TEACHING WRITING AS A PROCESS

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Abstract: *In order to become independent writers, students not only must master the formal features of written English, but must also become more conscious of the writing process itself and learn techniques which will make the process work more smoothly for them. In particular, teachers can show them various devices to use during the pre-writing phase that will launch them more confidently into the first rough draft. Further, teachers can give them guidelines and techniques for the revising phase of the process that will encourage them to look for and remedy deficiencies in their writing, rather than simply making a clean copy of the first draft. A good deal of writing in the English language classroom is undertaken as an aid to learning, for example, to consolidate the learning of new structures of vocabulary or to help students remember new items of language. In this context, the role of writing is little different from its role in other subject; it allows students to see how they are processing and to get feedback from the teacher, and it allows teachers to monitor and diagnose problems. They clearly have their value in language learning, but successful writing depends on more than the ability to produce clear and correct sentences.*

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Compared with speech, effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammar devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers.

Students are aware of their own problems in writing, and they have attitudes and feelings about the writing process. Teachers can play a valuable part in raising awareness of the process of composition by talking explicitly about the stages of writing as well as by structuring tasks to take account of this.

Teachers can play a support role during the early stages of the composition process by helping students to get their ideas together. This can be done by talking about things to generate ideas, by doing things such as interviewing other students, by pooling information, ideas, or opinions in the class, or by reading texts of various kinds.

The teacher can also provide good models for writing, indirectly, by encouraging good reading habits but also directly, when appropriate, by analyzing textual structure, particularly with some types of more formal academic writing.

Planning activities structured by the teacher can help students to develop a sense of direction in their writing, though they should always be encouraged to regard a plan as an enabling device or support rather than as a rigid control.

Teachers can encourage the drafting process by creating a workshop atmosphere in their classrooms, to the extent of providing rough paper, scissors, paste, erasers, etc. And while monitoring writing in progress, they can suggest that these are used for chopping and changing the structure of the text.

Teachers can support the drafting process in various ways. They can intervene quietly, questioning and advising, in order to help writers get their ideas down on paper

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in English. Or they can encourage students to read each other's work and suggest restructurings and revisions. Giving help during writing proves far more effective than giving it afterwards.

In summary, the classroom needs to provide an environment in which students can experience being writers, thinking about purpose and audience, drafting a piece of writing, revising it, and sharing it with others.

Here are some questions to guide the teacher's introspections about his/her own approach to writing:

To what extent do you think of writing as a skill in its own right which can be taught in the classroom through a range of tasks and activities?

Why do our students write in their English classes? Make a list of all the reasons why you think that writing is important in English lessons.

Do your students have to pass examinations in English? What kind of writing is required by the examinations?

What kinds of "texts" do students write in your lessons? Make a list of typical writing tasks.

How much time do they spend on:

a) Writing sentences;
b) Writing whole "texts", e.g. narratives, descriptions, etc?

To what extent do you think difficulty in foreign language writing is a language problem or a writing problem?

Can you introspect on your own writing in a first or foreign language? What are the difficulties you experience?

Do you work with students when they are writing, encouraging them to revise and edit their work as they go along?

Do your students ever collaborate on writing tasks?

Do your students even mark their own or each other's work?

Does writing take place in separate lessons in your student's curricula or it is integrated with their work?

In many English language classes the pattern has been to set written work, perhaps with some discussion beforehand, and then to mark the incoming pieces of writing. In other words, the traditional focus has been much more on the end result of the composition process, that is, the product of writing. Research now seems to suggest that we could be as much concerned with responding to the student writer as to the student's writing.

It would certainly be useful for us as teachers to investigate the process of composition and to find out what it entails so that we can reflect on the problems it may present to our students. Then we will be in a better position to develop the most effective and helpful classroom practice. As writers ourselves and as classroom teachers we can begin our investigations through introspection and observation.

The process of writing is often described as consisting of three major activities or groups of activities which should focus the teacher's attention:

Pre-writing

When students begin a writing project they need ideas, a purpose or plan which will provide a focus for the ideas, the language with which to express the ideas and enough interest and enthusiasm to sustain the effort of getting the ideas down on paper. Depending upon the students' level of language proficiency, a variety of techniques may be used for launching the project.

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Before putting pen to paper, the skilled writer in real life considers two important questions:

a) What is the purpose of this piece of writing? The first question is to do with function. For example, is it a report which the writer hopes will be persuasive and stimulate action? Is it an explanation of how something works, which has to be careful and clear, eg. a letter applying for a job? The purpose of the writing will influence the choice of organization and the choice of language. (This aspect of writing is considered in more detail in the section called Crafting).

b) Who am I writing this for? The second question is to do with audience. The reader may be individual, one you know well, or a group of colleagues, an institution, an examiner, or a tutor. Thinking about the eventual reader(s) helps the writer to select what to say and how to present it in the most appropriate style-formal, friendly, serious, or tentative.

The answers to these two questions provide the writer with a sense of purpose and a sense of audience, in other words, a writing context which significantly influences the first stage of the composition process, that of exploring possible content and planning outlines.

Writing and rewriting

The second phase of activity is the writing itself and with good writers this consists of making a first draft. But writing the first draft is often interrupted as the writer stops to read over and review, to get an idea of how the text is developing, to revise plans, and bring in new ideas or rearrange those already expressed. There is a good deal of recycling in the process from planning to drafting, reviewing, replanning, revising, etc. Good writers tend to concentrate on getting the content right first and leave details like correcting spelling, punctuation, and a grammar until later.

Revision involves assessing what has already been written and deciding on points like these:

- Am I sharing my impressions clearly enough with my reader?
- Have I missed out any important points of information?
- Are there any points in the writing where my reader has to make a `jump` because I've omitted a line of argument or I've forgotten to explain something?
- Does the vocabulary need to be made stronger at any point?
- Are there some sentences which don't say much or which are too repetitive and can be missed out?
- Can I rearrange any sets of sentences to make the writing clearer or more interesting?
- Do I need to rearrange any paragraphs?
- Are the links between sections clear? Do they guide my reader through the writing?

In summary, the drafting process focuses primarily on what the writer wants to say, while redrafting progressively focuses on how to say it most effectively.

Editing

The post-writing stage consists of reading through and trying to apply the reader's perspective in order to asses how clearly readers might follows the ideas. The editing process makes the final readjustments and checks accuracy so that the text is maximally accessible to the reader.

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Some poorer writers tend not to angage in editing but assume that their writing is clear to others because it is clear to them. Alternatively, poor writers may concentrate throughout the whole writing process on accuracy in grammar, punctuation, etc, without considering whether or not the overall structure is clear. They continually move from drafting to editing without any in-between stages of rethinking and reorganization.

It is a less-than-effective process that might well be unwittingly encouraged by teachers whose strategy for making is to correct only minor problems on the surface of the writing without commenting on any major problems in the structure. This is an understandable strategy on the part of teachers, given the amount of marking most of us have to do.

Practical activities for teaching writing

Purposes:

1. Affective:

- To help students design and select basic and at the same time representative information about institution, monument, public place, etc.
- To get the students to better know about the university they attend.
- To help students develop their love for and pride of their university.
- To enrich student's knowledge through the suggested texts.
- To offer the students the satisfaction of writing the guide of their university for foreign students.

2. Linguistic:

- To combine ideas using a range of cohesive devices and a range of sentence patterns.
- To practise the skill of writing.

Level: Intermediate

Size of groups: three or five

Material needed: copies (as many as there are students) of the task sheet and if possible, brochures or small guides for students to skim through.

Procedures:

1. Put students into groups and ask them to think of the things they would include in an information brochure about the institution. They may like to skim through any brochures you have made available. Ask them to make a list of all of the points.

2. Take suggestions from the class and write up a set of points on the blackboard which students can add to their lists: situation, history, buildings, equipment and facilities, types of students, subjects.

3. Then ask students individually to make notes on their own institution, selecting the most relevant categories.

4. Make out copies of the task sheet and go through it with the class, taking suggestions on how to combine the sentences and writing the end product up on the blackboard.

5. Encourage students to think carefully about how to combine ideas as they use their notes to write their own descriptions.

Language is one of the most useful tools we have as humans. Without it we could not think thoughts expressible to others, nor could we engage in the activities that commonly take place in the societies we build for ourselves. Thanks to language we are granted access to the knowledge that is accumulated in books and other publications. If we are lucky enough to acquire skills in a language beyond the one we already know, we vastly increase our capacity to do things with our lives.

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