A Developing Method in ESL Writing

Rory Britto

This paper deals with a practical orientation to writing classes in university ESL classes in Japan. The focus is on a cognitive approach based on the practice of English as communication. I give some theoretical background to the method, and then outline its implementation in the classroom. I feel that the techniques put forward here help provide a fruitful classroom environment and take advantage of certain characteristics of writing for a dynamic practice of English.

Teaching writing classes at university in Japan can be, and is, a rewarding and challenging experience. Through the years, I have developed what I consider an effective approach to the task. My approach can be defined, if need be, as a cognitive approach, extending more or less to a modified process approach. It is my hope that what this means will become clearer by the end of this paper. However, one characteristic of the cognitive approach is that our subjects are aware in some sense of the mental process that they apply to the task. That is to say that they have an understanding, at some level, of their own needs and motivations. I feel not only does it facilitate our task by addressing these needs and motivation, but also ultimately that is the only avenue of success. Our burden is further lightened by the fact that the students can be made aware of the processes involved, and therefore are able to manipulate them in achieving success.

BACKGROUND

To characterize the process approach is to say that the focus is not necessarily on the finished product *per se*. In other words, perfection in grammatical surface structures is not the goal in writing, but through the practice of more or less unfettered (yet at times controlled) writing, a development of cohesive grammar can be attained. More on this point will be explained later. I am not willing to state that I have found the philosopher's stone of writing pedagogy. However, for the purposes to which I turn, I feel that I have some degree of success in effecting productive outcomes.

I would appreciate it if the reader approached this paper as more of a report on pedagogical considerations and their applications to a particular methodology, than a presentation of outcomes of any particular empirical research. The focus here will be on this particular teacher's approach to teaching writing classes at the university level in Japan.

The classes for which I am responsible do not vary very much in so-called level. They consist of a virtually homogenized group of students whose active or productive knowledge of English ranges from poor to fair to adequate. As part of the foreign language English curriculum at Kurume University, students of the department of Languages and Literature are required to take writing classes in addition to classes that focus on reading, speaking, and listening. This requirement extends through their second year. As they enter the third year and classes under consideration here, any further classes in writing are elective. A writing class in this situation can consist of anywhere from five to twenty or so students. At other universities and colleges where I have taught freshman and sophomore required writing, the number of students in a class can number from about twenty to around fifty.

In this paper, when I discuss writing, as will be noted later, I mean the type of writing that Widdowson classifies as writing in *use*, rather than writing as *usage*. The difference between these is that when we practice writing as usage, we are practicing the physical manipulation or the mechanical operations of writing. This type of writing is akin to the type of speech exercise that one finds in pattern practice drills where the overriding concern is with the surface manifestations, and where meaning is of secondary consideration. While this type of writing has its very important purposes, the focus in this paper will be on the other type: writing for use. Writing for use is writing in its discursive or its communicative function.

One way of looking at the distinction is that when we *use* writing, we necessarily follow the conventions (to a greater or less extent) associated with linguistic mastery. In other words, our *use* of writing is dependent on conventions of *usage*. When we are engaged in real communication, utilizing the conventions of expression lessens the burden of our task. In addition, surface structures must take form that achieves certain performance criteria. So that, the better we are able to manipulate the instruments of communication, the better our chances for conveying the thoughts that motivate such behavior. However, the obverse it not necessarily true. Usage does not necessarily lead to purposeful *use* of language. We can practice writing grammatically correct sentences and manipulating them for a very long time without ever putting them in practice. In the extreme, we can do so without necessarily knowing what they mean.

PREPARATION FOR WRITING

When beginning a writing class, one of the first things I discuss with

my students, or rather, one of the first questions I ask them is about the nature of writing. This applies both to writing for communication sake and to writing as a tool for the development of linguistic ability. This is done through a series of questions intended to draw out their thoughts about communication and the potential role that writing plays in learning a language.

My first questions usually focus on the nature of writing and its purposes. A common expression gathered from the students is that writing is an act of communication, and of course this is true. We can say with certainty that writing is a vehicle for expressing or conveying our ideas to others. The term communicate here bears clarification in that the type of communication under consideration is a one-way process. It can be viewed as the creation of a self-contained discussion. That is to say, it is not necessarily a reciprocal act of communication as with spoken discourse. Unlike the common notion of communication, input from the interlocutor does not play an immediate vital part. It might hinder as much as help in the writing process if, in fact, we could get comment from the intended audience in each step of the process of writing.

One of the more important aspects of writing is that it is a "...complex, cognitive process that requires sustained intellectual effort over a considerable period of time". (White and Arnet (Nunan 1999: 273) Ultimately, whether the focus is on communicating with a specific audience, communicating for a specific purpose, or communicating as self-expression, writing is an act of creation that serves as a way of formulating our thoughts.

While not necessarily of direct concern to the students, writing is also an act of the creation, preservation and transference of culture. One

could pursue this avenue in the discussion, especially if one were to address issues of cross-cultural communications as the content focus of the writing class.

PURPOSES AND GOALS

With this in mind, the focus then turns to the purpose or purposes of having a writing class in the language curriculum. As the students move into the wider world (especially the world of international business), they *may* find themselves in a position where writing in English is necessary. This however, probably applies to a small percentage of the student population. For the vast majority of students of English here, the chances for such opportunity, or demand are really very slim. A more realistic reason for including writing in the curriculum (that is inclusive of the reason given above) is simply that, writing helps our students learn.

As mentioned above, I feel that the students are aware, whether sub-consciously or otherwise, of learning processes and seem to respond when it is brought to their attention that writing and thinking seem to rely on some of the same processes. Putting arguments together, stringing a cohesive discourse, and manipulating logical sequence are all parts of the thinking process, and are also keystones to effective and persuasive writing.

The goal of language education is to be able to express ones thoughts in such a way in the target language. As Nunan puts it, "The practice of discourse and the practice of grammar can be said to stem from the same source." (Nunan 1999: 287) He provides an example illustrating this when he notes that "decisions about how to package information within a sentence, and what grammatical forms to use... can often only be made with reference to the discourse context within which the sentence is to be

placed." (*ibid.*)   Practice doing this in the medium of writing has its specific advantages. The main advantage is the lack of constraints of time that we find in face-to-face oral communication. In writing, we have the opportunity to repackage and revise the information we wish to convey, at our leisure. Sometimes this revision is closer to our intention than our original expression. We can also experiment with different ways of saying the same thing before making our presentation, which may not be afforded in conversation. Writing does have this advantage of allowing us to consciously apply ourselves to the manipulation of grammar and meaning.

At some point in the discussion, usually before talking to the students about the mechanics of convention, I ask them what they think the goal of their writing class should be. Quite often, a student will offer that it is their intention to master English. However, we should realize that this is more or less an emotional expression. It would be nice to be able to "master" such a challenge as learning another language. However, the reality is different and further, it is not necessary to master a language in order to become conversant and even fluent in it. At any rate, I ask them to be realistic about their level of aspiration and consider that the time frame under discussion is either for one semester or two. I remind them also that university classes in Japan meet an hour and a half, once a week, for 12 weeks per semester. Teacher contact time therefore is 18 hours for the semester courses and 36 hours for the year-long two semester courses.

In consideration of this, their responses change and turn to practical matters, such as being able to write a business letter or a letter to a friend in a foreign country. It seems to me that the class would have to focus on that exclusively and intensely for such an ability to be achieved

in such a short time. This would change the general nature of the class to a more specialized orientation.

While the latter is feasible, it is purposes like the former that prove problematic; however with the right approach, fruitful in the time frame given.

GOALS

At this juncture, I offer them a tentative goal that includes the emotional component of their "mastery" response, while at the same time maintaining a realistic orientation. This tentative goal is potentially inclusive of any short-term practical goals that they may have. When I propose that our goal should be to become a good writer, I ordinarily get unanimous agreement. I point out however that the word 'good' is problematic. To define a good writer is virtually impossible. The examples I use range from Hemingway to Mishima to Melville. These examples are offered facetiously, however, what I intend to stress here is that there are many interpretations as to what a good writer is. While some view Hemingway (as an example) as a good writer, there are those who hold the opposite view. The point being here that determining what a good writer is, is often a subjective judgment and as a goal it may be impossible to say when we have reached it. This is an open-ended goal similar to the "mastery" of English goal. Emotionally, it resonates, however in practical terms, it may be an unrealistic ideal.

Here then, I offer to the students a modification of this goal. I ask them if it might not be a *better* idea to say that our goal is to become a better writer. The students seem to accept this as an insight, and this is fortified when I assure them that while it may not be possible that everyone master English, or that everyone become a good English writer. It is

possible and more than likely that everyone become better at English and a better writer. I emphasize that this applies to their teacher as well as to themselves hoping to humanize the educational process, and they seem to appreciate it as such when put in these terms.

Here we have the wellspring of the communicative approach. We use language as human beings, and to the extent that we produce sentences or utterances, whether perfect or imperfect, we produce them as human beings. It is also here that one of the obligations of educators can be fulfilled. As teachers we have many obligations to our students, from dispensing information, to providing models to correcting mistakes, but these could conceivably be done by mechanical means. What makes the difference is that we have certain social obligations to our students, the overriding one which is to have their better interests at heart. More specifically, it is our charge to offer our students meaningful success. It is on this point that I feel certain I can promise them that they can become a better writer, not necessarily a good writer, but a better writer. It is important to offer them success in this way, because as has been shown that while "the greater the success...the stronger is the tendency to raise levels of aspiration" (Child 1993:55). Tangentially, at the same time we should keep in mind that "where success comes too easily, levels are frequently lowered." (*ibid.*) Hence, I feel it proper to avoid mechanical writing exercises such as pattern practice or sentence combination as writing exercises. These types of exercises meet with success that is too easily attainable and do not engage the communicative or cognitive capabilities of the students.

BETTER WRITERS

With the goal established, it becomes an easy step to elicit the next natural question. That is: How can I become a better writer? Here I offer

the students three or four pointers to keep in mind as we go on through the course. The first should be obvious.

Write, write, write and write. I tell them that the best way to become a better writer, or the best way to practice writing is to write, write and write. I try to impress upon them that the more one writes, the better one gets at it. I am reminded of and offer a quote from Erasmus in this connection: "The desire to write grows with writing". I would add that the ability to write increases apace with the actual practice of writing. I feel that it is not necessary really to concentrate on the quality of what one writes at this point but that quantity is the more important consideration. It is a matter of logical expression that quality attaches itself to quantity. This is not to say that through some magic process there is a point where one gets better after writing so many words. The real implication is that the more practice one has in expressing oneself, not only the easier it gets to do so, but through practice the forms used come under better control.

Change is good. Writer's block is a common phenomenon, not only among native speakers but Second Language Learners also. It is my feeling that sometimes teachers tend to forget that it is not just a simple matter to assign a topic for writing and the students will write. Each individual brings his personality and life experiences to the tasks that we do assign, so that although we think it natural that everyone should be able to write about *Baseball*, for instance, this topic may not hold the interest of some of our students who consequently may feel forced to write about something that they really don't want to. I stress to them that when they come to a topic that they feel they have nothing to say about, to remember that any topic given takes place in the real world that surrounds them. This means that those things that are associated with

baseball in their minds are equally valid as themes for writing. If one is interested in clothing design, one could discuss the aesthetics of the uniforms. If one's interest lies in architecture, one could focus on the baseball stadium as a topic. This can be applied to transportation systems [to baseball games but not necessarily so] and experiences connected with them. The imagination can be led to consider how watching sports on television (for that matter, watching television) has changed the family, or how television itself has changed over the years. I offer these as examples to show the students that they are neither limited by the topic nor by their imagination.

As a matter of fact, when I do assign topics for writing, as often as possible, I offer a variety of approaches one might take in dealing with them. When worse comes to worst and I have the odd student who really cannot begin writing chose from alternatives, I offer and have them write on the topic from one of those approaches. These students need the extra time to formulate an idea, and the best approach I have found is to allow them the extra time. While this means that they may not produce an acceptable quantity of writing during the preliminary stages, the freedom given to them allows them to explore and discover ideas that are important and meaningful to *them*. However, they are still responsible for producing the required number of pages when submitting their homework.

Avoid using erasers. Mistakes are part and parcel of the writing process and as such, should be dealt with as much as possible when the students are involved in that process. What this requires is that during class time when the students are engaged in writing that the teacher go around offering suggestions for correction, coherency, and style. Of course there is more than one kind of mistake, among which are

mechanical mistakes and conceptual mistakes. In the case of mechanical mistakes, (that is mistakes connected with grammar, spelling, and such) it is natural to want to eliminate them, and when they are pointed out to the students, they almost reflexively reach for the eraser. This, in and of itself is not bad, but one thing I have noticed with Japanese students is that when they do this, some tend to erase the whole line where the mistake occurred and rewrite the whole sentence again. This is really time-consuming and a distraction to the process of writing and learning, at the level of rough draft at least. Energies spent on this unnecessary attention to perfection could be put to better use elsewhere. To get the students to concentrate on and correct only the error requires close inter-action and supervision and in a class numbering in the tens of students, not really feasible, but it can be brought to the attention of particular students when the teacher makes his rounds of the class offering suggestions for correction and advice.

As for conceptual errors, I like to point out that when we erase ideas, sometimes it is difficult to get them back. When we use computerized word processors, we can often use the undo function to recall sentences and phrases that may prove useful later. However, when writing by hand, unless one is taking notes on the side, what we have erased may be lost in the stream of thought and difficult to retrieve from the memory. Instead of erasing, by crossing out phrases and ideas that don't seem to fit at the time, they still remain visible and easily modified or transferred to a more appropriate place in the discourse.

Express yourself. Our students are at a special age. It is a time in their development where their mental life is occupied by emotion and they seek outlets for their expression. They are at a time when they have drama in their lives. They are often involved romantically, and all this

leads naturally to a desire to give vent to their creative expression which according to Arnold is "the quintessence of human activity, and as such a powerful source of strength and inspiration for learning." (Arnold 1999:222) Our students are busy trying to find out who they are in the world and concerned with, as Bundage and Macheracher put it, "whether they are changing in the direction of their own idealized self-concept than whether they are meeting standards and objectives set for them by othe rs." (in Nunan 1999: 15) Another principle that is applicable from the same source is that they "learn best when the content is personally relevant to past experience or present concerns and the learning process is relevant to life experiences." (*Ibid.* pg. 15) The way Stevick puts it is that "the emotions should be dealt with as well as the intellect; students should have the opportunity to interact [more on this later]; they should make self-committing choices; and activities should contribute to the st udent's sense of security." (in Arnold 1999:174).

Feel free. A sense of security, which is directly relevant to our students concern, is the security one attains when not worried about criticism. It seems often that our students are hesitant to express themselves for fear of being criticized, mainly for mistakes that are found at the usage level of writing. With exercising such freedom, does come risk. This is a given, however "students who avoid risks are stalled by actual or anticipated criticism from others or by self-criticism that they themselves supply." (Arnold 1999: 63) I encourage to them take risks in using the language they know to express themselves. It is possible that their affective filter can be lowered should they "center on meaningful communication rather than on form;...." (Richards and Rodgers 1986;134) At the same time, I stress that while I may make suggestions on how better to express themselves, grammatically *and* stylistically, that their writing is exactly that - their writing. I assure them that I will not read their paper

aloud nor have them do so without their permission. If I do have suggestions about changes in the content, I emphasize that it is their decision to accept or reject any suggestion I make. Any critique that I have dealing with the content of the paper is that of a reader, and a teacher of expression, not necessarily that of a teacher of language. As with the above principle of *change is good*, I stress that it is the student not I who has control over what they themselves write.

Mechanics and Conceptual Stucture

Part of becoming a good writer lies in the control of form. To this end, I take the time to go through the basics of written structure with the students. I make a distinction between mechanical structure and conceptual structure.

It is a common assumption that Japanese students don't have much practice in writing before coming to university, especially as concerns English. Therefore, it is often surprising how easy it is to teach them about margins, headings, indentation, paragraphs, and general form that can be categorized as mechanical structure. My feeling is that there is a strong passive knowledge of how these things are manifest that stems from their reading in their own language. Although the orientation in Japanese writing is vertical rather than horizontal as with English, basically the structure is the same. By the time they enter university, they have read thousands of paragraphs in their own language and are able to intuit how they are constructed. I usually spend only about half an hour of the introductory class dealing with such things. At times during the course of the class, errors do occur, and by this I mean that sometimes a one-page paper is written as one or two long paragraphs. However it is a simple matter to offer reminders; once this is done it seems that they do not recur.

The next step in the process is to deal with what I call conceptual structure. What this means is creating in them an awareness of the function of the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. In this respect, I focus mainly on the introduction. I emphasize that a writer must consider the reader when expressing himself. It is the writer's responsibility to draw the interest of the reader and to set the tone of the composition. I am particularly fond of using an example from music to emphasis these two points. It would be an odd juxtaposition were the melody of *Someone to Watch Over Me* to follow the introduction to the *William Tell Overture*, an attention-getting introduction, to be sure. This is a very salient example that the students can relate to, and with such an explanation, most students seem to understand and proceed to incorporate introductions in their writing. Of course, at the first assignment, there are many who do not and who need reminding. However it seems that with gentle reminders and feedback, and only after a relatively short time, (from my experience, two or three writing assignments as the most) that most students get the hang of it. This is quite important for as Celce-Muria points out, real world writing may not be "generated without the writer's first having a purpose for writing." (Celce-Muria 1991:255). It is during the process of creating an introduction that the writer determines his or her purpose.

Topics and Themes

As for writing topics, I usually divide the course into two phases. In the first phase of the class, when choosing topics, I tend to focus on a modified "rhetorical patterns" approach. In this approach, "···the students are exposed to a variety of types of discourse structure common to English prose." (*ibid. pg.* 255) As is normally practiced, "examples of professional writing illustrating a particular pattern that forms the

focus of a lesson or sequence of lessons" (*ibid. pg.* 255), are presented to the students. However, in my writing classes I have modified this approach and instead of giving them examples of published writing to read and assimilate, I verbally model the type of discourse. The main types that I focus on are "exposition", "description", "comparison and contrast", "process", and similar types. I do stress to the students that types of writing such as these are not mutually exclusive, and good writers employ a variety of discourse types in any single piece of writing. Nonetheless, my main thematic is that writing is a time to reflect on and analyze ones experiences, so that when assigning even "rhetorical pattern", I make an attempt to "personalize" the topic.

As a simplified example, I usually assign a composition concentrating on description as one of the first assignments. Normally in this case, the teacher directs the students to describe a place, their room, their garden, or some such. Often the students turn out pretty good and detailed descriptions of such places. However in any real communication, such descriptions are far and few between. We do not normally engage in extended descriptions in this manner; usually our descriptions are short and the purpose is not description itself but to enhance and make our communications more vivid. What I do is ask that the students think of a favorite place and the things found there. Of course, they cannot remember all the things in a certain place, but a few things do stick out in their memories. The reason that they do is that they have meaning or some kind of value to the students. It is those things that I ask the students to describe. I tell them that everything in our lives has a story and ask them to focus on that story. When conveying that story to others we strive to create an image and description is helpful in realizing that image in the mind of the listener or reader.

As I mentioned above, I model the composition to the students before assigning them to begin writing. I find this useful to help the students understand how to organize their compositions and what sort of thing I expect. It also gives them an idea of how a writer goes about explaining, paraphrasing, stressing points, tangentializing, including parenthetical thoughts and other aspects of writing. Another facet of this is that it is a good listening activity for following extended discourse and awareness of the aspects just mentioned, as used in speech.

In the second phase of the course, I concentrate on content themes. These themes are often topical dealing with political, environmental and social issues. I think it important also to include topics that deal with personal values, for as I have mentioned, one purpose of writing is that of the exploration of the self, or self-discovery.

As for when to have the students write, considering the set-up I have just outlined, I have no qualms in having the students write in class. This is usually begun after my oral compositional model which can take any- where from thirty minutes to an hour, depending on how many examples I provide, and this depends on the reaction of the individual class and the individuals in it. After setting the writing assignment, and after the stu- dents have written about a paragraph or so, I go around to as many stu- dents as possible, in the time remaining, looking at their papers. I make comments generally of three types at this time: comments concerned with grammar and spelling, comments dealing with style, and comments about the content message. I consider such writing in the classroom as a draft of the finished product, which I usually assign to be finished at home.

Though it seems that "teacher comment has little impact on student

writing", (*ibid. pg.* 257) I do comment on grammar mistakes individually at their desks, and try to help them understand the causes of such errors. As such, this becomes a private lesson in grammar, and hopefully it has the affect of improving the student's understanding of grammar. At the same time, I also discuss with them ideas of style and usage. More importantly than that, however is the interest shown in the content of their writing. Although Leki has found "…that students expressed a lack of interest in teacher reaction to the content of their papers, and instead indicated a desire to have every error marked on their papers," (ibid.) it is my experience that with the type of lesson I have outlined, most students do seem receptive to comments on the content if one couches them in terms of discussion, not necessarily with the expectation in the improvement in writing. That is not the purpose of the comments I make in this regard. I intend here to make a communicative contact with the person who is trying to express themself. If, for example I disagree with what a student says, I will tell them; not expecting them to make changes in the content, but to show them that people will react to what they say. As for the second point that Leki makes, while not correcting every error, I do make an effort to help the students individually, and I feel that the person-to-person contact made while making my rounds through the class is beneficial to such end.

After class is finished, I assign them to finish the composition at home, usually requiring them to produce one page in the first semester and optimally two pages in the second, for each writing assignment. These lengths are arbitrary, however, they do serve as an attainable gradated goal for which to aim.

The final phase, after the students finish their compositions and bring them to class, is where the students engage in bringing their

compositions to communicative life. Quite often in writing classes, what happens is that the students complete the assignment and hand them in, then the teacher makes his or her corrections and comments, and returns the paper to the student, either for revision or as the graded finished product. This seems however, not only to lack a communicative function, but also fails to take advantage of what may be called association complexes. In the latter case, the more meaningful and salient the psychological associations a person makes with what she or he produces, the better the learning of what went into that production. In the former case, our students are writing to make themselves understood. When they get their papers back from the teacher, they may not be able to tell whether they have been successful in that or not.

ORAL PRESENTATION

In order to address both of these issues, I have the students present their papers orally to each other. The way that this is done is to have the students line up in two rows facing each other. I then have them ask each other to tell what they have written about the subject. I ask them to have their paper in hand when they do this, but discourage them from reading the paper directly to each other. What this means is that I ask them that when they are speaking, not to look at the paper. I tell them that they should read what is on the paper, grasp what they have written or read, look up at their partner and speak. This is a three-step process that seems to me more effective then having them just read and speak. At the same time, when one student is presenting his or her paper, the other should not be looking at theirs and instead should pay attention to what the partner is saying. I require the listener to ask anywhere from three questions at the first presentation to ten after they have gotten used to the exercise. Quite often, I notice, the students wait until their partner has finished presenting her or his own paper before asking questions. Of

course this is not the way natural communication is to be had, so this is one of the things I watch for during the exercise. When I notice students doing this, I remind them that asking questions during an exposition is the natural way that communication takes place. At times, I intersperse myself into the dyad in order to model interruption, turn-taking, questioning, meaning-clarification, and other activities associated with conversational discourse.

This points out the main function of the teacher in this type of exercise: that of facilitator or activity manager. During this time, the teacher concerns himself less with whether students are producing 'good' English than whether they are following rules of discourse; i.e. speaking in the target language, asking questions, paraphrasing, explaining meaning, and so on.

I have the students change partners as many as five or six times during a session. The way this is done is to have them rotate clock-wise with one student at either end going over to the other side. Graphically, this might best be represented by:

A	B	C	D···	W	X
1	2	3	4···	Z	Y

going to

1	A	B	C	D ...	W
2	3	4	5···	Y	X

Usually by the fourth time, they are able to recall and produce what they have written and feel comfortable presenting what they have written

without looking at their paper. It should be noted here that this type of memorization is not rote, but based on a cognitive understanding of the content of the message. Anecdotally, it is my intuition that as they practice presenting in this way, they are more and more able to recall what they have written, including the parts that they have not specifically read aloud to their partner.

In this type of exercise, I feel that the students have a chance to practice all four skills (to the extent that division is valid and useful) and further, have a chance to practice communication among their peers.

What I have outlined here is a method based on a communicative approach to language teaching. The focus has been on practicing language more than any reference to language learning. I feel that in this way we can lead the students to a more fruitful experience in the classroom expanding on what they have learned using more traditional methods of learning language. I have mainly focused on writing, but as I hope has become clear, my aim is toward the practice of language in more or less its full dynamic to facilitate its learning. It is my hope that the reader find any of the ideas herein useful in any way, whether in practice or theory.

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