Teaching Writing As a Means of Education for International Understanding

Takashi Sugo （菅生　隆）

Abstract

This paper is part of a practical report based on the author's experience of over a decade in teaching writing. In order to promote education for international understanding, a number of unique programs and activities matching the proposed teaching goals were adopted as part of writing classes. It was suggested in a questionnaire that students should improve their communication ability through E-mail correspondence and other programs. The students also showed a positive attitude to the programs implemented by the author.

1. Introduction

In a society characterized by the progress of internationalization and information socialization on a global scale, the need for education on international understanding in the area of school teaching is now beginning to be recognized even in our country. The concrete practice of this line of education has been demanded in recent years. How should we advance education for international understanding in this global era of enhanced psychological, political and economic interdependence?

In the following sections, the author gives concrete examples of the development of a lesson practice that enables achievement of the specified teaching goals in our classes.

2. The Teaching Goals of Education for International Understanding

To date, the rapid progress of internationalization in Japan has prompted various approaches in the field of education.

Considering the key issues, the author could point out technical terms such as international education, education for international understanding, international understanding, cross-cultural understanding, multicultural understanding, global education, and developmental education. However, this paper does not seek to examine these terms. The author would admit that common recognition has not necessarily been achieved among educators and practitioners regarding education for international understanding, and proposes the following related goals:

(1) To foster understanding among people in individual countries as well as national attitudes, and to bring about a deeper appreciation of the cultures, civilizations, ways of life and behavior patterns of nations.

(2) To improve recognition of the importance of international cooperation and promote education for peace.

(3) To increase communicative ability in foreign languages (especially English) and promote mutual understanding with people from numerous foreign countries.

(4) To urge cooperation in the resolution of global issues such as environmental development, human rights and peace.

(5) To foster positive attitudes toward communication.

3．On Computer Literacy Training

Computer literacy is a fundamental premise for implementing this kind of approach, and students' learning should not be obstructed by a lack of computer skills. Fortunately, few students have problems operating hardware or software due to experience with gaming devices. Additionally, computers in the home are now relatively common. This computer knowledge can be applied to computer use in the classroom.

These days, most students have a basic knowledge of software applications and have taken computer lessons, thereby eliminating the need to allocate time from English lessons to teach these skills. There are classes whose lessons center around document processing, so we can be assured that students can type fairly well. Accordingly, touch-typing does not need to be taught in English classes. Even in Japan, using computers to write is becoming more common, and an increasing number of students are now proficient at word-processing. This naturally leads to the use of E-mail correspondence.

4．Practice of International Education
4．1 Sister School Exchanges

Wisconsin State is the sister state of Chiba Prefecture, and exchanges are carried out actively at the prefectural level. According to the contract between our school and the sister school, we agree to carry out the following activities:

(Contract)
1. E-mail correspondence
2. Essay writing regarding social problems, etc.
3. Exchanges of school introduction videos and artwork
4. Letter correspondence
5. Short-term overseas study exchanges

The results achieved through practical implementation of the above activities are outlined below.

4．2 Writing Purpose and E-mail Correspondence

In the past, the emphasis of my writing classes was not on *to whom* or *why*, but on copying and reproducing the base text of the book, including grammatical items. Students were not clearly examining the *why* of their writing. It is necessary to understand the fundamental items and principles (lexical items, grammar, syntax, and so on) that support writing. This means that developing the skill of writing requires steady effort, but this does not sufficiently include the standpoint of *why*. A foundation of writing, in choosing basic sentence structures and patterns, comes from consideration of the audience. However, the main classwork in the past was directed to merely producing correct translations from Japanese to English. Through communicating with students from a foreign country, our students were motivated to consider the *to whom* and *why* aspects of their writing. We corresponded by E-mail mainly due to its speed and low cost, although letters and faxes are also conceivable means of communication. The teaching procedure is as follows:

(Procedure)
1. Have the students type in the computer room.
2. Have the students save their essays to a portable memory device.
3. Have the students connect to the Internet at school or at home.
4. If we receive useful mail, print it out and share it with other students.

When students read correspondence, linguistic problems arose. The students

of the sister school sometimes used sentences and characteristic expressions that considerably exceeded our students' levels of comprehension. However, it is important to experience cross-cultural information that is not available in Japan and can be found in these authentic expressions.

When the handwriting of a Japanese student was praised with phrases like, "You have good handwriting," the student was pleased. In Japan, it is thought that letters should be written in an aesthetically pleasing way, as seen in calligraphy in the country. Letters written by students who received training in penmanship at Japanese junior high school level were clearly written well.

4.3 Opinion Exchanges and Debate

4.3.1 Essay Writing:
Opinion Exchanges for Peace

The purpose of this program is to deepen mutual understanding on the basis of education for peace. This is accomplished through the exchange of Japanese and American students' opinions on various global problems. An example of the topics that the class examined is nuclear testing in France. It is well known that a Japanese Diet member who appealed for nuclear testing to be stopped became a topic of discussion in Japan. Our class sent E-mail to the social studies class of a U.S. high school to ask their opinions on the merits and demerits of the enforcement of this nuclear testing. It was during a unit on the Second World War that the U.S. students watched a video related to the atomic bomb drop. The content of the replies highlighted thoughts on the problem from an American perspective and became useful materials to promote education for peace. Some of the responses received are provided below.

4.3.2 Example E-mails

Dear Mr. Sugo,

I am sending copies of student responses to your question about nuclear testing. We are in the process of getting additional e-mail addresses, but I am sending messages until we have those set up. The responses are:
My own personal feelings about atomic bomb practices are that they should not be allowed.
It pollutes the environment with radiation and waste debris and should be stopped. The enemy doesn't care how big the bomb is or how loud it is, as they're going to die anyway. So, again I think that atomic bomb testing should not be practiced. Besides, what if people start getting hurt? There should not be wars in the first place.
Thanks,
(anonymous)

I would just like to say that I don't think anybody should be nuclear testing. We don't need things like this in our world. It's just plain idiotic. I mean, if one country sends one into another country, then everybody else is going to get all upset and it would be chaos. I really think nuclear testing is cruel and stupid, and in my opinion anyone who believes in it is ignorant.
I personally think France is just on a power trip right now. They want the power.
Like I said — ignorance.
Sincerely,
(anonymous)
P.S. After all, why can't we all just get along?

4.3.3 Debate on Differing Opinions

Based on the above opinions regarding nuclear testing, the author tried to develop a debate in Japanese using a simplified procedure, as it was not thought that

students would be able to succeed with the difficult complete format of a formal debate.

(Procedure)

1. The students are given information on the basics of debating and watch a video about how to conduct a debate.
2. The class is divided into two groups: the pro side and the con side.
3. Various opinions on testing are collected and summarized using news resources.
4. The class is provided with the following simple format:

(Format for debate)

(1) Opening pro-side argument
(2) Questions and answers
(3) Opening con-side argument
(4) Questions and answers
(5) Strategy preparation time
(6) Second pro-side argument
(7) Second con-side argument
(8) Objections from each side

It is necessary to consider whether the procedure adopted in the context of the school is feasible or not, because inevitably, teachers in general tend to avoid teaching debates because of their difficulty. For this reason, the practice was introduced as an initial step.

4.4 Video and Artwork Exchanges: The Parcel Exchange Program

The purpose of this program is to promote international understanding through the exchange of artwork. The teacher arranges the exchange of parcels between members of our class and members of a class from the U.S. The first stage is for students to arrange a Treasure Box containing their own treasures and send them to their partners by airmail. Disney character goods and photographs of the students are examples of items included.

The second stage involves an exchange of artwork. Anything self-made has been exchanged so far, such as posters, ceramic art, works of Japanese calligraphy and videotapes. We also carried out an exchange of Christmas presents as a fun activity. It can be said that we succeeded in implementing closer international exchanges by way of artwork between Japanese and American classes.

4.5 Letter Correspondence and Draft Writing
4.5.1 Letter Correspondence

This project is carried out in addition to E-mail correspondence, and has included exchanges such as self-introductions and cultural information by letter. Correspondence by letter with an overseas pen pal is a familiar international exchange activity for us. "E-mail and telephone are OK, but with a letter we feel the human warmth in the handwriting" — this was the impression of one student. These exchanges have continued ten or more times so far.

4.5.2 The Role of ALTs in Writing Drafts

It is very natural for communicative use to increase students' desire to use English. Even students who do not usually show an interest in English lessons will try to voluntarily write English sentences at home. They also often ask if reply letters from their U.S. partners have arrived. When students write drafts, the teacher should keep advice on grammatical matters to a minimum because the focus is on the content of the writing.

Sometimes, examples of English sentences may be extracted from magazines and newspapers, and at times they are printed and distributed to the class as samples.

The teacher might receive questions from

students on expressions that are not in their repertoire. The teacher should refrain from explaining expressions that he/she doesn't understand and make it a rule to discuss them with the ALT. It can be said that the role of the ALT is as important as that of the Japanese teacher due to the judgment required on the delicate points of the English and Japanese languages.

4．6 Homestay Acceptance

One male student involved in E-mail correspondence wanted to visit Japan in a private capacity, which represented an opportunity to increase exchanges between both schools. It was our hope that the student would want to actively learn and be interested in the traditional things of Japan such as its culture and economy. His deep enthusiasm for Japan was clear from his E-mail.

The student from Wisconsin State came to Japan and stayed at the author's home for about two weeks. He experienced Japan and the life of a senior high school student. He also took part in many events and visited the prefectural sports convention, and seems to have had a wonderful experience. International exchange in a private capacity has a significant level of grass-roots importance and leads to a large wave of cultural exchange.

5．Student Attitudes toward the Writing Program

After the implementation of this program, the author distributed a questionnaire to the students to examine its effectiveness. The results showed that, although the average evaluation of students' attitudes toward the program was originally 3.1, this score had increased to 3.8 by the end of the writing course. It can therefore safely be said that

students showed a positive attitude toward it. Furthermore, in the free description on "What do you think of your writing ability after completing the writing course?" more than two-thirds of students reacted positively. An example of a student response is, "I think I improved my writing ability and have a positive attitude compared to before. I enjoyed writing very much." The questionnaire was scored on the following scale:

(Scale)

High		Mid		Low
5	4	3	2	1
Like				Dislike
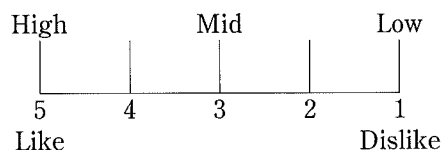
6．Concluding Remarks

The author has shown examples of implementation for the proposed teaching goals on education for international understanding in writing classes. It can be said that the feasibility of these kinds of programs has been enhanced by the progressive improvement of the Internet environment and recent educational equipment in schools compared to the past.

We must actively and efficiently utilize multimedia rather than simply watching changes in the educational environment associated with changes in society. This does not mean that we should jump on the bandwagon of prevailing high technology; rather, the author aims to implement steady teaching practice. Technology is a means to the end of teaching language — that is, communication. We should be aware that some teachers confuse the means with the end. We use language mainly for communicative purposes; we must bear this in mind and not put the cart before the horse. We should remember that the

true nature of education lies in the human relations between teachers and students.

With the benefit of hindsight, our writing programs were allotted randomly in lesson plans without each one being connected organically. For this reason, the author plans to clarify positioning within the year's lesson plan from now on.

Finally, these programs have a universality of methodology. The programs the author has outlined are useful in the educational practices of other teachers. These practices are not for special situations; indeed, the author would say that they are suitable for public schools. As a point of consideration with these programs, it is desirable that education for international understanding in Japan should foster a wider range of views among students.

References

Dunkel, P. (ed.). *Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Testing: Research Issues and Practice.* (1991) New York: Newbury House.

Gower, R., Phillips, D., and Walters, S. (eds.). *Teaching Practice Handbook.* (1995) Oxford: Heinemann.

（千葉県立匝瑳高等学校教諭）