



Teaching Writing in an EFL Classroom : An Idea to Get Your Students' Pens Moving

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Introduction

Why do people want to learn a foreign language? A popular answer to that is that they want to 'use' the language to communicate something to others in either speaking or writing. Therefore, helping students to improve their speaking and writing skills has always been a primary goal of my teaching. I want to help my students to be able to express their thoughts freely in English. In this paper, I want to focus on writing and share an activity I have used successfully over the years to 'get my students' pens moving.'

Admittedly, it is not easy to get Japanese university students to write freely in an EFL classroom. Seeing your students sitting in front of a blank sheet of paper with a still pen in their hands and a blank look on their faces may be one of the teachers' nightmares. For many students, being asked to write what they think is not enough to get them to write. They may have some ideas but they often do not know where to start or how to start. They need a little push or scaffolding to get the pen moving. Below, I introduce a specific idea or an activity, called story rewriting, to get your students write more and better. Importantly, it is practical (i.e., easy for teachers to implement), doable (i.e., not too difficult for students), and fun to do for both students and teachers.

In that activity, I encourage the students to write freely (i.e., write whatever is going through their heads), to keep their pens moving, without thinking about grammar too much or being afraid of making mistakes. Through this activity, I believe students will learn to 'think in English,' an ultimate goal of my teaching, and gain confidence in their ability to write in English. Writing is a challenging activity even in one's native language. My purpose is to have the students write down their thoughts in English without hesitation. After all, we learn to write by writing. Without free writing, we would never be able to learn to write, be it a first or a second language.

Story Rewriting

First of all, it should be noted that this writing activity is preceded by input (comprehension) activities. This is because, after all, comprehension precedes production in language acquisition and students need to do some input activities before they are ready to engage in output (production) activities in writing.

Story rewriting is an activity in which, after comprehending a listening or a reading passage, you are asked to rewrite what is written in that passage referring to some cues, such as key words or concept maps (see Inagaki & Inagaki, 2014, for a similar activity using story retelling). I often use

stories, especially funny stories, for this activity. I recommend stories that contain about 250 words and have punch lines at the end. “Three Tortoises” (210 words), a funny story contained in Methold et al. (2001), is suitable for this activity and, as an illustration, teaching materials using this story are provided in the Appendices. The following is the procedure for an activity including story rewriting:

<Step 1>

Before listening, comprehension questions about the main points of the story (see Appendix A) are distributed to the students so they will know what to listen for. After listening to the story, the teacher provides the answers to the questions calling on the students. The purpose of this step is to comprehend the gist of the story.

<Step 2>

The script of the story (see Appendix B for a script) is passed out, and the students engage in reading-out-loud activities, such as reading aloud the script, overlapping (reading the script while listening), and shadowing (reading aloud while listening without looking at the script). The purpose of this step is to have students fully understand the story as well as learn some of the vocabulary and expressions used in the story so that they will be later able to rewrite the story without much difficulty.

<Step 3>

A list of key words for story rewriting is distributed (see Appendix C). The students are given two minutes to think about how to rewrite the story based on the key words provided.

<Step 4>

The copies of the script of the story are collected from the students and story rewriting sheets are distributed. The students are asked to rewrite the story referring to the key words within 15-20 minutes. After collecting their writings, the teacher returns the scripts to the students.

The advantage of the story rewriting activity in Step 4 is that it does get their pens moving. Without nothing but the key words to rely on and given the time limit, the students would have to draw on everything they have in their heads to complete their writing. I call it ‘brainstorming.’ With repeated use of this type of activity, I have seen their writing improve quite remarkably (see Appendix D for an example of a student’s story rewriting with the teacher’s feedback on it).

Furthermore, as you can see in Appendix D, I give my students some feedback on their writing, correcting some grammatical errors and writing encouraging words. In addition, I give an extra point, or “plus one,” if the student can add more details of the story, use their own words in their summary, write it grammatically and logically (using, say, transition words and relative clauses), etc. I have found that students are more motivated to write when I give them feedback like these. I truly believe that giving feedback can be a powerful incentive for students to write more and thus become better writers.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have introduced story rewriting, an effective way to get Japanese EFL learners' pens moving, thereby enhancing their writing abilities. I hope that this paper will encourage some English teachers to try story rewriting in their own classes and modify it, if necessary, to make it more effective or better suited for their students.

Finally, there is one thing you should be aware of when teaching writing: Nowadays, students have easy access to the Internet to copy and paste others' work. An added advantage of the story rewriting activity, then, is that students have to do their writing in class, not at home.

References

- Inagaki, S., & Inagaki, S. (2014). Eigo-ryoku ga tsuku jugyo o mezashite—Story retelling no kokoromi— [Aiming for a class that increases students' English proficiency: A case for story retelling]. *Language Center Journal*, 13, 21-27. Osaka Prefecture University.
- Methold, K., Flaherty, G., Hargrave, J., & Jones, H. (2001). *Stories to tell again (3)*. Tokyo: Macmillan Language House.

Appendix A: Comprehension questions

Listen to the story and answer the following questions.

1. What did the oldest tortoise notice while waiting for the cake at the restaurant?
2. What did the second oldest tortoise suggest the youngest tortoise should do? Why?
3. The youngest tortoise agreed to his brother's suggestion, but on one condition. What was the condition?
4. Having waited for the tiny tortoise for a few days, what did the second oldest tortoise do? Why?
5. Then, what happened next?

Appendix B: A script

Three tortoises

Once upon a time there were three tortoises who were brothers. The oldest tortoise was very large. The second oldest was medium-sized and the youngest tortoise was a tiny tortoise. One day they went into a restaurant, sat down at a table and ordered some cake. While they were waiting, the oldest tortoise suddenly cried out, “Hey, we forgot to bring some money to pay for our cake.”

“Tiny tortoise, you can return home and get it,” said the second oldest tortoise. “You’re the youngest, so you should be the one to go.” The tiny tortoise wasn’t very pleased with this, but he knew he shouldn’t argue with his elders. “All right,” he said. “I’ll go. But you must promise not to eat my cake while I’m away.”

A few days later the two tortoises were still sitting in the restaurant waiting for the tiny tortoise to return with the money. The oldest tortoise turned to the second oldest tortoise and said, “Let’s eat our brother’s cake. I’m starving.” “So am I,” said the second oldest tortoise, and he reached for the cake.

As he did so, the youngest tortoise shouted from near the front of the restaurant, “If you touch my cake, I won’t go and get the money.”

(210 words)

Vocabulary

Once upon a time:	argue with: disagree with
tortoise: a slow-moving reptile with a hard shell	elders: people who are older than you
cf. turtle:	starving: very hungry
tiny: very small	reach for: move your arm and hand to take something
be pleased with: be happy/satisfied with	

Appendix C: Key words

Key Words for Story Rewriting

Once upon a time there were three tortoises who were brothers. The oldest tortoise was . . . The second oldest was . . . and the youngest tortoise was . . .

One day,

- ①. restaurant → order cake
- ②. Oldest → forget money
- ③. Second Oldest → tell Youngest tortoise → go home and get money
- ④. Youngest tortoise → say OK → do not eat my cake while I am away

A few days later,

- ⑤. Oldest and Second Oldest → still wait for the Youngest tortoise to return
- ⑥. Oldest → let's eat Youngest tortoise's cake → starving
- ⑦. Second Oldest → reach for the cake
- ⑧. Youngest tortoise → shout → near the front of the restaurant
- ⑨. "If you touch my cake, I won't go and get the money."

Appendix D: An example

Name: ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

Story Rewriting: Three tortoises

Wonderful
start

Once upon a time, there were three tortoises who were brothers. The oldest tortoise was large. The second oldest was medium-sized, and the youngest tortoise was a tiny tortoise. One day, they went to a restaurant. They sat down ^{at the table} and ordered three cakes. ^{No "s"} While they were waiting, the cakes, ^{gone!} the oldest tortoise noticed that they forgot the money to pay for ^{their} them cakes. The second oldest tortoise told the youngest tortoise to go home and get money because he was the youngest. The youngest tortoise said "OK, I'll go. But you mustn't eat my cake while I'm away." He wasn't very pleased with this, but he knew he shouldn't argue with them. A few days later, the oldest and the second oldest were still waiting for the youngest tortoise to return with money. The oldest tortoise said "Let's eat the youngest tortoise's cake. I'm starving." The second oldest tortoise said "So am I." and reached for the cake. Then, the youngest tortoise shouted from near front door of the restaurant "If you touch my cake, I won't go and get the money."

A complete and perfect
rewriting. It's
super.

(+1)

