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<https://doi.org/10.15017/6796320>

出版情報：言語科学. 30, pp.1-10, 1995-02-25. The Institute of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University
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GROUP COMMUNICATION: ENVIRONMENTAL INPUT FOR COMING UP WITH IDEAS, DEVELOPING PLANS AND WRITING

Jack Kimball

Abstract

This analysis conceives of group communication as a contextual framework for college language learning and, to be more specific, it explores group-oriented communication as a means of invention for involving students in mature discussion and other collaborative activities. The paper analyzes key elements of collaboration and invention, linking these elements to contemporary sociolinguistics.

The paper begins by defining collaboration and invention and then proceeds to establish criteria for describing their role in the foreign language classroom, with particular emphasis on written communication.

Introduction

Here is a common enough classroom phenomenon: When a foreign-language instructor asks a Japanese student a question, the student will turn to her desk partner or a neighbor to seek clarification and confirmation. The student and her partner converse briefly and, typically, they come to a mutual understanding before the student responds.

This co-dependency on the part of students is a thoroughly healthy impulse for group-oriented language learning, especially so once the instructor figures out how to harness and direct students' co-dependency toward positive ends, such as having students come up with ideas to write about. With regard to learning to compose in English, for instance, the students' impulse to talk to one another can be augmented nicely so that they feel comfortable talking and working together, reading, writing, and rewriting in what I characterize as an environment of collaborative invention.

What is collaboration? What is invention?

How collaborative invention happens in college writing is a question that requires descriptive definitions of both *collaboration* and *invention*. First, what is collaboration? As I approximate it, collaboration suggests "any shared exchange involving two or more students who are purposefully interacting as peers toward an objective." The key elements in my generic definition of collaboration are, shared exchange, purposefully interacting, and objective. These elements serve as preliminary criteria for determining whether peer contact is a true collaboration. Coauthorship is, for one, a prime example of collaboration. Writers meeting face-to-face to talk over the formulation of ideas for composition would certainly be another example. Discussion of "global issues," such as suggestions for source material or criticisms directed toward

revision, would similarly meet the criteria for collaborative activity.

Could students talking about translation from the second language (L2) to the first (L1) be an instance of collaboration? Or can student discussion about a point of grammar (subject-verb agreement, for instance) be viewed as an act of collaboration? I think so, in that these activities are shared, purposeful, and pointed toward an objective. Whether these are acts of invention, however, is a question I shall take up shortly.

Second, what is invention? This is a far more complex term. Rhetorician Richard Young defines invention as "concerned with discovering the subject matter of discourse" (1976:1). Young's ambiguous definition of invention is engaging and open-ended. We need to figure what Young's phrase, "discovery of the subject matter," might entail -- in other words, to know what Young means by invention we need to participate in inventing its meaning.

Still, Young's definition, as such, does not fix upon the distinctive features of writers' "discovery" or their "coming up with ideas." John Dewey's remarks concerning problem-resolution and acts of invention seem fitting:

it is artificial, so far as thinking is concerned, to start with a ready-made problem, a problem made out of whole cloth or arising out of a vacuum. In reality such a "problem" is simply an assigned task. [...] If we knew just what the difficulty was and where it lay, the job of reflection would be much easier than it is. [...] In fact, we know what the problem exactly is simultaneously with finding a way out and getting it resolved. Problem and solution stand out completely at the same time (1933:108) [italics in original].

Implicit in Dewey's impatience with the ready-made problem is the argument that "the job of reflection" requires a real context, an "entire situation" that makes itself known to comprehensive inquiry and a consuming intellect, a situation that remains blurred to fragmentary inspection, such as "an assigned task," or to a mind working in a "vacuum." Further, Dewey's idealization of "reflection in experience" advances Young's ambiguous urges toward discovery, by stipulating central features of the inquiry and discovery process. First, inquiry or reflection implies concern with the course subject matter, that is, "a sympathetic identification" (Dewey 1917:172). Second, inquiry proceeds best when the subject matter is left open; "thinking occurs when things are uncertain or doubtful or problematic." He adds, "When there is reflection there is suspense" (173). Third, "thinking involves taking a risk... conclusions of thinking, till confirmed by the event, are... hypothetical" (174).

Group work as environmental input

In reference to foreign language acquisition and language pedagogy, Dewey's 80-year-old concerns about inquiry and discovery resonate with contemporary questions about curricula. Freeman and Richards (1993) perceive a shift in emphasis away from methods that focus on perfecting learners' behavior, toward learning environments that hold students' powers of thinking and reasoning as central. Rivers (1993) argues for a more "secure" and experimental learning

environment that provides options for language acquirers, including opportunity for their expressing preferences with regard to course content and strategies for inquiry. Kenny (1993a, 1993b) stresses self-discovery and learner-mediated input, such as "investigative research" in which foreign language students define their interests, take risks and thereby achieve greater autonomy.

Language learners' identification with the subject matter and their taking risks are two criteria for an invention that engages writers intellectually. Writers are enriched to the degree that they sustain both the experience and, I would argue, their pleasurable awareness of the experience. With respect to these criteria, some examples that I acknowledged above as forms of collaboration are not instances of invention: Concerns about translation in L1 may forestall risk-taking in L2; collaboration on grammatical issues, such as subject-verb agreement, leaves little opportunity for participants to identify with the actual subject matter.

Writers identifying with and approaching their topics with uncertainty, taking risks, and enjoying their experience -- these features not only establish measurable criteria for invention-as-discovery, but also situate invention in a learning environment or "entire situation" in which students create their own input as they talk and work together.

A taxonomy for triggering learning

From a sociolinguistic perspective, student discussion directed to an "entire situation" constitutes a set of rich "environmental inputs" that trigger innate learning mechanisms for developing language skills and accessing knowledge (see Pinker 1994:408). Bloome (1993), for example, conceives of invention-as-discovery in terms of social construction by means of various language skills, an instance of learner-centered "intertextuality" through which students form themselves as speakers, readers, writers, etc. A taxonomy for triggering learning mechanisms of college writers and for initiating them into an "intertextual" awareness of their social imaginations and their processes of reflection can be laid out schematically. In the broadest terms, collaborative invention involves (a) topical lines of questions on the subject under study, (b) strategic lines of questions on how to develop or learn more about the subject matter as well as how to plan to write about it, and (c) formal lines of questions concerning arrangement and revision of the written product.

(a) One fruitful point in time for group work is in advance of writing, for example, students talking over ideas for writing, responding to one another's questions and suggestions, etc. Sharon (1994) reports on "group investigation" among adult English learners in Israel in which students practice many forms of dialectic. Students are

presented with a general topic, such as how to celebrate a holiday. First, the topic is broken down into subtopics and research questions. Second, students plan how to research answers, and then, students conduct their research and prepare written presentations for the class.

(b) In my work with Japanese college writers I frequently introduce topical prompts like the following. "Among plans discussed for future space travel is human exploration of Mars. This exploration will take place in many stages." Students are then invited to talk over the details of these stages as they imagine them. They are also asked to describe possible problems facing explorers in terms of the physical conditions of the planet, to consider various categories of explorers, and so forth. Once a student enters into group discussion, he may find himself expressing any number of new and perhaps surprising ideas.

(c) Another good point in time for collaborative invention is when students have completed a draft of their own writing. The instructor can help students by preparing a sheet of questions and topics for students to review as they read and discuss one another's compositions and discuss their plans for revision. Prompts that urge writers to define their terms and to give examples are always helpful.

Finally, for collaborative invention to take hold, the instructor needs to practice it himself. A teacher's classroom style can greatly enhance the rather novel idea of dialectic if the teacher encourages dialogue as a standard procedure. Instructor-student classroom interchange in the form of

inquiry and response is one occasion for modeling dialectic. Instructor-student conferencing is another occasion. A teacher can conduct a brief conference with one or more learners before, after or sometimes during student collaborations to help participants engage in the ideas under discussion and stay focused.

Conclusion

Group-oriented invention, in brief, offers a contextual method for guiding the student writer at various points in the composition process. By way of summary, here are four immediate benefits to group work with regard to language learning and written communication.

1) Language Learners Speak More English

Time allotted to peer dialogue affords each student much more time to speak and interact in L2.

2) Language Learners Find New Reasons for Talking and Writing

In group discussion language learners find themselves meeting the challenge of alternative voices, and accounting for their understanding in the face of choice.

3) Language Learners Practice New Discourse Forms

When college writers talk over ideas related to each other's compositions, they are being initiated to new dimensions of English-language invention.

4) Language Learners Enjoy Themselves

Students develop and enrich their understanding of one another as they interact in mature discussion.

Collaborative invention transforms student conversation into a powerful method for language practice and language learning, making it possible for writers to explore a variety of issues and subissues, giving language learners the real-world and real-time opportunity to "come up with ideas," plan, and inquire into compositional strategies. In addition, group-oriented invention engages students' higher-level intellectual faculties and thus it serves as a nurturing context for raising learners' awareness of their own writing processes and the rich meanings embedded within.

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