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Teaching Writing Skills
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Abstract

Students associate writing with pain and have been given little opportunity to engage in enjoyable writing. This paper advocates methods which can be used for improving the writing ability of the students. After discussing the difficulties in writing, it explains what type of teacher invention and assessment can be useful. It also provides recommendations to stimulate writing skill among students.

Writing as a Skill

Writing is a skill like driving, swimming, typing or even preparing a good meal. Teachers always command our students to write and grow frustrated when some of our students hesitate, stare outside the window, dawdle over blank paper, give up and say “I can’t write”, while other students are able to write and give the paper at the end of the period.

The reason for this sort of variation in responses may be that few teachers have ever allowed adequate time for prewriting and have taught the students the strategies for effective writing. One needs to understand the complicated and intertwining processes of perception and conception through language.

First of all, one should not have the attitude that writing is a natural gift. The result of this attitude is that students do not do their best when they write or even hardly try at all. However, some students when they are not successful may have to keep their critical thinking skills to themselves.

For these students, specific instruction is essential. Both students and faculty assume that writing skills need not be taught at all at the undergraduate level. One must not have the tendency to observe the skill of writing from a distance and should get on the field where one can understand the pressures under which the writer operates.

What Really Makes One to Write?

The negative force that the students feel is the resistance to writing. It is because of their poor knowledge in the subject matter. Good writers will be overflowing with information about the subject that they write. They will be interested in specific details, insights, anecdotes, connecting thoughts and references. Sometimes, the subject itself seems to take hold of the writers' experience, turning everything that happens to writer into material. The more a writer knows about the subject, the more he tries to write about the subject. Sometimes, most of all, it is the approaching deadline for submission. Some writers may not be able to finish their work before the deadline. One needs to reconsider one's attitude towards those who delay writing.

Writing as a Language Exercise

Writing is only used as a means of making the students to practice a particular language exercise. Students usually take down the new vocabulary; write answers for reading comprehension and do note-making, developing the hints. It is really doubtful that it teaches them real writing.

There are also certain tasks like essay writing and letter writing where the students can express themselves using their own words. But only a few students are skillful in indulging in such activities. Others really struggle. If the objective of the students is to pass the exam which does not include any extended writing, they never know the value of writing effectively that is a part of long-term education process.

Writing, a Painful Process!

Writing is hard work for everyone. It is really painful to indulge in active thinking that clear writing demands. It is scary to sit down with a blank sheet of paper and know after an hour that one does not have anything worth keeping in the paper. Even T.S. Eliot says that every word is a struggle for a writer. It is upsetting to find how an apparently simple subject often turns out to be complicated, but writing is not an automatic process. It is a skill that can be acquired through practice, hard work and determination.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 4 April 2010

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Some Steps for Writing Clearly

Writing clearly takes more effort than speaking clearly and it can be a more threatening experience. Written word is permanent and allows the reader some time to analyse and assess. In contrast to written words, spoken words once recorded have short lives and mistakes made while speaking are more readily overlooked and forgotten.

E-mail can be very casual among friends. But formal electronic correspondence requires the same rules of writing. The reasons are both personal and professional.

Getting an idea across requires writing that is well organised, specific and appropriate for comprehending. Clarity in writing also demands editing and revising so that the intention of the writing is clear. Otherwise, unclear references or incomplete details can make the reader to fill in the blanks and distort the meaning.

Sentence errors, incorrectly linked ideas and careless punctuations may project an uncaring attitude and raise questions in the readers' mind regarding the capability of the writer. The extensive use of Jargon and technical language in writing not aimed at a specialised audience marks a writer a pompous and the writing as inapproachable. From the dreaded college application essay to job application letters and business communications, the words on the paper inform others what and how the writer thinks.

Involving the Students in Teaching

The most important factor in writing exercises is that students need to be personally involved in order to make the learning experience of lasting value. Encouraging student participation in the exercise, while at the same time, refining and expanding writing skills, requires a certain pragmatic approach. The teacher should be clear about what skills he/she is trying to develop.

Next, the teacher needs to decide on the methods which can facilitate learning of the target area. Once the target skill areas and means of implementation are defined, the teacher can then proceed to focus on what topic can be used to ensure student participation. By reasonably implementing these objectives, the teacher can expect enthusiasm, dexterity and successful learning from students.

Choosing Target Areas and Thereafter

Choosing the target area depends on many factors; what level are the students? What should the students be able to produce at the end of this exercise? (a well written letter, basic communication of ideas, etc.) What is the focus of the exercise? (Expression of ideas, conveying a message, tense usage, creative writing).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 4 April 2010

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Teaching Writing Skills

Once these factors are clear in the mind of the teacher, the teacher can begin to focus on how to involve the students in the activity thus promoting a positive, long-term learning experience.

Having decided on the target area, the teacher can focus on the means to achieve this type of learning. As for assessment, the teacher must choose the most appropriate manner for the specified writing area. If formal business letter English is required, it is of no use to employ a free expression type of exercise. Likewise, when working on descriptive language writing skills, a formal letter is equally out of place.

To Involve the Students

The teacher can consider how to involve the students by considering what type of activities are interesting to the students; will they need any of the skills pragmatically? What has been effective in the past? The best way to approach this is by brainstorming sessions and feedback from students. By choosing a topic that involves the students, the teacher can provide a context within which effective learning on the target area can be selected.

On Error Correction

Finally, the question of which type of correction will facilitate a useful writing exercise is of utmost importance. There are some criteria for the evaluation of text book writing activities the teacher has to ensure.

1. Do the students find the activity motivating?
2. Is this kind of writing relevant to their needs?

However, if the task is more general (for example, developing informal letter writing skills), may be the best approach would be to have the students work in groups thereby learning from each other. Most importantly, by choosing the correct means of teaching, the teacher can encourage rather discourage students.

Importance of Having an Outline

A scratch outline can be helpful for writing a good essay. It is a good follow up to the prewriting techniques: brainstorming, free writing and making a list. For example for the topic, Problems of being a sportsperson and student in the college, the following can be the outline.

1. Little time for studying

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 4 April 2010

K. R. Vijaya, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Teaching Writing Skills

- a. not reading textbooks
- b. not able to complete the assignments
- c. poor performance in the tests
- 2. little time for sports practice
 - a. not able to practice regularly
 - b. no physical fitness
 - c. underperformance
- 3. No time for personal pleasures
 - a. not able to watch T.V programme
 - b. not able to meet friends
 - c. sleeping late

Such outlining is a skill that will develop the ability of the students to think in a clear and logical manner.

There are several models of outlining available to us, and have been in practice for many years. A topic outline focuses on the aspects (content) that a student must cover while preparing his or her draft. Students think and put down in writing the broad contents of a topic as they may have already gathered some information. Then they can sequence the content in such a way there is a free and unhindered flow from one point to another. On the other hand, a sentence outline, similar to what is presented above, presents the actual content by listing, in an ordered manner, the significant sentences of a paragraph. Sentence outline may be very helpful for our students, as this model demands writing sentences one by one in terms of the content sequence.

Process Writing

Process writing can also be used to encourage learners to start working on their writing skills from a beginning level. By removing students' fears about producing sub-par written work, the teachers can encourage them to improve their writing abilities. Only mistakes made in grammar and vocabulary should be corrected. Students may strive to come to terms with writing in English by writing in English. Allowing for mistakes and refining based on materials covered in class - instead of "perfect English" - will help students incorporate skills at a natural pace, and improve their understanding of materials discussed in class in a natural progression.

Some Practical Recommendations

Here is a list of recommendations to improve the writing ability of students.

1. Students should be provided with regular time slot to think, write, read rework ideas and rewrite.
2. The students can be encouraged to write about topics that matter to them the most.

3. When the students do not know what to write about a particular subject, free writing sometimes helps. The teacher can let them not worry about spelling, punctuation, committing mistakes or finding exact words. The students may write without stopping.
4. Students can be given time and opportunities to get feed back on their writing. Constructive comments from the teacher and their peers provide helpful feedback.
5. The mechanics of writing including spelling errors and grammar rules are more meaningful if taught on the spot.
6. The students can be exposed to good written models.
7. The students can be provided with a wide variety of reading materials on which they can be asked to reflect upon.
8. The students can be encouraged to write in all subject areas. That kind of writing gives students a means to move from observation to reaction.
9. The students can be encouraged to fine tune their work so that it is as close to their final draft.
10. The teachers can be enthusiastic, well prepared and organised when teaching writing skills.

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