



Writing materials development for learner autonomy

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This paper traces the development of a series of materials for a writing course that promotes learner autonomy for first-year students at Kanda University of International Studies. The course involves a process-based approach to writing and is supplemented by a peer online writing centre and a teacher-led writing centre. In addition, materials have been developed in order to address common errors in both grammar and writing. The curriculum has been developed collaboratively with students and current teachers through the administering of surveys and the collection of feedback.

この研究は神田外語大学1回生のライティング(英作文)コースの教材についてです。このコースはライティングセンターと呼ばれる、生徒が自分たちの作文を教師や他の生徒に添削してもらって自習システムを取り入れています。また、文法や英作文の間違いを正すための教材も含んでいます。生徒の自主学習を最大の課題としています。

This paper traces the development of a series of materials for a Basic Writing course at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) that focuses on the promotion of learner autonomy. The course involves a process-based approach to writing (Hyland, 2002; Raimes, 1983) and is supplemented by a Peer On-line Writing Centre (POWC) and a Teacher-Led Writing Centre (TLWC). In addition, supplementary materials have been developed in order to address common grammatical and lexical errors. This curriculum development has attempted to take into account the concerns of students and teachers both past and present. The main concerns were the limited applicability of the previous curriculum,

the lack of attention to grammatical issues, and vague exit competencies. In order to address these concerns and align the curriculum with Kanda's philosophy of interaction, interdependence, and individualism (Johnson, 1976), the curriculum was created with a focus on learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy at Kanda is characterized by two aspects, curricular and extracurricular (Johnson, 2002). The curricular aspect "is responsive to the particular needs of individuals," what is termed a "personal curriculum" (Johnson, 2002, p. 2). Some essential features of this include "flexibility of route, rate, and mode of learning, choice," and "responsibility," (p. 3). Johnson (2002) notes that the two basic concepts of the Kanda curricular interpretation of learner autonomy are individualization and achievement-based proficiency. The exit criteria for a successful KUIS learner include "1) a designated score on the KEPT¹ ... and 2) a demonstrated ability to perform a set of language competencies," (Johnson, 2002, p. 34). The Basic Writing curriculum revision process took into account these two basic tenets.

The Basic Writing course at KUIS is a compulsory subject for approximately 450 first-year students. Upon successful completion of the Basic Writing course, students are required to take an Advanced Writing course in their second year of study. In addition to addressing concerns about the curriculum, the new materials have attempted to create a smoother transition into subsequent writing courses at the university.

Curriculum development

After a number of years without changes to the Basic Writing curriculum, the committee in charge of this course decided that it was time to renew the course materials and design. Students of high and low writing proficiency were not getting either the accelerated or simplified materials that they needed, what Johnson (2002) terms, "a failure to accommodate individual differences," (p. 29) and a "failure to guarantee that students attain a specific and acceptable level of English proficiency," (p. 29). The standards, goals, and objectives of the Basic Writing course were undefined and vague. Previously, the curriculum began directly with writing essays and continued with those essays throughout the year. The intention was to create a new curriculum that would move from paragraph writing in the first semester to essay writing in the second that would also be flexible for different student levels, consistent in meeting the first-year exit criteria, and would foster among the students interaction, cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), and autonomy in writing.

Needs analysis

The data gathered from the needs analysis (Graves, 1996) indicated that there were many approaches to writing that were used by Basic Writing teachers at KUIS, and various opinions about the pace at which concepts and tasks should be introduced. Some teachers felt that a focus on grammar was important in a foundational writing course; others felt that a focus on meaning-based writing was the highest priority, and many felt that a combination of the two was the best approach. According to data collected by Lehtinen

(2006), students reported that “brainstorming, the writing process, peer editing groups, using computers to write and having conversations about writing” were new to them (p. 5). The importance of content, grammar and vocabulary, structure, and original ideas was underscored by the generally equal ranking of “extremely important in writing” that students gave to each -- 32%, 33%, 27%, and 27%, respectively (Lehtinen, 2006). This data indicated that an approach that excluded either grammar or meaning-based activities would be detrimental to Kanda students’ learning needs.

Materials developed

Like all first-year courses at KUIS, the curriculum for Basic Writing is also somewhat determined by the requirements of more advanced courses; in this instance, Advanced Writing. Basic Writing exit competencies, thus determined, are “integrated skills tasks administered and assessed by teachers,” (Johnson, 2002). These include the ability to summarize and critique articles, the ability to organize ideas into different essay types, peer editing, grammatical awareness, and an understanding of the writing process. The schedule of the course is flexible, so that teachers can adjust the tasks and the time needed according to requirements.

Another important aspect of the course has been the design of supplementary materials that are specific to the curriculum. Materials were created to supplement the core curriculum that teachers and students can use at will. This resource includes worksheets targeted at specific writing problems faced by students and grammar worksheets based on common writing issues. These supplementary materials

are again intended to maximize learner autonomy for students outside of the classroom; Johnson (2002) writes that, “the best way we can accommodate different learning styles is to provide choice and allow the student to choose preferred learning tasks.” This also allows teachers to be flexible in their use of course materials.

Learner autonomy

Within the classroom, the writing process, peer- and self-revising, and editing are an important part of promoting learner autonomy (Mangelsdorf, 1992, as cited in Lockhart and Ng, 1994). The writing process that we follow consists of brainstorming, pre-writing, planning, drafting, revising, and editing. This is a cyclical process, with students continually going back to their drafts and reworking them. We also employ peer feedback, checklists, and conferences as a means to help students become autonomous writers, especially in the areas of revising and editing.

As Johnson (2002) writes, “the classroom ‘chalk and talk’ mode of delivery is not the only possible mode of course delivery,” (p. 31). Mention has been made of facilities available to students outside of the classroom – the Self Access Learning Centre (SALC), the Peer Online Writing Centre (POWC), and the Teacher Led Writing Centre (TLWC). While not intended solely for Basic Writing students, attempts have been made to mould these additional or supplementary resources into more complementary resources – resources more closely linked to the course both in terms of advice and method. We have also attempted to further strengthen the links between them and the curriculum particularly with regards to the focus on autonomous

learning. So, while the curriculum itself has been of great importance, a more concerted integration of these resources into the idea of a curriculum has been another significant part of the process.

Self-Access Learning Centre

The Self-Access Learning Centre, SALC, the latest version of which dates from 2003, provides an extensive collection of resources and materials; including grammar, pronunciation, videos, reading and cultural material, through to learning advisors and staff (Cooke, 2007). Various other areas, such as a poetry and letters board provide opportunities for expressive writing. The writing centres are part of this overall construct.

Peer Online Writing Centre

The Peer Online Writing Centre, POWC, was launched in 2004, initially with 6 peer advisors. The idea was for this centre to work alongside and as a supplement to the Teacher-Led Writing Centre (TLWC). English level, in itself, was not so much a factor in choosing students for these positions, but rather their interest or demonstrated ability to give constructive feedback on ideas (Rosalia, 2004). One of the initial problems of the centre was the reticence of students and teachers alike to accept the value of advice given by peers, who were not trained English professionals or even native speakers. One of the main hurdles to overcome has been to break down this preconception and to give the centre a certain credibility. According to feedback from students conducted over the past year increased focus on

peer-editing within the classroom itself has gone a long way to breaking down the idea of the teacher as sole arbiter and holder of knowledge. While studies such as Zhang (1995) have concluded that students overwhelmingly prefer teacher feedback, others such as Mendonca and Johnson (1994) have outlined the effectiveness of peer editing. Recent research at KUIS has borne out these findings (see Lehtinen, 2006; Rosalia, 2004).

Teacher-Led Writing Centre

The Teacher-led Writing Centre, TLWC, is an important facility available to students outside the classroom. The TLWC provides students the opportunity to speak with someone apart from their room teacher about their work. It also attempts to create a learning environment whereby students and teachers can work in collaboration to improve the students' writing. A major concern, however, particularly taking into account the different English language backgrounds of the teachers, was a lack of consistency in the advice and correction given. Perhaps most obviously, the differences in spelling and some grammatical structures, but also, and maybe more importantly, the different approaches to writing structure and organisation could be a source of confusion. As mentioned previously, another major concern has been the use of the centre merely as a correction service. Teachers have been encouraged to elicit specific aspects of writing, such as introductions, tenses, use of articles, that a student requires help with. Consequently a list of guidelines for writing centre teachers was implemented and is outlined in Appendix 1.

Finally, the work on these other facilities has mainly involved an attempt to work in tandem with classroom writing teachers, to supplement rather than duplicate the work done there, particularly in relation to peer/self editing and the overall promotion of learner autonomy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two major concerns of learner autonomy and clear exit competencies have been central to the re-development of this curriculum. The work undertaken has attempted to establish a pedagogical framework which can be flexibly implemented and tailored to individual classrooms and learners.

Acknowledgments

This paper has drawn on the ideas and expertise of many people currently working within the English Language Institute (ELI) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) and others who have been involved with the ELI over the last 20 years. Dr. Frank Johnson's interest in and promotion of learner autonomy at the Institute is a precursor to much of the work going on at the present time. Perhaps more directly, mention should be made of the assistance and direction of Ms. Nicola Galloway, the coordinator of the Skills Committee at KUIS, and also the work of our colleague Mr. Ben Lehtinen, who is responsible for a significant amount of the materials for the current Basic Writing Course.

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Appendix 1

Teacher-Led Writing Center Guidelines

Writing Centre Guidelines (For Tutors)

- 1) Find out the purpose of the writing assignment (e.g. critique of article or personal narrative).
- 2) Elicit specific aspects of writing that the student wants help with if they haven't collected any cards from the board (e.g. introduction or tense).

NOTE: Students should not merely say 'grammar' or 'writing'. This is especially crucial when a student comes with a 5-page paper. Students may also have trouble selecting cards from the board; therefore you should explain

that explanations of the words are on the back of the card.

- 3) Ask students what kind of feedback they would like to receive:

- Read through the writing and highlight sections that need revision if requested.

OR

- Read through the writing but do NOT highlight the mistakes. Give the writing back to the student, tell them to read it out loud and find for themselves the mistakes related to 2) above. If they don't notice them, go back and point out the location.

OR

- Code the errors that students have requested help with.

NOTE: DO NOT REWRITE WHOLE CHUNKS OF STUDENTS' WRITING.

- 4) Give the student time to edit their writing.
- 5) Give feedback on whether their editing was successful.
- 6) If the student's writing exhibits consistent errors, direct their attention to one instance and then ask them to apply the correction throughout the writing.

NOTE: Individual instructors can decide whether or not to give feedback on collocations, idioms, natural expressions, and other stylistic features.

Appendix 2

Questionnaire for Basic Writing Students

See <www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=595502942274>.

Footnotes

¹ Kanda English Proficiency Test