

# Applying the Curriculum Cycle

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## **1. Introduction**

When I was reading up on bilingualism, I came across the Curriculum Cycle in Gibbons 2007 and was struck by how it made writing lessons a better learning experience. Writing lessons, at least in Japan, typically mean students working solitarily and little interaction between students in the class. This, for lack of a better word, is boring, for many students and lecturers. When I was invited to give a faculty development workshop on the new curriculum (introduced in April 2009) at the English Department in November 2009, I thought this, together with some other suggestions, would be something valuable to share. I thought my colleagues might be interested in ideas on writing lessons since the new curriculum emphasises paragraph and essay writing.

## **2. The Curriculum Cycle**

The Curriculum Cycle consists of four stages through which a particular text type can be made explicit to students. Each of these stages has a particular teaching purpose:

Stage 1: Building the Field. In this stage the aim is to make sure that your students have enough background knowledge of the topic to be able to write about it. The focus here is primarily on the content or information of the text.

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Stage 2: Modelling the Text Type. In this stage the aim is for students to become familiar with the purpose, overall structure, and linguistic features of the type of text they are going to write. The focus here is therefore on the form and function of the particular text type that the students are going to write.

Stage 3: Joint Construction. Here the teacher and students write a text together, so that students can see how the text is written. The focus here is on illustrating the process of writing a text, considering both the content and language.

Stage 4: Independent Writing. At this stage students write their own text.

(Gibbons 2007:195)

### **3. Applying the Curriculum Cycle**

#### **3.1 Stage 1**

What attracted me most about the Curriculum Cycle was that it made writing lessons a shared learning experience. This is especially so in Stage 1, where I have to make sure that students have enough knowledge or information of the topic. Activities in this stage include reading, research on the Internet, video viewing and discussion. When the topic was the introduction of English classes in primary schools in April 2011, copies of an article in the Japan Times were distributed, followed by discussions between pairs of students on what they thought and whether they agreed or disagreed with the new policy. The lecturer also elaborated on the usage of unfamiliar words and phrases and led a class discussion. Students were told to conduct their own research on the Internet when the topic was social networking and to print out and bring an article to class. When working on the topic meeting people online, the class viewed parts of an episode of *Ally McBeal* (an American courtroom drama) in which a woman sued a man for not revealing the fact that he was three feet tall. This was again followed by pair and class discussions and explanations on language use.

Students generally appreciate variety in the way lessons are conducted and they seem to enjoy the different means of information gathering. They also find the exchange of opinions interesting and language work valuable. Most Japanese students have known only the grammar translation approach to learning English for their university entrance examinations in which there is often no context to the language. Many find it an eye-opening experience to study language in context.

#### **3.2 Stage 2**

This is where the lecturer introduces the students to the structure of the type of text they are going to write. In the past academic year (April 2009-March 2010) for instance, we managed to cover paragraphs, comparison/contrast texts and narrative texts. Depending on whereabouts we are in the term, the lecturer also brings up issues such as directness and conciseness. Most students find that the expectations concerning these two characteristics in English are different from what they are used to. I also reminded them to provide support for the claims they make by using

phrases such as “according to the Japan Times/media reports”. Students are also taught to use hedges effectively.

### **3.3 Stage 3**

This is one of my favourite parts of the lesson, in which the whole class is brought together and everyone can see what the others are doing. Again depending on whereabouts we are in the term, the students are asked to write what they have been working on on the board. The board space allotted to each student depends on class size. Early one term, for instance, the students wrote on the board three main points of their paragraphs. While they are busy writing, I go around correcting their language and making notes of common mistakes. After they have finished, they usually return to their seats and look at what others have written. This is a great opportunity for me to discuss grammatical errors in context, such as “I agree to the new policy” instead of “I agree with the new policy”. It is generally easier to learn grammar when there is a context to the language than learning it in isolation. I also suggest alternatives to awkward expressions and comment on word choice (e.g. “to influence Japanese culture” being more common than “to affect Japanese culture”). We also discuss style as in “to get language skills” is casual while “to acquire language skills” is formal.

Another aspect of English students find interesting is the various varieties of the language. I usually tell students it is up to them whether they want to use British English or American English and that they can mix the two in casual situations. In formal use such as when they are writing a paper or giving a speech, it is better to choose one and be consistent. Most students have little experience in distinguishing features of different varieties of English and find it interesting trying to come up with British counterparts of American vocabulary items or grammatical constructions.

I have found that teaching English in context is something that has been lacking in many Japanese schools. Most students have learnt grammar and vocabulary divorced from context, which makes the language meaningless and learning monotonous and ineffective.

### **3.4 Stage 4**

I have little to say about this stage since this is where students working independently on their own texts and hand them to me after they have finished.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Curriculum Cycle has helped me make writing lessons an interactive learning experience. There is so much students can learn from each other and the Curriculum Cycle provides the opportunities for doing so.

#### **References**

- Garcia, Ofelia and Baker, Colin. 2007. Bilingual Education: An Introductory Reader. Clevedon, Buffalo and Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- Gibbons, Pauline. 2007. Writing in a second language across the curriculum. In Garcia and Baker (eds.), 195-201.