

A Pathway to Effective Writing:

Teaching Writing at
Intermediate and
Advanced Levels

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As we said by the end of Module 1, in this Module we shall be considering some methodological aspects related to how we can teach our students the process of writing effective compositions.

Good writing is easily identified by any reader: just by reading it anyone can easily tell whether a piece of writing is good or bad. However, in order to help our students become good writers, we need to identify the good things a writer does in order to teach our students the techniques that they can apply to their own writing.

Regular writing

One problem with 'writing' is that in many EFL classes it is relegated to homework or classes devoted to writing. Most good writers acknowledge that they write a lot, so the first step towards successful writing is to include a 'bit' of it into your regular classes.

Giving the writing a purpose

Another problem is that writing is often done 'cold' while in 'real' life this is never the case. Writing is normal in response to something else whether it be another piece of writing (i.e. answering a letter), a conversation (i.e. taking notes during a telephone conversation), or after reading something (i.e. replying to a job advert). This means that the piece of writing has a context and, in most cases, a 'thinking' time. Authentic, purposeful writing activities encourage students to focus on their strengths and areas of interest while simultaneously working to improve their weaknesses.

However, we frequently hear our students complain "*Why do we have to do this?*"

This question, which we dread to hear, actually gives us a golden opportunity for a teaching moment. There are many purposes of writing:

- Give someone instructions
- Pass on information
- Get a driver's license
- Fill out a job application
- Create a resume
- Express feelings
- Organise thoughts ... and last, but not least,
- Pass an exam!!!

Therefore, it would be useful to try and make the writing you give in class (or for homework) as realistic as possible by discussing the topic and writing before starting to write

Fitting writing into your lessons

Writing is often seen by students as being 'boring' and difficult. In order to lessen the load on students it would be important to:

- ✓ Break the writing up: talk about the topic, plan, discuss the plan, write the outline and discuss, write the first paragraph & discuss etc.
- ✓ Make it part of the lesson by talking about the topic, reading about it, developing role plays from the situations etc.

True, writing is a tool, and explaining the purpose of writing to students is a necessity so that they understand what it is they are doing and why. So having clarified with them the exact reason why we are asking them to undertake this strenuous task, the next step is to provide them with structure and direction.

Approaches to Teaching Writing

Raimes, 1983, classifies the approaches to teaching writing as follows:

- **The Controlled-to-Free Approach**

This approach is basically aimed at helping students to achieve mastery of grammatical and syntactic forms. It adopts a sequential structure in which students are first given sentence exercises, then paragraphs to copy or manipulate grammatically (by changing questions to statements, present forms to past, or plural forms to singular, changing words to clauses and combining sentences) and eventually are allowed to try some free composition writing. These controlled compositions help students to write and yet avoid making mistakes, which makes error correction easy. As such, this approach stresses grammar, syntax, and the mechanics of writing. It emphasizes accuracy rather than fluency or originality.

- **The Free-Writing Approach**

This approach stresses quantity rather than quality. Teachers who use this approach assign vast amounts of free writing on given topics with only minimal correction. The emphasis is on content and fluency rather than on accuracy and form. The underlying belief is that once ideas are down on the page, grammatical accuracy and organization will ensue. Thus, teachers ask students to write freely on any topic without worrying about grammar and spelling for five or ten minutes. These pieces of free writing are not corrected. The teacher simply reads them and may comment on the ideas the student expressed. Alternatively, some students may volunteer to read their own writing aloud

to the class. The main concern here is the content of the piece and the audience to whom it is addressed.

- **The Paragraph-Pattern Approach**

Instead of accuracy of grammar or fluency of content, this approach stresses textual organization. Students copy paragraphs and imitate model passages. They put scrambled sentences in order to form paragraphs, identify general and specific statements, insert or delete sentences and choose or invent an appropriate topic sentence.

- **The Communicative Approach**

This approach stresses the purpose of writing and the audience for it. Students are encouraged to behave like writers in real life and ask themselves two crucial questions:

Why am I writing this?

Who will read it?

Traditionally, the teacher alone has been the audience for student writing. But some feel that writers do their best when writing is truly a communicative act, with a writer writing for a real reader, so when using this approach, teachers tend to take hold of any opportunities they may seize to extend readership.

- **The Process Approach**

Recently, the teaching of writing has moved away from a concentration on the final written product to an emphasis on the process of writing. Thus, students are encouraged to ask themselves:

How do I write this?

How do I get started?

In this approach, students are trained to generate ideas for writing, think of the purpose and audience, write multiple drafts in order to present written products that communicate their ideas. Teachers who use this approach give students time to try ideas and feedback on the content of what they write in their drafts. As such, writing becomes a process of discovery for the students as they discover new ideas and new language forms to express them. Furthermore, learning to write is seen as a developmental process that helps students to write as professional authors do, choosing their own topics and genres, and writing from their own experiences or

observations. A process writing approach requires that teachers give students greater responsibility for and ownership of, their own learning. Students make decisions about genre and choice of topics, and collaborate among themselves as they write. During the writing process, students engage in pre-writing, drafting and post-writing activities. However, as the writing process is recursive in nature, they do not necessarily engage in these activities in a precise order and often the steps are carried out several times until the final version is satisfactory.

Before you go on reading, go to the activities section and do Task 1.

The Writing Process

The writing process describes the phases of a writing project with which all students are expected to become familiar. The purpose of incorporating the writing process in a formal way into your lessons is to encourage students to adopt certain behaviours that will make their writing better and more complete. The writing process encourages students to see writing as something that develops through exploration, research, consultation, revision, editing, and publishing or sharing their work with others.

The writing process includes the following phases:

- ✓ pre-writing
- ✓ drafting
- ✓ revision
- ✓ editing and proofreading
- ✓ publishing

In order to clarify these concepts, before you go on reading, go to the activities section and do Task 2.

Having clarified what each stage involves, let us turn our attention to ways in which we can address some of these steps with our students.

We often spend time on the nuts and bolts of writing such as sentence or paragraph structure, cohesion, appropriate language and style etc, but often neglect the pieces we want to bolt together. In the following boxes you will find ways of developing lessons that basically concentrate on the pre-writing and drafting stages, which constitute the basis of successful writing.

Prewriting and drafting

Box 1 – *Brainstorming*

Usually brainstorming is done in one of two ways:

- a. students are put into small groups, given the topic and a time limit and told to write their ideas down – then all the groups ideas are collated;
- b. the brainstorming is done as a whole class activity with students shouting out their ideas and the teacher writing these ideas on the board.

However, you can consider a different technique which may guarantee a wider scope of student participation and help keep the pace high:

- Write the topic (or question) on the board.
- Sit your students in a circle (if possible) and tell them you will give each student 4 seconds to give you an answer.
- Start at the left of the circle and if the student gives you a response write it on the board and move on to the next student. If a student doesn't say something within 4 seconds ask the student to move their chair slightly back and move on. Go round the whole class and then start again and repeat the process.
- On the third round any student who didn't say anything (in any round) is 'out'.

Although the first time you use this brainstorming technique you may get little response, once the students are used to it (and its rules) you will find that it is quite productive.

Box 2 – *Speed writing*

This technique is based on the Free Writing Approach. It is like a written brainstorming session, but it requires that students do the actual writing individually.

- Make certain that all the students can see the 'brainstorming' board where

you have written the topic or question.

- Tell the students you are going to give them only 15 minutes (you could give as little as 10 minutes but don't give more than 20) to write. They should concentrate on ideas, not on language, grammar or punctuation.
- They write as quickly as possible and should not stop.
- They cannot cross anything out or correct mistakes during this time.
- If they cannot think of a word or a phrase they should leave a blank space or write it in their own language.
- Once the time is up, shout 'stop'.
- Students should now work in pairs or small groups and read out what they have written.
- At this stage all the students should just listen.
- Next, as a group (or pair) the students should work through the text correcting mistakes, changing punctuation, translating words or phrases into English, or fill in the blanks.

Box 3 – Loop writing

Loop writing is a way of ensuring paragraphs link together forming a coherent text. This task builds upon the brainstorming and speed writing stages we have described before.

- During the speed writing you will find that students have generated lots of ideas, but that most of these will be at a sentence level or possibly paragraph level. This means that these ideas now need to be structured into a complete text.
- In groups ask the students to choose 1 piece of writing.
- Ask them to read through it and link ideas together that have a similar sub-topic.
- Now they should decide which idea (or sentence) will start the piece of writing.
- Using this idea (and the ones that go with it in the same paragraph) they should write the first paragraph.
- Next, they should summarise the first paragraph in one sentence. This sentence is then used to start the second paragraph. The students then follow the same steps used to create the first paragraph and then summarise the second paragraph.

- The students use the sentence that summarises the second paragraph as the start of the third paragraph and they continue with these steps until they have completed the writing.
- As a final step, the students read their final version through again and check as a 'whole' text.

Of course, the materials you that can be used to develop lessons using these tasks will be dependent on your class/students. In general, it is useful to bring in examples of different types of 'long' writing (i.e. letters, articles, reports, essays etc). These do not necessarily have to be 'real' examples (although those can be useful) but could be from coursebooks, the Internet, or even from other students (clearly these would need to be 'good' models).

Before you go on reading, it would be useful to try and see how these suggestions work. Go to the activities section and do Task 3.

Revision

After our students have written their first drafts, it will be necessary for them to take the next step and revise their production. Here are some tips that we can give them to carry out this process:

Tips for students:

- ❖ Remember, an essay is a group of related paragraphs about one main idea. The introduction states the controlling idea. The body paragraphs contain the subordinate ideas that support the controlling idea. The conclusion restates the controlling idea and indicates the end. If ideas don't flow in a logical sequence from paragraph to paragraph, move the paragraphs around until your main points fall into a clear pattern. For example, you may want to organize your ideas chronologically, according to how things happened from start to finish in time, or you may want to talk about your ideas in order of their importance.
- ❖ Just as an essay is made up of related paragraphs that develop a central point, a paragraph is made up of related sentences that develop a central point. If a sentence in a paragraph does not provide evidence for the main idea of the paragraph, delete it, rewrite it, or

move it to another paragraph.

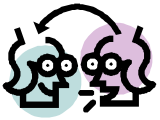
- ❖ Check to make sure you have not accidentally left out an important point. If so, add a sentence or paragraph to clarify your meaning or provide further evidence for your main point.
- ❖ Check to make sure that all your subordinate ideas support the main idea. If you have accidentally included something that does not support the main idea, delete it.



Before we move on to the next step in the writing process let us consider the following questions:

- Do you believe these tips might help students in the revising process?
- Are there any further tips you would like to add?
- Do you give your students tips of this kind (or any others)?

Please, tell us about this in the forum.



And now please go to the activities section and do Task 4 where you will be asked to analyse a sample revision.

Proofreading and editing

Basically, proofreading and editing relate to taking care of any problems the students may have with conventions like spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage. At this stage, students may want to make *minor* changes to the content of their piece (a word here, a phrase there), but if they want to make bigger changes, they should be advised to go back to the Revising stage.

Editing is hard because there a lot of things the student needs to pay attention to in order to do it well. In general, students find it boring and tedious, and on many occasions they feel they are not good enough at it. However, it is important to show to them that going through this stage is necessary to show readers that they care: both about what they write and about their audience as well.

Before you go on reading it would be interesting to consider a few points about editing:

- Do all types of text require editing or are there occasions when it would be even unnatural to edit a text?
- What does the decision to edit a text depend on?

If you want to, you can share some of your ideas in the Forum.



In fact, it would be true to say that not all pieces of writing require editing (a note to someone at home, or simple directions, for example). But longer, more formal pieces of writing need to be taken more seriously and here editing becomes essential. And here we are up against a big philosophical problem: our society is so focused on correctness that we find it extremely hard to even consider the fact that it is **natural** for students to make mistakes. In fact, it is **natural** (and I stress the word “natural”) for everyone to make mistakes, even for experienced, good writers.

As teachers, we have two options: either we can teach our students a bunch of rules and hope that they will be able to apply them to their work, or we can encourage them to identify mistakes and teach them a wide range of strategies to handle them. The most important step here is to accept that mistakes will occur and that the best thing we can do for our students is to help them develop strategies to identify them and eventually, as they gain knowledge and proficiency in their use of the language, to correct them.

Another interesting point about editing and proofreading is that good writers usually make bad editors of their own work. There is really no contradiction here: most writers know exactly what they meant when they wrote, therefore it is extremely difficult for them to identify obscure points and mistakes. It seems then, that the most advisable thing to teach our students is that after they have identified and corrected as many mistakes as they possibly can, they should get someone else to edit and proofread their work yet again.



How can we go about this editing process in class? Maybe you can make some suggestions and share them in the forum.

Having covered the different steps involved in the writing process, we have come to the end of this module. In the next one, we shall consider specific technique that can be used to help students become for proficient in the writing of different genres.

See you soon!