Developing Writing Skills in a Foreign Language via the Internet

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Introduction

There is little doubt that academic writing can be very challenging for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as they must overcome the personal challenges associated with academic writing (generating ideas, organization, and mechanics) in order to develop the skills requisite for genre specific, coherent, and readable essays. With the introduction of the personal computer into the second language-writing classroom, and access to the Internet, both educators and learners alike have been provided with unlimited sources of information in the form of readable, authentic texts that address a wide variety of topics that are essential for second language development. This text describes a procedure whereby the collaboration of equally skilled second language learners, along the integration of electronic technology into the second language classroom, can aid writers in the production of genre specific compositions.

Objectives

The purpose of this activity is to have learners write a compare/contrast essay in collaboration with a small group of classmates based upon information solely found within an electronic environment. Access to the Internet allows this group of learners to identify and collect an entire corpus of information electronically. As a result of this partnership, learners plan, negotiate, research, and share information in order to meet the requirements of the assigned task.

The use of learner collaboration within the second language classroom and the subsequent benefits for learners is well supported by a number of experiments. These salient points have come to light from the research; interaction between learners and the subsequent sharing of information is compatible with the theoretical goals of the communicative approach to writing (Fathman & Kessler, 1993); de-emphasis of teacher-centered instruction (Long & Porter, 1985); aids in the development of syntactical competence (Kowal and Swain, 1994); and students act as resources for each other to achieve a common goal (McGroarty, 1989) which results in meaningful, useful, and practical language applications that increases group members' motivation for learning (Greenfield, 2003; Hauck & Haezewindt, 1999).

The Internet, with the capacity to connect users throughout the world, has also been extensively examined for its potential to aid in the development of second language learner's skills. Results of a number of studies indicate that the Internet is found to contain real language in a meaningful context (Warschaur & Healey, 1998), and as a result of viewing this material, learners develop into creators of language rather than passive recipients (Brown, 1991). Implementation of technology within the second language writing classroom also promotes learner autonomy (Graus, 1999), is an excellent means for teaching foreign culture and language (Osuna & Meskill, 1998), and in general, positively influences students' attitudes which contributes to an overall greater willingness to write (Kern, 1995).

Theoretically and pedagogically, it appears that the marriage between collaborative writing and electronic technology is an ideal means to help writers develop the much-needed skills to succeed at academic writing.

Compare/Contrast Essay

The focus of this particular genre of essay helps a reader to better understand and determine the merits of two or more

subjects. In order for our learners to clearly discuss these merits, it is important for them to be able to write this type of essay and explain how two or more subjects are similar and/or different. It is also important to educate learners of the genre specific features that distinguish a compare/contrast essay from others found within the canon of academic writing. As a result, this section does not deal with the common features of academic essays (topic sentences, paragraphs, conclusions), but rather the differences, namely connectors and organization, which set compare/contrast essays apart from other academic writings.

Within this lesson, learners are made aware that certain connectors are primarily used for compare/contrast essays. These words for comparison include: both, in the same way, similarly, similar to, like, likewise, is like, have in common, just as, compared to, same as, and resembles. While contrast is indicated by the following: however, although, but, in contrast, unlike, different from, differs from, on the contrary, whereas, while, and on the other hand. Various exercises, such as a cloze, can be used to provide opportunities for learners to use these connectors correctly before essay writing occurs.

As well, writers are informed of the methods of properly organizing a compare/contrast essay. There are two primary methods of organization used: chunking (divided pattern or block method) and sequencing (alternating pattern or point by point). With two subjects in mind, chunking separately presents all the points and details of the one subject. Then the next section discusses and includes all the points and details of the other subject. For example, if our writers are asked to compare the annual weather of Hong Kong and Toronto, Canada, they would first include the relevant details of Hong Kong's precipitation, temperature, and humidity. Next they would go on to discuss specific information concerning Toronto's precipitation, temperature, and humidity. In contrast, sequencing discusses all the pertinent details and supporting evidence for only one point at a time, however, the discussion focuses upon both subjects. Referring back to our discussion of Hong Kong's and Toronto's weather; the first section would be about the yearly precipitation received in both cities. This would be followed by a full discussion of the temperature of both Hong Kong and Toronto, and would finally end with the complete details of humidity readings.

Since there are different methods to organize this genre of text, it should be explained to writers that there is no right or wrong one; learners should use the method that is most suitable for them. Regardless of the method used, learners should always present the points for discussion (in the case of Hong Kong and Toronto; precipitation, temperature, and humidity) in the same order as stated in their thesis statement. Finally, previous experience has shown that it is beneficial to expose learners to various examples of compare and contrast texts in order to have them analyze the method of organization, and the types and numbers of connectors used. Having being acquainted with the configuration of this genre, learners can model their own work in this area of academic writing.

The Internet

The Internet has made many opportunities available to both learners and educators that were not feasible in the past. For example, there are endless resources available in the form of newspapers, magazines, government listings, grammars, dictionaries, newsgroups, key-pals, and mailing lists just to name a few. And, at our very fingertips are assorted, authentic materials whose access are not limited to either temporal or spatial constraints, for the Internet is easily accessed 24 hours a day from any computer terminal throughout the world. With these unique opportunities in mind, writers are required to only use the material secured from the Internet to compose their essays. It is assumed that a class previously received formal instruction which focused upon the use of electronic technology, thus, there is no need or space to discuss the practical tips required for successful navigation of the Internet.

In this lesson, writers are required to locate a variety of facts about a major world city. As already known, there are numerous sites available to provide the necessary information to complete a writing assignment, and even though an instructor may have personal favorites, learners should be persuaded to personally explore and decide upon their own chose of sites. Learners can easily access web sites by simply using a familiar search engine (Google, Yahoo) and typing in the subject they wish to secure more details about. As an example, once again referring back to Hong Kong's and Toronto's weather patterns, by typing "Hong Kong Weather" in Google, this will result in a seemingly countless number of sites to provide adequate information to compare or contrast these two cities. Once the appropriate information has been found, learners should be encouraged to make notes of the facts for use in their drafts. In addition, writers should be encouraged to document all pertinent information (author's name, date retrieved, URL address) because the Internet is so fluid, often times we are no longer able to revisit a particular site if there is a need for additional information.

Learner Collaboration

This next topic is very exciting for both educators and learners as we witness the results of integrating learner collaboration and modern technology in the second language writing class. The first step is to divide a class into teams of an equal number of students; ideally three members per team if possible. With the class divided up, each team is given a number between 1 and 10 and paired up with another team.

Next, an instructor assigns each team a major world city for which they are responsible for collecting information to complete their academic essay. Recently, for example, a class was allocated a mix of cities from different countries including the following: New York, Bangkok, Beijing, Toronto, Paris, Rome, Moscow, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, and Vancouver. From this selection of diverse locations, it can be seen that depending upon what metropolitan areas are matched up for this task, there can be either a wide or narrow range of differences or similarities. For example, my class was quite surprised when there appeared to be a great number of similarities, and few differences, between the weather conditions of Paris, France, and Moscow, Russia.

Now, the paired up teams will collaborate to decide what three points they will include to write about in their essays. The decision to stipulate three points for discussion is based upon the fact that each team member will be an 'expert' for one of the points so as to insure all members will contribute equally to the final product. Although the teams are left to negotiate what topics they wish to cover in their essays; an instructor may intervene with alternative suggestions if the groups' decisions are not deemed suitable. As a result of team negotiation, there has been a wide variety of interesting topics selected: historical (when the city was founded and by whom), architectural (classification and description of different styles), political (type and characteristics), and meteorological (temperature and precipitation).

Once the topics have been decided upon, each group member independently searches the Internet for the required information. Having found the pertinent information and written their information into a paragraph or two, it is suggested that each member of the team completes a peer review exercise to insure proper structure of the work submitted. This exercise usually focuses upon global issues which concern ideas and organization, although there is the potential for local errors to be discussed too. As well, I suggest that they use an invention strategy, listing, to be sure that all the information to be discussed is included, and this procedure also helps to organize the new essay from the parts contributed by each team member. Having completed these steps, each three member group synthesizes their materials to make an organized essay.

At this point in this task, the groups that were initially assigned to work together e-mailed their finished product to the other team. Once again, after the information from the other team has been received, each team will use listing in order to easily organize their new essay. Having checked and organized all the information, each team is responsible for writing a single, coherent, well-organized essay that compares and contrasts three features of two major cities. Finally, the completed essays are submitted for grading. However, there are also alternative methods for presentation of the classes' work; in the past a class has made a poster presentation, and another has delivered their essays through a Power Point presentation.

Conclusion

Although writing in a foreign language can be a daunting experience for second language students, learner collaboration, in conjunction with access to the Internet, provides unique opportunities to aid in developing writing skills. Furthermore, this integrative approach to genre specific writing also encapsulates the skills that parallel those that will be essential for our learners to possess outside of the second language classroom. No doubt, based upon the endless potential of the Internet, it will continue to have a profound influence upon EFL instructing and learning in the future.

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