Field: Writing, Literature

How to Develop an Awareness of Form and Content -
Tasks in a Writing Class -

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The objective of the writing class was to allow students to master various kinds of writing genres such as academic essays, e-mails and creative writing e.g. stories. Tasks were introduced for students to develop an awareness of ‘form’ and ‘content’, both on the sentence level and throughout the whole piece of writing. With the notion of form and content, students (1) know when to use grammatical structures on the sentence level to convey meaning (2) can differentiate between style and structure of genres and the topics they express. Tasks aimed for students’ metacognition of their writing experiences were introduced. In this presentation, how students can develop a notion of form and content will be discussed, introducing actual tasks and their results. Furthermore, results of the class and student feedback will be presented along with future plans.

Class
Students were sophomores taking an elective course. The class size was 25 students. They met once a week for 90 minutes through the year. One class consisted of humanity and social science majors; another, aerospace and communication technology. The class was taught in Japanese with the exception of listening activities. Class level was intermediate.

Procedure
The main textbook was Effective Academic Writing, 2 The Short Essay (Oxford University Press). In the first term, basic paragraph writing and how to write e-mails were covered. At the end of the term, students were introduced to narrative and descriptive essay organization. In the second term, the course included opinion, comparison and contrast and cause and effect essays.

E-mail writing
One important in-class assignment was writing e-mails and students spent the last 20 minutes to write them. The topics included thank you letters, apology and
invitation. In the next class, the teacher briefed on what was good about the e-mails as well as common mistakes that students had made. To reduce marking time, e-mails were handed back with symbols indicating whether they met the requirement. On other occasions, symbols were used to indicate errors for student correction.

Tasks for metacognition
Students regularly engaged in tasks to critically think about form and content. In the case of story writing, the procedure was as follows: (1) a teacher written fairy story was narrated, accompanying listening activities e.g. write a title, draw three pictures (2) a handout of the story was given, students analyzed the contrast between academic essays with form and content in mind, following a group discussion of the analysis, class discussion (3) peer evaluation.

Playful activities
A competition on the best fairy story was held, based on peer evaluation.

Form and Content exercises
Students have a fairly good knowledge of grammar but do not know how to use it when they are writing. Numerous tasks were developed. One example on the sentence level is 'use the past continuous' to describe scenery. In the sentence, ‘Wind was howling, rain was pouring; black clouds covered the sky,’ scenery is a moment described through movement.

Critical Thinking
Students were encouraged to reflect on their writing. As the course proceeded, they handed in comments on intuitions they had gained through the activities. They were also encouraged to compare peer work, reflect on it and write comments on those instances.

Results/Student Feedback
Student feedback showed that the tasks had helped them gain new insights on writing; some students faced anxiety due to past writing instruction.

Bibliography
Nunan, David 2004 Task-Based Language Teaching. Cambridge University Press.