

Write-to-Learn: Geography Strategies

Daniel Teng-Lung Peng
[tlpeng \[at\] ms18.hinet.net](mailto:tlpeng[at]ms18.hinet.net)

This paper presents eight lessons based on the "Write-to-Learn: Geography Strategies" approach showing how this approach can be utilized to teach English writing to senior high school students to write a descriptive report. The target group is senior high school students in Taiwan, with a level 3 in EFL English proficiency. At the end of a period of six to eight weeks these students should be able to write a descriptive report of their own interest.

Introduction

As stated in *Write-to-Learn: Science Strategies* (Robert J. Anthony et al. 1996), using print-based activities in science can make significant improvements in knowledge-construction, knowledge-storage, and knowledge-retrieval or at the very least can make improvements in the communicative effectiveness with the scientific culture. In a similar sense, we believe that using print-based activities in world atlas and geography can make significant improvements in knowledge-encoding, knowledge-storage, and knowledge-retrieval. Or at the very least it can make improvements in communicative effectiveness and efficiency with the world atlas and geography culture in that students can build up written fluency as well as conversational competency through their background knowledge and information. By doing so, both phrases and sentences can be transported back and forth and the dialogue around the text, therefore, can be set up accordingly. In short, it is the functional purpose of teaching English as a second language through write-to-learn: geography strategies that is significant, not the occurrence of those terminology or the information in the text in isolation.

It is not surprising that genre plays an important role in the powers of literacy, in the admission to and in the approach to teaching writing. Genre "in theory" is a form of writing in a certain social context in its own right. Genre "in practice", however, is more productive in terms of how writing can be taught both effectively and efficiently in the classroom, as curriculum work and writing in the classroom work best when students are informed by a clearly defined pedagogy-- a genre "in practice".

According to *Learning and Teaching Genre* (Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, 1994), writers seem to develop proficiency when:

- They are presented with modeling, e.g. lesson 5.
- They learn by doing, e.g. guided practice in lesson 6 and 7.
- They realize that writing has to be practiced, and that drafting and revising are part of the writing process, e.g. lesson 6 and 7.
- They are confident in their ability to apply what they have learned to other contexts, e.g. independent application in lesson 8.

A Set of Lesson Plans Based on the *Write-to-Learn: Geography Strategies* Approach

Lesson 1:

At the first class, a variety of resources with regard to information on the geography will be brought to class. This includes world atlas, geography books, encyclopedias, reference books, a map of Canada and a world map. Students are grouped into ten, (depending on the class size, the class in Taiwan, for example, is usually made up of more than fifty students). Each group is asked to select a single resource, to scan and survey their resource, and to report at least one "area of interest." Students are then informed that over the process of this study of the geography of the world atlas, each is expected to write a descriptive report about a country using information from several sources.

Lesson 2:

Brainstorming: Warm-up exercise

Have your students imagine a country they are very fond of. It can be a country they go to relax in, or to enjoy themselves. Once they all have a country in mind, ask the following questions and have them respond freely in writing. It is best not to hurry through this exercise. Give your students time to meditate on their responses. Students could do all this as an oral guided imagery activity with very little writing required. In addition, pairs and groups could look at the recorded words from their partner and try to guess the country.

- What is the name of the country in your mind?
- How do you reach this country?
- What is the first impression you have when you arrive there?
- If you turn to the right, what do you see? How about to the left?
- How is the traffic condition there?
- If you like the food there, how does it taste?
- What are the colors you see?
- Do you like the weather there?
- Are there many people there? What are they doing?
- What objects, plants, animals are there?
- How do you feel about living in this country?

These are just some of many questions we can ask during this exercise. The exercise can also be adapted for descriptions of weather, climate, language spoken, location, population, ... and so on. Teacher asks the questions. The students respond in writing. Their responses form the basis for writing that have more energy, and more vivid detail.

Lesson 3:

- Draw

Geography serves as a setting where dialogue around the text can be built in order to facilitate the spoken English conversation between teacher and students, and between student and student. On the part of the teacher, there will be a textbook, but its function has a minor role. There is much reading aloud, much discussion and resources are in preparation for papers to be read to the class. On the part of the students, a map of Canada is made by each group, but there are no activities that are extraneous to the work immediately in hand. The teacher shows the class his/her expectations using Canada as a model.

Lesson 4:

- Label

The teacher transcribes the key elements to be discussed later on in the class with instruction cues on different sheets of paper, so that students can associate the key elements with their background knowledge or information they already have in mind. For example:

- _____ What is the area of Canada?
- _____ What is the population of Canada?
- _____ What is the capital city of Canada?
- _____ What is/are the language/languages spoken in Canada?
- _____ Is the population density of Canada high or low?
- _____ What is Canada famous for?
- _____ What is the birth/death rate in Canada?

Lesson 5:

- Caption

In this class, the information retrieval matrix is developed. The matrix is the fundamental instructional template which helps students set purpose, locate information, and transform and interpret information. Students are asked to fill in the blanks of the grid. The teacher is supposed to wait five seconds before giving help. A model grid is written on the chalkboard. The key point here is that the students

has to know the answer to their question and to locate the answer in their resource.

Figure 1: The information retrieval matrix with focus questions about

Canada.

Country	Area (km ² , thousands)	Population (thousands)	Capital City	Language	Extra	Extra
Canada	9,976	26,522	Ottawa	English & French	Low population density	Cultural mosaic

According to John Dewey, a teacher is a guide, not a task-maker. Under this concept, the last column of the matrix is, therefore, left blank, as illustrated in "extra" above. Students are directed to include interesting information that does not relate to any of the other focus questions under this heading. To facilitate the use of matrix headings as a model to guide the transformation of information, the teacher must first distribute to the class a summary report, the descriptive report for Canada as shown in Figure 3, about the country Canada. By giving each group a different source, discussion about the content of the matrix headings is more likely to occur. Students are expected to survey the passage for information regarding to the focus questions and fill in the blanks with the required information under the appropriate column.

The following cloze test, which is regarded as a more restricted content of text and is more suited to be used as ESL material, is offered as a warm-up exercise before the teacher provides the students with a descriptive report for Canada as shown in Figure 3 in Lesson 7.

Canada is the _____ country in terms of area, which has an area of 9,976,000 km. It was populated by _____ people in 1994. _____ is the capital city of Canada. Both _____ are official languages spoken in Canada. The distance from east to west coast of Canada is over 5,000 km. The difference between the highest and lowest points in Canada is about 6,000 meters.

On the one hand, on account of Canada's _____, many countries regard Canada as being abundant in territory and open spaces. But on the other hand, the less populated areas often lack a comfortable climate, fertile land, or available natural resources.

One interesting fact about Canada is that it is called a " _____ ", as opposed to the "melting pot" of the U.S.A. Different customs and heritages of many countries enrich Canada's cultural environment. To date, the traditional style of cultural groups has been changing. People move to different provinces or different places of the country, mainly to such metropolitan cities as Vancouver or Toronto, often because of job availability. However, Canadians acknowledge and have preserved many of their cultural diversities.

- Cultural mosaic
- English and French
- low population density
- Ottawa
- second largest
- 26,522,000

(Numbers adopted from Matthews, Geoffrey J. and Morrow, Jr., Robert. 1985. Canada and the World: an Atlas Resource. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc.)

Lesson 6:

Students are assigned the task of looking for the information required for each focus question for each of the following countries : U.S.A., Cuba, and Venezuela (Figure 2), based on the model of the information retrieval matrix in Figure 1. Each group of five should work from a different reference source. Up to this point, each group is only required to look for one source.

Figure 2: Summary information about U.S.A., Cuba, and Venezuela

Country	Area (km ² , thousands)	Population (thousands)	Capital City	Language	Extra	Extra
U.S.A.	9,363	233,700	Washington	English	?	?
	9,373	249,975	Washington	English		
Cuba	109	9,900	Havana	Spanish	?	?
	111	10,609	Havana	Spanish		
Venezuela	912	16,640	Caracas	Spanish	?	?
	912	19735	Caracas	Spanish		

It becomes self-evident that the discrepancy of information from group to group depends on the different resources students consults, i.e., information from different sources or the statistics of books published in different year. In order to write a report, we, as teachers, in the first place, must make a decision about the criteria for them to report the information they have found. Here in this example, the statistics must be from a source which is most recently published, e.g., 1996.

Lesson 7:

In this lesson, the matrix for Canada (Figure 1) is used to model the translation of the matrix data into a written report. The teacher makes a description of Canada on the overhead following the order of the columns of the matrix. The teacher underlines the data and descriptive language used in the Canada report to point out those places in the text where the pattern of prose would vary from one report to another.

Figure 3: Descriptive report for Canada

Canada is the second largest country in terms of area, which has an area of 9,976,000 km. It was populated by 26,522,000 people in 1994. Ottawa is the capital city of Canada. Both English and French are official languages spoken in Canada. The distance from east to west coast of Canada is over 5,000 km. The difference between the highest and lowest points in Canada is about 6,000 meters.

On the one hand, on account of Canada's low population density, many countries regard Canada as being abundant in territory and open spaces. But on the other hand, the less populated areas often lack a comfortable climate, fertile land, or available natural resources.

One interesting fact about Canada is that it is called a "cultural mosaic", as opposed to the "melting pot" of the U.S.A. Different customs and heritages of many countries enrich Canada's cultural environment. To date, the traditional style of cultural groups has been changing. People move to different provinces or different places of the country, mainly to such metropolitan cities as Vancouver or Toronto, often because of job availability. However, Canadians acknowledge and have preserved many of their cultural diversities.

(Numbers adopted from Matthews, Geoffrey J. and Morrow, Jr., Robert. 1985. Canada and the World: an Atlas Resource. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc.)

The students are then assigned to write a report about one of the countries, U.S.A., Cuba, and Venezuela with their group of five based on their data and resources. It is important that the students' reports closely follow the structure used in the model illustrated by the teacher for the class and substitute names and information for their assigned country in the appropriate place.

Lesson 8:

The students apply the procedure to constructing an information retrieval matrix and writing a descriptive report about Taiwan. Please note that at this point students are supposed to be in a position to work independently of any further teacher direction. Figure 4

shows one student's information and descriptive report on Taiwan. At this point, students might be ready to try a comparative essay using Taiwan and the country in Lesson 7.

Figure 4: Summary Information and Report on Taiwan

Province	Area (km ² , thousands)	Population (thousands)	Capital City	Language	Extra	Extra
Taiwan	36	21,000	Taipei	Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, & other dialects	High population density	Economic miracle

Taiwan is a small province in terms of area, which has an area of 36,000km. It was populated by more than 21,000,000 people in 1996. Taipei is the capital city of Taiwan. The mandarin Chinese serves as the official language. Taiwanese as well as other dialects, however, is also spoken throughout the island.

Because of Taiwan's high population density, the living quality is getting worse from day to day in the sense that there is serious environment pollution (including air, water and noise pollution), awful traffic conditions, and a high crime rate, as compared to the living quality of Canada. A great many of Taiwan residents have been emigrating to other countries, mainly to Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States of America.

One interesting fact about Taiwan is that it is proud of its economic miracle. As Taiwan is a small island, its primary industry is focused on international trade --export and import. The pattern of industry has been changed from low-endmanufacturing to high-tech manufacturing. According to a survey, Taiwan has nows ixtx percent of computer production in terms of worldwide computer market share.

(This article is an actual student's response and so errors are those of the student.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anthony, Robert J. and Johnson, Terry D., and Yore, Larry D. 1996. Write-to-Learn: Science Strategies Victoria, British Columbia: Mosaic.
- Brown, H. Douglas. 1994. Principles of Language Learning and Teaching. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents
- Collerson, John. 1988. Writing for Life: What are these genres anyway?
- Cope, Bill and Kalantzis, Mary. 1993. The Powers of Literacy: A Genre Approach to Teaching Writing. Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press
- Derewianka, Beverly. 1990. Exploring How Texts Work. Rozelle, NSW: Primary English Teaching Association
- Freedman, Aviva and Medway, Peter. 1994. Learning and Teaching Genre. Portsmouth, NH:Boynnton/Cook Publishers.
- Johnson, Terry D. 1997. Archetypal Structural Patterns in Stories for Boys and Girls. Victoria, British Columbia.
- Korber, John. 1997. ESL Lessons, Games, Ideas k-12. <http://www.aitech.ac.jp>
- Leki, Ilona and Carson, Joan. 1997. "Completely Different Worlds": EAP and the Writing Experiences of ESL Students in University Courses. *TESOL Quarterly*, Volume 31 No. 1, Spring 1997
- Matthews, Geoffrey J. and Morrow, Jr., Robert. 1985. Canada and the World: an Atlas Resource. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc.
- Paul, Richard W. 1993. Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapid Changing World. Santa Rosa, CA.:Foundation for Critical Thinking.