

How to Learn to Write and Speak in English by Yourself

Torkil CHRISTENSEN

Introduction

This paper is an outline of a lecture that is offered as part of the “Bridge Lecture Program,” lectures offered by the University to high schools around Hokkaido to give high school students a taste of what it is like to study at the University. The time allotted for the lecture is usually around one hour, but there may be only 45 minutes or at times 90 minutes to present what there is to say.

The lecture will suggest an approach to learning to speak and write without classroom study, an approach that students can implement individually. Learning to speak and write in English is a source of anxiety for students entering university but in high school the learning of these skills is not treated to any degree of satisfaction for the student, or university for that matter. The excuse being that there is no time left over after university preparation and that there is no room for matters like speaking and writing.

The school publishes a list of the lectures offered in the Bridge Lecture Program, and for this lecture the high schools hear:

英語で書くことと話すことを同時に、自分で、学んでいきましょう。

この講義では、書くことと話すことの似ている面を基に練習方法をまなびます。どんな言葉でも、学習すれば、書いたり話したりできるようになります。ただし、第二言語で書いたり話したり練習する機会が、教室でも教室以外の生活でも意外と少ないのが現実です。

講義では簡単に自分で出来る練習方法を説明します。暇なときや思いがけず時間があいたときに練習すれば、だれでも（時間と練習の量によりますが）書くこと話すことをマスターできるのです。

The description is in Japanese as is the lecture, and rephrased into English it becomes something like this:

Key Words : English as a second language; EFL speaking; EFL writing; language learning strategy; High school English learning.

Learning to write and speak by yourself

This lecture will draw on the similarities there are in writing and speaking to propose a way to learn these two skills. The method will be helpful for any language when studying it effectively. However, especially for writing and speaking, the opportunities for learning outside the classroom are severely limited.

The lecture will explain how students can study by themselves, simply. By studying in their free time and when there is suddenly time available anybody can master writing and speaking (depending on how much they study).

Reasoning behind the selection of the topic

The lecture suggests ways that students can employ to learn to speak and write in English. It suggests ways to get started and details a number of expansions on the basic ideas that can be made with a minimum of fuss, when using the suggestions for getting started. It does not address the anxiety that students have about accuracy and correctness, but along the way doing the kind of study suggested here, a lot, will “automatically” remove most of the mistakes students initially make in their English, and make the English that students produce of a good enough quality for communication.

The topic of the lecture was chosen as it concerns matters that are not well covered in the English study taking place at schools. The skills acquired would moreover be very useful and could benefit students after only limited application. Engaging in the methods suggested here would be seen to be useful and productive to students, and would be intrinsically motivating to students undertaking the study.

Methods of study are apparently not taught, or even considered, in language learning in high school. Students are assumed to know what to do with a lesson and no particular consideration is given to expand the material in a lesson to make contact with the world of the school or student. Students are left unaware that there are other ways of language learning than the rote learning offered at school. The idea that a student can independently undertake meaningful language study without detailed guidance by a teacher appears to be alien to the activities that go on in language classes in high schools.

Undertaking the study to be suggested in the following requires very few resources. Access to a dictionary and maybe an elementary textbook of English will be sufficient to get a student started. Some manner of communication with others will undoubtedly be of benefit to encourage and maintain the study but it is not essential, even when exchanging and sharing with others would certainly provide helpful encouragement.

The order that students undertake the study in, the order of focusing on speaking and writing or exclusively focusing on one of the skill areas is not really important. The critical element in this kind of “private,” unsupervised study is interest and motivation, after students have started the study, they will likely themselves get ideas for how they wish to pursue the study, ideas which are their own and which suit their individual learning styles. It is hoped that the ideas here will provide a start for students to study by themselves and that through the study they will get a feeling for the potential they individually have as independent language learners.

The paper will first deal with speaking, then writing, then suggest how to integrate the two, and finally provide suggestions for extending the ideas in the final part of the lecture. However, as above there is no need to follow this particular order. Starting by doing things that seem doable and interesting and pursuing the study efficiently can be done in any number of ways.

The first steps to get to speak in the second language

Thinking about how we all learned to function in our first language suggests ideas for thinking about learning to speak in a second language. There is no particular agreement among academics about how languages are acquired, but with the knowledge there is, it seems quite clear that the massive doses of grammar/structure based study that students are subjected to in second language learning is less than effective in turning out happy users of the second language, certainly in Japan. So while bearing in mind the first/second language environment differences, how to get to speak in the second language?

The first strategy the lecture suggests is making up English sentences in the head, without mouthing anything, silently creating English in the head. The generated word groups (sentences?) can be based on what is happening around the student or have some other basis, the point is to focus on stringing English words together in the head (a kind of internal monologue). Conducting such an internal monologue can be done at any time when a student is not otherwise occupied, there is the time when nothing much is happening at lectures, the time when the student is commuting to and from school, the lulls that there are in the work at the part time jobs many students have, or when the student is awake at night and unable to sleep. There will always be elements in the environment that can be described in English, the clothes and possessions of neighboring students, pictures and ads in buses and subway cars, and the furnishings at work or at home. During the day there are many such opportunities offering subjects for saying things in English, where the student is able to create things to be said without anybody else noticing.

The topics would be what is going on around the student, trying to express what is seen or what is occurring. It is of course also possible to rehearse language of

lessons past or future as well to try to put together explanations for topics of interest. When lost for words dictionaries can be consulted maybe only at a later time, but when stuck for a word focusing on rephrasings and roundabout ways of saying what a topic requires.

The first steps to learn to write in the second language

When practicing writing, paper and pencil would be necessary, this and a store of simple commonly occurring sentences. It is probably a good idea to try to describe things with simple sentences and expressions and add to the sentences, stretching and transforming the sentences in the process.

Like: I feel tired. -- It is ten thirty and I feel tired. -- It is ten thirty I just got home, and I feel tired. -- and so on. Writing out such sentences regularly will acquaint the student with the mechanics of writing as well as they provide an opportunity to think about how the different phrases in a sentence hang together and how additions and switching parts of the sentences around changes the tone and meaning of what has been put on paper.

Using vocabulary that has to be learned can be plugged into simple sentences that when stretched become more meaningful and interesting. From: "There is a ____ in the street," with "dog" and "walking" added becomes "There is a dog walking in the street." and with a further added phrase, "There is a dog walking in the street sniffing at everything." Generally the vocabulary the student is trying to learn would be more "difficult," but the principle would be the same.

Writing feeding into speaking and vice versa

Both these two ideas for getting started with writing, "mechanically" stretching simple sentences and creating sentences where specific vocabulary items fits in, can of course be based on sentences that have been made in the head during the day and then written down when there is an opportunity for that. Or the opposite, written down sentences can be used as the basis of elaborations and testing of word usage in the head, silently playing with the word strings forming the sentences in the head.

Using these simple tools regularly will provide a good start to mastering both speaking and writing. With speaking there is the matter of voicing what goes on in the head, but that can be accommodated with friends or when alone during the day or maybe at home. Doing it regularly, forming sentences in the head and/or writing down sentences, will make English less daunting and when thinking about producing language, spoken or written, and it will ease communicating with others when that is required.

Keeping up doing this for longer periods may however result in a loss of interest

at times and it would be reasonable not to expect a student to practice in this manner with perfect regularity. There will be breaks in the activities, and it is important to remember not to be disappointed in oneself when these “duties” (making up English in the head and writing down things in English) are forgotten. Language acquisition takes time and does not occur when undue force and externally imposed pressure is applied. When a student forgets to “study” for a while there is no need to grieve over what was lost, just get started again when that becomes possible

Further developing the speaking and writing abilities

When a student has “studied” in this manner and become used to speak and write English on these terms it is time to develop the study further. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is no particular hurry or need to force the tempo. Students may enjoy the internal dialogue with “just” what appears around them and scribbling words and sentences that have appeared in lessons or other situations in daily life and may not want to integrate and expand this further. Such an attitude should not be considered negatively, the study is an independent activity and there will be active and less active periods.

When there is a wish to push on with the study, it is possible to focus on the writing or on the speaking element, or some mix of the two. Developing only the writing skills may seem advantageous but there will be times when vocalizing what a student wants to say will be necessary and attractive and visa versa. The following will suggest a few extensions of the basic approach described above that can be used to expand the range of activities and learning that can take place.

Vocabulary

The basis for the English spoken in the head can be new vocabulary (making sentences with the new words a student has encountered or wishes to learn) or phrases (maybe first encountered in class), topic based sentences are also possible (how to say something about “x” in this environment [where the student happens or imagines to be]). When studying regularly, options of this kind seem numerous and any element of the language to be learned can benefit from this approach. It may be helpful to write things down or have lists of words or phrases to use. Writing down clever/useful sentences as they appear in the head is also a good way to remember what has been practiced, going over the notes occasionally.

Dialogues

With set dialogues it is possible to elaborate and extend these. With basic exchanges, the challenge can be to add something to the final utterance, or maybe to

each of the utterances. The problem here is to be careful to take account of changes in meaning as a dialogue is being elaborated upon. When together with a friend this seems a powerful tool to get beyond the generally somewhat cut and dried dialogues presented in textbooks.

A mechanical variation of this would be to conclude an utterance by adding “and,” “but,” or some other connecting word or phrase and add something that would fit the now incomplete sentence. With a fellow student a response would be elicited.

Telling stories and giving opinions

Telling a story without preparation or expressing an opinion when suddenly asked (when not prepared) is often dealt with by deflecting the discussion (maybe even saying “I don't know”) and sidetracking the conversation (changing the topic). These are of course perfectly acceptable strategies, but they are not necessarily conducive of conversation, or result in improvements in linguistic competence.

A student could prepare spoken opinions or descriptions/stories in the head, prior to the times when such are required, and these can be written down so they are remembered better. It is of course rarely known what topics discussions will focus on before they start, but if a student has an inventory of opinions (prepared in the head), the student will be experienced in how to express responses in a discussion and even when a topic may be different from what has been prepared for it will be feasible to take part in the discussion. One way I suggest is for the students to explain a topic/issue in a set number of words/lines (50 or 100 words, three or seven lines). Such an approach would make the job at hand manageable and doable.

Building up an inventory of opinions/responses can be done at leisure, as the student sees fit. Writing down opinions and descriptions and rehearsing them in the head. There can be a set schedule, making an explanation for a topic maybe once or twice a week or it can be done on an ad hoc basis. When the time is ripe the student can identify a topic and think about what it would be possible to say about the topic, doing it this way there will be time to look up unknown vocabulary, think of the expressions that can be used, and the student will generally be able to become sufficiently familiar with a topic prior to having to talk/write about it.

Tying the writing and speaking together

With these quite simple and simple to implement ideas it will be possible to attain a reasonable level of competence in English or some other second language. When the need is felt, branching out into reading and listening will be no great problem and the experience with doing the independent learning will stand students in good stead

when they are thinking about how to go about the further study.

When a student feels stuck and despairs that there is no real progress or that the way things are going are not interesting, thinking about what the obstacle is will throw up an alternative way ahead that can re-ignite interest. Learning a language is not easily done but even with the only moderately linguistically rich environment (in the second language) offered in schools, libraries, and bookstores not to mention on TV and on the internet, periods of inactivity need only be short.

The suggestions above involve largely mechanical reactions to everyday situations that each student has to express in words and make interesting for this student (one-self). Specific topics have not been brought up as different students will be interested in studying different subject matter, some may focus on developing what they have been exposed to in the classroom while others may have very different ideas for what will be helpful to them.

The varieties of English, the cultures where English is spoken and other matters that students express great interest in have not been specified either. It is expected that students will focus on what they are interested in and use that to pursue the study.

Finally

At the time of writing the lecture has not been given and high schools actually wanting to hear it will be a critical element in determining student reactions. However previous experience with lectures focusing on reading and language study in general makes me confident that the reception will be positive. Like all language study the goal of the study is communication and all of the suggestions here are conducive of achieving that in a reasonably successful. It is hoped that at a minimum the lecture will offer the potential of presenting students with an alternative to the structured classroom learning diet and to some extent start the process for students to become independent learners.

[Abstract]

How to Learn to Write and Speak in English by Yourself

Torkil CHRISTENSEN

This paper describes a one hour lecture about how to study writing and speaking by utilizing the similarities between the two skill areas. The goal is for the students to become able to study these skills by themselves without having to rely on classroom study. The lecture is given as a part of the university Bridge Lecture Program.

[要 約]

英語で書くこと（作文）・話すこと（会話）の独習方法を身につけさせる

トーキル・クリステンセン

この論文は、書くこと・話すことの共通点を基本にこれらを学ぶ方法を述べた一時間の講義について説明する。目的は、生徒一人ひとりが自分で進める学習方法を身につけることである。これは北星大学の設けた北海道の高等学校のためのブリッジ講義で発表された。

Key Words : English as a second language; EFL speaking; EFL writing; language learning strategy; High school English learning.