

Plenary I

Teaching Productive Skills: The Views of a Writer

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ABSTRACT

To understand teaching and evaluating the productive skills, we must consider how they are different from the receptive skills, listening and reading. Because of relative ease of teaching and assessing the reading and listening, their related notions and approaches dominate English instruction. We tend to place a greater emphasis on acquisition and comprehension than communicative competence, although the latter is the obvious goal of speaking and writing instruction. Some of the issues discussed include means of testing communicative competence rather than language acquisition, giving priority to task appropriacy rather than level, ways to solve the problem of PPP, adapting instruction to fit stages of learner development, and using discoveries in neuroscience to improve our methodologies.

Keywords: EFL, writing, speaking

I. How Writing and Speaking are Different from Reading and Listening

While we often put reading together with writing and listening together with speaking since these skills tend to occur together, another way to organize them is by process. Listening and reading represent receptive activities while speaking and writing represent productive activities. So the first question we must consider when examining how to teach the productive skills, is how they are different from the receptive ones.

It took me twenty years of study, teaching, and textbook writing to come to understand some of the deeper and more profound differences, and that is what I intend to discuss in today's presentation. First let me explain that in the twenty or so textbooks I have published, almost all of them are writing and speaking books. For writing, these include the *Writing from Within* series (Cambridge), *Significant Scribbles* (Pearson), and *Basics in Writing* (Longman). The main speaking books are *The Snoop Detective School Conversation Book* (MacMillan) and the *Active Skills for Communication* (Cengage) series.

So, returning the primary question, how is teaching the productive skills, writing and speaking, different from teaching the receptive skills, listening and reading? The big difference, from which many others spring, is that writing and speaking deal with output, while reading and listening deal with input. This fundamental difference may seem blatantly obvious, but because of it, the goals, approaches and methods are completely different. The main goal in listening and reading is comprehension and acquisition. In speaking and writing it is communicative competence. While it would be somewhat incorrect to say that input is passive and output is active, output requires one to generate original

language, and so, it is more demanding in many ways.

1. Acquisition versus communicative competence

Teaching output is not the same as teaching input. This seemingly moot point did not mean much to me in my early days of writing. Like most other teachers, I thought my primary job as a language teacher was to help students internalize new language: grammar, vocabulary and functions. Now I believe that acquiring new language is one of the lesser goals. Still, when I first started writing textbooks, my English teacher bias towards acquisition caused me to try to include whole grammar paradigms and full vocabulary sets in my writing and speaking materials. The problem was that the students, when performing, sought competence, and usually ignored the rich lists I offered. I wanted them use a whole range of expressions (“Do you mind if,” “Is it okay if,” “Can I”) but they tended to just home in on one, a single phrase they could use to succeed at the task, hone their ability to use it in as many ways as possible. So, this shows another difference in input vs output-oriented materials. Input-oriented materials, with acquisition as a goal – meaning the acquisition of new language, not skills – tend to offer full sets of vocabulary, grammar and functions. Output-oriented materials, however, in promoting communicative competence, should just offer enough to succeed at the related task. The time saved by *not* practicing unnecessary language items can be used in real communicative practice instead.

So what exactly is communicative competence? It is far more than what TOEIC measures. Canale defined it in 1983 and with one minor modification, this definition is still the most apt. The four areas of competence are:

Linguistic competence – grammar, intonation, and other language mechanics

Strategic competence – how to start a conversation, change topics, fix a misunderstanding

Sociolinguistic competence –language customs according to the situation, appropriate responses

Discourse competence – organization, the bigger piece such as an article, e-mail, lecture, etc.

Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell, have broken Sociolinguistic competence into two other categories, Sociocultural competence and Actional competence (1995), but I consider the latter more of a motivation and personality issue than a language competence.

2. Level versus task appropriacy

The goals of acquisition versus communicative competence cause another difference closely related to materials design, and thereby, textbook choice. The language level is critically important for input-oriented teaching, which explains why graded readers come in up to ten different levels. In output-oriented teaching, however, as long as students can understand the instructions and the task, they will produce something at their own level of competence. In output-oriented materials, level is far less important. The same task, “tell your partner a food you like” can be used with both beginners and advanced students. Better students will complete it with richer, more complex structures, while weaker students with simple words and phrases, but which are still communicative. This is why one of my lower level writing textbooks is popular in both elementary schools and universities.

In output materials, far more important than language level, is task appropriacy. A good task is: 1) one that is relevant to both the producers and receivers, for example by personalizing; 2) one that leads to smooth language generation at a variety of levels; 3) one that practices language skills that can be used in the real world; 4) one that is open-ended enough for students to employ a variety of strategies in accomplishing it; and 5) one that leads to growth without requiring a huge amount of pre-teaching. In short, while level control is critical for input-oriented teaching, it is less important for output-oriented

teaching. Choosing the right tasks is.

A technique called “task analysis” (Cameron, 2001) has been developed to evaluate a wide range of features an ESL task represents, but I would like to propose another kind of “analysis” that EFL teachers need to employ: “reward analysis.” Though this concept does not yet exist in our field, recent discoveries in neuroscience suggest that reward is an essential part of learning. This discovery will be discussed in section III-3.

3. Ease of assessment

Maybe the biggest difference between input and output-oriented teaching is ease of assessment. The intended end product of reading and listening, acquisition and comprehension, are relatively easy to assess. The communicative competence of writing and speaking is hard. This difference has caused huge repercussions in the both the educational and working worlds. Because of the way our social system operates, we need outcomes that can be quantified. So, to assess applicants, companies and schools use TOEIC, TOEFL, TEPS, or NEAT scores as indicators of English ability.

Yet, traditionally, these tests just evaluate reading and speaking skills, not production. They only assess a small part – and maybe not the most important part – of English ability. What they do not assess, communicative competence in speaking and writing, are critical skills in today’s business world, where competent international communicators are needed. For this reason, seven years ago, 15 major Korean companies, including the Bank of Korea, Shihan Bank, and others, announced that they would no longer use TOEIC or other proficiency tests to assess English ability (Kim & Kang, 2005).

Granted, the commercial tests mentioned above have recently added writing and speaking tests to their battery, but these production tests have not really caught on. Reading and speaking tests are hard to administer, hard to score, and hard to validate. They are expensive too. Each test taker must be personally scored by a rater, and the raters need training to reduce, though they cannot eliminate, their subjectivity. So, we still tend to judge English ability by reading/listening test scores.

The same is true for the way we give grades to our students. Even in a writing or speaking class, a disproportionate share of the grade will probably be based on easy-to-test listening and reading abilities. Again, the main reason is that input is relatively easy to assess, and also, easy to teach. And again, the repercussions are phenomenal. We have created an educational system that claims to be equal to all, and yet provides its greatest benefits to a select few. Although learners might have kinesthetic or visual learning style biases, research with secondary students has demonstrated that “approximately 90% of traditional classroom instruction is geared to the auditory learner” (Hodges, 1982, p. 30). The worst of the repercussions is that we label auditory learners, those good with words, and what were previously called left-brain learners, those good at memorizing details, as being smarter than the others, when in reality they have learning orientations that better fit the narrow forms of delivery and assessment we rely on.

II. Methods of Testing Writing and Speaking

Generally, there are two levels of assessment: testing linguistic knowledge and testing communicative performance. Testing linguistic knowledge means assessing how much a student knows about the language, without open-ended production. Testing communicative performance, the only true way to

assess communicative competence, means giving students a communicative task and assessing their ability to complete it.

1. Assessing writing

Testing linguistic knowledge in writing can be done in many ways, depending on the course goals. If accuracy is the goal, then students can be given a text and asked to correct the errors. Likewise, the number of errors in their own writing could be counted, though this method tends to punish those who experiment with higher-level structures. Or, if organization is the goal, then students could be asked to write topic sentences for set paragraphs, or put pieces of information into an outline.

Testing communicative competence in writing means giving the students a writing task and evaluating the product. The important point here is to have a rubric, because subjective judgment is too variable across a whole stack of papers and too easily influenced by how long a paper is. In general, you should create your own rubric based on what you are teaching. In my classes, for example, I change the rubric throughout, but I mark the final composition according to: a) General organization, b) Content, c) Topic sentences & paragraphs, and d) Introductory paragraph. Brown and Bailey (1984) offer a rubric with five equally-weighted criteria for scoring. They are: (1) Organization, (2) Logical Development of ideas, (3) Grammar, (4) Mechanics, and (5) Style. Other rubrics can be found on-line, such as at the “CUNY Assessment Test in Writing” site. If you are teaching for a commercial or national writing test, you can use TOIEC’s rubric, which is available on their site.

2. Assessing speaking

Speaking tests to assess performance are harder to administer and grade for a number of reasons: a) they can only be given to one or two students at a time, b) they take time, c) they are hard to evaluate reliably, d) they do not have the natural flow of real communicative experiences, and e) the presence of a teacher in a test situation often creates anxiety and poor performance in the test takers. The last point is often missed by teachers doing oral interviews. As Dalby wrote:

...we are not always aware that we may be hindering our students’ ability to communicate effectively. For example, testing a student’s conversational ability through an interview-style, teacher-student test has questionable validity. Even if an interview required the same skills as a conversation (which it does not), the unequal power relationship between the teacher and the student will affect the learner’s ability to have a natural conversation. (2010)

These difficulties in testing speaking might be compounded by even more at the institutional level. As Jason Ryan wrote in his blog:

The problem [with] the logistics (I’m going to use this word a lot) of designing and giving speaking tests in Korean public school English native speaker classes is that there are so many unforeseeable, unplannable, and unbelievable (from a native teacher’s perspective anyways) issues and challenges that come up throughout the whole process that trying to do a truly professional EFL/ESL speaking test is nearly impossible—in my opinion...” (2011)

Since giving speaking tests is so hard, I have met very few teachers who do so. Most teachers, including myself determine grades through participation, homework completion, subjective evaluation of performance in classroom activities, and especially, linguistic knowledge tests or quizzes on input aspects of the course, such as on vocabulary and grammar. In my presentation class, for example, less than half the grade comes from actual presentations. Instead, students are given TOEIC-oriented

vocabulary lessons to study at home and are quizzed on them in class. Interestingly, the students don't seem to mind this system.

Nevertheless, there are speaking tests that assess communicative performance, and as Tim Dalby at Jeonju University writes, he does not "believe that real spoken interaction can be tested in any way other than through speaking" (2012, p. 63). He discusses two types of tests, those using *information routines* where students describe, compare, or tell stories, or *interaction routines* where students negotiate with another speaker, either the teacher or another student. Students might be asked to negotiate a plan, buy something in a store, or engage in a role play, such as apologizing to a teacher for being late (Kitao & Kitao, 1996). Information gaps are good *interaction routines* for two students, and since goal driven, allow for evaluation of the higher competences, such as the strategic, sociolinguistic and discourse competencies mentioned in section I-1.

III. A Few Considerations for Teaching Productive Skills

In years of teaching and writing materials for productive skills, I have come to realize a few important points in regard to these skills. I will discuss them in this section.

1. Why acquisition does not come before production

In section I-3, I discussed how the relative ease of teaching and assessing listening and reading has created an imbalance in which the teaching of these skills dominates our educational system. One might argue, however, that in the big picture, students have to acquire the language first and then learn how to use it later, so it is reasonable to focus on acquisition in primary and secondary schools and leave production for later. Unfortunately, this view does not correspond with what we know about how the brain works. Even forty years ago, Pablo Freire warned us that the "banking model of education" (1970), in which students are put into a passive receptive mode and filled with information that might possibly be needed later, prevents them from realizing their full potential. We now know from neuroscience that this mode of learning is also one of the least effective. The brain learns best what is needed at the moment, what can be manipulated or interacted with, and what produces reward. Information that is banked for later use is usually lost before that "later" ever comes.

This brings us to another problem that pervades language education, but one that exists at the classroom, not administrative level. Most materials and lessons use a PPP model (*present, practice, produce*). New language is a) *presented* for students to learn, such as a vocabulary list; b) they are then given controlled *practice* in how to use it correctly, such as filling in blanks; and finally, c) they are asked to *produce* it in a communicative task. This ordering of events sounds quite logical, but again, neuroscience tells us, that like educational banking, it does not fit the way the brain works. We learn language best when our unconscious brain feels an immediate need to learn that language. This is supported by Ahn's research with Korean children (1996), where he found language needs are critical to learning.

Our brains are negative feedback machines. We do not feel language needs until we try to communicate something and have a hard time doing so. Therefore, it is not until the *produce* stage of PPP that a sense of need arises, and thus, the real readiness to learn. So actually, it is after the *produce* stage that *presenting* and *practicing* would be most effective. If we plod through language presentation and practice before the need for that language is felt, it just doesn't take hold. Every teacher has experienced the situation where students are asked to produce the language they studied in one or more classes before,

and are unable to do so. In most cases we end the teaching there, throwing in the towel so to speak, when in reality, this is the perfect time to reteach that language.

The problem with PPP is especially poignant to us, speaking and writing teachers, since our main goal is production. So, how can we solve this problem? One way is to adopt a better model, PFPPP. PFPPP is *Produce and Fail* (thereby creating learning readiness), *present, practice* and *produce* again, in a kind of assisted-performance venue. As a writer, however, I know that PFPPP is impossible to use in textbooks. No publisher wants a syllabus that causes students to fail in the first step. So almost every textbook uses PPP. Still, even if we cannot replace it, there are things we can do to modify it and neutralize its shortcomings. Here are some suggestions derived from my own experience and from TBLT: task-based language teaching (Ellis, 2003).

- 1) Take the emphasis off of *present* and put it on *produce*. If you *present* a vocabulary list you want students to learn, don't spend 30 minutes defining the words and having them memorize them. A couple minutes of listen and repeat or silent review are enough. Then, have them refer back to the list in the *practice* and *produce* phases, once they really need that vocabulary. In other words, use the *present* section as a reference guide to be used while producing.
- 2) Keep the distance between the P's short. In that way, the language offered in the *present* and *practice* phases are still in working memory when students get to the *produce* phase. In *Active Skills of Communication*, for example, on pages we *present* language, we also have *practice* and *produce* activities on the very same page. We might *present* a limited set of target phrases at the top of the page, have a short *practice* activity in the middle and then have students *produce* the phrases in a personalized, open-ended speaking task at the bottom. Generally, you should avoid just *presenting* and *practicing* language one week, to be *produced* the next. Think of the stages of PPP as being a single contiguous act, like picking up a nail, holding it in place and driving it home with a hammer.
- 3) Use a task-based language teaching approach. In fact, since our main goal is production with communicative competence, it is hard to imagine how we could teach writing and speaking without a student-centered communicative task at the end of each lesson. Some key concepts of TBLT, such as making sure the students know from the beginning what they will have to do and the language they will need to do it, should also be employed. In *Active Skills for Communication*, for instance, we start each unit with a demonstration of the speaking "Challenge" – an extended speaking activity – that they will do at the end of the unit.

2. Deep processing

An older idea from cognitive psychology that has been more recently supported by findings in neuroscience is deep processing. Deep processing refers to the way the brain processes information. Deep processing requires a greater amount of thinking and manipulation, which activates multiple processing centers of the brain, and thus leads to deeper learning. For example, reading a dialog out loud only requires light processing, while revising it at the same time to contain personal information requires deep processing. Existing proficiency affects depth of processing as well. Using the example above, a Korean elementary school student reading a dialog would probably require deeper processing than a native speaker revising it to contain personal information.

Controlling the degree of processing is a critical skill in both materials development and classroom teaching. Avoid using textbooks that rely solely on simple matching and multiple choice exercises, while at the same time avoid using textbooks that push students too far beyond their ability. The best

scaffolding might be having simple exercises at the start of the *practice* phase that lead to harder ones just before the *produce* stage. In this way, the processing in each step is relatively deep, but not so deep that the exercises are undoable. Having students fill in blanks or write sentences with language items requires more processing, and thus deeper learning, than just having them match words to meanings or answer multiple-choice questions.

3. The Biggest problem in teaching production

It was previously mentioned that output-oriented language lessons are generally harder to teach and harder to assess than input-oriented lessons. Making such sweeping statements might be risky, but I would still like to add one more: From my experience, speaking and writing is also harder for the learners as well. Since the final tasks require them to generate language on their own, rather than merely comprehend the language a teacher provides, speaking and writing tends to require a higher level of engagement of a greater variety of skills. Therefore, like the adage that on-line study requires twice as much motivation as face-to-face study, performing speaking and writing tasks, especially for weaker students, requires a higher degree of motivation as well.

In fact, motivating students to engage in open-ended speaking and writing tasks is one of the hardest parts of teaching these skills, especially in the EFL situation, and even harder in regard to writing materials for them. For this reason, we need to look at motivation from the standpoint of brain studies, and how it relates to learning. Interestingly, goal-driven motivation and long-term learning are controlled by the same thing, a neurotransmitter known as dopamine. Dopamine has many functions, but of greatest interest to us are: a) drive (“I gotta have it.”), b) reward (Ah, that was good.”), and c) enhanced learning. Dopamine is released when something happens that makes you feel good, such as listening to music, eating, or being hugged. People with high levels of dopamine tend to be go-getters, while those with low levels, couch potatoes. Kandel’s Nobel Prize-winning research found that dopamine also triggers the synaptic changes of stronger learning (2001). In fact, drug addiction, since drugs work by causing the release of dopamine, is really a form of super learning.

The connection between drive, the feeling of reward, and learning makes sense. Our brains are built to remember things that make us feel good. Since memories are associative and situational, we also tend to remember all the conditions present, including sensory and emotional components. It is reasonable then, to assume that the learning that occurs in a dopamine-releasing experience will contain the linguistic components as well. Actually, this is just how advertising works. By showing you something desirable along with the product name, advertisers get you to remember the product name. My own preliminary, but not yet published, research suggests this might be the case for language learning as well. Neutral language items in heart-warming stories, such as places or names, were learned better than the same items in explanatory lectures. Therefore, dopamine might be a critical factor in language learning, although, to my knowledge, no formal theory saying so exists yet.

In the classroom, dopamine-releasing experiences might include sharing something meaningful, making a personal relationship, engaging in a creative act, playing a game, getting a reward, or succeeding in a challenge. All of these are related to building self-esteem. Using task-based teaching, personalization, and positive feedback are three powerful ways to dopamine release in a language lesson. In short, for speaking and writing activities, the reward component might be more important to language learning than the organization of the linguistic elements. This is why I suggested in section I-2 that we use “reward analysis” along with “task analysis.”

4. Stages of learner development

Another important concern in teaching speaking and writing is attendance to the learner's stage of development. Adjust your expectations to fit the level each student is at now, rather than where you want them to be. For example, do not require sentence-level writers to write in paragraphs. Do not require early L2 conversationalists to use full sentences. Instead, provide scaffolding that fits their zone of proximal development. For EFL writers, I have found five stages:

[TABLE 1] The Five Stages of EFL Writer Development

Stage:	Goals:	Methods:
1) Letter & Word	words, sentences, simple grammar	phonics grammar pattern recognition
2) Sentence	structure, variety, stylistic sense	sentence combining extensive writing
3) Paragraph	coherence and unity	topic sentences transition words building approach
4) Composition	organization	top-oriented outlining modes of development introductory paragraphs
5) Academic/Professional	Rules of genre	experimenting with standards and rules for research writing, journalistic writing, advertisement writing, business e-mail writing, etc.

Most of these methods are well known and used in writing instruction with the exception of one: sentence combining. Sentence combining, in which learners combine two or more kernels into a single sentence, as below, can be used to teach any kind of sentence grammar, but by generating the target language, rather than just identifying it. It also teaches learners basic stylistics: how to recognize a good sentence from a poor one.

Kernels:

I had a cat.
It was gray.
It was old.

Two of many possible answers:

I had an old, gray cat. (good)
I had a cat and it was gray and it was old. (poor)

It surprises me that despite a large body of research showing the value of sentence combining, that it is hardly being used (although more so in Korea than the rest of Asia). Although it is a method that came out of the sixties as an offspring of transformational grammar theory, the English Review Group at the University of York, UK still considers it the most effective means of teaching grammar to writing students (2004).

This group examined an existing 4566 studies on teaching writing, and systematically reduced that

number to 58 studies that were the most relevant and the most scientifically rigorous. Of these, ten were chosen for in-depth review. Their preliminary findings, published in June, 2004, can be summarized in one disturbing sentence:

"In terms of practice, the main implication of our findings is that there is no high quality evidence that the teaching of grammar, whether traditional or generative/transformational, is worth the time if the aim is the improvement of the quality and/or accuracy of written composition." (English Review Group, June, 2004)

If learning grammar is necessary to help students learn how to write sentences, and yet the good research shows grammar instruction is ineffective, then how can we teach it? The same group gave us the answer six months later. Using the same 4566 studies, boiled down to a rigorous 18, they concluded:

"An overall synthesis of the results from the eighteen studies examined in the in-depth review comes to a clear conclusion: that sentence combining is an effective means of improving the syntactic maturity of students in English between the ages of 5 and 16." (English Review Group, December, 2004)

In other words, while direct grammar instruction may not aid writing skills, sentence combining does. In my experience, students like it too because of its open-ended, puzzle-solving nature. Let us revitalize this lost method.

IV. Conclusion

The most important thing to consider when teaching writing and speaking is how different they are from listening and reading. The goals of output-oriented teaching are different and thus, so are the methods. Our field has a heavy bias towards input and acquisition, but were we to stop our language teaching there, we would be leaving our learners silent, in a black hole in the universe of English. In addition to taking in English, they need to radiate their own out as well.

We have looked at some of the concerns and techniques that might improve our instruction of speaking and writing, but maybe the most important is that our goal should be communicative competence, not merely the acquisition of words and vocabulary. Adopting this goal requires us to give our learners appropriate production tasks, just enough scaffolding to succeed in them, and ample room to complete those tasks on their own. In this way, we not only broaden their skills beyond those measured by TOEIC, but we also give them voices in a language that favors self-expression. In that way, we go from being merely language teachers to being people makers.

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