The TExT Procedure: A Strategy for Developing the Expository Writing of English Language Learners

Cathy L. Guerra
Texas A&M International University

Introduction

In the late 1970s as a novice biology teacher, I was surprised by my students’ reactions to doing written work in my classroom. After assigning them a writing assignment, students would begin to grumble and groan. They argued that they could not write because they did not have pencils. One vocal student spoke up and said, “This ain’t English class. We don’t need to do no writin’ and we don’t need no pencils!” These students clearly did not want to write. Their comments clearly indicated their misperceptions about writing. Their written work revealed their struggles with writing.

Difficulties expressing thoughts in writing are not confined to high school students. For the last 20 years I have seen students in my university classes struggling to produce a written essay or paper. I don’t believe these students have difficulty because they have inferior ability or intelligence. When engaged in class discussions, students are able to communicate their ideas. So, what factors are interfering with their ability to express what they know in written form? While the purpose of this paper is not to explore factors that affect students’ writing, a few factors that have a direct connection with instruction, especially as they are related to literacy, will be mentioned here.

One factor that was evident in my high school students was the lack of transfer. They saw writing as an activity confined to their English class. They had probably not done much writing outside of English class, and in English class, the writing they had done had probably been confined to literary contexts. They had not developed the understanding that writing is useful in a variety of contexts. Hence, they did not connect writing to other subjects and contexts. I believe this may also be one cause of the difficulty college students encounter when asked to produce a written work.

A second factor that may, at least in part, account for difficulties in written expression is oral language proficiency. Oral language proficiency requires lexical and syntactical development. (Although phonological and morphological development are also required for young children to develop proficiency in oral language, these factors will not be considered in a discussion of the oral language development of older students. Older students would already possess phonological and morphological knowledge of the language to support oral expression. Therefore, these factors would not be expected to hinder the written expression of older students, whose first language is also based on an alphabetic system.) Lexical development is demonstrated when the individual recognizes and possesses control over hundreds of words. These individuals have a broad vocabulary which enables them to express themselves clearly and accurately. Syntactical development involves learning the grammar and sentence structures that characterize the language. Having syntactical knowledge of the language they are speaking, these students use a variety of grammatical constructions and sentence structures to communicate.

A large number of students who are enrolled in undergraduate college classes and who are second language learners, demonstrate a need to expand in the areas of lexical and syntactical development. They often lack knowledge of vocabulary words used in class discussions, and ask for their meanings. Their oral communication indicates limited vocabulary knowledge in that they tend to speak haltingly, often searching for words to express their ideas. In many cases,
students’ oral language is also characterized by unsophisticated syntactical development, such as overuse of simple sentence structure and incorrect phrasing of questions. It is well-established that development of oral communication skill precedes and supports development of written communication. Therefore, students may often struggle to produce a good written product because their oral communication is not sufficiently developed.

In addition to these facets of language acquisition that can hinder the individual’s ability to express himself orally and in writing with ease and clarity, is the lack of sufficient development of academic language. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in academic English requires up to five years or more to attain (Cummins, 2001, in Gunning, p.40). Therefore, ELLs may not demonstrate their true abilities on achievement and cognitive ability tests administered in English (Gunning, 2010). It can be inferred from this that ELLs, because of the extended time that is required for them to become proficient in academic language in English, may not be able to demonstrate the ability to represent thoughts and understandings about academic content in writing. Academic language refers to the specialized vocabulary and thinking skills of a content area needed to produce an understandable spoken or written text.

Academic language includes the thinking skills of analyzing, explaining, inferring, and organizing, as well as language skills. It requires the ability to think and talk about language as well as use language (Zwiers, 2008, in Gunning, p. 40). The acquisition of academic language affects all learners, whether or not they are second-language learners. When learning new content, all students must learn the specialized vocabulary, content-specific language, and the thinking skills necessary for coherent processing and communication of content area information. Further, students must be able to learn and demonstrate their understanding of academic content in writing.

The TExT Procedure for Expository Writing

The TExT procedure for expository writing was developed to provide a teaching strategy for working with English language learners, which would serve as a guide to help them develop effective expository writing skills. The strategy is intended for use in any academic content area and with second-language students in grades four through college. The TExT strategy is based loosely on the Language Experience Approach. This approach uses oral language to teach reading by having students compose stories from common experiences. Students dictate these stories to the teacher who then records exactly what students have said. Instead of using oral language to teach reading, the TExT procedure uses oral language to help students develop their written communication skills. The TExT procedure, described below, stands for the three major steps in the procedure: Think, Express, and Transcribe.

The first step, Think, includes another procedure developed by this author to be used with the TExT procedure, called K-Quest. K-Quest is a brainstorming activity that is based on K-W-L. The “K” in K-Quest stands for the question, “What do I know?” “Quest,” stands for the question, “What questions about this topic do I need to answer?” At this point, students are given an opportunity to think about the topic they are being asked to write on. Students brainstorm for information they know about the topic. When they have identified the information they know, they brainstorm to identify questions they need to answer to be able to complete the written assignment on the topic. The Quest part of K-Quest require them to use the thinking skills of analyzing, explaining, inferring, and organizing to consider the questions they need to answer before they begin to write on the topic. First, they identify what they already know about the topic and record those ideas. Then, they identify questions about the topic they need answers for in order to fully develop their written
paper on the topic. Information may come from reading assignments, class discussions, lectures, or other sources available to the student.

When the student has completed the Think step, he will proceed to the Express Step to orally compose what he wants to say. To facilitate this process, it is suggested that the student use a tape recorder. ( If computers with headsets and recorders are available, it would be advantageous to have students complete this part of the TExT procedure at the computer. ) The recording will provide the student with a permanent copy of what he says, which will be very helpful when he begins to compose the written draft.

To complete this step of the process, the student is encouraged to speak naturally, as though he were having a conversation with another person about the subject he is writing about. The student will use the notes she made during the Think Step as a guide for what she wants to say during this step. It is to be expected that this step of the process will take an extended amount of time, so the student should be given adequate time to work on the oral composition. Although lengthy, having students first orally compose what they want to write will facilitate their thinking about the content and the ideas they want to express in writing. Having students first transfer their thoughts into spoken form is a way of scaffolding to provide the support that will help them communicate their thoughts in written form more clearly and completely.

The third step, Transcribe, involves the student in the process of putting what she has said into written form. The third step, like the second, can be expected to take considerable time. During this step, the student will first produce a rough draft by writing down what she said without making any changes. The student will then edit, revise, and proofread the rough draft. It is recommended that, when students are ready to begin the Transcribe step, that they choose a partner with whom they can work to complete the editing, revising, and proofreading processes. Each partner will read his or her partner’s paper to make suggestions for revisions or corrections. When all corrections and revisions have been made, the student will then write the final draft to turn in to the teacher.

Based on the description of the TExT procedure given above, it might be assumed that the process is linear. However, the TExT procedure is recursive in nature. The Think step leads to the oral Express step, which leads back to the Think step. Students naturally move from thinking to speaking and back again to thinking. The same is true of the relationship between the Express step and the Transcribe step. Oral expression leads to writing, the Transcribe step. As the student is transcribing, or writing, the oral message that he or she recorded, it will naturally stimulate additional thought, leading back to oral production of thoughts, which can then become a part of the transcribed message. Hence, a very natural use of literacy and language skills should occur.

**Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The TExT Procedure for Guiding Expository Writing is based on two strategies that have been successful in helping students in reading and comprehension: Language Experience Approach and K-W-L. The Language Experience Approach has proven extremely effective over three decades for teaching reading to students ranging in age from elementary to adult. Instead of drawing on students’ oral language to facilitate their reading development, TExT draws on students’ oral language to support their writing, based on the research that shows the direct correlation between oral language development and writing.

K-Quest was developed as a part of the Think step, based on the K-W-L strategy which is well-known and highly recommended for helping students use the thinking skills of analyzing, explaining, inferring, and organizing content. Using K-Quest in the first step of the TExT procedure,
students identify questions they need to know the answers to as they develop a written expository piece.

The TExT Procedure for Guiding Expository Writing promises to be of great value as a way of teaching students how to write expository papers as well as a very effective strategy that students can apply independently when producing content-specific writing assignments. It is straightforward and easy to learn how to use. The steps of the procedure are easy to learn and follow a logical sequence so that relatively little time should be required to teach and learn it. The TExT procedure includes several steps of the writing process, which should prove beneficial in reinforcing basic processes involved in developing a piece of writing. Finally, the TExT procedure is learner-centered, requiring students to be actively engaged. Research has shown the value of student engagement in learning.

The TExT procedure draws on what we know about the role of oral language to literacy development and learning new information. Research on critical thinking indicates that the development of language has a close relationship to the development of thinking (Berry, 1985; Gambell, 1988, as cited in Smith, 2003). Lemke (1989) states that oral language is an important means of learning and acquiring knowledge. We know that oral language is necessary to learning and thinking because it provides a foundation for the development of many skills. Growth in intellectual skills requires oral language as a means of developing understanding and meaning (Hong and Aiex, 1995, p. 2).

Condon and Clyde (1996, p. 587) describe a strategy they call “co-authoring.” They state that co-authoring is a means for students to learn content and develop understandings about a medium and how to use it. Co-authoring relationships in the classroom range from “No Conversation” to “Full Conversation” in which the students and the teacher form a community of composers who create a product, collaborate on it, and discuss it. Because each person brings his/her own insights and experiences into the co-authoring relationship, a variety of learning opportunities is created. The TExT Procedure provides students the opportunity to carry on private conversations with themselves as a way of talking through information to make sense of it. The co-authoring strategy could be incorporated into the TExT Procedure as a way of facilitating and extending students’ oral language as they articulate what they have read. It would also provide peer support for students, such as English language learners, who are still developing their oral language skills. Smith (2003) posits that students learn how to organize their thinking and focus their ideas through oral expression of ideas. This is the overarching purpose of the TExT Procedure. The TExT procedure is designed to help students use their oral language skills as a means of organizing and analyzing their thoughts on a topic, which they can then represent in written form. Students who are not confident about their ability to express their ideas orally will not be comfortable or competent relating their thoughts in writing. It is intended that the TExT procedure will serve to bridge the gap between spoken and written communication, while enhancing students’ learning and understanding of content.

Finally, it is suggested that the TExT procedure be field tested. Qualitative and quantitative studies may yield data that would provide useful information to educators regarding the value of using the TExT procedure. Data collected may also add to the already extensive knowledge base in the area of literacy development. Field testing would be beneficial in determining the effectiveness of the TExT procedure with different populations of students. While the TExT procedure is based on strategies that have proven to be effective for teaching reading and writing, it needs to be tested to determine its effectiveness in helping students develop their expository writing skills. Research is also recommended to determine whether this procedure is more effective with a specific grade-level
of students than others, as well as to determine its effectiveness with second language learners or other special groups of students.
References