Junior High School Students’ Perceptions of Writing Difficulties and Their Effects on Strategy Use in Relay-Note Activity in English Lessons

Both nationwide surveys on academic ability conducted by Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2004 and those surveys implemented by local boards of education during 2004-2005 indicated that the English writing ability of junior high school students had not reached a satisfactory level. The surveys concluded that junior high school students had not sufficiently experienced language activities where they think and write about a given topic, expressing their thoughts in a short paragraph. It was thus suggested that language instruction be enhanced to provide students with more opportunities to practice writing their own ideas about various topics. Based on the survey findings, MEXT, aiming to implement the writing practice, has revised the Course of Study for English at the junior high school level, and the new program will be implemented in 2013.

Students definitely need to be provided with more writing practice. However, we need to investigate what conditions in the classroom would contribute to the improvement of their writing abilities. To answer this question we would like to consider a writing activity called relay-note activity (Nakashima, 2000). The relay-note activity assigns students to work on a writing task in a small group of 3-4 members. Each group is given a topic as a writing assignment every week.

Group members share a notebook in which each student writes a short passage (usually more than three sentences), and as each group member finishes writing, the notebook is passed to another group member. The teacher provides students with feedback that focuses on content rather than form. The relay-note activity is a concrete example of cooperative learning, because the activity allows students to interact with the teacher and peers by writing their own thoughts, reading peers’ writings, being provided with corrective feedback from a teacher, and aiming for mutual development.

In the present study, one hundred seventy-seven 8th graders in a public junior high school had participated in the relay-note activity, for over six months. To identify how students’ perceptions of writing difficulties changed and how the change affected their writing strategy use, questionnaire surveys were conducted in October 2008 before the research began, and in March 2009 immediately after the research was completed. The improvement in writing skills was measured by counting the number of words in each student’s writing texts. In addition, interviews were conducted with ten voluntary students in March 2009 to probe the extent to which they were engaged in the activity. Our specific research questions were followings:

1. How do junior high school students’ perceptions of
writing difficulties and their willingness to write change over time?

2. How are students' perceptions of writing difficulties related to their writing strategy use?

3. What quantitative changes are observed in students' writing texts?

The detailed analysis of the questionnaires indicated that students' willingness to write was raised after participating in the relay-note activity. Then, the students in the lower group, who had had more difficulties in October 2008, experienced reduced perceptions of writing difficulties, whereas the opposite trend was observed for the upper group, who had had a lower perception of difficulties in October 2008. Furthermore, the strategies students in both groups used were confined to a particular set of strategies, regardless of how they perceived the writing activity; that is, reference to peers' writings, interests in the content, and use of learning resources were more frequently observed than the other three, asking peers for help, use of feedback, and sense of audience. Students' commentaries in the interview or responses to the open-ended question in the second questionnaire clarified that students were motivated to work on the relay-note activity because it was a new language learning experience, unlike exercises and mechanical drills. Students were more interested in writing about their own thoughts and ideas about the given topics and reading what peers wrote about the topics. The results obtained from quantitative analysis of students' writing texts indicated that: (a) the volume of students' writings appeared to depend upon the topics, (b) students might have gradually learned to write longer sentences, though the progress of each student varied significantly among individuals, (c) the first writer of a group, who produced the greatest number of words among the four group members, appeared to function as a model for the rest of the group members.

Based on the findings above, we discussed some issues which would allow us to understand the nature of relay-note activity and considered necessary conditions which should be satisfied in conducting the relay-note activity: (a) to establish good communication among students during the activity, (b) to provide effective teacher and peer feedback, and (c) to develop students' audience awareness as well as their writing skills.

The paper concluded that the relay-note activity would provide students with more opportunities which compensate for the lack of their experience of writing in meaningful ways, and as a result reduce their perceptions of writing difficulties. This is made possible by creating a supportive learning environment, where students are allowed to ask peers for help and work collaboratively in a group. In order to improve students' writing ability, however, we argue that it is essential to equip them with technical knowledge of writing (e.g., effective use of dictionaries, methods of brainstorming) as well as providing them with a supportive learning environment.

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