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Speaking Scenarios and L2 French Composition

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Abstract

This article proposes a task-based (TB) speaking-to-writing scenario as a general model for facilitating written output and overall language learning. It begins with the design of the speaking scenario, laying out the basic lexical, morphological, and syntactical foundations of the writing assignment. The latter follows accordingly the formal stages of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, and revision). Both tasks are informed by pre-task, main-task, and post-task protocols of TB teaching and learning, peer collaboration, and instructor's feedback.

Introduction

Research conducted on the teaching of second/foreign language (L2/FL) writing has hitherto focused predominantly on the theoretical and experimental aspects of learning to write. Little attention has been paid to the insights these research findings may offer to instructors in terms of practical classroom applications that improve writing output and support overall language learning. Drawing on the emerging theory and practice of "Writing to Learn" (Ruiz-Funes, 2015; Williams, 2012), especially writing to learn a second or foreign language (Manchón, 2011a, 2011b), this article offers ideas on how to design and carry out, in a communicative classroom setting, a speaking-to-writing task based on a thematic lesson unit. It capitalizes on the basic protocols of Task-Based Teaching and Learning (TBTL), as conceptualized by Prabhu (1987), to formulate a general model for (1) creating a communicative writing task (pre-task, main task, post-task), (2) scaffolding the formal stages of the writing process from drafting to collaborative peer revision, and (3) incorporating instructor's corrective feedback (CF) and assessment protocols. Exploring the well-established link between speaking and writing,[1] the model speaking-to-writing scenario proposed in this article capitalizes on the context of a TB communicative (speaking) activity to introduce the topic and lay the basic lexical, morphological, and syntactical foundations of the writing task. This scaffolding of content and form has the potential to increase writing output and accuracy, supporting the development of global language learning.

Literature Review

A growing body of research on "Writing to Learn" (WL) has shown that writing instruction has a significant impact on L2/FL acquisition process (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014; Harklau, 2002; Manchón 2011a, 2011b; Ruiz-Funes, 2015; Williams, 2012; Wolff, 2000). The role that literacy plays in first language (L1) language acquisition (Kroll, 1981) may provide a reference

point if only to draw a distinction indispensable for understanding the benefits of scaffolding written work in the L2/FL classroom. Namely, while L1 speakers generally don't experience problems with basic self-expression by the time they begin to learn to write, L2/FL learners, who lack commensurate L2 lexical and morphosyntactic command, exhibit an over-dependency on dictionary usage, translation, and L1 writing skills (Cohen & Books-Carson, 2001; Cohen, Books-Carson, & Jacobs-Cassuto, 2000; Gibbons, 2002; Hyland, 2008; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Lally, 2000; Lefrançois, 2001; Uzawa, 1996; Valdés, Haro, & Echevarriarza, 1992). Faced with this challenge, how should classroom L2/FL instructors approach writing instruction while taking into account developmental issues specific to elementary-level L2/FL learning? The ACTFL proficiency guidelines suggest that it is a question of time until beginning L2/FL students, at first "able to write no more than lists, complete forms, or compose but a few disconnected sentences to convey [auto]biographical information" (novice-low level), arrive at the point that they can "recombine learned vocabulary and structures to write about topics of their daily lives" (ACTFL, 2012). The ACTFL writing proficiency guidelines imply that students' writing abilities develop at the rate of overall communicative (speaking) competence. In other words, as previous studies have shown, L2/FL students' writing skills are closely correlated with previously learned material, collaborative interaction, and task complexity (Albrechtsen, Haastrup, & Henriksen, 2008; Constanzo, 2009; Dykstra-Pruim, 2003; Ruiz-Funes, 2015; Shanahan, 2006; Weissberg, 2006; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012; Williams, 2012). Accordingly, this article proposes that, by preceding writing assignments with level-appropriate communicative (speaking) activities that reinforce vocabulary and structures learned in class, L2/FL teachers can successfully create classroom instructional contexts for writing that have the potential to increase not only oral and written linguistic output but also overall language development.

Creating a Communicative Writing Task

The general prototype for creating a task-based communicative writing activity derives from the communicative classroom speaking activities in which elementary language college students customarily engage in the course of instruction. As Constanzo (2009) indicates, foreign language learners should marshal what they learn in the course of daily classroom instruction as a foundation for developing writing skills (p. 113). Following Constanzo's suggestion and the widely accepted hypothesis that collaborative tasks have a positive effect on writing (Adams, 2007; Donato, 1994; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Hyland, 2008; Storch, 2003, 2005; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996, 1998; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012), it would be exemplary to propose a task-based (speaking) activity as a transition to a writing assignment.

In keeping with the cycle of TBTL (Prabhu, 1987; Ellis, 2003), the speaking pre-task activity introduces students to the topic, and provides the linguistic resources necessary to accomplish the task, some of which may include "tabular presentation with information" which "often involves selection of relevant information" (Prabhu, 1987, p. 46). Drawing on information- or opinion-gap activities (Prabhu, 1987; Ellis, 2003), the main task itself provides students with additional content which may prove useful for development of the topic in writing. The post-task of this communicative activity primes students to explore the given topic in writing by providing a prompt, a suggested outline, and structural strategies for the development of the piece, without, as Gascoigne (2003) recommends, straitjacketing

compositional creativity. This methodology follows through the writing process with a collaborative (oral) peer revision, assisted by editing protocols which inform both form and content.

Let us take for example the second-semester topic of childhood memories that one finds in Chapter 6 of *Deux mondes: A communicative approach* (Terrell, Rogers, Kerr, & Spielmann, 2013). [2] The instructor may use the interview questions in Activities 4 (“Entretien: Quand j’étais petit[e],” Terrell et al., 2013, p. 194) and 7 (“Entretien: La vie au lycée,” Terrell et al., 2013, p. 196), or create an enhanced communicative scenario (see Table 1). After scaffolding the topic of discussion and rehearsing learned vocabulary and grammatical constructs as a pre-task, using a scenario script helps students hold a coherent conversation that goes beyond the disjointed question–answer format one usually finds in most first-year textbooks.

Main Task: (B) Share your childhood memories with a classmate (A).

- A: Comment étais-tu quand tu étais petit(e) ?
 B: Je j’... (verbe à l’impf). Et toi ?
 être petit(e) ≠ grand(e) avoir bon/mauvais caractère
 être mince ≠ fort(e) être intelligent(e)
 avoir les cheveux longs/courts être patient(e)/obéissant(e)
 avoir les cheveux (adj [m pl]) être extroverti(e)/sociable
 avoir les yeux (adj [m pl]) être sympa(thique)
 porter un appareil dentaire être fauteur de troubles
 porter des lunettes avoir l’esprit vif
- A: Moi, je ne n’... (être à l’impf) pas (adj [m/f sing]).
 A: Moi, je ne n’... (avoir à l’impf) pas les yeux ... (adj [m pl]).
 A: Moi, je ne ... (porter à l’impf) pas de/d’ ...
 A: Qu’est-ce que tu faisais pour t’amuser ?
 B: Je j’... (verbe à l’impf). Et toi ?
 écouter de la musique jouer|
 faire des mots croisés aux cartes à papa et maman
 faire une réussite aux échecs à la poupée
 regarder la télé du piano à la petite auto
 sortir avec des amis de la trompette au petit train
 aller au cinéma du violon à cache-cache
- A: Moi, je j’... (verbe à l’impf).
 A: Est-ce que tu étais bon élève à l’école primaire ?
 B: Oui, je j’... (verbe à l’impf). Et toi ?
 être bon(ne) élève être chef de classe
 recevoir de bonnes notes faire mes devoirs
 obéir à l’instituteur (-trice) participer à des activités ...
 se comporter bien en classe être membre du club de ...
- A: Moi, je ne n’... (à l’impf) pas ... Une fois, je ... (au p-c).
 B: Est-ce que tu étais serviable à la maison ?
 A: Oui, je j’... (verbe à l’impf). Et toi ?
 mettre la table faire le ménage sortir les poubelles
 faire la vaisselle passer l’aspirateur faire la lessive
- B: Moi, non. Je ne n’... jamais ... (au p-c) !

Abbreviations: impf = imparfait; adj = adjectif; m = masculin; f = féminin; sing = singulier; pl = pluriel; p-c = passé-composé

With the help of this structured oral task, students have the opportunity to recycle learned vocabulary and structures and negotiate meaning through an input-interaction process that

provides an invaluable context for writing as a post-task activity. While the beneficial effect of “enhanced” and “interactionally modified input” on lexical and grammatical acquisition and their potential impact on writing has been well attested,[3] practical examples that can be readily used in the classroom have been few and far between. The proposed use of communicative speaking-to-writing scenarios would fill this lacuna.

From draft writing to collaborative peer revision

After students have personally reflected on their childhood memories and shared them with their partners, the instructor then assigns a writing prompt (as a post-task assignment), following the movement of the completed communicative activity: Write a multi-paragraph essay about your childhood, starting it with a general introduction of several sentences summing up your (1) physical appearance, (2) personality, and (3) interests in school, sports, or house chores as you remember them. Then write a paragraph on each one of those three points. In each paragraph, start with the topic sentence (*l'idée principale*), supporting it with secondary statements (*l'explication*) and two or three examples (*l'illustration*). A concluding statement (*une clôture*) or transition should end every paragraph. Conclude with your best memories in either one of these areas or with a comparison of your past and present lifestyles (conclusion). To some extent, this strategy should guide the student to conceive the structural development of the essay while, at the same time, capitalizing on the newly learned vocabulary. The outline expands the writing topic, offering students more than just a “bare prompt” (Way, Joiner, & Seaman, 2000, p. 173). They further provide a useful organizational framework for the development of the writing assignment.

Once the students have written the first draft of the assignment at home, the writing process continues in class. This step in the process calls for peer revision; yet, going beyond the traditional peer revision of the first draft, this post-writing activity re-engages students into the communicative classroom by involving them in an interactive, collaborative revision process (Constanzo, 2009; Donato, 1994; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Storch, 2003, 2005; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996, 1998). In this one-on-one oral peer revision protocol, paired students are prompted to read their own papers aloud to their partners, who listen, interrupt to ask questions or elicit clarification, negotiate on surface structure, or reformulate the content and expression of ideas (Bitchener, 2012; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Swain & Lapkin, 2001, 2002). A structured thematic checklist, consisting of questions geared to clarify points (see Appendix), which stimulate further development or modify linguistic structure, helps students ask for clarification.

Especially because writing is usually carried out as an individual activity, this oral peer revision activity allows for a synchronous, interactive, and collaborative construction of meaning (Collins, 1981; Ruiz-Funes, 2015; Williams, 2012). Beyond the focus on (the creation of) meaning, this interactive peer revision promotes attention to form and content, for writing demands more cognitive processing than speaking (Adams, 2007; Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008; Albrechtsen, Haastrup, & Henriksen, 2008; Niu, 2009; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012; Wolff, 2000). Although learners may attend to form differently in oral and written tasks, collaborative peer revision (of written work) has been shown to operationalize

metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of language form (Gutiérrez, 2008; Leeser, 2004; Niu, 2009).

Instructor's corrective feedback (CF) and assessment

Despite the beneficial effect of peer revision, for the very fact that it privileges “spoken interaction” as Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tindi (1997) have observed (p. 159), written CF should follow up as part of a formal writing assessment process. The instructor could offer students another opportunity to revise their writing by either prompting for more information, calling attention to form, attending to individual student situations, “taking a more finely tuned approach to corrective feedback,” as Ferris, Liu, Sinha, and Senna (2013) explain. In any case, L2/FL writers should interact with some type of error CF and with a pre-established writing-based assessment rubric. As Ferris and Roberts (2001) conclude, students who receive either coded or more explicit error CF do better than those who receive no CF. For the final grading of the writing assessment, a holistic primary-traits analysis (PTA) or scoring rubric allows for a more effective evaluation of the piece (Walvoord, 1998). The analysis of primary traits (such as content, organization, language, revision) assesses writing through the lens of communicative competence correlating the performance to the assignment task with the writer's level of language ability (East, 2009). The “content” trait, based on an appropriate response to the prompt, ranges from “incomprehensible” to “well-developed subject” taking the linguistic level of the writer into account. The “organization” trait, assessing fluency and cohesion, further supports content in its analysis of the development of the main idea expressed in the prompt, the logical sequencing of ideas, and use of transitions within sentences and between paragraphs in more narrative or expository writing. Encompassing lexical and morphosyntactical elements of the writing assignment, the “language” trait, focusing on overall communication of ideas, evaluates level-appropriate lexical knowledge and structural accuracy. Finally, the “revision” trait takes into account the speaker-writer's efforts to reformulate lexical and structural problems or to make significant revisions to the final draft. The secondary traits are assigned a weighted scale, giving equal value to the primary traits related to content, organization, language, and revision (East, 2009, p. 94).

Conclusions

Without bypassing any of the basic stages of the writing process (reflecting on the task and prompt, brainstorming, outlining, composing the first draft, proofreading, peer revision, composing a second or final draft), collaborative classwork creates a sense of continuity in the teaching and acquisition of language, while emphasizing the two most productive ones: speaking and writing. Sequencing of oral and written tasks provides valuable scaffolding for students' development of written and global communicative skills. Although it may take some imagination and creativity to expand most textbook situational frameworks to create an ideal speaking-to-writing communicative scenario, even having students work in pairs to interview each other focusing on a certain topic in the course of ordinary classroom communicative practice may be sufficient foundation to create the pre-writing context for a given composition assignment. Capitalizing on this speaking-to-writing sequence not only rehabilitates writing, a traditionally solipsistic activity, but also re-centers the development of writing skills of first-year college students within the collaborative context of the communicative classroom.

Appendix: Oral Peer Revision

Pair up with classmate to start peer reviewing your first draft.

As your classmate reads his or her composition, listen to it carefully, trying to follow the development of the subject. You may use the following thematic checklist to ask for clarification or elicit further development.

1. Introduction Quand vous étiez petit(e), comment étiez-vous au physique, au moral, à l'école, et à la maison?

2. Développement:

a. Votre autoportrait et personnalité

Comment étiez-vous au physique? Étiez-vous grand(e) ou petit(e)? Vous aviez les cheveux de quelle couleur et de quelle longueur (courts/mi-longs/longs)? Aviez-vous les yeux bleus, verts, noirs ou marron? Portiez-vous des lunettes? Un appareil dentaire? (2) Comment étiez-vous au moral? Étiez-vous sympathique, gentil(le) ou méchant(e)? Vous étiez sociable? Aviez-vous beaucoup d'amis? Est-ce que vous invitiez vos amis à vos fêtes d'anniversaire? Une fois qu'est-ce que vous avez reçu de spécial lors de votre anniversaire? (3) Étiez-vous sportif? A quels sports jouiez-vous d'habitude? Pour clôturer le paragraphe, étiez-vous un enfant typique?

b. Votre vie à l'école

Comment étiez-vous à l'école? Studieux/studieuse? Paresseux/paresseuse? Fauteur de troubles? 1) En classe, qu'est-ce que vous faisiez? Faisiez-vous attention à l'instituteur/à l'institutrice? Étiez-vous bon étudiant/bonne étudiante? Receviez-vous des bonnes notes? Avez-vous jamais reçu une mauvaise note? En quelle matière étiez-vous fort(e) ou nul(le)? 2) Étiez-vous membre d'un club d'étudiant? Participiez-vous à des excursions?

c. Votre vie en famille

Comment étiez-vous en famille? Paresseux? Serviable? Sage? Fauteur de troubles? 1) Comme tâche ménagère, qu'est-ce que vous faisiez ou n'aimiez pas faire? Pourquoi? Aidiez-vous votre père/mère à préparer les plats, à mettre la table, à la débarrasser, ou à faire la vaisselle? 2) Dans la maison, quelle était votre pièce préférée? Qu'est-ce que vous faisiez dans cette pièce? En général, avez-vous de bons souvenirs de votre enfance à la maison? Gardez-vous le souvenir d'un événement extraordinaire? Qu'est-ce qui vous est arrivé cette fois-là?

3. Conclusion

Par rapport au passé, votre vie a-t-elle beaucoup changé? Comparez votre passée (*autrefois, j'étais ...*) avec votre présent (*maintenant, je suis ...*). Au présent, travaillez-vous plus à la fac? Êtes-vous plus serviable à la maison qu'auparavant?

Endnotes

[1] See for example Belcher and Hirvela (2008), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982), Constanzo (2009), Kroll and Vann (1981), Shanahan (2006), Tanner (1982), Thaiss and Suhor (1984), Weissberg (2006), Zoeller (1969).

[2] For a discussion of the treatment of L2 writing in French textbooks, see Gascoigne (2002).

[3] For a definition of "enhanced" and "interactionally modified" input, see Lee (2000). On the effect of lexical and syntactical input on writing, see, for example, Albrechtsen, Hastrup, and Henriksen (2008), Gass (1997), Duin and Graves (1986, 1987), Koda (1993), Snellings, van Gelderen, and de Gloppe (2004), Lightbrown and Spada (1993), Swain (1985), Webb (2009).

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