George L. Greaney published September 1997

Less Is More: Summary Writing and Sentence Structure in the Advanced ESL Classroom

Anyone who has taught ESL students at the advanced level has encountered the following problem: Student writing tends to be marked by short, simple sentences without many indicators of transitions or logical connections between sentences. Students seem to avoid writing more complex sentences with subordinate clauses, appositive phrases, and other marks of sophisticated writing, because they are uncertain about how to use such structures and avoid the risk of error by keeping their writing syntactically simple. Although such students have studied English grammar and syntax for years, their passive knowledge of such structures as relative clauses does not automatically generate such structures in their writing. Even if a student is able correctly to combine sentences when doing grammar exercises in a textbook, the same student will produce simple, choppy strings of short sentences when called upon to write an essay. After many years of trying to teach students how complex sentences are formed in English, I hit upon a way to elicit more complex sentence structure spontaneously in their writing.

I asked them to summarize a in a paragraph or two a short narrative assigned for homework. Then I asked them to take these paragraphs and reduce them to one comprehensive sentence. To illustrate the task I tried to write a one-sentence summary of my own on the blackboard. I found that I had to use two sentences to include all the essential points as I saw them. At this point, instead of abandoning the activity, I decided to challenge the students to play along and try to outdo the teacher. When I read their revised summaries I discovered that, in most cases, even when they were not able to produce a single, comprehensive sentence, students wrote more focused summaries with more complex sentence structure than they had used in their earlier, longer summaries.

The use of summary writing as an in-class activity involves the students in a collaborative exercise in which the teacher plays along with the students. The element of competition, if introduced as a game rather than as a test, stimulates the students to attempt to use their

linguistic and analytical abilities to communicate their thoughts and to aim at a clear and precise goal: the one-sentence summary. If a student fails to achieve the goal, it is only a game. Moreover, the process of rewriting can take place many times because each draft is only one sentence long, and two or three revisions can be done in one class period. In this process the study of the paragraph as a discourse unit is approached by focusing on the sentence, the building block of the paragraph, and it is easier to see what is wrong with one sentence than to see what is wrong with a group of sentences. Students must focus on the idea of completeness in the small unit, and this thought process can then be applied to the development and shaping of a good paragraph. Moreover, the sentence is the form which is best suited to writing an outline of an essay. Exercises in outlining can follow this exercise in summarization, and students can move back and forth between these units, as they write a paragraph, then summarize it, and vice versa.

Many aspects of rhetoric come into play: the use of the present tense in relating the plot of a story, the choice of the third person to tell the story (the text we had read was in the first person), and the issue of what is essential to the theme and the plot. But, above all, summary writing calls on students to frame more complex, syntactically sophisticated sentences. The use of summary writing is part of the tradition of writing teaching, but I believe its application to the ESL classroom needs to be explored more fully.

The writing exercise is part of a class discussion, so that the writing, being circumscribed and brief, is closely linked to oral summaries which form the material for the writing. Students cannot get bogged down in the task of filling up the page; rather, the goal is the opposite, to be as concise as possible. Instead of generating comments on a five-paragraph essay that "a tighter focus is necessary" or that "this is repetitive," both teacher and peer criticism is controlled by the writing task, which is simple: to say all that matters as briefly as possible. Students' reactions to the material are judged by how relevant they are to the main idea of the story, and how well the writing expresses this idea. By pointing out that what a student says and writes is "off the point" the teacher and peers must use analytical skills and keep focused. Moreover, by finding that it is not possible to sum up the reading in one sentence, the student is forced to confront the clarity and accuracy of his or her understanding of the reading. In the process of rewriting there occurs a great deal of rethinking and reflection.

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The One-Sentence Summary In-Class Challenge

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summaries with more complex sentence structure than they had used in their earlier, longer summaries.

Overcoming Student Uncertainty with Sentence Summaries

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Using Narratives to Explore Rhetoric and Complex Sentences

The choice of texts is crucial. ~~As I stated above,~~ I have found that narrative summaries are easier for students than summaries of more abstract essays or arguments. Moreover, summarizing a movie they have seen is an exercise which precludes the kind of quoting of key sentences from the text which is a common temptation to ESL students when they are asked to summarize something printed in a book.

The use of narrative that engages college students by dealing with themes that they can identify with (peer pressure, disillusionment, authority, etc.) facilitates writing by shifting the task from judging an argument or distilling complex and unfamiliar information into an analysis that is approved by the teacher, to the task of explaining to each other a story which they have enjoyed.

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Thus, the oral rhetorical skills they use every day in explaining a story they liked to a friend are called upon in the classroom. Many aspects of rhetoric come into play: the use of the present tense in relating the plot of a story, the choice of the third person to tell the story (the text we had read was in the first person), and the issue of what is essential to the theme and the plot.

In the compass of one sentence they must convey their understanding of a text objectively, eliminating comments about how "cool" the story was or how they feel about it. This kind of "objectivity" is a prime desideratum in any classroom. But by using summary assignments the teacher can encourage clarity and objectivity by making these qualities necessary to win the game, as it were.