

A Left and Right Hemisphere Approach to Developing Writing Skills

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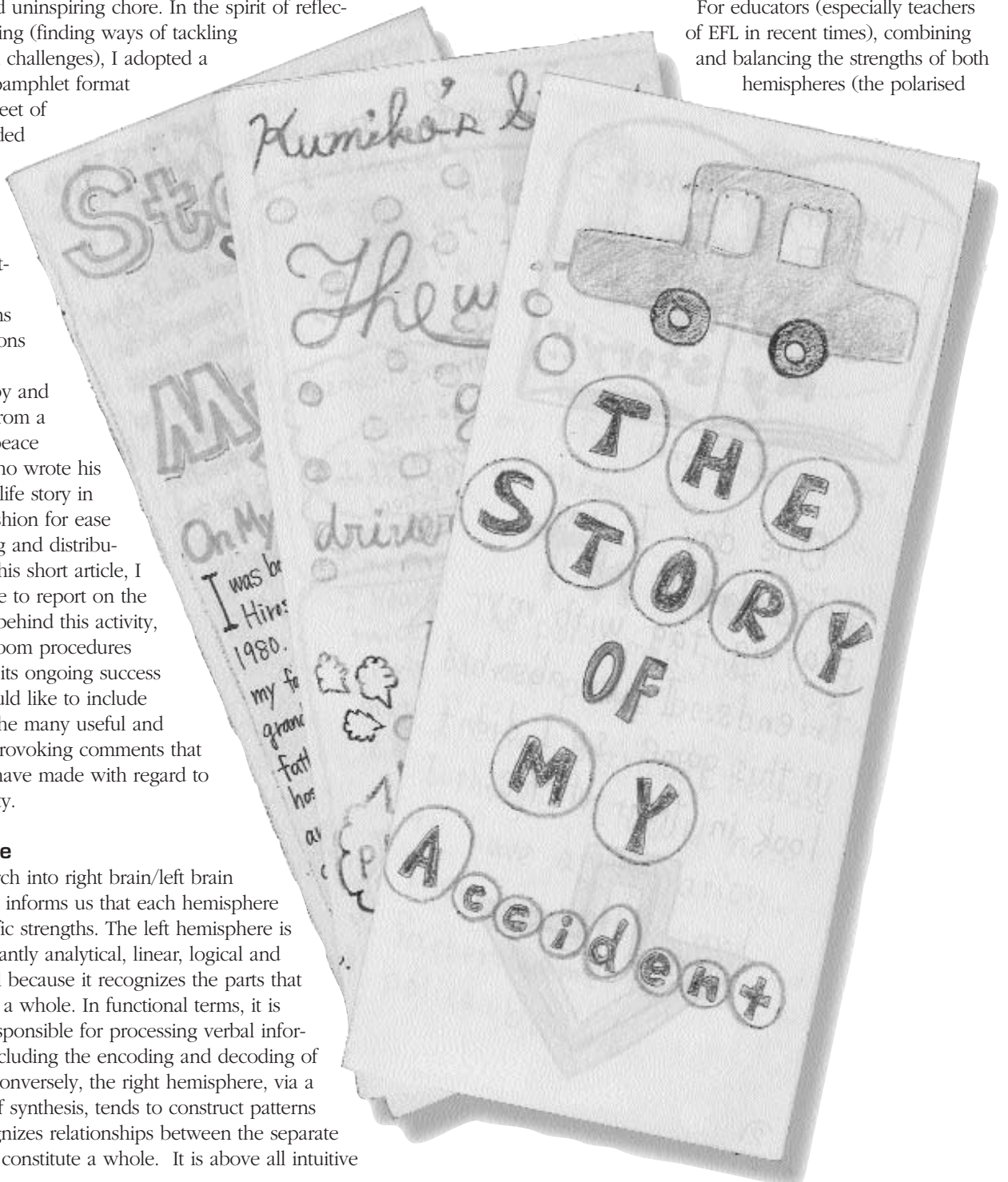
In my experience of teaching composition at tertiary level in Japan, getting students to produce pages of written text about themselves often descends into a dull, demotivating and uninspiring chore. In the spirit of reflective teaching (finding ways of tackling classroom challenges), I adopted a foldable pamphlet format (an A4 sheet of paper folded to make six panels) incorporating written text, illustrations and cartoons (an idea inspired by and adapted from a political/peace activist who wrote his turbulent life story in such a fashion for ease of printing and distribution). In this short article, I would like to report on the rationale behind this activity, the classroom procedures involved, its ongoing success and I would like to include some of the many useful and thought-provoking comments that students have made with regard to this activity.

Rationale

Research into right brain/left brain education informs us that each hemisphere has specific strengths. The left hemisphere is predominantly analytical, linear, logical and sequential because it recognizes the parts that constitute a whole. In functional terms, it is chiefly responsible for processing verbal information including the encoding and decoding of speech. Conversely, the right hemisphere, via a process of synthesis, tends to construct patterns and recognizes relationships between the separate parts that constitute a whole. It is above all intuitive

and holistic. In functional terms, it is mainly responsible for visual and spatial processing. However, verbal information (language capacity) is largely excluded.

For educators (especially teachers of EFL in recent times), combining and balancing the strengths of both hemispheres (the polarised



view of a logical left and a fanciful right is a useful distinction, but in reality, rather oversimplified) in the learning process is of great interest and has challenged the profession to think of new ways to stimulate learners' higher cognitive processes including an awareness of their learning preferences (Fletcher 2000). The success of the activity as described in this article can most probably be attributed to the students' positive response to combining the linear and logical structure of the left side of the brain with the creative, intuitive and holistic dimensions of the right side of the brain. Incorporating their own colourful and highly memorable illustrations/drawings with their own written compositions in a pamphlet format, students are encouraged to draw inspiration from both hemispheres. The use of colour activates visual thinking, stimulating creativity and memory; the use of graphic representation (drawings and illustrations) helps students to improve their comprehension/perception skills and also helps them to clarify their cognitive processes and to communicate their ideas to others more effectively (Williams 1983). As a result, students are able to explore an unusual outlet for their creative expression with a sense of renewed interest and curiosity. In addition, students often surprise themselves with their yet untapped artistic flair, are able to build self-confidence and attain a huge sense of satisfaction at having developed a finished product that is highly unique and individual, which

they can then enjoy sharing and discussing with others in the classroom. This final part of the process has the added advantage of aiding the development of students' emotional intelligence (located in the limbic system of the brain), underscoring the importance of feelings and emotions in the language learning process (Fletcher 2000).

Classroom Procedure

First of all, I should mention here that autobiographical writing is one of the types of writing that second-year students are asked to practice in their text (Gabbrielli and Harris 1996) as part of the Advanced Composition course that I teach in the English Department at Yasuda Women's University. The activity (project) usually takes 3-4 weeks to complete, starting with students drawing a time-line and then plotting happy and sad events along its axis. This leads to a discussion in groups in English about their lives. When this stage is completed, I show them the pamphlets produced by previous students and explain how they were developed. At this point, students sometimes feel a little anxious about having to draw pictures. However, to allay their fears and to stimulate interest, I introduce them to a series of books by Ed Emberley (see references below) that show you how to draw simple and effective illustrations of people, animals, buildings, nature scenes etc. in an easy step-by-step format.

Students are then asked to draft a pamphlet focusing on

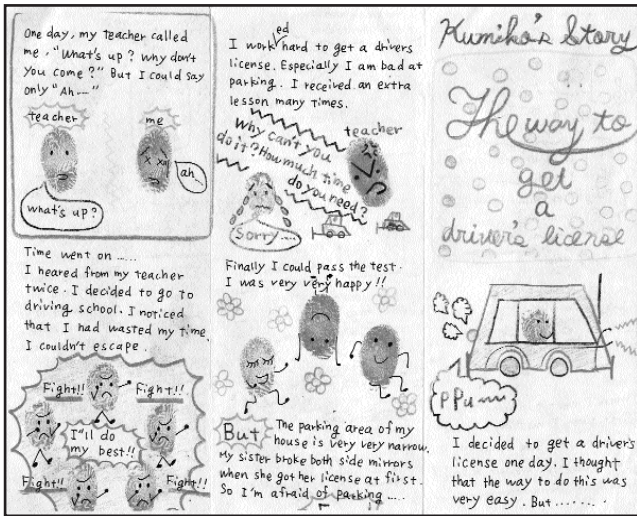


Figure 1. A Student's Pamphlet.

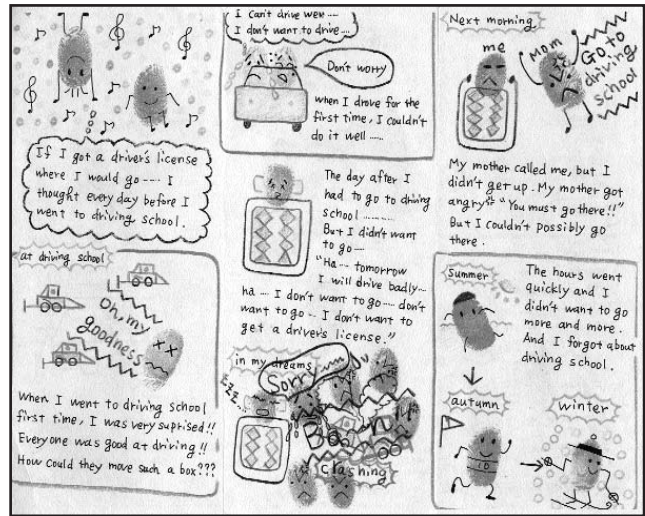
one or more aspects of their lives, experimenting with both written text and visual images. It is always rewarding and satisfying observing students on task, allowing themselves to give full vent to their creative processes. However, this is also a busy time for me as students invariably ask for advice and help with ongoing corrections as they develop their work during each class session. By the third or fourth week, students are about ready to produce the final version of their pamphlets. This is always an exciting time for them as they pay particular attention to the accuracy of their written texts and to the aesthetic quality of their illustrations (and how they should complement the text) and to the general layout of all the features which make up the pamphlet (title, subtitles, lettering, borders, etc.).

In the final stage of this activity, students get together excitedly in groups and read each others' work and then re-group to share their work with other classmates. Finally, I collect the pamphlets so that I may also enjoy reading them. As this is a piece of work that I include as part of continuous assessment, I grade the pamphlets and return them so that they may continue to enjoy and share them long after graduating. Quite often, I ask students for permission to make colour photocopies of their work to use as models for future writing classes (see Figure 1).

Student Feedback

Happily, students always seem to enjoy doing the above mentioned activity and usually respond enthusiastically in their post-course feedback. For a general idea of how students feel, I have included below a few comments selected from letters and questionnaires collected at the end of the course:

- "I didn't know how to write about myself. I hadn't written about myself in a long time. But I enjoyed it. I thought it was very important to tell about myself to other people. I think to read other people's story is interesting."
- "It was hard for me to make this autobiography because at first, I couldn't think of what to say easily, and what is more, I'm not good at draw a picture. But when it was completed, I felt sense of accomplishment."



- "This subject is a pleasant time for me, because I like to draw pictures. I drew pictures on the paper with a lot of pens and I write my story. I used my head and fantasy. I had a good time."
- "At first, I didn't want to make my autobiography because I thought it was hard work for me. But while I was making it, I could feel it was interesting. And, I am not good at drawing pictures, but this time, I could enjoy drawing pictures because it was things I like and my face. When I finished the autobiography, I was satisfied with my work. Through making it, I could look back my past in pictures and words and I could think all I did until now was very good!"

Concluding Remarks

This activity continues to be highly successful four years after my first hesitant experiment and students still show an eagerness to engage with the task. Although it is impossible to understand the neurological and bio-chemical processes involved in language learning, it does appear to me that by using this approach to stimulate the whole brain, students are reaping the rewards of integrating both words and pictures in their written work.

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