshop: Coaching students to give and evaluate peer feedback. *TESL Canada Journal, 27*, 114-127.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Min, H. T. (2005). Training students to become successful peer reviewers. *System, 33*, 293-308.

Min, H. T. (2006). The effects of trained peer review on EFL students' revision types and writing quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 15,* 118-141.

Rothman, J. (2014). Investigating changes in peer feedback. 語学研究 *ICU Language Research Bulletin, 29*, 1-14.

Timson, S., Grow, A., & Matsuoka, M. (1999). Error correction preferences of second language learners: A Japanese perspective. *JACET Bulletin, 30*, 135-148.

Wurdinger, S. D., & Carlson, J. A. (2009). *Teaching for experiential learning: Five approaches that work*. Lanham, Md: R&L Education.

Appendix A

Appendix B

Feedback Form Class: _____

Student Name:		1	2	3	4	5
Interesting / Funny / Exciting / Memorable						
Word or Page limit						
Essay organization & structure						
Development & coherence of ideas (clear flow)						
Grammar **Subject verb agreement** **Count / non-count** **Prepositions** **Other**	**Spelling**					

Positive Points:

_____

_____

_____

Areas to work on:

_____

_____

_____

Grade/Mark: _____