

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING SECOND-LANGUAGE WRITING

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Abstract. This article describes some strategies of teaching second-language writing. Special attention is paid to attitudes about the role of writing in teaching a second language. The aim of the paper is to show the new emphases in teaching writing in a second language.

Keywords: second-language writing; the purpose of writing; intensive teaching; new emphases; content-based writing.

Traditionally, when students write in a second language, the purpose of the writing activity is to catch grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. Under these circumstances, sometimes the only writing students do is to write out grammar exercises. Sometimes those grammar exercises are disguised as composition writing; that is called guided writing, in which students are given a short text and instructed to change all the masculine pronouns to feminine ones or to change all singular nouns to plural nouns or to change from present tense to past tense and so on. The students do not create the texts themselves, because a more traditional philosophy of teaching language has persuaded teachers that students are not ready to create language; they are only ready to manipulate forms. The writing is carefully controlled so that the students see only correct language and practice grammar structures that they have learned. Children learning a second language often do not do real writing at all even if they can already write in their first language.

In other, more advanced, classes following the same philosophy, students are assigned compositions or other kinds of texts to write. Most often in these classes the poor teacher takes home many student papers at

night and carefully marks all the spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors in the writing. When the papers are returned to the students, the students are often asked to take the paper home and correct all the errors and maybe recopy the text onto a clean sheet.

The focus in these types of writing exercises is primarily on language structure. Students get good marks if they manage to write texts with as few errors as possible. In order to avoid errors, then, students naturally write very cautiously and conservatively in their second language. If what they have to say does not fit with what they already know how to say, they simply write something easier, something they know they can control. As a result, we can get students' writing that is crippled, filled with cliches, and very boring both for the student who is writing and for the poor teacher reading and checking all those papers.

But attitudes about the role of writing in teaching a second language have recently changed. Instead of being the last skill taught and instead of being only a servant to grammar, writing has now become much more important in the second-language curriculum. There is every reason that it should be. Writing is the natural outlet for the students' reflections on their speaking, listening, and reading experiences in their second language. When students are not focused on grammatical errors but when they are instead writing freely, writing or trying to write what they think they want to say, they develop confidence and a sense of power over the language that none of the other skills is likely to produce until the students are very well advanced in their language studies.

In other words, students have to be quite advanced users of English before they can feel a great deal of satisfaction at being able to hold a conversation in English, understand an overheard conversation in English or a radio broadcast, or even read a newspaper or short story. But writing in

a second language is quite different. It gives students time to shape what they want to say, to go over it until it seems to reflect what they think, and to exert their influence upon the second language, and this is true even at the most elementary levels of English proficiency. Anyone who writes in any language invents a reader to whom the writer is addressing the text; English students, too, get to invent this reader who will understand their English. Writing is the one language skill where the language student has, at least as long as the text is being created, complete control over that spiteful, slippery new linguistic code. This feeling of control can be very invigorating and satisfying.

So what are the new emphases in teaching writing in a second language that allow students to develop this sense of success with the second language? The first and most important new emphasis is on the rhetorical context in which these students are writing. There are many different kinds of writing and many different reasons for writing. It is important for us as second-language teachers to figure out exactly what we are training our students for. Why will our students ever write anything in English? Will they perhaps correspond with native English speakers? Will they be writing to apply for visas or applications for admission to schools in English-speaking countries? Will they be writing to English-speaking agencies for information? The main question is: how will writing in English be useful to our students? We may examine the role of writing in our curriculums and realize that actually English writing is taught for only one reason: as reinforcement for English speaking. This is certainly a reasonable goal for English classes, but then we must engage our students in writing activities that support that goal, like doing interviews in English or taking notes for oral reports or writing dialogues and acting them out.

Next, there is a new emphasis on the content of student writing. Teaching writing no longer means simply having students do grammar exercises in writing; it no longer means having students manipulating alien texts that have no special meaning for them. Instead, now students are supposed to write about what they are interested in and know about, but most especially, what they really want to communicate to someone else, what they really want a reader to know. This desire on the part of the writer to communicate something is very important, because if it is already difficult to function in a foreign language, it is much more difficult for students to write if they are required to write about something they have no interest in – when, for example, they don't have enough information on a subject to write about or they simply have no particular desire or reason to communicate information. For the most part writing is easiest to do and is likely to have the highest quality when the writer is committed intellectually to expressing something meaningful through writing.

All of these new emphases constitute what is called the process approach to teaching writing. Previously what was important when a student wrote was the product that the student created. What does the final paper look like? Is it neat? Is it free from errors? The emphasis in the newer, process approach is less on the product and more on the wandering path that students use to get to the product. In the process approach, students are taught strategies that should help them to finally reach a decent product, because of course the product is still important and grammatical accuracy is still an important goal, but the writing class is more exploratory, less punitive, less demoralizing; the student writer is less alone. The process approach encourages students to experiment with ideas through writing and then to share their writing with their classmates and to get the opinions of several people to help them figure out what to say and

how to say it. The result is that the writing class is getting suddenly noisy, maybe noisier than even a conversation class, as students work in groups to write, read each other's writing, and comment on it.

A second result is a change in the kinds of assignments made in writing classes. The process approach encourages many different types of writing assignments for a variety of purposes. For example, many ESL teachers have experimented with content-based writing courses. In such courses there is a body of material to be learned – for example, the material in a history course or an introductory psychology or sociology course – and the writing in the English class consists of assignments that might be made for that psychology class. In other words, the students learn psychology through English. Content-based approaches to teaching writing nearly always include quite a bit of reading in the content being studied, and the link between reading and writing assignments has become more obvious. But once again the reading is chosen for a purpose – to learn or to communicate something interesting or important about the subject– not primarily to practice English.

Such arrangements for content-based writing courses may require the cooperation of content-area teachers, and as such may be difficult to arrange, but other types of assignments also take the students out of the English classroom into other environments.

There is, for example, a new acceptance of translation from the native language, but again, not simply for the purpose of the exercise of translating, but rather for the purpose of communicating something interesting in English that originally appeared in the native language, or the other way around. Interviews with people who do not speak English but whom the students are interested in for whatever reason, for example, can be rewritten in English and shared in class.

In all of these assignments, there is a new emphasis on the students and their interests. Students are working with teachers now to help the teacher make assignments by letting the teacher know what kinds of writing they are interested in doing and what kinds of topics they are interested in dealing with. Teachers are trying to find out where their students' interests lie.

Another result of this change in attitudes is a new emphasis on publishing students' work. Students are much more likely to be willing to exert energy in their work if they think someone else will read it or even simply if their work is treated as important in itself, worthy of publication and the attention that publication brings. If students are writing for publication, again they have some idea of the real audience who will be reading their work, and this perception in itself will make the writing easier.

It is obvious by now that writing classes have changed. They have become more humanistic, more friendly, and more fun. ESL students are now writing in their second language, and they have a greater variety of writing tasks and more interesting opportunities to write. Students and teachers are more relaxed; they work together, they collaborate.

What seems to be important in teaching second-language writing is the idea that writing in any language is done for a purpose, usually to communicate with a reader. Any other reason for putting pen to paper is physically writing but it is not really writing. Writing can give a language student a sense of command over the language that no other language activity can give so quickly. Because of this, writing classes can be a great deal of fun while at the same time giving language students confidence in their ability to manipulate English.

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