Free Writing Instruction

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Abstract

In the first part of this paper, the current-traditional writing instruction in Japan is reviewed, and the major paradigm shifts in writing pedagogy, namely, from accuracy to fluency, from teacher-centered to student-centered, and from product-oriented to process-oriented are discussed. In the second part, an experimental free writing class is briefly introduced with five proposals in adopting free writing instruction in EFL classrooms in Japan and a scoring and evaluation scheme based on communicability and fluency.

Introduction

In this paper, first I will review some of the recent studies on teaching writing and discuss possible constraints that have hampered the shift in writing instruction in Japan. Second, I will report the experimental free writing instruction I conducted in one particular classroom in Japan and present some principles in free writing approach by non-native speakers of English teachers.

1. Teaching writing in classrooms in Japan

(1) Translation and service activity

A typical English composition class in Japan consists of word-by-word translation of English into Japanese combined with prescriptive discrete grammar item instruction. And regrettably, as Okihara (1984) points out, research into writing instruction has been inactive. Quite often, university entrance examination preparation has been condemned for such accuracy centered instruction. A great amount of English has been crammed into students, yet the results are quite discouraging. Dissosway concludes “cramming of vocabulary and grammar rules in the absence of meaningful context or
in teaching situations where available context is ignored does not produce long-term knowledge" (1989:14). Writing as a "service activity" (Paulston 1972, as cited in Okihara 1984) to reinforce grammar and vocabulary seems to have been the major objective of English composition classes in Japan. Takahashi recalls his high school English composition class as "the symbol of horror" (1990:16) and something "only those who possess mysterious memory can achieve" (ibid.). The criticism of writing instruction in ESL classes by many scholars (see, for example, Applebee, 1984; Hirston, 1982) can be applied to writing instruction in EFL classes in Japan as well. They observe that writing teachers still emphasize techniques that the research has largely discredited, and most instruction "follows a very traditional model, consisting of exercises and drills with very few opportunities for students to actually write" (Zamel, 1987:699). These teachers seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate pieces at the sentence level or even clause level, rather than as a whole unit of discourse, and in these classes language skills are hierarchically sequenced and writing is reduced to a limited range of exercises and activities. Some researchers and educators in Japan, too, have repeatedly emphasized fluency oriented, content based writing instruction. Nevertheless, textbooks for English composition are based, almost without any exception, on presenting discrete items of grammar in linear sequence with Japanese-English translation drills to supplement and reinforce grammar and vocabulary. From-controlled-to-free writing approach as suggested in Okihara (1984:26) may prove effective in promoting students' writing if, and only if, totally implemented. At present, writing teachers are still struggling with its very beginning stage, i.e. sentence-based, word-by-word translation where no errors are tolerated, and practically no free writing is done in English composition classes.

(2) Hints from second language acquisition (SLA) studies

Accuracy/fluency debate can be found in the SLA research as well, and it has given insightful implications to writing pedagogy. Rivers and Temperley (1978) distinguish 'skill getting' and 'skill using' and contend that teaching skills (accuracy training) eventually leads to 'skill using' (fluency). Their view of language teaching provides theoretical justification for accuracy centered writing instruction.

After 1980, such accuracy centered proposition yielded to fluency based theories. Thus, on the issue of syllabus designs, the importance of process was advocated. Some of the basic assumption of a process syllabus are discussed by Prabhu (1982), Krashen and Terrel (1983), and others, all of whom stressed the importance of meaningful communication. They view the language as self-correcting and self-expanding, and this, in turn, justifies free writing in writing instruction. Hughes (1983: as cited in Ellis ed. 1987) even denies formal language instruction with presentation and practice of target
language rules.

More recently, instead of taking accuracy/fluency debate as dichotomy, Ellis (1987) proposes integrated model in which accuracy/fluency is treated as a continuum. He surveys the ongoing debate, provoked by error analysis of learner interlanguage, regarding whether teaching be focused on linguistic form (i.e. on accuracy) or whether it should instead be concerned with providing opportunities for unfocused language use (i.e. for fluency). He contends that language teaching has tended to treat learning as the acquisition of homogeneous competence enshrined as grammar of the target language norms and argues both for a model of SLA that gives due recognition to language-learner language variability and for an approach to language teaching based on the acquisition of a heterogeneous competence. His "variability model" suggests that formal instruction can benefit the development of the learner's careful style, and the knowledge initially available in the learner's careful style can be incorporated into more casual styles. His model, if placed in the framework of writing pedagogy, proposes to allow variability or errors in traditional terminology to occur in students' performance and avoid overt error correction, while ensuring a match between the interactional opportunities of writing given to the learner and the kind of competence the teaching is designed to create. He concludes, "All interlanguage systems are heterogeneous. At any single stage of development, including the terminal stage, at least some forms will exist in free variation." (1987:183-184).

(3) Why no free writing

Teacher's refusal to accept learner's interlanguage variability and obligatory feeling that any deviation from the norms of NS must be corrected are, by far, the most critical and hazardous in reforming writing pedagogy in Japan. In addition, being a NNS, Japanese teachers of English may be too conscious of his imperfectness. Traditional notion that teachers must be perfect still, without doubt, lingers on, and many teachers fear losing their dignity and being defaced by showing even a bit of incompetence. Perfectionism may have its place in teaching discrete grammar items where the correct answers are usually supplied in the teacher's manual. In a free writing class where the teacher is expected to guide students' creative thinking process, these NNS teachers often lack confidence in providing a better product model, and they avoid free writing as much as possible. In addition, there have been some discouraging remarks made on writing in English by Japanese learners of English that hampered shifting teachers' self-consciousness. Takefuta (1982) compares ways of thinking of L1 Japanese and L1 English, and concludes that L1 Japanese way of thinking is emotional and ambiguous, while L1 English counterpart is logical, analytic, and clear. He further makes quantitative analysis of English written by L1 Japanese and lists five characteristic features. In
sum, he concludes, English written by L1 Japanese is "quite different from NS norms, and calling such English Japanese-English cannot be helped." (ibid. 136). It is criticism of this kind that discourage Japanese teachers of English from adopting innovative and research proven pedagogy and impinge on the reform of writing pedagogy and language instruction as a whole. Such a reproachful comment on the Japanese, in my view, even reminds me of the Meiji era when anything western was valued superior. Learning a foreign language does not, and should not mean the blind integration with the target language culture. Rather, it must help understanding the similarities and differences between the two cultures for better communication. Being a NNS, we cannot avoid the variation from the NS norms "at any single stage of our interlanguage development." (Ellis, ibid.)

To study the effect of non-nativeness, Suenobu et al. studied intelligibility of 50 sentences produced orally by Japanese students. The sentence contained many grammatical and vocabulary errors "which might be taken as fatal ones in the Japanese English teaching scene." (1989:159). They received 40 evaluated answer sheets from NSs in Portland, Oregon, and 79.2% of the sentences were rated intelligible. From this, they confute the "implication that communication between NS and learners cannot be attained until the linguistic ability of the learner approaches that of the NS." (ibid. 139), and advise language teachers not to discourage their students by "hypercorrection". Ando, in introducing his writing strategy, makes an insightful comment: "Never try to write well, for being a Japanese, Japanese-English is unavoidable." (1979:21) In my opinion, in addition to physical constraints such as class size and time limitation, free writing has not been adopted in writing classes in Japan, due mainly to the teacher's negative assement of his competence created by the traditional criticism that denies "Japanese English".

2. Writing instruction based on English as a Native Language (ENL) approach

(1) Five propositions

The following is a report of one free writing class I experimented with 50 high school freshmen students of average English competence. Out of five class periods per week allotted for Sogo Eigo 1 (General English), two class periods of 50 minutes long each were used for free writing. General principle of ENL approach is based on the findings that language acquisition, either the first or the second, differs in no important way (Corder, 1971; Krashen, 1977). A number of studies in SLA have reported the similarities in developmental sequence in first and second language acquisition. Just as a learner makes errors in his first language acquisition, he makes errors in his second language acquisition. ENL approach, thus, is nothing new in fundamental notion of language acquisition. It proposes that teachers should encourage learning by treating
errors as developmental interlanguage variability. It attempts to regard English as a native language in English as foreign language classrooms. For achieving a successful writing class based on ENL principle, I will make the following five propositions.

1. Give up the notion that the teachers must “teach” or “input” the knowledge they own.
2. Create an atmosphere in which “talking” and “consulting” with friends and with the teacher are encouraged.
3. Encourage students to write as much as possible, without worrying about grammatical, spelling, and other errors.
4. Let students form groups on their own and encourage them to cooperate in group projects.
5. Employ a variety of activities to avoid routines.

First of all, in free writing classes, the teacher should keep in mind that his primary job is to help students think and write creatively for a real purpose and audience. Maintaining such less directive and nonevaluative attitude may prove difficult in Japan where the current-traditional notion of what the teachers should be still predominate.

To start with, the teacher should step down from the platform and go around students while they are working on writing, giving hints and advice from time to time. This will help creating interactional environment in which the teacher plays a role of a guide or a coach. Furthermore, if students complain of not being able to find the right expression, teachers should instruct them to use Japanese and the use of Japanese in their composition does not affect grading, emphasizing the importance of writing “longer” composition. Such quantity-oriented instruction is similar to “Free Expression Method” implemented by Gorman (1979, as cited in Okihara ed. 1984), and more recently, Tekeuchi concluded that “Quantity is a barometer of one’s wish to express his ideas.” (1989:40). In fact, many of the early compositions of my subject students resorted to Japanese for a delicate expression of their thinking. Another pedagogical strategy is to exploit the group dynamics. The students in Japan are accustomed to act in groups rather than independently, and the teacher can take advantage of this group dynamics. Students feel at ease to work in groups of their own choice, and if competitive feeling is aroused, as happened frequently among my subject student groups, each group may come up with unpredictable and unexpected results in their group project, showing significant improvement in the quality of writing task. Finally, to give a variety in teaching materials, the teacher can get useful ideas from ESL writing textbooks (see, for example, Byrne, 1988; Oshima and Hogue, 1988), and arrange them to suit the writing classes in Japan.

The objective of this process-oriented instruction is to promote writing as a means for intelligent inquiry and for exploring the world around them. By using the language that
the students are acquiring as a means of real communication, students will learn to "clarify the values" (Nakasato, 1980:18-19). My subject students, too, have clarified self-identity by actively investigating the topics they were assigned.

(2) Evaluation and grading

Evaluation and grading are systematically embedded in the educational system in Japan, and thus reliable and valid scoring is required for free writing class as well. Two scoring schemes, analytic scoring and holistic scoring, will be reviewed first to determine their feasibility in a free writing class.

(a) Analytic vs. holistic scoring schemes

An analytic scoring by "T-unit" which was developed by Hunt (1965) has been modified by SLA researchers (see, for example Larsen-Freeman and Strom, 1977; Laseness-Freeman 1978; Perkins, 1980) to discriminate learners' interlanguage proficiency, and Arthur (1979) points out the validity of error-free T-unit in evaluating learners' writing ability. Tomita (1990) uses T-unit and its indices modified by SLA researchers in analyzing high school students' compositions, and asserts the validity or error-free T-unit and the number of T-unit in evaluating the ability of Japanese students to write English. Despite these findings, however, analytic scoring by T-unit and its indices is not suitable for a free writing class. Firstly, analytic scoring is based on accuracy-based concept of language instruction which contradicts the objective of content-oriented free writing class. Secondly, analytic scoring consumes much time and energy of the teacher who usually has at least 40 students per class and thus it is impractical.

Holistic or impressionistic (here, both terms are used interchangeably) judgement, on the other hand, centers its focus on the whole content which is considered not to be the sum of its parts. Oller (1979) asserts holistic judgement to be indispensable in evaluating writer's expression of intended meaning and how well the intended meaning has been expressed. Perkins (1983) even states that holistic scoring has the highest construct validity when overall writing proficiency is the construct to be judged. Though criticized often as subjective hence invalid, holistic scoring does have a high coefficient with objective scores. Kaczmarek (1980) reports that in her study holistic scores strongly correlate with independent readers and with objective scores. In line with these findings, I adopted impressionistic evaluation with two major criteria: fluency and communicability. The following is a scoring standard for each grade.

A: Satisfy the minimum number of words and most sentences are communicable to the grader and convey the intended meaning. Grammatical errors, including global errors, are seen but most of them do not hamper the grader's comprehension.
sion.

B: Mostly communicable but fails to reach the minimum number of words requirement.

C: Satisfy the minimum number of words but about half of the sentences are not communicable to the grader.

D: Fails to reach the minimum words and about half of the sentences are not communicable.

The above seems a very simple scale. Nevertheless, in my subject students, the correlation coefficient of their final grades for the free writing class and the scores of TOEFL practice test conducted in the third trimester showed $0.81 (p \leq 0.05)$ (Iseno, to appear). Given the present physical conditions of too large classes, more detailed scoring scheme will put too heavy a task on the teacher to bear. The above scoring scheme, however, is not free from criticism. Three possible criticisms will be considered below.

(b) Rater’s variability

Communicability judgement of students' compositions may vary by scorers. If so, this scoring scheme not only fails to judge learner proficiency but exerts a serious problem in the student's future career course, for grades weigh heavily in college entrance examinations as well. Inter-rater reliability coefficient was reported to be as high as 0.90 among NS raters. (Kotani et al. (1989)) reports that impressionistic scoring of the Japanese raters and NS raters has a correlation coefficient of 0.943 and concludes that the impressionistic evaluation used in their study seems to be a reliable measurement. Borrowing Suenobu's intelligibility judgement experiment procedures (1989), I have surveyed twenty Japanese teachers of English to judge the communicability of 50 sentences(9) that my subject students wrote in their compositions. All of these sentences have global errors which would be regarded critical mistakes in grammar classes in Japan. Analysis of survey reveals the interrater reliability coefficient of $0.87 (p \leq 0.05)$ (Iseno, to appear). This implies that holistic scoring based on communicability judgement by Japanese teachers of English may prove to be a useful tool of evaluation in free writing classes.

As for concurrent validity of holistic scoring, published research has yielded contradictory results, some denying the concurrent validity between holistic scoring and objective tests. (see, for example, Ebam, 1989). Therefore, at present, though my subject students' objective test scores and my subjective evaluation showed a high reliability as mentioned above, further research on the concurrent validity of holistic scoring is needed.

(c) Fossilization
Yet another criticism is fossilizing errors in learner's interlanguage by not correcting them. Semke (1984) used four different methods of evaluating students' writing i.e. 1) writing responses to the content; 2) correcting all the grammatical errors; 3) making positive comments and marking the errors; and 4) requiring that students correct all the marked errors. She concludes that the practice of having students correct their errors did not lead to the elimination of those errors in future compositions. In order to investigate the error ratio (no. of errors / total no. of words), I picked up five sample students at random and examined their compositions written in May, October, and January of the next year longitudinally. Not unexpectedly, all showed significant decrease in error ratio (Iseno, to appear). This is not to say that free writing alone promoted elimination of errors. During one year course, the students received other English instructions most of which were accuracy-oriented, and these may have played a greater role. The causes for decrease in error ratio are interrelated and thus it is not easy to determine the extent of each cause.

3. Conclusion

Adopting free writing was really like "taking a chance". Fortunately, however, my subject students really cooperated with me, though rather unwillingly in the beginning, throughout the one-year course. One noticeable difference in this free writing class was that students were more willing to spend time writing their compositions, made greater progress, and became more fluent than any other students I had taught previously. I consider this development on students not only gratifying but the best evidence for the validity of free writing instruction.

NOTES:

(1) The subject students were 40 girls and 10 boys attending Kobe City Municipal Fukiai High School Extensive English class.
(3) Here are some of the sentences:
   1. She fell in sink as end of this world.
   2. Do you want to smoke as to sacrifice around you?
   3. At that time I thought "Today's menu was dislike. I was able to eat this?"
   4. I can't be cured of timidity.
   5. I decided I have any confidence in myself.

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