

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 12 : 3 March 2012
ISSN 1930-2940

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Enhancing ESL Learners' Writing Skills

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of the writing ability and to suggest some practices. An ability to communicate is imperative in the present day situation to meet the academic, professional and social needs. Writing is a vehicle for communication. It is the creation of original text using the individual's intellectual and linguistic resources rather than copying one's text. There are many kinds of writings; writing composition, letter, thesis, article, project, book, etc. A college student's or a school student's performance of an academic year is always being evaluated only by the written examinations. Hence writing is a part and parcel of education. Writing examination is entirely different from creative writing. In the examinations, students reproduce what they learn in the course. But creative writing is an expression of individual's experience.

The most important thing in "teaching to write" is to make them realize the need to write and to develop a taste for writing. The students should cultivate regular writing habit. "Never a day without a line" should be the curricular motto.

Writing is the only skill which has a visible and ‘tangible’ outcome and has a high ‘face validity’ (White,1987:259).

Writing - An Art

An ancient proverb avers, ‘Tell me, I forget, Show me, I remember, Involve me I understand’. The learners should be involved in writing. Essentially, writing is learnt by writing and not by talking about it, nor by learning the rules and principles of writing. In fact, knowledge of how to write should precede the knowledge about writing. Reading and writing are the two sides of the same coin. So, reading and writing should be integrated in classroom instruction.

The scholarship of an academician is evaluated based on how many books and publications he has penned. The teachers of schools, colleges and universities know how the writing ability of students is at present. All the competitive examinations have a portion of questions on writing. A student who is better in listening, reading and speaking may be poor in writing. It is in the hands of the teachers to stimulate the writing ability of students.

Tierney and Pearson (1983) view reading and writing as essentially similar processes of meaning construction “involving continuous, recurring, and recursive transactions among readers and writers, their respective inner selves, and their perceptions of each other’s goals and desires”. They go on to add, “One must begin to view reading and writing as essentially similar processes of meaning construction. Both are acts of composing”. Similarly Smith (1979) argues that reading, writing, speaking and understanding speech are not separable aspects of language, since they all use the same cognitive structure.

A teacher’s major task in helping learners develop their ‘literacy inarguable’ is that they should familiarize their students with the strategies and skills which are needed for effective communication through the medium of writing. For this reason, reading, that is, purposeful reading, will play an important part in a writing programme. In reading, just as in listening to speech, an awareness of how language functions as a communicative system can be developed only through adequate exposure to a variety of forms in written language. By being exposed to varieties in written language, one learns the style, different types of sentences, spelling of unfamiliar but interesting words, punctuation system and the like. Therefore reading is likely to be a more pervasive and important act than writing, in the sense that writing receives help and support from reading.

More Demanding

But writing to be understood as a task is more demanding than reading to understand. Why? In the process of writing, we have two persons acting in one: the 'writer' (composer of ideas), and the 'reader' (that is, proofreader and editor). Writing in the beginning stage is more physical than mental. Writing, like reading is an active process. As the reader reconstructs meaning in the course of reading, the writer discovers meaning in the process of writing. Hence it is said that writing has heuristic function.

Principles of Writing Skills

Effective writing comes from writing experiences and ideas that are real and relevant to the writer. Writing helps to shape and organize experience. Language, in addition to its expressive and descriptive functions, has heuristic function too. That means, in addition to employing language to express and describe one's experiences through writing, one explores new ideas and thoughts. Writing helps to discover new ideas and thoughts during the course of writing, and helps to organize them from fluid process to solid product, and back again to fluidity. This genuine to and fro movement produces real writing.

Good writing occurs in the completion of real and meaningful tasks in the pursuit of real goals. The writer should first of all feel a need to write as a necessary act rather than as an imposed academic exercise. Therefore, classroom writing should not be made as an 'exercise', a mechanical activity, a mass drill. Instead, it should be a meaningful activity - an individualized interesting experience, a part of their real living.

Composition exercises are meaningless if they are entirely removed from the aims and interests of writers and those of their readers. Therefore, what the writer needs most in writing is a consciousness of the problems of his reader. His success as a writer depends upon the psychology of reading more than it does upon the psychology of composition.

Goal-oriented Activity

Good writing is a goal-oriented activity. Good writers do not simply express themselves; they plan their writing, around a goal they share with a reader and design it to be understood and remembered. Good writers are their own editors. This means they can test their own writing for effectiveness from the

reader's point of view by reviewing and revising. In the process of revising they generate new ideas and build them into their text. Revision and editing are mainly done keeping in mind the needs and problems of reader. Their very purpose is to reduce ambiguities and anomalies in writing and to increase its readability and acceptability in terms of the writer's goals and intentions. A writer who writes should read twice.

Creative thinking involved in writing can occur almost anywhere often while you are doing something else. It is important to get your brain working on a piece of writing as soon as possible, to give yourself time for this "free thinking" to happen.

Making Students Efficient Writers

To attain good response from students, teachers should use varied techniques to bring out their writing capability. The functions of teachers are to help students learn by imparting knowledge to them and setting up an amicable situation to learn effectively. Effective learning takes place only when the learner is able to communicate fluently both in writing and speaking.

Krasham (1982) claims that formal teaching of rules should be reduced to the minimum. There should be a shift in emphasis from conscious learning to unconscious acquisition. Before starting writing any write-up, we may list out at least 10 'WH' questions to develop our ideas.

When Do We Write?

Agatha Christie, creator of mystery stories, found that the best time for planning a book was while doing the dishes. Virginia Woolf, a British writer did most of the serious planning for her writing during long bubble baths. If you lead a busy life, you will want to do your creative writing while you are driving to work, or cleaning house, or taking a walk, or engaged in some other activities that does not require much concentration.

In a written communication, in addition to using proper words and sentences, the writer uses standard spelling, proper punctuation, capitalization, indentation, paragraphing, underlining, illustration and so on as adjunct aids.

A famous novelist George Orwell has suggested Five rules for effective writing in his essay '*Politics and the English Language*'.

- 1). Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech.
- 2). Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3). If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4). Never use the passive where can use active.
- 5). Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word, even if you think as equivalent of English.

Suggestions for Classroom Practice

The following suggestions for stimulating the writing ability among students may be practiced in the class-room.

- 1). A piece of news from a newspaper may be read in the class-room and students may be asked to express their critical views in writing.
- 2). A text written in their mother tongue can be given for translation in a foreign language and vice versa.
- 3). A five minute story writing contest may be held in the class-room.
- 4). A picture may be placed on a wall and students may be asked to write and explain it.
- 5). Students may be advised to cultivate habit of writing diary in a foreign language every day.

Conclusion

Nobel laureate Nadie Gordimer says that all great writing is deeply personal and heartfelt. Teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to write about topics that are relevant to their lives, to participate various writing activities, and to feel that their writing has value. Writing is a painful art. Without this labour of pain, no good writing emerges. Writing is, no doubt, a substitute for speaking. Hence, let us write whatever we can because writing is a pleasure by itself.

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