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FLUENCY FIRST: REVERSING THE TRADITIONAL ESL SEQUENCE

ABSTRACT: *The author describes an ESL department's whole language approach to writing and reading, replacing its traditional grammar-based ESL instructional sequence. The new approach is enabling students to become fluent in writing and reading before having to produce grammatically correct pieces or to comprehend academic material. The research and theory on language acquisition, literacy development, and learning support a whole-language approach to ESL. And the quantitative and qualitative results of the first three years of using the approach affirm its superiority over traditional approaches to ESL reading and writing instruction.*

INTRODUCTION

Too many English as a second language (ESL) students do not achieve their educational goals because they do not meet their colleges' writing standards. Those who evaluate ESL students' writing commonly cite the following problems: (1) lack of fluency or adequate control over the language, including inadequate vocabularies; (2) general lack of knowledge and the consequent inability to write effective pieces; and (3) errors in grammar and the mechanics of writing, despite the fact that most ESL students have had years of instruction in both. One way to address these problems is by reversing the traditional grammar-focused approach to ESL and

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© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1991

instead using a whole-language approach, we help ESL students acquire greater fluency and knowledge and thus write more effective, and even more correct pieces.

Freeman and Freeman suggest that the following whole-language principles are important for second language (L2) learning in classrooms: language should be learner-centered; language is best learned when kept whole; language instruction should employ listening, speaking, reading, and writing; language in the classroom should be meaningful and functional; language is learned through social interaction; and language is learned when teachers have faith in learners. This article describes an experimental whole-language approach to ESL writing and reading in an open admissions urban institution serving primarily minority students.

BACKGROUND

The ESL students in question typically have great trouble passing the university's required skills assessment tests (SKAT) in writing and reading, tests which students must pass before taking the bulk of their required courses, even the English Composition requirement. Prior to 1988, ESL students' average passing rate on the writing test had been only about thirty-five percent, and on the reading test, twenty percent.

The ESL faculty had historically taken a traditional instructional approach, stressing grammar and intensive reading and writing (a lot of work on relatively short readings and on writing paragraphs and essays). Yet pass rates had remained low. Then in the Fall of 1987, a group of faculty at The City College, CUNY began to use a whole-language approach to literacy. Since then students' writing and reading test scores have improved. We started implementing our approach in ESL 10, our first level ESL reading/writing course for students with a basic knowledge of English but weak reading and writing abilities. The ESL 10 students read several books, responded to them in writing in journals, and wrote 10,000-word, semester-long projects. We ran the classes workshop style, with students helping each other revise their own pieces, and understand the books they were reading. We used no ESL textbooks and did not teach grammar in those classes, but students made greater gains than we had ever seen in ESL 10. The approach was so successful that we extended it the following semester into our two upper-level ESL reading/writing courses, ESL 20 and 30. Since then, our SKAT reading test passing rate has doubled and the writing test passing rate has increased by sixty percent, even with only two-thirds of the faculty using the approach.

IMPLICATIONS FROM THEORY AND RESEARCH

First language (L1) acquisition

Implications for whole language approach are plentiful in the research literature. Educators can learn much about how lasting learning occurs from the research on L1 acquisition, not only because it is a language, but because L1 is something which everyone learns by the age of four or five, though it is extraordinarily complex. Macaulay summarizes how children learn L1: by being in the midst of abundant talk, by listening and experimenting with speaking, learning names of things, then phrases, and then the syntax they need to express themselves. They progress in L1 acquisition primarily through massive amounts of interaction with parents or more knowledgeable peers and they control their own L1 learning. Their knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation expands until they are fluent. The key to L1 acquisition is plentiful interaction with more knowledgeable others. The implication for L2 acquisition in classrooms is to provide similar language input and interaction, but due to time limits, in a far more condensed fashion.

L2 acquisition

Providing optimal input in the classroom in order to foster the development of L2 fluency does not mean teaching grammar. Krashen (1985) and McLaughlin argue from the research on L2 acquisition that L2 best develops in ways similar to L1: in contexts where the negotiation of meaning, and not the correctness of form, is the central motivating force, and where language exposure is real, extensive, and anxiety free. But in most language classrooms, language exposure is artificial (contrived, practiced, grammatically sequenced), limited, and anxiety arousing.

Krashen (1987) hypothesizes that the best classroom L2 acquisition will occur when the input provided to learners is comprehensible, interesting and/or relevant, not grammatically sequenced, provided in abundant quantity, and in such a way as to promote self-confidence and self-direction while arousing little or no anxiety. After examining popular L2 teaching methods and finding most of them wanting in such input, he concludes that pleasure reading and conversation have the greatest potential for meeting all the requirements for optimal L2 acquisition because they are made up of real input, and not the contrived type of input found in ESL textbooks and tapes. A whole-language approach includes much pleasure reading and real conversation.

Krashen also makes an important distinction between L2

learning and L2 acquisition. L2 learning takes effort, like extensive memorization of rules and practice of forms learned. Then when people try to use these learned forms in real language situations, they often make mistakes and find it difficult to express themselves adequately and even to understand others. L1 is acquired naturalistically through interaction with others, with far less mental effort and with a greater payoff. L2 may be acquired in a similar manner in schools with a whole-language approach. This is true for both children and adults.

McLaughlin explains that early stages of language development involve the same cognitive strategies for adults and children. The difference is that adults have superior memory heuristics that enable longer retention and more facile discovery of meaning. Adults also have more extensive L1 experience, vocabulary, and conceptual knowledge that help them to process information more quickly. And if literate in L1, they have far less work to do in acquiring literacy in L2. They can also learn and apply rules of language more easily, although an overemphasis on correctness can also impede progress in L2 acquisition.

McLaughlin and others who have studied L2 acquisition describe learners' errors in terms of strategies. Thus what seems to be L1 interference or perhaps an inability to master L2 grammar is actually the result of the learner's strategies to discover irregularities and rules in L2. L2 adults make similar mistakes, regardless of what L1 they speak, and these represent unsuccessful attempts to discover L2 rules. They make simplification errors, transfer errors, or overgeneralization errors as they strive to make themselves understood, and they make them for as long a time as it takes for them to develop their competence in L2. This period of development is referred to as the interlanguage stage and needs to be supported by efforts to help the learner communicate intelligibly in L2 before requiring that s/he be correct. To learn to communicate intelligibly requires a great deal of exposure to L2 with the types of input and interaction L1 learners receive.

L1 literacy development

The research on the most successful learning of reading and writing in L1 also shows that when learners do abundant reading and writing, talk about both, enjoy both, exercise a good deal of control over both, and are not overly concerned about correctness, literacy development, like L1 acquisition, is enjoyable, successful, and almost effortless. And through an approach such as whole language, learners acquire a good deal of functional language knowledge that otherwise they would have to take great pains to

learn: spelling, grammar, vocabulary, appreciation of literature, good composing skills, and good reading skills.

On the elementary level, Holdaway, Graves, Harste, and Smith, among others, have shown how children acquire the skills of literacy when they read and write extensively, talk about language and about what they read and write, have abundant time for independent reading and writing, receive constructive feedback on their writing, ask their own questions, formulate and test their own hypotheses, are not afraid of making mistakes, are encouraged to become serious authors, and are immersed in literate activities across the curriculum. They can control and direct many of these activities themselves.

Branscombe, Atwel, Bartholomae and Petrosky, and many others on the secondary and postsecondary levels report similar findings. It appears that students who read extensively and talk about their reading, who become fluent writers before having to focus on correctness (Mayher et al.), and who are writing to learn (Gere; Goswami) become more successful academic readers, writers, and learners.

L2 literacy development

As already indicated, research on L2 literacy development also points to the desirability of a whole-language approach, with an emphasis on integrative skills rather than grammar study, memorization, and repetitious exercises. According to Hudelson, language development researchers have concluded that people learn languages by actively participating in an ongoing process of figuring out how language works, and that learners must be in control of this process. Research evidence further suggests that the processes of L1 and L2 acquisition are more similar than different, which in the school setting means that L2 learners are in the process of creative construction of the new language. Errors are a natural part of this process as learners formulate and test hypotheses about the language. There are also significant individual differences in the rate of acquisition, thus a uniformly paced curriculum is of little effectiveness. L2 learners want to use the L2 and work hard to be included in the ongoing activities of the classroom. More knowledgeable others and peers offer important teacher functions in providing comprehensible input and motivation to help L2 learners continue learning English. This is true for both oral and written English (1-3).

Like native speakers, L2 writers creatively construct the written language, develop at their own pace, and control the process. Some will experiment and take risks in creating meaning in writing;

others will use familiar patterns for a long time. Investigations have shown that given sufficient encouragement and opportunity, ESL writers will work hard to create meaning, even those without native-like control of English (20–21). ESL learners also construct meaning from print as they read, just as L1 readers do (Carrell et al.).

There have been several studies conducted and hypotheses made about the processes of L2 writing which are very similar to those regarding L1 writing. For example, Edelsky found that the quality of writing is much higher for unassigned topics than for assigned ones in ESL writing. Others have found that personal involvement with a piece also has a positive effect on its quality. Pieces on unassigned topics tend to be better developed and have a personal voice. This is particularly true when there is a real audience, when writers have a stake in the piece, and when it is purposeful. And Urzua found that in writing/reading workshops, as opposed to traditional instruction, L2 writers revise more, develop a personal voice, and become more aware of the power of language. She also found that conferencing influences revising positively.

Hudelson concludes from a review of the research on children's ESL writing that ESL learners, while still learning English, can write. Their texts have many features in common with L1 writers' texts, features indicating that they are making predictions about how the L2 works, and testing and revising their ideas. She recommends a variety of strategies for classrooms, including using diaries and journals to promote fluency in writing and utilizing personal narratives and writing workshop techniques to help learners become comfortable with writing on self-selected topics, and with drafting, sharing, and revising. She also suggests incorporating expressive, literary, and expository writing into meaningful content-area learning.

Likewise, Krashen (1985) recommends using subject matter in L2 as a vehicle of presentation and explanation, but without demands for premature production or full grammatical accuracy. He cites the evidence from the successful language immersion programs in Canada and elsewhere, where teachers incorporate language development into content-area instruction. And in their studies of adult L2 writing, Raimes, Zamel, and others have found that the L2 writing process must begin with abundant opportunities to generate ideas before students focus on editing. They and other researchers in ESL (Krashen 1987; Spolsky) also argue that direct grammar instruction does not generally improve L2 writing or even L2 acquisition. In fact, it probably impedes both processes.

As for L2 reading, Carrell's review of the research shows that L2 reading and L1 reading are currently understood in much the same

way: as an active process in which the L2 reader is an active information processor who predicts meaning while sampling only parts of the text. In addition, everything in the reader's prior experience and knowledge plays a significant role in the process of L2 reading (Carrell and Eisterhold). Carrell further explains that L2 reading must involve both the predicting/sampling activities as well as bottom-up processing, or some decoding, to be efficient; thus reading experts now propose an interactive L2 reading model involving both types of processing. And Devine explains that research and experience have shown that reading is a vehicle not only for the development of L2 reading abilities, but for learning L2 as well. Krashen (1989) found that ESL students' vocabulary, writing, and spelling improve through extensive reading, another indication that using the language extensively and for real purposes helps one to acquire more of the language.

Learning theorists like Vygotsky, Britton, and Wells have stressed the interdependence of language and learning, and the fact that lasting learning, intellectual growth, and language are inextricably connected. This too suggests classroom learning contexts where learners learn the language and content through an abundance of language-mediated activities and projects over which they can exert considerable control.

THE NEW ESL APPROACH AT CCNY

Borrowing the terms of Mayher et al., that the ideal sequence in the development of writing would stress fluency first, then clarity, and finally correctness, we made these the respective goals for our three ESL writing/reading courses: ESL 10, 20, and 30.

ESL 10

We defined fluency as the ability to generate one's ideas in writing intelligibly and with relative ease, and to comprehend popular fiction with similar ease. To do this, students were given massive exposure to English. They read 1,000 pages of popular fiction, in books like Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca*, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, B. B. Hiller's *The Karate Kid*, Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*, and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They also read autobiographical and biographical works like *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, Louis Fischer's *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World*, and William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*. They had to read about 70 pages a week for homework, copy passages that struck them, and write responses to

those passages in their double-entry journals. They then discussed their responses and questions in small groups in class.

The ESL 10 students also worked on a writing project that had to total 10,000 words by semester's end. Most wrote autobiographical pieces consisting of significant chapters or memories in their lives; some wrote family histories. Others wrote of political strife they had lived through and escaped from, or mysteries, love stories, science fiction, or magazines. Each week they drafted a new piece for their "books," as we called them, read them to their partners, and got help from them on making the pieces comprehensible, logical, and interesting. Teachers then gave more of the same kind of feedback for students to consider for final revisions.

Although, at the beginning, many students complained about the amount of work required and the lack of grammar lessons, after a few weeks both students and teachers expressed amazement at how much the students had progressed in such a short time. As students became more involved in their reading and in their writing projects, they also became more engaged in them, often reading beyond assigned pages and writing up to twice as much as required. By semester's end, most were reading and writing fluently and even more correctly than in the beginning, without having received any corrections or grammar instruction. The overall enthusiasm and trust generated by the approach led us to continue with it in ESL 10 and extend it into the second level, ESL 20.

ESL 20

The goal for ESL 20 became clarity, which we defined as the ability to write expository pieces with a clear focus, sufficient support for that focus, logical development of ideas, and effective introductions and conclusions. In ESL 20, students went from narrative and descriptive writing and reading to expository writing and reading, but not in one leap. We wanted to ease them into expository writing, and from reading for pleasure into academic reading, or reading to learn. They began by reading two bestsellers, historical fiction or nonfiction, having to do with the U.S.A., such as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Studs Terkel's *Working*. As in ESL 10, they responded in writing in double-entry journals and discussed their readings in small groups.

They also wrote a 10,000-word, semester-long project on some aspect of America having to do with its people, history, culture, or problems. The project included letter writing, point-of-view writing, reading and writing about a best seller on the topic, interviewing an expert and reporting on that, library research, and a term paper.

Students revised their pieces in a workshop setting, as in ESL 10. And again, by semester's end, most students were writing clearly enough to pass ESL 20.

ESL 30

Those teaching ESL 30, the course at the end of which students have to pass the university's writing exam, reported and continue to report, that the students coming out of ESL 20 are now much better writers and readers than those formerly entering ESL 30. Teachers say they now do not have to focus as much on helping their ESL 30 students to compose well, and can concentrate on students' remaining problems with grammar and the mechanics of the language (which are no greater or less than when we used a grammar curriculum) and on getting students ready for the test, which requires them to write a 350-word persuasive piece that is almost error-free in 50 minutes. Thus the two major goals of ESL 30 are correctness and preparation for the test.

In ESL 30, teachers who are committed to the whole-language approach require that students revise their pieces first to be sure they are completely clear, intelligible, and well-written before they focus on correcting them. Once they are sure students can write clear and effective persuasive pieces, they have them begin work on eliminating the largest percentage of their errors by choosing just a few of their most serious and most frequently occurring errors, and looking just for them when they edit. This eliminates the bulk of students' errors without the cognitive overburden of trying to correct every error.

To become strong in argumentative writing, students read newspaper and magazine articles and editorials, write in their journals in response to them, discuss their ideas in small groups, debate the issues both aloud and in silent written debates with partners, and build up a knowledge of current issues and principles involved in them, like civil rights, government policies, domestic and foreign problems, personal values and beliefs, and ethics. Students also freewrite frequently, and write a few essays each week which go through the same process as in ESL 10 and 20: peer review, revising, teacher response, more revising, until the essay is clear and correct enough to satisfy the criteria posed by the writing exam. In the process, students ask many questions in the context of their writing, and then write what they've learned on individualized study lists of spelling words, new vocabulary, useful facts, grammar points they need to focus on, mechanics issues, and style issues.

Some ESL 30 teachers also have students write real letters to newspapers, public agencies, government officials, businesses, and

others to complain about an issue and to suggest solutions. We have found that this type of real writing is often the most effective. (For more specifics on classroom activities, materials, and techniques, see MacGowan-Gilhooly "Fluency Before Correctness: A Whole Language Experiment in College ESL." *College ESL* 1.1 (Spring 1991).

Evaluation

Students in ESL 10 and 20 are evaluated at the end of the semester through a timed essay exam with topics relevant to the semester-long projects they have done and the books they have read. But this exam is only one factor in their evaluation. They keep a portfolio with their beginning piece from the first day of the semester, their midterm exam, their final, and three pieces from their projects that they think are their best. The ESL 10 and 20 teachers read each others' students' exams and if necessary, pieces from students' portfolios, and recommend if the student should pass or repeat the course. Then the teacher bases the grade on the quality of the portfolio pieces, including consideration of the quantity of work completed. ESL 30 students are given the writing exam at the end of the course, and two readers other than the teacher, usually one from the ESL staff and one from the English department, evaluate the essays. Students who do not pass the exam must repeat ESL 30.

ESL 10, 20, and 30 classes utilizing the new approach have these commonalities: a workshop format, peer and teacher help with revisions, massive exposure to real language through extensive reading, writing, and speaking, absence of ESL textbooks, absence of sequenced grammar syllabi or uniform curricula, student control over much of their work, a portfolio system, and teachers helping individuals and small groups rather than leading the whole class.

We follow a uniform approach, or philosophy, but not a static method. Indeed, we are enabled to offer a curriculum that is anything but static. Materials and activities change with new insights; teachers regularly exchange ideas to help students increase their learning; students learn from their interests and work from their strengths; there is a great deal of life in the classroom, as students share their knowledge and expertise with others; and the approach helps students utilize better learning strategies and become more responsible for their own learning.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The quantitative results we have so far have reassured us and the

students that we are headed in the right direction. The number of students taking courses using the fluency-first approach is approximately 3,000 so far; with 250 in the Fall of 1987 and roughly 600 each semester from Spring 1988 through Spring 1990. Even though a few teachers of ESL 10 and 20 have stuck to a traditional curriculum, most have used the new approach, and overall, ESL students' reading scores since 1987 have almost doubled. We believe that this rate could be even higher if all were using the approach, and if the test were given after ESL 30 or even later; currently it is given after ESL 21, a reading course students take concurrently with ESL 20.

The writing test pass rate has gone from thirty-five percent to fifty-six percent, which is about the average for native speakers, and there is a much lower course repetition rate for ESL 10 and 20. In addition, more students who start on the ESL 10 level are passing the test. Prior to Fall 1987, only twenty percent of those students eventually passed the SKAT. And if the SKAT test were given after some content courses instead of after ESL 30, probably even more students would pass it. But we all know that numbers do not tell the whole story.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The most compelling evidence of the success of the approach has been qualitative, with uniformly enthusiastic feedback from teachers, almost universally positive feedback from students, and concrete evidence of improvement in students' written work and reading abilities. On a survey conducted at the end of the second semester in which the new approach was being piloted, teachers reported unprecedented improvement in students' control of English, with growth in fluency occurring very fast. Students typically doubled their production by the fourth week of class. Teachers also reported greater clarity in the way students presented ideas, more daring in their use of new vocabulary, greater ability to write interesting pieces, better reading comprehension and speed, greater enjoyment of reading than in previous ESL courses, and better discussions of readings with students providing insights from their own lives and world views.

Many reported that students' essays had more depth and richness, more fluency, and better grammar, and that all the students progressed more in these courses than in previous ones. Students also showed more growth in the affective domain, specifically more confidence, better ability to work with groups, and more tolerance for divergent views. And cognitively, they were

better at analytical thinking, and showed much greater intellectual curiosity. Further, the students who did the most work progressed the most, and students generally were more serious, concentrated, self-reliant, and open to others than in previous semesters when the approach was traditional.

Teachers reported a higher degree of engagement, attention, and time on task. Students were more willing to write and less afraid of it. They also did so much reading and discussion that it gave them a shared experience in which everyone seemed to have an equal footing; this was empowering to students who were less skilled in English. And teachers felt that students gained confidence in themselves as writers and saw themselves as serious writers in this approach; traditional approaches seemed to inhibit experimentation and exaggerate the importance of errors. Before the course, students could not apply rules they had learned to their writing; but after it, it seemed they could. Yet the only grammar instruction they had had was in the context of questions about their own writing as they revised it.

When asked what they would change about the approach, teachers said they needed more time for in-class individual conferences, more lab support in the way of tutors, better techniques for getting the groups to be more independent, and greater evidence that students are learning grammar and mechanics in ESL 10 and 20, even though they can see fewer mistakes as students progress through the courses. Teachers also wanted to do less talking and interfering with students' discussions and their written pieces, because such intervention appeared to lessen students' involvement and creativity. Many ended up not even looking at students' first or second drafts, but responding to the third draft after the student had worked with a peer. However, at that point, teachers said they wanted to give even more helpful responses than they were giving. And they wanted to work more on a one-to-one basis than they had been able to do.

The majority of students believed that they had improved considerably because they could write such long pieces and read so much in such a short time, compared with work done in former courses. They felt the organization of their writing had improved, and said they had greater confidence and control when writing and that they were surprised by how much they could write. They also felt they were better able to develop ideas and liked working on the semester-long writing projects the best. They expressed pride in having read several real novels in English, rather than ones abridged for ESL students, but they felt less sure about their correctness in writing. Many students also said that the course, although focusing

on reading and writing, had improved their speaking as well. And a few also commented that their ways of thinking have changed, that they felt Americanized because of the course work and that they liked that feeling.

Students said they wanted more grammar, even though they acknowledged greater growth in this ESL approach than in previous courses in which grammar had received major stress. They also wanted more practice for the final exam. And many students said that the writing demands of the double-entry journals were too great. They also said they were teaching each other too much and maybe the teacher should be teaching them more. In other words, despite their recognition of and satisfaction with their own growth, years of traditional instruction limited their confidence in the approach.

ONGOING RESEARCH

The City College has received a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to conduct further research on the approach, to train teachers in the theory and techniques used, and to disseminate project findings. The first item on our research agenda is to demonstrate how students' writing improves over time using a whole-language, fluency-first approach, compared with how it develops using a grammar-based approach. And we have many questions to answer, such as whether the pressure to pass the test adversely affects students' development in writing in ESL 30, and how well our students do in later required courses. We also want to experiment with students taking greater control and responsibility in the courses, and with other course themes, activities, projects, and readings.

But what we have already learned is that our students now are acquiring fluency in English along with what Mayher et al. call fluency in the written language, and that this latter fluency is the basis for their becoming competent readers and writers, enough to become successful members of the academy. Thus there are decided implications for such an approach in teaching native speakers of English as well.

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