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Writing Activity Using a Silent Animated Film in an EFL Classroom

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Objectives : The present study aimed to clarify whether the use of using a silent animated film during a writing activity can improve students' imagination and to determine the practical effectiveness of learning fundamental writing skills and rules before the writing activity.

Method : After receiving basic instruction on English essay-writing, students were asked to watch a silent animated film and then write a review of the film. Students were then asked to exchange papers with a peer and read one another's work.

Results : Many students were able to write a film review using the basic writing skills and rules they had learned before the activity. However, although some students made insightful and imaginative comments in their reviews, others were not able to finish writing their reviews without the help of translation software.

Conclusions : The present findings indicate that basic instruction on English writing is effective when provided to students immediately before a writing activity. Moreover, using a silent film in the present writing activity gave students the opportunity to use their imagination. In addition, by sharing the same story, students were able to maintain good rapport with one another. Lastly, teachers need to show their students how to use translation software appropriately, as the convenience of such technology may hamper students' imagination and creativity. Movie-based learning activities represent one way to instill positive attitudes towards learning English while reinforcing the use of imagination and creativity in writing.

Key words : writing activity, audiovisual materials, motivation, imagination

1. Introduction

Naturally it is essential for English teachers to choose appropriate texts related to the students' chosen profession such as nurses or radiological technologists in order to make them conscious of their professions¹⁾. That indicates it is demanded that both nursing and radiological technology majors will be able to write about medical sciences in English by using appropriate texts. However, in order to accomplish this, it is required that teachers

should give suitable instructions of the fundamental skills and rules of writing to their students. Additionally, teachers need to select appropriate and motivating materials so that they can encourage their students to write more actively.

Nowadays audiovisual materials are often used in language teaching because they have such compelling power that they seem to be more appealing to the students than written materials. In most cases, the teaching materials such as videos and DVDs have been con-

sidered to be effective in improving listening and speaking skills. However, in recent years, the effectiveness of their use in reading and writing activities has also been reported.

Moreover, as Yamamoto describes, “Movies can be interesting material that motivates the students to learn” and “will help the students to understand and write the paragraph according to each discourse mode such as narrative and description, because the movie itself has those discourse modes”²⁾. Therefore it is considered that writing activities using DVDs which have their discourse modes are feasible for the students who have not had many opportunities to do discourse-level writing.

The purpose of this report is to give a whole picture of the writing activity given to the students in English I class during the first semester of 2010 and to investigate how effectively a silent animated film used in the writing activity can stimulate the students’ imagination and creativity, and how effective it is for the students to acquire the rudimentary skills and rules before starting to write an English essay.

2. Method

2-1 Subjects and Course Design

2-1-1 Subjects

The subjects in this research are the first-year students who take English I. There are 113 students altogether, out of which 77 students are majoring in nursing, and 36 students are majoring in radiological technology.

2-1-2 Course Design

English I consists of two parts. One is to

learn English medical conversation for nurses and radiological technologists and the other is to read various kinds of medical and scientific papers. One of the two periods a week is allotted for English medical conversation, while the other period focuses on reading medical and scientific articles by using textbooks, newspapers and other books.

As a final assignment, they are required to submit their essays on the articles or excerpts from books or news articles they read during the class.

2-2 Activity

This activity aims at the students learning the basic skills and rules of writing an English essay and writing their film reviews. The students are asked to accomplish their own film reviews on a silent animated film, *Tsumiki no ie*³⁾, by using the computers equipped in the multimedia room.

2-2-1 The Multimedia Room Used for the Activity

The multimedia room, which was well furnished in April, 2010 in our college, now has 44 desktop computers on which students watch audiovisual materials, search the Internet and write reports or essays. Each desk has dual computer screens and the central monitor between them.

2-2-2 The Film Used for the Activity

This animated film was produced by Kunio Kato, a Japanese animator, and gained fame after winning the Academy award in 2008. The film is a 12-minute film, which is short enough for them to watch repeatedly.

The story is about an old man who lives in a small house made of bricks, which looks like

a floating house on the sea. Under the house where he now lives, his older houses, where he lived with his wife and his daughter, exist. When he wakes up in the morning, he finds his room soaked with the sea water. So he has to lay bricks to build the new house on top of the previous house like a child playing with wooden building blocks. Then, he is forced to dive into the sea in order to pick up his precious pipe because he dropped it into the sea mistakenly. When he dives into his previous houses, he begins to recall his memories of the old days in each house. The nearer to the bottom he dives, the further his memory goes back. The oldest house standing at the bottom of the sea can make him remember the day when he was young and met a girl who later became his wife.

2-2-3 Activity Procedure

In English I class, the students are asked to write their film (DVD) reviews after watching the film without subtitles and spoken words.

The procedure of this writing activity is as follows :

- (1) Teach the students the fundamental English writing skills and rules. Explain to them that an English essay consists of three parts such as introduction, body and conclusion, and also explain that a paragraph has three major structural parts : a topic sentence, supportive sentences and a concluding sentence.
- (2) Show the students the silent animated film.
- (3) Ask the students to write the outline of the story in chronological order by using conjunctions. Show the use of the tense with which they write the outline of the story because they get confused about which tense to use when writing the main outline of the story. According to Sherman, teachers need to instruct students to “make a distinction between telling the story from the outside and telling it from the inside”⁴. The difference of the tense is indicated as follows : “From the outside : The basic tense for telling the story of a film (or book) is the present simple. This is not a ‘historic present’ or used for dramatic effect, and can’t suddenly shift to the past as a narrative alternative. The present simple is accompanied by the present continuous and the present perfect. However, the past simple is used for events which are clearly past in relation to the story, especially if we are told when they happened. From the inside : If you enter the story and take on the role of the characters (e.g., by writing a diary, explaining your actions or interacting with the other characters), you see things through their eyes and use the same range of past, present and future as they would do”⁵.
- (4) Ask the students to write what the main character is thinking about and how he feels by using five senses (using the sensitive verbs such as see, hear, feel, taste, smell, and so on).
- (5) Ask the students to make comments on the film and write their own opinions on its theme. Ask them to add your remarks on what the author is trying to convey in this film.

- (6) After finishing writing the outline of the film, the students are instructed to exchange rough drafts with their classmates and to read each other's drafts in order to check errors in grammar and mechanics, content and organization.

3. Findings

Throughout this writing activity, most of the students made efforts to write their own reviews on this film although nursing majors failed their own reviews because of the time limitation.

From the movie reviews submitted by the students, it can be found that most students could learn the fundamental skills and rules required to write an English essay. Some students completed their film reviews with their imagination and creativity, while some of the students could not finish their film reviews without utilizing translation software equipped in the computers, which may be a boon to the students who have some difficulty in writing essays in English. Some students using translation software were advised to see if the translated sentences were fit for what they wanted to express and choose proper sentences they wanted to describe.

4. Discussion

4-1 The Effectiveness of a Silent Film

Writing is considered to be more difficult than any other language learning activity. Moreover, many students did not seem to be taught discourse-level writing skills in high school. Therefore it appears that the students need to learn discourse-level writing instead of

sentence-level writing. As I mentioned above, the films, which have discourse mode and include some plots, can be said to be suitable for the students to practice discourse-level writing.

The pictures without descriptive words in the film force the students to think for themselves and mentally travel to another world which they can create freely without constraint. Almost every student can provide the same rough sketch of the story of the film because this silent film is a motion picture. However, the detailed description of the film story and how the main character feels in the story can vary depending on the students' imagination.

As Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, in their book on picture books, argue, "the words draw our attention to some details in the pictures, but they leave very little, if anything, to the imagination"⁶. The fewer words the story has, the more imaginative the students become. It can be said that using a silent film without any spoken words makes the students expand their own imagination.

While the students are watching the DVD, they begin to think of their lives as well as become aware of the main character's uncommon and strange life which is different from theirs.

Furthermore, this story makes us conscious that we can live not only in the present day but also in the past and that we cannot live without our memories. When we reach the climax of the film, we are reminded that what we did in the old days makes us what we are now.

To sum up, it can be said that this film is fitting as a writing material because this imaginative and metaphorical story can broaden the students' scope for imagination and develop deep insight into human mind, which will contribute to the students thinking deeply and look inwardly.

4-2 The Effectiveness of Sharing the Film

It appears that, unlike treating with different themes, sharing the same story brings about a cooperative atmosphere among the students, which can motivate them positively to take part in this learning activity.

Zoltán Dörnyei states, in his book, "the notion of 'expectancy of success' has been one of the most researched factors in motivational psychology for the past four decades," and "we learn best when we expect success"⁷⁾.

In addition, Dörnyei quotes, as one of the tasks teachers give learners to put them in a more positive mood or optimistic mood, "Let students help each other"⁸⁾. The reason is that "students know that they also have their peers working towards the same goals, resulting in a 'safety in numbers' kind of assurance"⁹⁾. Therefore it can be said that it is a good task for the students to share their works and correct the grammatical mistakes and misspelled words in their peers' works if they could show the respect for their peers.

Lastly, as Dörnyei states that we need to "create a pleasant supportive classroom atmosphere,"¹⁰⁾ it seems to be important that the teachers provide a good classroom atmosphere as well as attractive learning materials so that the students can be engaged in writing their essays with confidence.

4-3 The Downside of Using the Computer System

Making the most use of sophisticated computers sometimes seems to cause some problems. Ironically, providing students with a great variety of usages of the computers can sometimes backfire. The conveniences of this learner-friendly system might lead to the students becoming less imaginative and creative. Therefore, teachers should show them the best way of using some information they can obtain on the Internet lest their imagination and creativity should be spoiled or weakened due to the attractive high-quality computer systems.

In brief, teachers need to convey to their students the importance of thinking independently and creatively.

5. Conclusion

It is indispensable and meaningful for the students, who will take care of people as medical professions in the future, to think deeply of how others feel and accept their feelings. It can be said that the students need not only to acquire language skills but also to consider how other people feel in learning English.

Therefore, it is considered that teachers need to motivate the students to learn English by allowing them to use their five senses and making their imagination active as well as instructing writing skills systematically and technically.

Much further research will be needed in order to provide a more detailed picture of what kind of movie-based teaching materials will encourage the students to positively partic-

ipate in English learning activities.

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無声アニメーション映画（DVD）を使用したライティング指導について

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目的：2010年度前期の英語 I において行った無声アニメーション映画を教材としたライティングの授業が想像力の活性化と英文エッセイの基本的な決まりの習得にどの程度効果があったかを考察する。

方法：初めに基本的な英文エッセイの書き方を提示し、DVD の鑑賞後、そのあらすじと感想を盛り込んだレビューを書き、お互いの作文を読み合うように指導した。

結果：ほとんどの学生がライティングの決まりに従いレビューを完成させた。想像力、創造性を活かした学生がいる半面、翻訳機の使用を余儀なくされる学生もいた。

結論：英文エッセイを書くにあたり、基本的なライティングの決まりを習得することの重要性を確認した。無声アニメーション映画を使用した英文エッセイ作成は学生の想像力の幅を広げ、その映画のテーマから、生きるということの意味について深く考える機会を与えたと言える。また、同じ物語を共有することが、同じテーマを探究することになり、良い環境作りの提供が可能となったと言える。最後に、メディアを使用した授業は、授業展開の可能性の幅を広げる一方、機械に依存することが想像力や創造性を弱める可能性があるため、教師による適切な指導が必要であることを確認した。今後さらに、学生の積極的授業参加を促せるように、映画を基盤とした授業展開の可能性をさらに追求していく必要がある。

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