One Student's Writing Process

by

Alice Kawazoe

English as a second language, cooperative learning, response groups, and writing processes are all important concepts Kawazoe touches on in this piece, first published in The Quarterly in 1990. But its essence is the central role that narrative - story - plays in language learning. Kawazoe is presently director of staff and curriculum development for the Oakland, CA public schools.

In the crowded classroom, desks are pushed together in pairs, and the din of voices would rankle the sensibilities of any administrator who deems quiet busy work as a cardinal virtue. Two young men sit, hunched over their desks - one tense with concentration, carefully and methodically reading the words; the other leaning slightly forward to hear, eyes focused on the page, following the reader's voice.

"Hey, is this stuff true?"

"Yes."

"Wow..." Steve Meagher shakes his head in amazement, stretches out his legs, and leans his six-foot four-inch frame back in his chair, looking every bit like the basketball player he is. "Tell me about the war and what it was like to fight."

Chiam Chitavang takes a deep breath. He has the body of a sixth grader with the face of a middle-aged man. "Well... it hard tell," he begins, slowly unraveling his war stories as a 14-year-old soldier in Cambodia. To escape the Khmer Rouge, Chiam and his brother fled into the hills and spent months foraging for food and dodging capture which meant sure death. He killed and saw his brother killed by a land mine. Chiam walked alone for four days to a refugee camp in Thailand where, after eight months, he was miraculously reunited with his mother, sisters and younger brother. "My life much struggle," he understates.

"That's no lie," Steve says, "but what you need to do is to write down what you just told me 'cause what you said is really live, and what you wrote is kind of boring."

Thus begins that delicate art of response, that dialogue which leads to revision, to expansion, to elaboration, to showing in words. The class is an ESL Remedial Writing class, and each student is struggling to gain enough facility in writing to pass the school district's Writing Proficiency Test. Response partners in this class consist of one English speaker, albeit remedial or reluctant, and one newcomer to the language.

At our school, newcomers could come from 50 countries and speak 53 different languages, including Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Ilocano, Cambodian, Arabic, Hindi, Portuguese, Laotian, Hmong, Lao-Mien, Punjabi. How does one teach this class of many colors, this multi-cultural, crayola-box class?

I learned quickly that I needed to elongate the writing process. I needed to slow down to give students the time to think and to give myself time to get off the assignment treadmills and catch my breath. Rushing headlong from assignment to finished product, with little regard to directed and useful prewriting and without time for re-thinking and re-shaping, might result in more scores in the grade book, but not more
writing proficiency. Students needed more time and more individual help than my hectic assignment-spewing pace would allow. Students needed time and modeling to learn how to respond to their partner’s writing; to learn how to make suggestions; to learn how to re-envision their writing and to make it grow.

I learned to teach skills in the context of the student’s own writing, so that the students, in turn, could edit and proofread. Rather than existing as compartments of isolated information — grammar in the workbooks, reading in the literature anthologies, prewriting in the dittos, writing in the notebooks, journals in the folders, vocabulary in the dictionaries, creative writing in Never-Never Land, and scores in the gradebook — the components of language arts instruction began gradually to fit in, make sense, synthesize into a meaningful whole — a process.

Nowhere is that process more evident than in the ESL/Remedial Writing class with writers like Steve and Chiam.

Chiam’s first draft of a memoir which he read aloud to Steve is a short and simple narrative:

I know what the war and what the war make on mankind. War put much strife. The job of soldier is to shot and kill. It much easy to shot in a dark.

Steve, ever curious about war and violence and perhaps fascinated by the lethal experiences buried within the small body of his response partner, first invited, then cajoled Chiam to talk about the fighting and killing he had done. “Tell me more ... I want to know more...” Finally, after halting explanations, more questions, more talk, Steve returned to Chiam’s paragraph and chose to underline the last sentence and asked him (1) to explain what he meant (Does he mean shooting into a dark place? Does he mean shooting at night? Why is it easy?) and (2) to write about a time, an incident, when it was “much easy to shot in a dark.” Here is Chiam’s revision:

I know what the war and what the war on mankind. War put much strife. The job of soldier is to shot and kill. We the soldier walked at night so not one can see us. Hot the air and all thing is quiet. We hear the ground sigh under our shoes and the hushes scratch us and break One or two houses sit. “Out, get out,” we yell again and one more time. No body come out.

But from the house noises heared, so we shotted fast.

It much easy to shot in a dark. The bullets have not eyes to see the body it kill. The bullets have blindness. I have eyes to see but the dark is better to hide eyes. Why do I kill? Because it is war. War in a dark is much easy for the soldier to kill.

Chiam’s essay will undergo one more step — the editing stage — but his revision has made a prodigious leap forward. Perhaps a better metaphor is Chiam’s own: his essay is an explosion of ideas triggered by his partner Steve, who by his directed and focused questions, fired Chiam’s thinking. As Steve said earlier, “Wow.” To both Chiam and Steve.

Afterword

How simple. Just put the lanky English speaker together with the Cambodian immigrant, and small miracles happen. Proposition 187—induced phobias will fade as two young men struggle to communicate — to listen carefully, record faithfully and comprehend as fully as possible what each has to say.

How naive. To have faith in these small miracles. Bah. Humbug.

In the years since this article was written, there’s been so much “baiting about of brains,” not to mention biases and values, about how students acquire English so that the language wears like warm slippers and not like tight fitting shoes. Hot debates swirl around bilingual education, sheltered English, English Only, Standard English Proficiency, English as a Second Language. I needed to be reminded of warm slippers. I needed to return to Steve and Chiam. I had the article, of course, and then remembered the tapes.

After rummaging through cardboard boxes in my garage, I found their audiotaped talk and heard again Chiam’s halting reading, the pauses signifying Steve’s listening, and the asking of questions that set the compass for their conversation.

“Hey, is this stuff true?”
"How did it happen?"

"Did you get hurt?"

"Did you ever see your family again?"

"How did you guys get here?" (United States)

"Why didn’t your mother come?"

"Did you ever kill somebody?"

"You shot in the dark? At night, you mean?"

Concerned that he was not getting as much as he was giving in the partnership, I asked Steve on tape how things were working.

Steve: He (Chiam) makes me feel smart. Man, you know, he takes notes on everything I say. I mean he writes it all down. And his stories, you know, they’re true stories, from his life. The stories are unbelievable, like from a movie, but they are from his life. He’s got so many stories inside, you know. I like trying to pull them out. And like, he’s telling them only to me, you know. So like, now they’re my stories, too.

As we beat each other up in debates about theory and pedagogy and sound practice, Chiam and Steve remind us of what’s at the heart of reading, writing, and language learning: talking story and listening story. Steve treasures pulling out the stories of a lived life. Chiam treasures Steve’s hard listening. They both treasure not only the explicit, but the implicit, all the subtleties and nuances of language as it is used, of language as it is heard.

In the stories, shared between Chiam and Steve, as it says in the Gospel of John, “The word becomes flesh.” That’s what makes good stories, good talking, good listening, good writing. Stories help us know the teller and listener. Stories become our shared life. “So like, now they’re my stories, too,” says the hard listener of the intent teller.

In the last chapter of Middlemarch, George Eliot asks a question many teachers muse about: “Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years?” In this instance I know answers. Chiam is part owner of a landscaping business. He’s designed spacious gardens for many Silicon Valley corporations (Syntex, Sun, Rohm). Steve owns a successful auto supply store in Denver, Colorado.

Do they remember the crowded English classroom? Probably not. Do they remember the activities? the assignments? You must be kidding. Do they remember each other and their stories? What do you think?