

NUFS Workshop 2017

Newsletter No. 1

Workshop in May

Date: May 13, 2017, 13:00-16:00

Venue: Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Room 226

Title: "Focus-on-Form Instruction for Junior High School Students"

Presenter: Yoko Takano (NUFS)

Abstract: Traditional grammar teaching consists of focus on forms where L2 learners conduct grammar practice without necessarily understanding the meaning of the sentences. On the contrary, focus on form is a different approach to grammar teaching where students can focus on the meaning before focusing on form. During the focus on form instruction (FFI), L2 learners can do many interactions and notice the connection between the meaning and the grammar form. This student-centered instruction is effective for junior high school students to improve their language skills including their mandatory paper school tests. The speaker will do FFI as workshop and show the results of her junior high school students' performance and mandatory paper tests.



Title: "Improving Students' Writing Abilities through Content-Based Instruction"

Presenter: Naoya Shibata (Seiryukan High School)

Abstract: Writing skills can be improved through integration with other language modalities, namely listening, speaking, and reading abilities (Cumming, 2012; Weigle, 2014; Brown & Lee, 2015). Moreover, learners can develop their second language abilities as well as abilities to communicate with others through working on content-focused activities. In this workshop, the participants will experience content-based instruction by integrating four skills from the perspectives of students and receive opportunities to consider how to implement content-focused activities in English communication. At the end of the workshop, the proponent will show the attendants the results of both speaking and writing tests conducted during 2016 school year.



The number of participants: 52

1. Interesting activities you might want to use in your class. Why?

- How the foods taste exercise – It's interesting if done correctly. It gives students international perspective.
- Skimming – I think students should understand even if they don't read every single sentence. They need to know how to understand the gist of the story.
- I would like to use content-based methods, especially brainstorming since it could be used for beginners, I think.
- To talk with partner about "My Goals and Efforts". Because it was very meaningful and important to hear other's opinions or ideas.
- I thought the retelling activities + pre-reading activities were very useful. It gives students the chance and time to properly understand the text. I also thought the flash writing activity was very interesting although I'm not sure if I could integrate it in my class.
- Flash writing is useful for students to improve writing skill. Because students tend to write a right English sentence, so they hesitate writing English. But Flash-writing is really easy for them to try to write English sentences, because they do not worry about grammatical errors or spelling mistakes.

2. What you learned from today's workshop

- Food is a good topic!
- Focus on Form. It gives learners good understanding without much explanation.
- I realized that there are still many things that I need to learn and apply in my classes.
- It's very important to set up easy-to-think and easy-to-write when we give writing tasks to students.
- I enjoyed hearing about the ways writing and speaking activities that can support one another. I'm also curious about ways I may be able to use focus-on-form principles in my advanced-speaking groups.
- As Naoya said, "Making the topic familiar to students is important", topic is important not only when they write but when they read.
- I learned topic selection is important. I want to ask my students how they feel about the topic.
- I learnt that content-based and writing –focused class could be conducted in such a way which communicative skills can be developed as well.

3. Questions and Answers

Q (1): Yoko's activity is very good, but it takes me a lot of time. I have to go ahead the textbook. How often do you do these activities?

A (Yoko): I do focus on form instruction every week in private class, and college. I understand your frustration which you must use textbook, but students' increase understanding grammar rules can speed up to do textbook tasks later. Good luck to change the teaching style, and you would be surprised to see your students' active learning in class.

Q (2): I think, in focus-on-form teaching, new grammar points are introduced by comparing with familiar grammar points that students have already learned, which will make students notice new grammar. But in



your presentation, you didn't focus on comparing familiar grammar with new one. How or where do students notice new grammar?

A (Yoko): In class, students can confirm meaning in Japanese to connect new grammar form after input activity. Especially, I emphasize the meaning of Japanese and English grammar form to make students understand clearly. Through many interaction by making use of F on F activity sheet, they gradually find out the connection between meaning and grammar form. Therefore, they can do extra activity such as speaking and writing with the grammar form later.



Q (3): To your speaking test, what and how do you do?

A (Yoko): As a speaking test, I give the topic to have conversation. For example, “Food memory of golden week” to check their grammar understanding in communication. They can reflect their food tastes and the grammar rules that they already learned. After the test, they have satisfaction to express their opinions and to use the grammar.

Q (4): What are good topics that you used before for high school students?

A (Naoya): I am sorry if I misunderstand your question, but do you mean what can be good topics for senior high school students to consider? If so, I would say the themes which can encourage students to reflect upon their personal experiences and broaden their perspectives could be good topics to introduce.

As my research findings showed, they tended to like familiar topics to themselves, such as their goal and challenges, and the person whom they admire. Beginner learners and slow learners should start from such items to establish scaffoldings. However, after students prepare themselves for challenging topics, teachers can gradually introduce challenging themes, such as ways to save the earth, and advantages and disadvantages of social network services. In fact, learners with an advanced level of English proficiency wanted to ponder on social issues to write essays.

If you are asking me which topics I have introduced so far are good, I would say “My Goal and Efforts” is the best theme as I had many opportunities to know about my students and help them to clarify and deepen their aims. Moreover, although my students did not like so much, I think two topics, namely ways to lessen racial discrimination and Future of English, were great since these two topics more or less provided learners with some occasions to consider intercultural communication and understanding.

Q (5): Did you ever try using microblogging with your students instead of longer writings? If so, how did it work out?

A (Naoya): No, as I prioritise the importance of essay writing activities in secondary educational context, I have never implemented microblogging activity into my class even though it can assure of higher authenticity. Although I talked about the following during the workshop, as I wanted to provide students with many opportunities to think about the society and their experiences, I started to conduct essay assignments at senior high school. Moreover, I think senior high school teachers should give learners some chances to learn how to write essays and reports in English even though some people may maintain that this is what university lecturers

should do. In Japan, I conjecture it is still rare to learn how to write reports and essays in even Japanese at senior high school; however, university students require such skills and they need to encounter some difficulties when they are assigned to reports and essays. I firmly believe that the tasks in secondary education and those in tertiary education should be connected enough to maximise positive washback effects. Therefore, I have never carried out microblogging activities with my students. I suppose it depends on the teaching goals and the learning goals. MEXT (2013) clearly states that the development of communicative competence should be prioritised; therefore, authentic writing activities should be conducted as well. In fact, people have many opportunities for written communication thanks to technological advancement and globalisation. I sincerely appreciate your suggestion.

Q (6): I'd like to know more about each step of writing.

A (Naoya): As to each step of writing, Brown and Lee (2015) also identified process approaches to teaching L2 writing based on Weigle (2014, p. 227).

Table 1

Process approaches to teaching L2 writing

Phases	Techniques
1. Prewriting: Activities provide background information, stimulate interest	Readings, videos, discussion, whole-class, group or pair work, researching, brainstorming
2. First draft: [Learners] sketch out ideas without much preplanning	Freewriting, little or no emphasis on form (grammar, spelling), focus on content
3. Commenting: Peer or teacher reads first draft and comments	Peer reviews (pair work), teacher conferences, feedback on content
4. Second draft: [Learners] look at [the] whole essay, use peer/instructor feedback, rethink, revise	Learner reorganizes, restructures, adds details, clarifies
5. Third draft: Learner edits, attends to writing conventions, rhetoric, grammar, vocabulary	Checklists, grammar logs, proofreading practice, dictionary checks
6. Postwriting: [Learners] share finished products	Discussion, pair/group work following up on topics covered, share products online, enter product into portfolio
7. Evaluation: Self, peer, and teacher assessment of the final written product	Using rubrics, teacher-student conferences, self-assessment

(reproduced from Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 444, bold in original)

As the above table shows, writers go through the same pattern to receive comments from readers and revise their writing based on the feedback, which can activate the negotiation for meaning between writers and readers.

Q (7): Sorry if it's off-topic, but do you think apps, such as LINE, are harmful to their reading and writing?

A (Naoya): Regarding the development of communicative competence, I do not believe so. Although it might hinder learners from improving their abilities to interact with others face to face if they



rely on such tools too much, I think that written communicational applications can be significant factors in developing communicative competence, especially strategic competence and discourse competence. They can learn how to clarify and deepen their ideas in writing through them, and also improve their reading skill to understand writers. Using activities with communicational applications, therefore, can be authentic.

However, it can be less helpful to develop their target language skills enough to read and write long passages insomuch as the users tend to send short messages in the most cases. Moreover, I sometimes realise that my students who like using communication applications use colloquial expressions and slangs in writing without knowing the registers. Therefore, some supplemental activities to help learners to learn such things will be essential to conduct.



Q (8): I also have my students do retelling, but it's hard for them to make sentences. I really want to know how to teach.

A (Naoya): Regardless of the language proficiency, the majority of my students also have difficulty in retelling activities. I think teachers can provide students with visual aids, such as drawings and pictures, so as to help them to reflect upon the reading content. Moreover, instructors can allow learners to use the textbook a couple of times and give some comprehension questions. As I understand that retelling activity is mainly expected to provide students with more opportunities to reread the text and deepen their understanding, it is not always necessary to encourage learners to retell their classmates the content with their own words.

As to retelling activity, I also include retelling section as a part of the paper-based term test task, especially when the target topic is related to the social issues and learners are supposed to understand some background knowledge written in the textbook. As they take retelling activity in class, I firmly believe that this task should also be evaluated to assure of higher positive washback effect. I provide students with some keywords to use and key points to cover. I do not evaluate learners' grammatical mistakes and errors, but content and logic. It might be helpful for learners to learn how to summarise the content of given reading themes.

Q (9): You showed us very interesting results. What types of things has motivated your lower level students?

A (Naoya): Student-centre activities, especially timed-conversation and small-talk, seem to have motivated learners to learn the target language. The interview data clearly showed that they enjoyed their content-based interactive activities. They had someone to talk with in the target language and received many opportunities to broaden their horizon by communicating with their classmates.

Furthermore, although the majority of the students, especially those who had lower language proficiency, disliked writing activities including essay assignments, they gradually became to find them useful and like them because they received higher score in a writing section of EIKEN and GTEC. One student informed me that she acquired the full mark on the writing section of EIKEN Grade 2, and about ten learners, including two out of four returnee students, got higher than 90 per cent on the writing section of Grade Pre-1.



Moreover, as to writing activities, such as Flash Writing and Essay assignments, almost all of the participants commented that they were motivated to write more as they had their readers including me even though a couple of students were sometimes demotivated because of an amount of feedback. Some of them even told me that they were happy to receive content-based comments from me since they knew that I read their essays carefully and sought to help them to deepen their ideas. Accordingly, although I truly understand how busy schoolteachers are, I strongly believe that they should make time to read the students' essays so as to understand them better.

Q (10): I wondered why you divided speaking practice part into two parts.

A (Naoya): I suppose you are talking about timed-conversation and small talk. It is true that learners deal with the same topic, and they can develop their oral language skills through the activities. I decided to divide speaking activities into two parts so as to provide learners with as many opportunities as possible to practise their speaking recursively. Moreover, they can also receive occasions to reflect upon their learning outcomes by comparing between their ideas at the beginning of the lesson and ones at the end of the lesson.

Q (11): I wonder if what you mean by CBI matches the definition of the term understood in the field of second language instruction.

A (Naoya): Content-based instruction (CBI) can integrate the content of specific subject matter with language teaching objectives (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003, p. 2; Larsen-Freman & Anderson, 2011, p. 132). This approach could also be defined as an instruction integrating reading and writing activities, which contents are prioritised and “grammar and vocabulary play the role of attendant foci” (Hinkel, 2011, p. 533). In my workshop, due to the time limitation, I sought to simplify the definition of CBI as much as possible, and thus introduced the basic information.



Q (12): Content-based writing includes no grammar or structure instruction? Why do some students feel their reading ability hasn't been improved?

A (Naoya): As to the former question, Hinkel (2011) maintains that although content-based writing instruction prioritise contents, “grammar and vocabulary play the role of attendant foci” (p. 533). Thus, teachers can and probably sometimes need to include grammar or structure instruction. I would say that my approach is a strong version of content-based writing instruction in the most cases. Therefore, I seek to help learners to realise their grammatical mistakes and structures through my content-based feedback, such as “what would you like to argue here?” and “I do not understand your ideas thoroughly as these two sentences seem to be incoherent”. However, I briefly introduce common grammatical errors which are based on students' essay drafts to them and make exercises for homework as I would like to spend as much time as possible for communicative activities. Furthermore, as those errors are commonly made, and the task was set for homework, the learners can receive some opportunities for self-study by using their grammar book.

As to the latter query, the participants maintained that they felt that their oral skills were developed as they received much more opportunities to work with their classmates rather than chances to read passages. In fact, as I mentioned at my workshop, the learners spent about a month for considering one topic; therefore, they read

similar themes during the term even when I used the supplementary reading material. As a result, the participants did not feel their development in reading skills. To redeem this weak point, extensive reading activity or extensive reading homework could play a significant role as learners can choose their preferences and read various books.

Q (13): Are your students supposed to prepare for the lessons?

A (Naoya): Yes, and no. From part two, there is a question to review the previous class in Small Talk, for example, “What did you learn or realise from Lesson 4 part 1?”. In addition, at the end of each handout, there is a section to review their learning. Moreover, as learners need to consider the target topic for their speaking and writing performance tests, they need to have their ideas about it. Therefore, I can say my students are supposed to prepare for some activities. However, as to other activities, such as vocabulary input and comprehension questions, they need not do it beforehand since I would like them to develop their abilities to deal with the given tasks within given minutes.

<Acknowledgement from Naoya>

It was such a great honour to do my first workshop at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, where I graduated from as an undergraduate student and a postgraduate student. Attending this monthly workshop had been one of my objectives since I entered to MA TESOL programme. Therefore, I really thank you for your active participation and questions. Thanks to you, I learnt a lot and received many opportunities to reflect upon my four-year teaching experiences. Although I may have provided the participants with unclear instructions for some points, I sincerely hope that my workshop will help them to come up with some content-based activities to conduct in their future classes.

Workshop in May (AR Orientation)

Date: May 14, 2017, 9:30-12:30

Venue: Aichi Kenko Plaza, Conference Room

Title: "Orientation of Action Research"

Advisers: Kazuyoshi Sato, Duane Kindt, Juanita Heigham (NUFS)

The number of participants: 18

