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Using Writing as a Scaffold to Academic Discussions in the Foreign Language Classroom

Following current best practices for language teaching, educators continue to focus on communicative proficiency and conversational exchange in the second or foreign language (L2) classroom (Brown and Lee 2015). Teachers have integrated speaking practice into reading, writing, and grammar lessons to add variety and create interactive opportunities for their students. This has been perceived to facilitate students' acquisition of targeted linguistic structures while providing them opportunities to test their language hypotheses (Zhang 2009).

Clearly, the integration of language skills across both content-focused and language-focused classes is important, and its significance to language learning cannot be denied. But simply giving students the time and space to interact is not enough; language teachers need to take important steps to scaffold these interactive opportunities and keep in mind the targeted language objectives of their students as well as the overarching standards of their institutions.

In preparation for the academic rigor of higher-education institutions and the high standards of international businesses across the English-speaking globe, our students must learn "to use language in more sophisticated ways: arguing, evaluating evidence, analyzing complex texts, and engaging in academic discussions" (Zwiers 2014, ix). In order to give students the tools they will need to access academic content and achieve goals they have for using English, we need to effectively teach these high-order functions of language. However, simply asking students to do such tasks with the language might not achieve this

goal. Although language and content teachers may dedicate an allotted amount of time to performing text analysis and generating academic discussions, this does not effectively happen by accident.

Concerning the use of academic language in speaking (that is, in academic discussions) in L2 classrooms, the pressure for students to perform can be intimidating. The necessary underlying academic skills may be there already—perhaps teachers have done such activities with students before, or students have done them in other academic contexts or in their first languages—but the academic language needed to fulfill these tasks takes time to emerge. An academic discussion may have started, but the students remain silent and unresponsive, participating only to a minimal degree. This scenario is fairly common. However, teachers might be able to allay this issue by giving students the time to write before having them speak in academic contexts.

This article describes how to effectively scaffold academic language in discussions,

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focusing specifically on the use of writing to help students organize their thoughts, stay focused on the topic, and lower their L2 speaking anxiety. The article includes examples from a high-beginning English as a second language (ESL) classroom in a university setting.

HOW WRITING MAY INFORM SPEAKING

Writing and speaking, as two productive language skills, have some commonalities. Both skills communicate meaning to a certain audience (sometimes oneself), and they draw on similar patterns of thinking in order to do so. One way that writing could beneficially inform speaking is with the use of more-sophisticated or complex language—language that tends to fit the criteria for targeted academic language that meets institutional and/ or language-program standards. Writing is more complex than speaking; it tends to contain the use of "more subordinate clauses, elaborations, abstractions, sentence-combining transformations, embeddings, and passive verb forms" (Sperling 1996, 56). In contexts where teachers want a student's speaking to contain more content-rich and accurate academic language (both vocabulary and targeted language functions), it makes sense that writing be the productive skill to influence speaking.

It is not a coincidence that written texts are more complex, are richer in content, and use more-accurate grammatical structures than oral texts. Students use more-sophisticated language in their writing because they have more time to organize their thoughts and clarify their message by choosing more-precise vocabulary and necessary grammatical forms. As students are required to piece together new concepts and apply, analyze, or critique them in various contexts, teachers need to provide them with the extra time to mentally work with complex language.

Giving students the time to first write a response to a given prompt allows them to better organize their thoughts and work out foreseeable misunderstandings that may occur if they are asked to speak right away. Adequate time also gives students the opportunity to find specific vocabulary that effectively communicates their intended meaning in response to the prompt, instead of reverting to nonacademic, catchall terminology such as *stuff* or *thing*. And, importantly, students at lower skill levels—having had more time to think—may participate more actively in academic discussions rather than remain silent (Rowe 1974).

KEEPING STUDENTS ON TOPIC WITH ORGANIZED LANGUAGE

In addition to helping students organize their immediate ideas by grounding those ideas in written text, using writing before speaking activities may keep students on topic and leave less leeway for them to digress. If students are simply given a prompt and asked to discuss, the discussion may begin on topic—but may soon go off track. As Zwiers (2014) points out, "classroom discussions are unpredictable and sensitive to the slightest nudges … nudges [that] might be a back channel, a question, a period of silence, a smile, a facial expression, or any other comment that changes the course of the discussion" (114). It is therefore crucial that when a "nudge" pushes students into a tangential direction, there is something to bring them back. Writing, coupled with appropriate facilitation from teachers, can serve this function.

Pieces of student writing from a pre-discussion activity, in which they are given time to think out a response to a prompt and organize

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their thoughts, can serve as notes during the following academic discussion. Students will have already thought through the discussion topic and will therefore be more able to contribute to a group discussion; they will also have some form of notes at hand to remind themselves of ideas they previously documented. This is helpful for two reasons: first, the notes serve as a reminder for students to refocus on the topic if they digress; second, notes are beneficial to restart the discussion when there are lags in conversation. Students may have notes from the pre-discussion writing activity about things yet to be said, and these ideas will spark new conversation.

Nevertheless, notes alone might not always be enough for students to keep their academic discussions on track. Even when students have notes, group discussions remain susceptible to the slightest digression. When students' writing appears to not be enough to bring their focus back to the topic, teachers may need to monitor groups and remind students of what they were asked to do. Often, a simple reminder or question is enough to reengage students in the discussion. While this requires teachers to remain engaged as facilitators to the academic discussions, less scaffolding will be required when written notes are available to students.

REDUCING SPEAKING ANXIETY WITH WRITING

However motivated students may be to learn a language, many express feelings of unease and anxiety in L2 classrooms (Horwitz 2001). This is especially the case concerning L2 speaking and group discussions (LaScotte 2016; Phillips 1989, 1992; Scott 1986). Despite teachers' best efforts to create engaging classroom-discussion topics in the hopes that all students

will participate, many students will miss out on (or opt out of) chances to speak. This is largely due to feelings of anxiety and/or intimidation that come with sharing in front of a group (Zwiers 2014). Writing prior to a group discussion can help allay this L2 speaking anxiety by giving learners the time and opportunity to think through what they might say before the discussion begins.

Many of the aforementioned benefits also apply to reducing L2 speaking anxiety. In addition to more-complex language, the higher general thought content and the fewer errors in students' writing may transfer to their speaking. Students who have had the time to think through what they would like to say, and who have monitored and corrected their grammar to the best of their ability, will be more confident to share their thoughts and opinions in response to a given prompt. With their thoughts organized and their choice of vocabulary carefully selected, students will feel ready to contribute in academic discussions. Giving the class the time to reflect on a topic through writing also sends a positive message to students. Not giving the class any time to reflect, however, "can convey the message that [teachers] do not expect the [students] to succeed independently" (Zwiers 2014, 134). Such a message only worsens student anxiety in the L2 classroom.

APPLICATION TO A CLASSROOM CONTEXT

The following informal observations of an ESL classroom in a higher-education setting illustrate the process and benefits of using writing to scaffold academic discussions in a real teaching context. The class being observed was a high-beginning reading and composition course in an intensive English

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language program in a public university in the United States. This course focused on developing the necessary skills and strategies to further students' abilities in reading and writing (although other language skills were integrated); the ultimate goal was to enable students to pursue higher education in an English-speaking country. The classroom participants included in the observation notes were 13 non-degree-seeking international students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Participants' ages fell within the range of 17 to 35 years old at the time this class was observed.

The methods used to observe this classroom were informal and not intrusive to the normal day-to-day learning that would take place on any given day. The instructor (the author), already being an everyday presence in the classroom, also acted as the observer in certain classroom activities. When observing the class, I wrote shorthand field notes detailing my observations of the students. At times, I walked around the classroom and wrote in a small notebook, much as I do when I am checking students' out-of-class work. At other times, I remained in the front of the classroom, again notating in a small notebook, much as I do when I am taking students' attendance and making notes for future class activities. The observed class activities consisted of (1) *rush-writing* and (2) the academic discussions that followed.

Rush-writing (also known as "quick-writing") is often employed in this class for a variety of pedagogical reasons. It builds students' fluency in writing; allows them to practice basic handwriting skills (or typing skills, if there is access to a computer lab); gives students the opportunity to use newly learned vocabulary and grammatical structures; and provides them with the necessary time (usually around five minutes) to think

through a prompt intended to spark academic discussion, which always follows. For the rush-writing activity itself, students are told that they have to continuously write for five minutes in response to a given question or prompt; grammatical accuracy is *not* a focus of this activity, so while students should not try to write poorly, they have permission to do so. If students do not know what to write, they may repeatedly rewrite the last word or the last sentence until they are able to continue their thought process. The important part of this activity is that students are continuously writing and therefore further developing their fluency in writing.

The actual audience for the students' rush-writing is intended to be themselves, although it is unclear whether or not the students perceive this to be the case. "[Many] have raised the compelling argument that in the naturalistic context of the classroom, student writers are aware that the teacher is their ultimate audience" (Sperling 1996, 65). Although samples of students' rush-writing are rarely collected, students may be writing to their teacher as the audience instead of to themselves or to their peers, as would be the case for a personal journal or for a group discussion, respectively. As such, teachers may want to explicitly direct students to "write for yourselves." Teachers could reassure students that this writing will not be collected and is intended only to provide them time to reflect on and develop their ideas before sharing with a group. This reassurance may result in more writing, as students will not worry about whether their sentences are "good enough" for the teacher to read.

Students took part in both small-group and large-group academic discussions, depending on the given day and subject matter being discussed; sometimes it was more beneficial for students to participate in smaller

groups, whereas other days prompted larger discussions that involved the entire class. The expectation in either scenario is that students participate fully and contribute to the conversation. They are either actively listening to their peers or contributing directly to the conversation with the intent to further develop or add to the discussion. If students are not able to develop their own novel ideas to contribute to academic discussions, they also have the option to state their agreement or disagreement with a previous statement, recognizing the original contributor.

Although there were many examples observed during the two-week period where I purposefully set up academic discussions with and without prior rush-writing, for the purpose of this article we will focus on two prompts:

1. **Reflect on your carbon footprint.** Why is it important to know the impact you have on the world? How do you think carbon footprints are reduced, or waste is managed, in other countries? What about your country?

2. **Being sick is never good.** How do you stay healthy? Do you think people do these same things in different countries? How does a country's culture impact its public health practices?

The two academic-discussion prompts were chosen because both require students to conduct a deeper analysis of the content being taught in class and apply it to outside situations. For both prompts, this included thinking on a transcultural and/or transnational level.

While there exist key differences in the topics and in the necessary vocabulary for these subjects, there are also similarities between the two. Both prompts include open-ended questions that target a deep analysis of the subject matter. And both prompts ask students to compare differences across cultures and across countries. It may be argued that the

depth of students' responses to a prompt depends heavily on their interest in the topic and on their knowledge of vocabulary related to the topic (in this case, students had learned relevant vocabulary for both prompts prior to these observations); however, I believe that the depth of discussion and overall participation of students also stem from whether or not they first had the opportunity to think through and organize their thoughts through writing.

In the first prompt, students did not have an opportunity to participate in rush-writing before the academic discussion began. The discussion was prefaced by the teacher checking students' homework, which included a worksheet that was used to document their carbon footprint (per an online questionnaire). Students first compared their results in small groups; then the class met as a large group to discuss the importance of knowing one's impact on the world and possible differences among countries. Although students were interested in the topic and motivated to participate in the classroom discussion, many struggled to form sentences in order to articulate their thoughts and opinions. Grammatical structures were simple, concise, and rarely without error. Precise vocabulary was not present. Even relevant unit vocabulary that had been discussed and practiced at length before this specific class was not included in students' sentences. Precise vocabulary terms were often replaced with circumlocution to talk around missing words—for example "the, uh, place, you know when it's away, the trash" (vocabulary word: *landfill*)—or dropped altogether without any effort to explain the word the speaker was trying to say. In addition to the simplistic grammar and a lack of vocabulary, another observation was that some students did not speak at all. These students in particular are normally quieter and prefer to listen rather than speak in most activities; however, the fact that they did not participate at all was still noteworthy.

In contrast, for the second prompt, students had the opportunity to participate in

rush-writing before the academic discussion began; this particular discussion came one week after the discussion of the first prompt. Instead of immediately speaking and comparing ideas in small groups, as they did when responding to the first prompt, the students took five minutes to rush-write and organize thoughts on paper. Then, the whole class discussed what individuals do to stay healthy and whether these practices are similar or different across cultural contexts. The class also discussed how a country's culture affects its public health practices.

Interested and engaged in the group conversation, students eagerly participated in the academic discussion; at times they had to make sure they did not talk over others. Grammatical structures were at times simple and concise, but the majority appeared accurate. Other, more-complex structures were also attempted, although these tended to include more errors. Unlike the discussion following the first prompt, this second discussion included many relevant and precise vocabulary terms instead of circumlocution to talk around missing words; it was clear that with the extra allotted time, students were able to find the vocabulary necessary to communicate their ideas. Lastly, all students effectively participated in the discussion; even those who did not contribute a novel idea were able to state their agreement or disagreement with a previous speaker. These perceived differences following the second prompt suggest that speakers are less anxious about speaking when given the time to write first.

A comparison of the results that were observed, in Table 1, shows that giving students time to collect and organize their thoughts before asking them to participate in academic discussions is a useful practice. These observations, while anecdotal, provide insight into valuable classroom practices, and it is important to consider the generalizability of these observations as we work to further our understanding of how writing informs speaking in L2 teaching contexts. In addition to allowing students the time and space to strive for more-precise vocabulary and more-advanced grammatical structures (many of which tend to be inherent in academic-language registers), the extra time given to students has great potential to alleviate L2 speaking anxiety in the classroom and result in more student discussion. Teachers who want their students to meet and achieve academic-content standards that require an academic-language register may use rush-writing or another writing activity before academic discussions to increase general thought content and student participation.

OTHER WRITING ACTIVITIES TO FIT THE NEEDS OF YOUR STUDENTS

While this article focuses primarily on the use of rush-writing, other writing activities are also useful to scaffold academic

Without Rush-Writing	With Rush-Writing
Students struggled to form sentences.	Students were eager to participate and engage others.
Students used simple, "safe" grammatical structures.	Students used more-complex structures (although not always correct).
Students often used catchall vocabulary (*thing*, *place*) instead of precise terms.	Students often used relevant and precise vocabulary.
Some students opted out and did not participate in the discussion.	All students participated in the discussion.

Table 1. Perceived differences in student interaction, with and without rush-writing

By implementing writing tasks before speaking activities, teachers allow students to better organize their thoughts, stay focused on the topic, and ultimately lower their L2 speaking anxiety.

discussions. Below are a few pre-task activities for speaking that you can explore in your classroom to fit the needs of your students:

- **Mind-mapping.** This is an activity that can be used to complement rush-writing or perhaps to replace it if your students are not advanced enough to continuously write for five minutes. With mind-mapping, students visually illustrate (with words or pictures) their understanding of a topic or response to a prompt. Instead of having students write for five minutes, you may ask them to illustrate their understanding of a particular subject, process, concept, or question. Mind maps are a great tool for visually organizing information. They may also serve as "notes" in the same way that writing does during academic discussions, helping to bring students' focus back to the topic of discussion.

- **Brainstorming.** This activity is easily confused with rush-writing, although the two are quite different. When brainstorming, students generate lists, questions, and ideas in response to a prompt in a way that is much less controlled than rush-writing. Brainstorming is a sensible option for instructors who are not as concerned with grammatical structure or complete sentences, but rather with the ideas themselves. This activity offers many of the same benefits as rush-writing for supporting academic discussions, but perhaps with less emphasis on grammatical structure in sentence construction.

- **Clustering.** Like brainstorming, this activity gives students the chance to

generate ideas in a way that does not require attention to form or grammatical structure. Students group their ideas or lists of words into "clusters" and then show how these clusters relate to one another. This technique often helps students see patterns or relationships between ideas and is useful before or during speaking activities. You may see many of the same results with this activity as you would with rush-writing, but it is again possible that students' grammatical structures may be less thought-out and accurate, as they are not asked to write in complete sentences.

- **Journaling.** This is an activity that many teachers use, but perhaps not in a way that scaffolds academic discussions. If you are not able to spend class time on pre-task writing strategies before discussion, you might ask students to respond to a prompt through a journaling exercise outside of class. This is also an option for teachers who would like their students to write longer responses to a prompt. Journaling provides all the benefits of rush-writing and does not take up much (if any) class time. It is an option for teachers who have limited time with their students or little flexibility in their class schedules.

In any of these activities, you might ask students to also come up with questions for their discussion-group members to answer. This is an effective way to generate and extend discussions in student groups. You might also adjust the length (or time) requirement for any of these activities to fit the needs or proficiency of your students. In the end, what is most important is that teachers find the

best way to serve their students, given their specific backgrounds, institutional/program constraints, and the students' needs and goals.

CONCLUSION

Writing is an effective pre-task strategy to scaffold academic language in discussions. By implementing writing tasks before speaking activities, teachers allow students to better organize their thoughts, stay focused on the topic, and ultimately lower their L2 speaking anxiety. Observations from a high-beginning ESL course show that academic discussions following rush-writing were more engaging, with students using more-accurate grammar and more-precise vocabulary when they spoke. To help students meet content and language standards related to academic language, I suggest teachers incorporate pre-task writing activities, such as rush-writing, to give students the time and opportunity to think through and organize their responses to given prompts.

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