

Learning Contracts and Team Teaching in a University ESL Writing Class

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The following paper is a teacher/research project on the area of ESL writing in an academic setting. This ESL class was designed as a whole language writing workshop using principles from chaos and complexity theory. The main purpose of the class was to prevent the chasm between the ESL/EFL classes and students' academic interests. Learning contracts were explored as a way to encourage self-directed learning and individual autonomy, while still balancing individual and group learning styles. Team teaching and on going teacher/research was one of the fundamental aspects of this project.

Understanding Individual Learning Needs

In many learning situations, international students who are learning English as a second language in an academic setting experience a chasm between their ESL/EFL classes and their academic interests. These students need to improve their ability to write in English and are often required to take specific classes in order to improve their English skills. The predetermined readings and teaching styles used in these classes often do not lead to significant improvements in the ability of individual students to tackle particular academic areas such as: accounting, engineering, humanities and a host of other content area interests. Problems include not only different learning and teaching styles, but also widely different learning needs and objectives among individual students and their institutions (cf. Benesch, 1996).

A significant amount of information on learning styles is now available (cf. Ely & Pease-Alvarez, 1996). However, this must be applied to particular ESL students learning to write across the curriculum (Leki, 1995). In the on-going teacher research project reported in this article, the three authors--Author 1, an ESL professor, Author 2, a Ph.D. candidate; and Author 3, a student teacher--co-taught a university ESL class in grammar and writing. The University is a large mid-west university in the USA, with several ESL classes as part of the Intensive English Program. The three authors made use of individual learning contracts to enable students to write on topics of interest to them and to center their writing around students' interests. The class of 18 students from seven countries met three times a week in 50-minute-sessions over a semester of 15 weeks.

The class was designed as a whole language writing workshop, using an authentic, holistic and negotiated curriculum, viewing errors as part of the learning process. The role of the teacher in this class is described as a kid-watcher, initiator and mediator, designing a distinct learning environment in which the revelation of a new culture develops. At the same time, the authors were particularly interested in studying how students make sense of what initially appears to be chaos. The chaotic, transitory moment can become the moment of discovery; the class becomes a dynamical system: a system that is open to change from both inside and outside the immediate environment. Each student and teacher engages in an individual trajectory to reach a particular attractor. The class sought to make connections between the academic disciplines of the students and the English language that the class was designed to teach.

Implementing Learning Contracts

Learning contracts are written commitments in which students state their specific objectives over a limited period. McGarrell (1996) recommends a one-week period for an intensive language course with three or more hours of instruction five days a week, or a two to three week period for an extensive language course that only meets for a total of three to four hours a week. In this class, we used two learning contract periods of three weeks each, followed by an open-ended period in which students set their own time limits. In other words, on several occasions each student developed a personal learning contract and then attempted to implement that contract. The purpose of these contracts was to encourage self-directed learning and individual autonomy, while still balancing individual and group learning styles (cf. Knowles, 1975, 1986).

Before we developed the first learning contract, we discussed learning styles in class and completed the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire developed by Reid (1993, pp. 273-277). We encouraged the students to become aware of the ways they best learn -- visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, individual and group -- so that they could use these talents to their advantage when creating their own assignments.

At the next session, students completed the Survey of Learning Needs and Objectives prepared by Hedy McGarrell (1996, p. 504), with its seven questions:

1. What is your long-term goal in learning English?
2. When do you expect to reach this goal?
3. How do you think you can best achieve your long-term goal?
4. What are some of your short-term goals? (Specify one or several.)
5. When do you expect to reach your short-term goal(s)?
6. What do you think would help you achieve your short-term goal(s)?
7. What kinds of activities have you found helpful in improving your ability in English?

We explained the idea of making a personal learning contract in small groups, and asked students to think about what topic they wished to write about and what genre would be appropriate (i.e. essay, research paper, poem, etc.).

In the third class, students broke up into teacher-led small groups or peer groups and helped each other to develop their first learning contracts. We used questions drawn from the work of Knowles (1975) and McGarrell (1996):

1. What am I going to learn? (Objectives)
2. How am I going to learn it? (Resources and Strategies)
3. How am I going to know that I have learned it? (My evidence)
4. How am I going to prove that I have learned it? (Verification by teachers and peers)

A target date for completion of three weeks from the preparation of the contract was assigned, and all students were asked to sign the one-page contracts after indicating the total amount of time they planned to spend each day (outside of class) on self-directed learning (assuming a six day learning week).

At the same class session, we gave students a one page handout, Progress Report 1 on Learning Contract 1, to be handed in one week later with responses to the following questions:

1. Time I actually spent on self-directed learning each day;
2. My comments on this self-directed learning process: How did it work?
3. What help do I need now?
4. Do I want to change my original learning contract in any way? If so, how?

The following week a further progress report was requested.

Student Experience with Learning Contracts

At first, many students seemed confused. Some initial learning contracts from students from Jordan and Malaysia were vague:

"... grammar writing and some phrasal verbs and stuff; to learn how to write an essay; I am going to learn the communication skill..."

Another (from Malaysia) was more precise:

"Read some magazines, go to library, watching TV for practice my listening, the magazines will base the articles [i.e. essay] I choose [to write]."

Another student from Thailand revised her objective from:

"I am going to learn how to write good essay for my MBA [Master of Business Administration] program in next semester," to "I am going to learn how to write a summary of a story from my pocket book."

This was a general pattern: student objectives became more specific and concrete, rather less grand and abstract.

By the end of the first week, student response was positive, as expressed by the same students from Jordan and Malaysia:

"I think it works good and it helps me concentrating on certain objects which are my weak points and which I need help with."

"I think it is a good way of learning since it started by giving idea to the related topic I intend to do and try to rearrange my idea correspond to topic."

There was a general problem, however, that many students were far more committed to their academic interests than to the ESL writing class, not seeing the connection that a better grasp of English would enable them to learn better in their content area classes. A 36-year-old student from Turkey expressed the situation as he saw it:

"I have almost 70 pages reading and analyzing homework for management class every week. My average studying time 3 hours per day is not enough at all. Because of different terms that cause me to read slowly."

This commitment to academic interests other than ESL was also shown in class attendance, which generally averaged about 14 of 18, with absent students often preparing work for assignments and tests in other classes, viewed as a higher priority.

To combat this attitude, the teachers tried to emphasize through the use of the contracts that this particular class was a tool which should further the students' performance in their other academic classes. Students looked quite shocked at first when they learned that they could write papers required for other classes as a learning contract in the ESL class, but many quickly took advantage of the opportunity. A student from Jordan wrote sample answers to a CPA exam he planned to take, three students in a reading class wrote summaries of their books, and a student in a business program wrote his required case studies for his first learning contract. In this way students saw their need for English proficiency because they wanted to reach a specific goal outside of the class itself, and English became the means to reach a desired end, rather than the end in itself (Schwarzer, D, 1996).

The Team Teaching Experience

The three teachers had met on several occasions before beginning to teach, working out course objectives to indicate to students that this particular course would be "a bridge course between your earlier study of English and your specific academic interests." It was agreed that at the opening class, students would be told explicitly:

"To improve your writing, find: (1) your own interests and purposes; (2) who is your audience; and (3) in what genre(s) you wish to write. The genre and type of writing depend upon the purpose of your writing."

Students were also asked to obtain a (free) e-mail account, begin dialoguing with one teacher (selected by the student) either on paper or e-mail, and learn to type as soon as possible. Students found themselves faced with many issues new to them, especially as the syllabus explained that each student should keep a portfolio with his/her best written pieces, and final grades would be based on a combination of learning contracts, portfolios, class participation and a final project.

Originally, the teachers operated in a hierarchy of Author 1, the ESL professor, Author 2, the Ph.D. student, and Author 3, the M.A. student, with one leading for a day and the others higher in the hierarchy feeling free to interrupt and add to the lesson at any point. After the second week of class, however, we decided to do away with hierarchy and function as a team. As the semester went on, it became clear that the meaning of what we had done was different for the different members of the teaching group. Author 2, the Ph.D. student saw "team" as meaning a lead teacher would teach for a week, with others feeling free to interrupt regardless of their place in the hierarchy. Author 3, the M.A. student saw "team" as meaning that together the teachers would come up with the curriculum, and together they would implement it. Author 1, the ESL professor tended to jump in and out of class participation, trying to let the other two teachers develop their own styles, but still bringing them back to his ideas of what must take place in a classroom (student responsibility, authenticity in teaching and learning).

At this point, each class session began with one teacher doing a brief reading to introduce students to different genres. However, students spent the bulk of class time working either individually, in peer groups or with teachers on their personal learning contracts. At first, students were quite puzzled to discover that teachers were not going to stand up and lecture to them for fifty minutes, but after two weeks all students realized they were expected to bring relevant books to class, to write in class on their chosen topic, and to help their struggling classmates, even in the midst of their own struggles. In fact, students gained many insights about the "individual" learning contracts from the interaction within the small group discussions rather than directly from the teachers. Thus the students realized it was important to work on their own as well as to participate in the writing workshops available throughout the week in order for them to interact with their peers.

The teachers also discovered that the class needed a time to talk as a group for the last ten minutes; and the teachers then made a presentation and led a brief discussion on some issue that had emerged during the teacher-pupil and peer group discussions in that particular class: topics such as plagiarism, citing sources, and thesis sentences. This approach was very much in keeping with that suggested by Doll (1993) in which the curriculum of a course is seen as part of a process "not of transmitting what is (absolutely) known but of exploring what is unknown" (p. 155).

As the semester progressed, new patterns of learning developed. The first class each week often became a time for finishing a first draft, the second for revisions, and the third for making a final (presentation) copy, though students continued to work at their own pace and often did not follow the general pattern. The third (and final) class each week was generally a time for students and teachers to reflect together, with a teacher initiating a substantive session of twenty to thirty minutes on an emerging issue. The luxury of having three teachers certainly encouraged on-going controversy about course objectives and progress, as well as greater personal contact with students. However, it would still have been possible to utilize learning contracts provided a single teacher was willing to spend more time outside class on individual conferences with students. Although the team teachers did begin to have regular individual conferences later in the semester, if only a single teacher was leading the class individual conferences would have been necessary in the early weeks.

Student Autonomy and Textbooks

All three teachers strongly believe that the use of different reading and writing sources used for authentic reasons are essential for ESL learning. We also believe that the use of the ESL textbook as a resource for the ESL class is important. However, we do disagree with the common practice of using only one book for the ESL class, that becomes the curriculum of the class, and in our opinion does not encourage authentic ESL learning. Students were encouraged to selectively use the two reference books assigned for the course--Raimes (1992) and Hacker (1994). The students realized the teachers were not going to lecture from them, and that these texts should be used as tools: as reference books to tackle individual problems, after considering chapter headings and indexes. Also, teachers found many of the suggestions and exercises in Reid (1993) very helpful. However, the teachers stressed that students were expected to use the book as one resource, and that the books are not the curriculum of the class.

Teachers' Growth Through Research

Side-by-side with the student learning experience, there was a teacher learning experience. The evolution of team-teaching made evident certain conflicts in the understanding of the situation and in goals for the class. Furthermore, the teachers were influenced by five different countries' traditions--Israel, Argentina, the United Kingdom, the United States and Indonesia--so their preconceptions, cultures and teaching styles were significantly different.

Despite the differences among the teachers in age, culture and experience, all were united by a desire to implement teacher research. Every Friday, the teachers met for an hour to discuss the previous week and plan the next week. These meetings were audio taped, transcribed and form the basis for further research to be reported shortly (Schwarzer, D., Kahn, B. and Smart, K. manuscript in preparation). The importance of revisiting again and again key experiences, as suggested by Fleischer (1995) was certainly demonstrated, as we realized how our perceptions of those experiences differed; and the relevance of linking academic reading with teaching experience was clear, as we attempted to implement a new system of work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). As Lather insists, our goal was "to search for pattern and meaning rather than for prediction and control" (1992, p. 92).

In this article, emphasis has been placed on describing our experiences in such a way that other teachers can try out these ideas. Clearly, this was an exercise in qualitative research; and as Melroy comments: "It is only at the end of the experience that we begin to see the whole we have constructed" (p. 1). Knowles (1986) and Kolb (1981) too stress the importance of concrete experiences in

which "we undertake to learn something through our own initiative; we start with a concrete experience" (Knowles, p. 1). We did not begin with the idea of teaching as equal partners or even using learning contracts, but that was what happened.

If you are willing to take the risk of seeing the ESL curriculum as an open system that changes in response to student and teacher needs, then perhaps you too will experience the excitement of combining learning contracts and team teaching among equal participants in an ESL classroom. But then . . . perhaps your experience will be quite different, because different needs and opportunities will arise.

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