

LOOKING FOR A LEARNER-BASED WRITING COURSE SYLLABUS? TRY REPGRID

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on how to design a learner-based writing syllabus using a repertory grid technique. We describe the steps involved within the process of negotiating the syllabus items with the students according to their perceived needs for development as identified through repertory grid data. Finally, we discuss the points to be considered in such a process.*

Key words: *Learner-based writing syllabus, repertory grid technique.*

Özet: *Bu çalışmada öğrenci merkezli yazma dersi içeriğinin belirlenmesinde kavramsal algulama yönteminin kullanılması araştırılmıştır. Bu yöntemi kullanarak öğrencilerin kişisel gelişim ihtiyaçlarının ortaya çıkarılması ve bu bulguların ışığında yazma dersi içeriğinin belirlenmesi aşamaları ayrıntılı olarak incelenmiştir. Son olarak bu süreçte göz önünde bulundurulması gereken konular tartışılmıştır.*

Anahtar kelimeler: *Öğrenci merkezli yazma dersi içeriği hazırlama, bilişsel kavram toplama tekniği.*

1. Introduction

Most of the time, attempts to improve students' writing ability fail as the starting point for improvement is provided by the teachers themselves or the institutions. That is, in a usual writing course, the focus has only been on the teachers' transmission of pre-determined content. However, such an approach to learner development does not match with the specific learner needs for it is the teachers providing students with ready-made solutions for the pre-determined problems (Swan, 1993). For this reason, we believe, at the beginning of any development program, the focus should be on uncovering students' perceived need for improvement as only in such a condition development will be directly relevant to personal needs. The philosophy of involving the learners in the learning process is highlighted in Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory.

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A fundamental postulate of personal construct theory holds that if we want to understand a person (in our case a student), then we have to understand how s/he perceives the world (in our case the features of a good piece of writing). And so how s/he construes personal choices and decisions (in our case his/her perception of strengths and weaknesses regarding writing and the possible action steps to be taken to overcome those perceived weaknesses for improvement). Following this line of reasoning, rather than using a ready-made writing syllabus, we have tried to negotiate the writing course syllabus with the students considering their needs as identified through repertory grid technique.

The aim of using Kelly's Repertory Grid (Pope and Keen, 1981) technique is to involve the students in the identification of:

- their personal constructs regarding the features of a good writer,
- their perception of "themselves as writers" (which meant self as a writer at the beginning of the study), and their "ideal selves as writers" (which meant the writers they would like to be in the future),
- their perceived needs for improvement in writing.

2. Repertory Grid Elicitation Procedures

At the beginning of the year, we held a conference with the students to inform them about the aim and the procedures involved in repertory grid elicitation. We also explained the students the meanings of the vocabulary used in the grid, such as Element, and Implicit and Emergent constructs. In literature, elements are defined as "an individual's personal observations or experience of the world" which are "used to define the area of the topic" (Rep grid 2 Manual, 1993, p:6). Following this definition, we explained to the students that their elements were the writers who were well known to be personally meaningful to them. The second vocabulary to be dealt with was constructs. Constructs are defined as a person's "classification of his personal observations or experience of the world (Rep grid 2 Manual, 1993, p:6). Drawing on this definition, we pointed out to the students that constructs refer to the futures of a writer who they thought was good at writing. We also explained to them that each construct had two poles: "Emergent and Implicit". As a result, we indicated that the way (considering the feature identified) in which two of the elements were alike constituted the emergent construct, while the other feature which differed from the emergent pole stood for the implicit construct.

2.1. Elicitation of Elements

We followed Pope and Keen's (1981) method in the elicitation of elements. That is, we elicited both the elements and the constructs from each of the students. This elicitation procedure was completed in the researchers' office with the students which took approximately 40 minutes. When eliciting elements, we asked the students to think of nine writers – three of which they believed to be Effective, three Typical (Average), and three Ineffective. The students were then asked to write down the writers' names in order of effectiveness. As the main concern of the procedure was to elicit the students' views on the features of effectiveness in writing, they were asked not to provide the researchers with the identity of the writers they considered, but rather to use codes for their names. They were then advised to code the Effective writers from the most effective to the least effective, such as E1, E2, and E3. They were asked to apply the same procedure to Typical and Ineffective writers.

2.2. Elicitation of Constructs

Using the nine writer codes written on nine pieces of cards, the students employed a triadic elicitation technique. In other words, they selected three cards randomly, in order to identify the triads. They then recorded the identified triads (e.g. E1, T2 and I3) on the triads column in their grid forms. Having completed this, the students were asked to articulate which two of the three writers were similar to each other and different from the third regarding the features of a good writer. The similar pairs (e.g. E1 and T2) were then marked on the triad's column in the grid form and their construct (e.g. rich vocabulary use) was recorded on the Emergent (similarity) pole. Next, the construct (e.g. repetition of the same vocabulary items), which distinguishes the third writer from the two on the same dimension was recorded on the Implicit (contrast) pole. The students were allowed to make as many comparisons as possible for the triads randomly selected. The same elicitation procedures were repeated until either the students pointed out that they were not able to propose any other constructs, or when they started repeating the constructs they had already dealt with.

We also used a five-point rating scale for the constructs in the grids. In this scale, "1" represented the closest value to the Emergent (similarity) pole, "3" the mid value, and "5" the closest value to the Implicit (contrast) pole. Having elicited the students' elements and constructs, the students were asked to rate each of their elements on each construct that they came up with. After the completion of the ratings, the students were asked to rate

themselves as “self as a writer” and “ideal self as a writer” on the same constructs.

3. Follow-up Interview for Repertory Grid

We conducted a semi-structured interview with the students immediately after they completed their repertory grids. The focus of the interview is specifically on the students’ reasons for preferring one pole of the construct rather than the other, for choosing five of the constructs as the most important, and the ways in which they regard themselves similar to or different from the writers whom they identified themselves with. In addition to the above mentioned points, in the interview, the focus is also on the identification of any problems that might lead to any misunderstandings regarding the features contrasted. Some possible problems might be:

1. the use of the same construct twice in the repertory grid,
2. attempt to express two different constructs with one word,
3. attempt to express the intended meaning with one word, which might recall different meanings by different readers,
4. vagueness in focus,
5. incomplete information given,
6. lack of parallelism between the emergent and the implicit constructs regarding the features construed.

In line with Sendan’s study (1995), we eliminated the problems by mainly employing the elaboration strategy, and in a few cases, change or deletion strategies. This process helps both the teachers and the students to better clarify and understand the identified constructs.

4. The Analysis of the Repertory Grid Data

We subjected the students’ repertory grids to content analysis to find out the personal constructs held by the students about the features of a good writer. In our case, the content analysis of the repertory grid data produced a total of eight constructs from seven students. As it is indicated below, at the beginning of the study, the students in our study perceived good writers as those who:

- are good at using grammar
- discover the topic before they begin to write
- formulate their topic sentence before they go any further
- exclude irrelevant ideas regarding the topic
- use a variety of vocabulary
- support their ideas effectively

- organise their thoughts at the beginning of a writing process
- make use of transitions for a smooth flow of ideas

Another concern in the use of rep grid is to find out how the students perceive “themselves as writers” as compared to their “ideal self as writers” (i.e. their role models). The analysis of the students’ ratings of “themselves as writers” and their “ideal selves as writers” on the constructs that they came up with revealed that the students perceived need for improvement in all of the constructs that are mentioned above. On the whole, the most problematic issues seemed to be on the use of grammar appropriately, vocabulary use and knowledge, supporting their ideas, organising their thoughts, excluding irrelevant ideas regarding the topic, formulating their topic sentence, respectively.

Having analysed the repertory grid forms, we interviewed the students one more time to confirm whether our view of their needs for writing improvement matched their views. At the end of our interviews with the students, we came up with the topics to be considered when preparing our learner-based writing syllabus.

5. Conclusion

The basic premise of this workshop is that the students are more capable of improving their writing skills if they are actively involved in identifying their own strengths and weaknesses, rather than having their needs articulated for them by the teachers. Following this line of reasoning, we have tried to share with the audience how we negotiated the writing course syllabus with the students considering the weaknesses as identified through repertory grid forms.

The repertory grid technique might be one of the beneficial tools in the identification of the students’ needs by having them articulate their own weaknesses. The information obtained through this technique might be a sound starting point in preparing a learner-based syllabus and accordingly, the writing tasks to be used to remedy the problems identified. In effect, as the students take part in decision-making mechanism (syllabus negotiation), they take the responsibility and ownership for change (i.e. writing improvement), rather than developing a resistance to a writing course.

References

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Appendix

Repertory Grid Form

Construct	Triads	Emergent Constructs (similarities) Elements	Rating Scale										Implicit Constructs (contrasts) Elements			
			1			2			3			4		5		
			E1	E2	E3	T1	T2	T3	I1	I2	I3	Self		Ideal		
1																
2																
3																
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