

An Authentic Context-based Course Development for L2 Writing Instruction

Yu, Ho Jung
(Kyungil University / Professor)

Yu, Ho Jung. An Authentic Context-based Course Development for L2 Writing Instruction. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 77 (2020): 317-332. The purpose of this article is to show one instructional case, representing an authentic writing context with various instructional strategies. One of the critical drawbacks in learning English in the EFL context is that it is challenging for students to apply the language that they acquire in class to a real context. In other words, to overcome this drawback, it is critical that teachers develop instruction that fills this gap. In addition, it is evident that teaching English writing is part of education, so it is required that teachers implement the most practical learning theories and strategies in teaching writing. Keeping this principle in mind, this article introduces one example instruction that can be utilized in L2 writing class. This article elaborates on one possible problem in English education in general and English writing in specific, demonstrates how collaborative learning and problem-based learning are employed in one writing course and one unit of a lesson, and justifies the use of instructional strategies in the unit. (Kyungil University)

Key words: authentic L2 writing instruction, cooperative learning, problem-based learning, situated learning, Vygotsky's constructivism

I. Introduction

Learning English writing represents many benefits. For example, learning English writing is instrumental in enhancing reading, listening, and speaking (Grabe, 2009; Hirvela, 2007). English writing is also conducive to improving critical thinking skills (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Hu, 2017). It has been scholarly supported that writing instruction helps learners to enhance the advancement of the literacy and critical thinking skills of the target language.

L2 writing educators need to design L2 writing instruction to enhance L2 writing competence given the real context of using the target language. The fundamental cause of learning English is to use the language. The specific purpose of learning English writing is to communicate with others. However, the reality is that it is challenged that foreign language learners lack authentic use of English that they learn in a classroom. so it has been urgent that the teacher helps learners to use the language of English in real context (Ozverir, Herrington, and OSam, 2016). According to Chen and Brown (2012) maintain, L2 learners do not engage in writing class based on textbooks that does not “accommodate the diverse purposes” (p. 435) the learners have for their English learning. They note that L2 educators should design authentic tasks to meet the learners’ expectations and characteristics. To cultivate the competence of the target language in an authentic situation, it is crucial to find a context where learners can use the language that they learn. English writing teachers need to make efforts to identify various authentic contexts in which learners can utilize their language skills.

Also, teaching does not happen without strategies. Teaching writing can be implemented with different instructional theories and strategies that are useful in the process of writing. L2 writers can practice collaboration to complete the online and offline joint writing projects (Cho, 2017; Storch, 2011; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). Also, the process of writing itself involves cooperation in providing feedback to each other. L2 writing educators can apply the instructional theories and strategies, such as cooperative learning, problem-based instruction, situated cognition, or Vygotsky’s constructivism (Orey, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978) in their writing instruction. L2 writing instruction can be theoretically and practically sound.

Therefore, this article presents an L2 writing instruction in an

authentic context where English is used, elaborating on how instructional theories and strategies, such as cooperative learning, problem-based instruction, situated cognition, and Vygotsky's constructivism are incorporated in the real context of writing.

II. An Authentic Context-based English Writing Instruction

2.1 Problem Statement

It is challenging for EFL (English as a foreign language) students to use the target language that they learn in a real context. It is fundamental that teachers create an authentic learning context in order to help students to believe that the language that they are learning is useful and practical. Regarding an authentic context, our city district fails to represent useful information about tourist attractions for international visitors. Therefore, I propose an English course where students write English texts to post them on the website of our city district, or to be a booklet for international tourists. The texts here do not have to be written only in words, but can be written with images and words. The reasons to develop this course are two-fold: one is to introduce many places and activities for the local culture to international tourists, and the other is that students learn the language in a meaningful way. Out of the seven course units that consist of 1) the problem-finding discussion, 2) understanding of genre-based writing, 3) analyzing and understanding texts, 4) research, 5) writing texts, 6) presenting and selecting, and 7) submitting the results to the city district, this theoretical application assignment highlights part of the third unit, capitalizing on understanding the content and textual features of texts for tourist attractions. To make their own texts about tourist attractions, students will be able to grasp the genre of such

writing, including content, textual organization, sentences, words, and non-verbal elements (if any); and also to evaluate whether texts are effective enough to attract international tourists.

2.2 Target Learners

The target learners are 20 students at my university who are from different majors, representing global trade, sports, photography, social service, and nursing. This course is an elective course that usually students take after the two required English courses, English Communication 1 and 2. Some students have also taken one English reading course as another elective course. Since my university is not competitive, most of the students are not fluent even after taking the two required courses. However, there are those who participate in overseas programs, such as two-week global experience, a four-week language training in the US or Canada, and a 16-week language training in the US or Canada. These students want to practice and improve their English continuously. At the same time, many of the students who take this course have not taken an English writing course. In sum, the 20 students are varied in terms of English competence and experience about the target language and culture.

2.3 Instructional Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to: 1) Describe the content of a given text about tourist attractions clearly; 2) Describe the organization of the text clearly; 3) Understand the variety of sentence structures in the text; 4) Understand the vocabulary items in the text with 90 % accuracy; 5) Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the text to attract international tourists; 6) Make a presentation about what

students understand within groups and in a whole class.

2.4 One Lesson Plan for the Course

2.4.1. Context of the course

The overarching goal of this course is to make ten collaborative English texts about tourist attractions in our city district that does not present appropriate tourist information for international visitors. To complete the project, the entire course is divided into seven stages: 1) Discussion about the need or a problem relating to English texts about tourist attractions in our city district, 2) Activities about understanding genre-based writing, 3) Analyzing English texts for local and international tourist attractions; 4) Research, consisting of a survey and interviews about international citizens, as well as field visits and online search; 5) Writing four English texts in each group with peer, teacher, and international faculty feedback; 6) Presenting the results of each group and selecting the 10 best texts out of 24 texts by student evaluation, as well as teacher evaluation; 7) Submitting them to the city district as a form of proposal, which can be written in Korean, except for the English texts.

2.4.2 Context of the lesson plan

A class meets for two hours per each week. The present lesson is the first part of the class. During the 50-minute lesson, the students analyze one authentic English text with a group of four students. Each group has at least one advanced speaker and one intermediate speaker of English. The day before this lesson begins, the teacher contacts more capable students in each group with a group chat application, discusses the ways of making all of the group members engaged in group work,

and assigns the task of a leader and student facilitator in each group. The lesson is mainly divided by the teacher's warm-up about the lesson, students' activities individually and in group, and the teacher's wrap-up. For homework, each student in groups analyzes three English texts for tourist attractions only for content and organization and post the results on the learning management system of the class for a pod's discussion.

2.4.3. Details of the lesson plan

Warm-up (10 minutes): The teacher plays a major role in this step, asking warm-up questions, presenting one sample text, and introducing students' activities.

The teacher greets students and asks them questions like:
Have you ever read a booklet or an online text about tourist attractions before or while making a domestic or international trip?
What information are you expecting when running your eyes over it?

Then, the teacher shows the website about tourist attractions (19 Top-Rated Attractions & Places in Visit in Arizona: <https://www.planetware.com/tourist-attractions/arizona-usaz.htm>), selects the section of "Phoenix," and reads and explains the text briefly. Also, the teacher circles all of the adjectives that indicate the writer's opinion or emotion about the place. However, the teacher does not analyze it in detail since the detailed analysis may prevent the students from sharing their own thoughts in analyzing the text.

The teacher explains the objectives of the course, arranges the students based on English competence in groups of four students, and tells them to analyze the town of "Bisbee" on the tenth place in the website. When students do the group work, the teacher gives each group the following guided directions of the textual analysis with the reading material: 1) Identify the name of information in the text; 2) Describe

the overall organization of the text; 3) Circle difficult words or phrases with a colored pen and clarify the meanings of them; 4) Underline at least five different sentence structures and discuss how the structures are different; 4) Identify any non-verbal element and discuss its effectiveness; 5) Box all of the adjectives and discuss impressions about the place implied by the adjectives; 6) Discuss how effective the text is to attract tourists.

The teacher puts the directions on the screen in order for students to refer to them during their work. He hands out the text to all of the students in every group and asks them to decide one note-taker for group discussion.

Main activities (30 minutes): The main activities consist of group discussion on the text of “Bisbee” and each group presentation to the whole class. During the students’ main activities, the teacher works around to facilitate group discussion.

Each group checks responses to the questions together. Before checking the answers, they identify one facilitator who is already decided before class and one note-taker. Group discussion is composed of three parts, covering 1) information and organization, 2) words or phrases, sentences, and non-verbal element, and 3) adjectives and opinions.

First, they begin discussion about the two questions: “Identify and write the name of information,” and “Describe the overall organization of the text.” Before discussing the questions, one student, not a facilitator and a note-taker, read the text aloud in group. The rest of the group follow the student, capitalizing on the two questions. Especially, the note-taker checks the words that the reader has difficulty enunciating. The facilitator initiates and facilitates the group to address their thoughts on the questions, and the facilitator listens to the

responses, asking follow-up questions, if needed, and also sharing his or her thoughts at the end of the other group members' answering. The note-taker writes down key ideas and shares it at the end of the first part of discussion.

Second, students in groups answer other three questions: "Circle difficult words or phrases with a colored pen?" "Underline at least five different sentence structures and discuss how the structures are different," "Identify any non-verbal element and discuss its effectiveness." The advanced learner who is a facilitator leads a discussion to deal with one by one cooperatively. The procedures of the discussion, for example, initiating, asking further questions, note-taking, and summarizing at the end of it, are similar to those of the discussion in the first stage.

Finally, students in groups answer the remaining two questions: "Box all of the adjectives and discuss impressions about the place implied by the adjectives" and "Discuss how effective the text is to attract tourists." The facilitator initiates a discussion, and students work together. The procedures of the discussion are similar to those in the previous stage.

The reason why the above activities are divided into three sections is that they enable students to read the text in a structured way and to apply this structured analysis to the following lesson, homework, and ultimately the final project of writing. The teacher closely observes the group activities and initiates a gesture to support when he notices any struggle in each stage. However, showing his willingness and availability, he makes an environment where students feel free to ask a question.

At the students' activities, each group makes a brief presentation about its analysis, based on the questions: "What information can you find? How is the text organized? How difficult and easy is the text? Do you want to visit the place? Why and why not?" Each group makes

a presentation within one minute. A beginning level of a student from each group or a student who needs to speak more takes on this presentation. This way, the teacher ensures a fair degree of each student's participation in the group work.

Wrap-up (10 minutes): This stage consists of the practice test and the teacher's announcements about homework and the following class. The teacher gives the practice test to individual students. The teacher reminds students of the post-test, homework, and the following class.

III. Elaboration on Selected Learning Theories and Instructional Strategies

The lesson involves the four learning theories and instructional strategies: Problem-based learning, situated cognition, Vygotsky's constructivism, and cooperative learning. First, problem-based learning is grounded in the idea that a class deals with an authentic problem. Dealing with an authentic problem that first needs to be discussed and identified means for students to propose a possible solution, out of many approaches, to the problem or to identify the causes and consequences of it. This learning is in stark difference from conventional learning. Even though students are in the classroom physically, most of their resources are outside the classroom. The teacher and the textbook are not only resources for learning. Students need to search for them, although the teacher is the key facilitator to make valuable resources available to students. Problem-based learning challenges students to proactively interact with others in groups and even with experts on the outside. The student-centered learning requires proactive social interactions in an extended learning community or with diverse resources. Therefore, students are encouraged to be critical, proactive,

collaborative, and also responsible for the process of learning.

In addition, situated cognition is the learning theory, most of whose principles can be harnessed in a problem-based instruction, which is not a theory but a strategy or type of learning practice. The most fundamental notion of situated cognition is that learning reflects real life. In other words, the knowledge and skills that they learn can be easily transferable to the real context since their learning is from the real world or an approximation to it. Teachers can bring this theory in a broad scope of learning, ranging from simple mathematical problems to complex social problems.

The theory of Vygotsky's constructivism highlights the idea that a learner acquires what he needs to develop in a particular learning context from the assistance of an expert or collaboration of more competent peers. Social interactions are essential in the process of learning. Once the learner has achieved the knowledge to need to be developed, he can leverage it to carry out many related tasks on his own.

Finally, cooperative learning promotes learners' working together for collective goals. To make the goals accomplished effectively, a small size of group is desirable. The group members are closely interdependent to each other in the process of learning. To make it happen, it is significant for each individual to be responsible with a specific goal.

The above theories and strategies support L2 writing instruction based on an authentic context. The authentic context provides a situation where L2 learners can construct meaning via a mode of writing. To learn a language to use is the fundamental purpose of learning a language. Therefore, L2 teachers need to make continuous efforts to bring an authentic context into a classroom or to let the real context to be a classroom.

IV. Relationship Between the Design and the Chosen Learning Theories and Instructional Strategies

This lesson relates to the four chosen learning theories and instructional strategies: problem-based learning, situated cognition, Vygotsky's constructivism, and cooperative learning.

First, the design is related to problem-based learning. The lesson plan itself may not represent its conspicuous relationship; however, it is clarified in the context of the course on page 2 where the present lesson is situated. The lesson is one of the segments in order to deal with the problem that one district of the Daegu Metropolitan city in South Korea does not have effective and enough information for international tourists. The course tries to resolve the authentic problem cooperatively. As part of the course, this lesson asks students to develop their understanding of how to introduce a place in English potentially to attract international visitors by analyzing the real-world text about an authentic site, called 19 Top-Rated Attractions & Places in Visit in Arizona. The lesson may help students to acquire knowledge to come up with texts about tourist attractions.

This lesson is closely related to the theory of situated cognition. This particular lesson reflects the real world of attracting people to tourist attractions. For example, in the lesson, students analyze the real-world text about the town of "Bisbee." In the main activities, they analyze textual features, encompassing content, organization, and language. The knowledge acquired from this exercise is situated in an authentic context, so it is likely to be transferable to produce their own writing to be used later. This lesson provides a critical opportunity for students to perceive that this learning is meaningful and authentic because they handle real concerns. This way, this lesson is grounded in situated cognition.

The lesson also presents Vygotsky's constructivism in two ways. First, the teacher as an expert or a knowledgeable adult helps students to understand knowledge that they are going to use in the later part of the course. For instance, in the warm-up of the lesson, the teacher demonstrates how to analyze the sample text about "Phoenix." Here, the teacher assists students to handle a similar task in the stage of students' activities. Second, in the students' main activities, they analyze another text about the town of "Bisbee" in groups. A more capable peer in a group helps less capable learners to understand knowledge that they need to acquire throughout constant interactions. Eventually, as Vygotsky's constructivism promotes, the assistance of the teacher and more competent peers is likely to empower students to complete similar tasks in the post-test and homework.

Finally, the lesson, as well as the entire course, is based on cooperative learning. The course project is impossible to be completed individually, but possible only when each member is accountable for their job, since research and analysis, as well as writing four texts, are required for each group. Also, this particular lesson asks each in a small group to be responsible for the task. In the stage of the students' main activities, students in each group play a role as a leader and facilitator, one student as a note-taker, and one student as a presenter for a whole class. In the lesson, each student conducts their own role, being responsible for it and interdependent to each other. Therefore, cooperative learning is evident and fundamental in this lesson.

V. Justification of the Chosen Learning Theories and Instructional Strategies

The four selected theories and instructional strategies are appropriate to address the learning challenge. The overarching challenge is to create

an authentic learning context for EFL learners. To design an authentic learning context, lack of one city district's information about international tourists has been problematized. Based on the notion of problem-based learning, which is an overall strategy for the course where this lesson is placed, the problem to be resolved throughout the course has been pointed out. Students in groups are asked to solve a real and challenging problem with different resources in the real world. Situated cognition is also applicable since, to resolve the authentic problem, students need to develop the knowledge and skills that are used in the authentic writing context. Developing them can be possible when the teacher brings authentic resources and addresses the questions, and students accomplish answering them. Also, Vygotsky's constructivism is effective to cope with challenges that students have as language learners and inexperienced EFL writers. They need to have constant assistance in accomplishing development goals ahead, involving understanding English and the specific genre of writing. Therefore, Vygotsky's constructivism provides the rationale of interactive learning from more knowledgeable beings. Finally, cooperative learning should be needed to make it possible and effective to handle the instructional challenge addressed. The final accomplishment in the authentic context is impossible to be made individually. A student need responsible peers that are given specific goals on each process of learning to propose a solution to the authentic problem that the city district has. Overall, the selected instructional theories and strategies should be useful to address the challenge of authenticity in EFL writing by handling the city district's problem.

However, weaknesses still exist in the above theories and instructions. For example, problem-based learning indicates that learning is authentic, critical, or socially interactive. However, it may imply that students are applying their already acquired knowledge to solve the

problem that the class identifies. It is agreeable that, during the process of problem-based instruction, students may acquire some knowledge and skills that do not take much time. This is not a desirable instructional method to help students to solve a problem and at the same time acquire new knowledge and skills that take an extended amount of time. Learning a language is the area that needs an extended amount of time and effort. Also, almost all of the selected theories and instructions represent group work that allows students to learn tremendously through constant interactions. However, there should exist concrete ways to check individual improvement and engagement. These are the weaknesses that the four selected theories and instructions are not explicit about.

The four selected theories and strategies cover most of the instructional needs to address the problem and secure learning through the process of solving the problem; furthermore, the theories and methods about motivation can be put into practice in order for students to deal with the problem willingly and to have achievements. Students choose to be autonomous, challenging, meaningful, and essentially collaborative during the process of this course. The teacher needs to check motivation and how to max it out not only for the ultimate goal of learning and but also for individual improvement, especially about English, while solving the problem. Also, the teacher needs to observe individual goals in class and how they are transformed in the process of learning. To make students motivated to reach their individual goals and also collective goals in group, the teacher can use different strategies, like Six C's of Motivation. To conclude, observing students' motivation and using appropriate strategies to enhance it can be one of the ways to make up for the possible weaknesses presented above.

VI. Conclusion

This article was to propose one authentic writing instruction in which students can have an opportunity to deliver information to international visitors in English. The stages of the instruction is composed of 1) the problem-finding discussion, 2) understanding of genre-based writing, 3) analyzing and understanding texts, 4) research, 5) writing texts, 6) presenting and selecting, and 7) submitting the results to the city district. This article entailed part of the third stage, focusing on understanding the content and textual features of English texts that introduce tourist attractions. In addition, this article demonstrated how the learning theories and strategies — situated learning, problem-based instruction, cooperative learning, and Vygotsky's constructivism — that are practical in authentic writing projects can be employed for L2 writing instruction. The course suggested should be tested to assess its practicality and effectiveness in L2 writing in order to make learners engaged and improve their English competence. However, L2 writing educators need to make continuous efforts to design authentic L2 writing instruction.

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hju2007@gmail.com

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