VISUALIZING GRAMMAR

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Abstract. The distinction between casual and academic or formal English is highlighted as teachers and students come to realize the language required for success in school settings necessitates a greater level of commitment to achieve. Academic language development is explored using SDAIE (specially designed academic instruction in English) to facilitate acquisition of grammar and IHMC CmapsTools are used to assist with hybrid and on-line teaching. Emphasis is placed on the combined usage of the instructional strategy and the learning tool.

1   Introduction

Teaching academic writing focuses attention on academic language development. Academic language must be taught especially to second language learners. One of the cornerstones of academic writing is knowledge of grammar rules. As second language learners develop mastery of the various levels, it is usually with an eye toward academic and professional writing. Students entering college with this goal in mind face numerous challenges and grammar is the first hurdle.

Choosing an instructional approach to ensure the development of academic and professional language is critical. Tools such as this enhance the intructor's teaching practices and are important for student success. An instructional model, SDAIE, (Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English) http://www.lbschools.net/Main_Offices/Curriculum/Areas/SDAIE is presented in this paper which integrates language development within the context of academic English, utilizing IHMC CmapTools as a resource to guarantee that new concepts and rules introduced are more easily remembered. http://cmap.ihmc.us
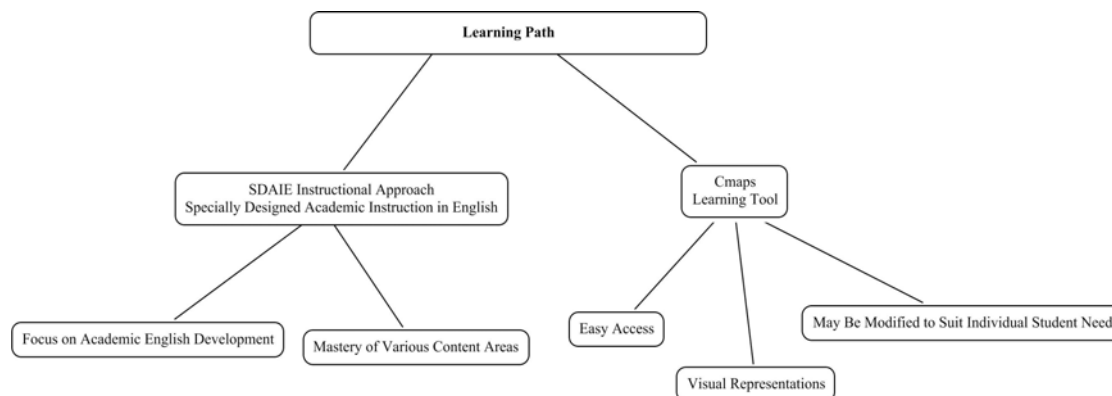

Figure 1. Combining Instructional Strategy and Learning Tool

2   Discussion

Howard Gardner highlighted different learning styles in his research over thirty years ago, and explained how this perspective enabled more students to remain engaged at any given time during a lesson. Varying the presentation increased the likelihood that the various intelligences would be used in mastering new material (Howard Gardner, 2006). As attention to on-line (OL) learning intensifies, his message appears to be more valuable than ever. In addition, as personal and world economies shift, many students find it difficult to purchase textbooks, or given their non-academic workload dedicated to contributing to the family income, complain of not having time to read an entire textbook. Consequently, they rely solely on the availability of readings in the reserve room of the library, which are limited in number. This harried world that tries to learn so much in so little time, poses a challenging problem for today's educator. Therefore, combining the SDAIE instructional model with CmapTools ensures that students engaged in the learning process have easy access to grammar rules during the writing process.

The elements of SDAIE include: the use of graphic organizers, in this case, CmapTools, grouping strategies to facilitate cooperative learning in the virtual or actual classroom, consideration of various learning and teaching styles, and where appropriate adaptation of the text. While being mindful of the language level of the students, attention is also paid to accesssing prior knowledge, and increasing wait time in consideration of reducing the affective filter. Academic language learning is further supported by modeling in the classroom or OL with repetition through constant use of the target vocabulary. Students are taught to become aware of their particular strategies to master material, such that those strategies can be modified by the individual, as the need arises.
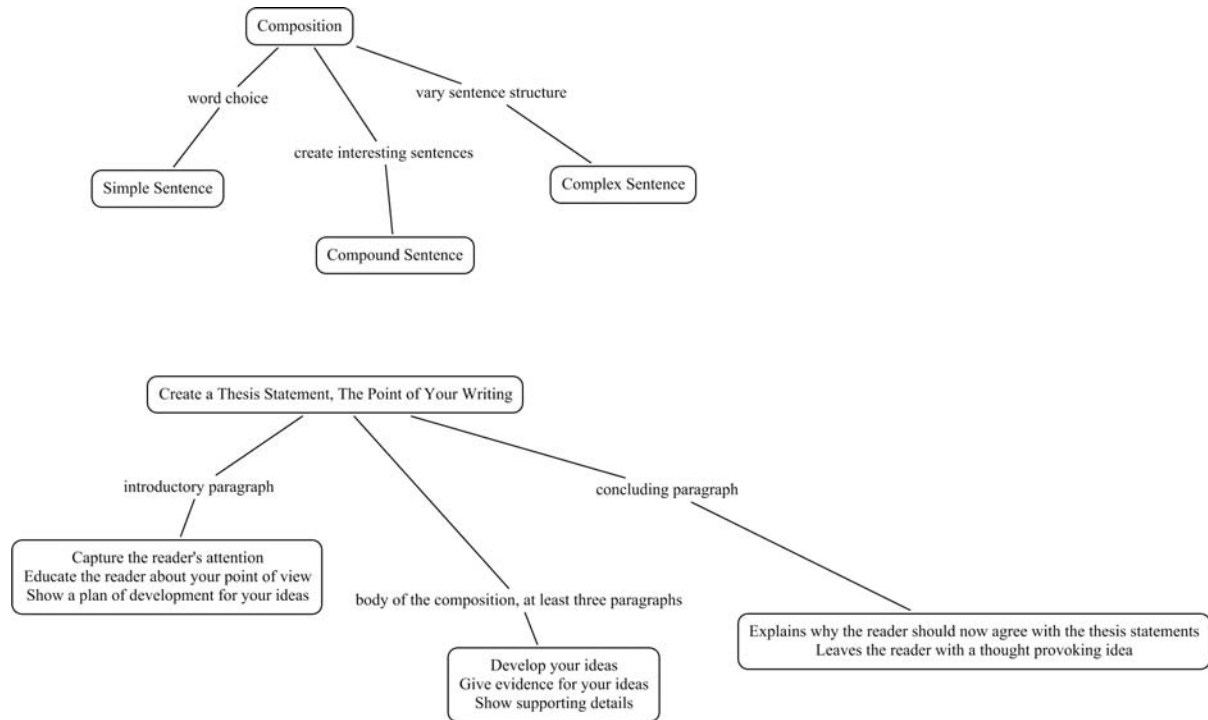

Figure 2. Creating a Composition at a Glance

CmapTools facilitate memorization of the rules required to dominate the language. Within the context of interactive learning experiences, students utilize vocabulary and concepts in the classroom environment to deepen their understanding in a hybrid or OL environment.

Given the cognitive demands of academic language, and the focus on meaningful opportunities to utilize the combined approach of SDAIE and CmapTools in an authentic situation, the students quickly come to realize the benefits of this approach. They become aware of moving from the big picture to specific ideas within a topic. Gaining access to the subject matter in a second language through the use of context embedded language with the help of a handy reference guide such as CmapTools, students learn to use the language as a tool to understand a subject rather that to simply focus on language learning itself.

Within this context, students are exposed to a wider range of the target language and discover that use of the language enables them to access a world of ideas thereby empowering them in the process. Students have the opportunity throughout the learning process to review grammar rules and re-use the new vocabulary taking advantage of the collaboration of SDAIE and CmapTools using themes in teaching to ensure the familiarity that develops enables the students to have greater confidence and therefore a better experience. With this language as meaning making approach, language is kept whole and its rules kept handy. As Freeman and Freeman point out, "…an important part of learning is the process of constructing meaning by determining which parts count" (Freeman and Freeman, page 87, 1993).
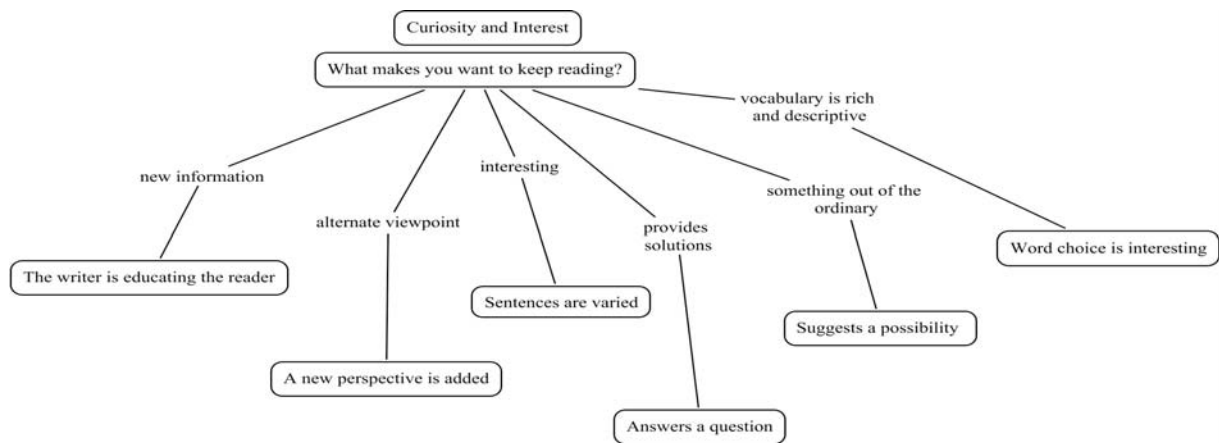
Figure 3. How a Writer Stimulates a Reader's Interest

3   Conclusion

As students use all four aspects of language: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and evolve an understanding, they discover that yes, language is about rules, but it is also a tool to be used to negotiate meaning. With this dual focus on self-efficacy and academic competence, students learn early on that writing is as important as listening, and reading is as important as speaking. Taking charge of the personal learning process through the use of CmapTools is efficient and empowering.

The use of SDAIE strategies ensures that teachers do not oversimplify the subject matter by focusing the English language development exclusively. The use of CmapTools illustrates that there are many roads to the same goal. Using the strategies and tools together allows the teacher to present the curriculum materials in their complexity in a top down fashion so that students see that the parts they know belong to a whole. This makes certain that students are in a position to place themselves within the total picture of the learning experience, giving themselves permission to learn as much as possible.

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