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**TEACHING SKILLS: TEACHING WRITING**

* Reasons for teaching writing
* Writing issues
* Writing sequences
* Correcting written work
* Handwriting

1.**Reasons for teaching writing** There are many reasons for getting students to write, both in and outside class. Firstly, writing gives them more ‘thinking time’ than they get when they attempt spontaneous conversation. This allows them more opportunity for *language processing*- that is thinking *about* the language - whether they are involved in study or activation.  
When thinking about writing, it is helpful to make a distinction between *writing-for learning*and *writing-for-writing***.** In the case of the former, writing is used as an aide -memoire or practice tool to help students practise and work with language they have been studying. We might, for example, ask a class to write five sentences using a given structure,  
or using five of the new words or phrases they have been learning. Writing activities like this are designed to give reinforcement to students. This is particularly useful for those who need a mix of visual and kinaesthetic activity.

Another kind of writing for-learning occurs when we have students write sentences in preparation for some other activity. Here, writing is an enabling activity.

Writing-for-writing, on the other hand, is directed at developing the students’ skills *as writers.* In other words, the main purpose for activities of this type is that students should become better at writing, whatever kind of writing that might be. There are good ‘real life’ reasons for getting students to write such things as emails, letters and reports. And whereas in writing-for-learning activities it is usually the language itself that is the main focus of attention, in writing-for-writing we look at the whole text. This will include not just appropriate language use, but also text construction, layout, style and effectiveness.

It is clear that the way we organise our students’ writing - and the way we offer advice and correction - will be different, depending on what kind of writing they are involved in.

**2.Writing issue**

The kind of writing we ask students to do (and the way we ask them to do it) will depend,as most other things do, on their age, level, learning styles and interests. We won’t get beginners to try to put together a complex narrative composition in English; we probably won’t ask a class of advanced business students to write a poem about their mothers (unless we have specific reasons for doing this).

In order to help students write successfully and enthusiastically in different styles, we need to consider three separate issues:

* **Genre**

One of our decisions about what to get students to write will depend on what *genres* we think they need to write in (or which will be useful to them). A genre is a type of writing which members of a *discourse community*would instantly recognise for what it was. Thus, we recognise a small ad in a newspaper the moment we see it because, being members of a particular group, or community, we have seen many such texts before and are familiar with the way they are constructed. We know what a poem looks like, a theatre listing or the function and appearance of the cover copy on the back of a book. One of the decisions that we will need to make, therefore, is which genres are important and/or engaging for our students. Once we have done this, we can show them examples of texts within a genre (for example, a variety of different kinds of written invitations) so that they get a feel for the conventions of that genre. Such *genre analysis*will help students see how typical texts within a genre are constructed, and this knowledge will help them construct appropriate texts of their own. At lower levels, we may give them clear models to follow, and they will write something that looks very much like the original. Such *guided writing* will help students produce appropriate texts even with fairly limited English. However, as their language level improves, we need to make sure that their writing begins to express their own creativity within a genre, rather than merely imitating it.

* **The writing process**

When students are writing-for-writing, we will want to involve them in the *process* of writing. In the ‘real world’, this typically involves *planning*what we are going to write, *drafting*it, *reviewing* and *editing*what we have written and then producing a final (and satisfactory) version. Many people have thought that this is a linear process, but a closer  
examination of how writers of all different kinds are involved in the writing process suggests  
that we do all of these things again and again, sometimes in a chaotic order. Thus we may plan, draft, re-plan, draft, edit, re-edit, re-plan, etc before we produce our final version.  
 We will need to encourage students to plan, draft and edit in this way, even though this may be time-consuming and may meet, initially, with some resistance on their part. By doing so, we will help them to be better writers both in exams, for example, and in their post-class English lives

* **Building the writing habit**

One other issue, which we can refer to as *building the writing habit,* deserves mention here. Many students either think or say that they cannot, or do not want to write. This may be because they lack confidence, think it’s boring or believe they have ‘nothing to say’. We need to engage them, from early levels, with activities which are easy and enjoyable to take part in, so that writing activities not only become a normal part of classroom life but also present opportunities for students to achieve almost instant success. It is when students have acquired this writing habit that they are able to look at written genres and involve themselves in the writing process with enthusiasm.

**3.Writing sequences** The three examples of writing listed below show a range of level and complexity. During teaching you can be seen that work on one skill (in this case writing) is often preceded by - or leads on to - work in another (e.g. speaking or reading).For more details, consult the main resource : How to Teach English by Harmer,20

* Example 1: postcards (pre-intermediate/intermediate)
* Example 2: email interview (pre-intermediate upwards)
* Example 3: writing a report (upper intermediate)

**4**. **More writing suggestions  
4.1.Instant writing**

One way of building the writing habit is to use instant writing activities as often as possible with both children/teenagers and adults who are reluctant writers. Instant writing activities are those where students are asked to write immediately in response to a teacher request. We can, for example, dictate half sentences for students to complete (e.g. ‘My favourite relative is ...’ or ‘I will never forget the time I ...’). We can ask students to write two sentences about a topic ‘right now’. We can give them three words and tell them to put them into a sentence as quickly as possible.  
 *Instant writing* is designed both to make students comfortable when writing, and also to give them thinking time before they say the sentences they have written aloud.

**4.2.Using music and pictures**

Music and pictures are excellent stimuli for both writing and speaking. For example, we can play a piece of music and the students have to imagine and then write out the film scene they think it could accompany (this can be done after they have looked at a film script model). We can dictate the first sentence of a story and then have the students complete the story, based on the music we play them. We can then dictate the first sentence again and have them write a different story (because the music they hear is very different). They can then read out one of their stories and the class has to guess which music excerpt inspired it.

Pictures offer a wealth of possibilities. We can ask students to write descriptions of one of a group of pictures; their classmates then have to guess which one it is. They can write postcards based on pictures we give them. We can get them to look at portraits and write the inner thoughts of the characters or their diaries, or an article about them.  
 All of these activities are designed to get students writing freely, in an *engaging* way.

**4.3.Newspapers and magazines**

The different kinds of text found in newspapers and magazines offer a range of possibilities for **genre analysis**, followed by writing within that genre. For example, we can get students to look at a range of different articles and ask them to analyse how headlines are constructed, and how articles are normally arranged (e.g. the first paragraph often - but not always- offers a summary of the whole article). They then write an article about a real or imaginary news story that interests them. At advanced levels, we can get students to look at the same story dealt with by different kinds of publication and ask them to write specifically for one or the other.  
 We can do the same kind of genre analysis in newspaper and magazine advertisements.

‘Lonely hearts’ entries, for example, always conform to a genre frame. Our students can learn a lot from analysing the genre and being able to imitate it. In the same vein, agony column letters (where people write in to ask for help with a problem) offer engaging writing practice.  
 Finally, we can show students a story and have them respond to it in a variety of different genres, and for different audiences (e.g. the report of a long traffic delay can prompt letters to the newspaper, emails, text messages, letters of apology, etc)

**4.4.Brochures and guides**

We can get students to look at a variety of brochures (e.g. for a town, entertainment venue, health club or leisure complex) to analyse how they are put together. They can then write their own brochure or town guide, using this analysis to help them.

Younger learners may enjoy writing brochures and guides for their areas which give completely wrong information (e.g. ‘Sending postcards home: Look for the bins marked “Rubbish” or “Litter” and your postcards will be delivered next day; Travelling by bus: The buses in London are similar to taxis. Tell the drivers where you want to go and they’ll drive you home!’). This is potentially just as engaging for children and teenagers as writing serious pieces of work

**4.5.Poetry**

Many teachers like getting students to write poems because it allows them to express themselves in a way that other genres, perhaps, do not. But we will have to give students models to help them write (to start with, anyway), since many of them will be unused to this kind of writing.  
 We can ask them to write acrostic poems (where the letters which start each line, when read downwards, form a word which is the topic of the poem). They can write a poetry alphabet (a line for each letter), or we can give them sentence frames to write with ‘I like ... because ...’ x 3, and then ‘But I hate ...’). We can get them to write lines about someone they like with instructions such as ‘Write about this person as if they were a kind of weather’. We can give them models of real poems which they have to imitate.

Poetry writing is especially appropriate for younger learners who are usually not afraid to have a go in the ways suggested above; but it is appropriate for older learners, too, since it allows them to be more creative than is permitted in some other activities.

**4.6.Collaborative writing**

Students gain a lot from constructing texts together. For example, we can have them build up a letter on the board, where each line is written by a different student (with help from the class, the group and/or the teacher). We can tell a story which students then have to try to reproduce in groups (a version of this activity goes by the name *dictogloss***,** where, when students have tried to recreate what they have heard, they compare their versions with the original as a way of increasing their language awareness).

We can set up a *story circle*in which each student in the group has a piece of paper on which they write the first line of a story (which we dictate to them). They then have to write the next sentence. After that, they pass their papers to the person next to them, and they write the next sentence of the story they now have in front of them. They then pass the paper to the next student and again write the next sentence of the (new) story they have. Finally, when the papers get back to their original owners, those students write the conclusion. Students can also engage in collaborative writing around a computer screen.

**4.7.Writing to each other**

The email interview (e.g.above) is an example of getting students to write to each other. They can also write emails, or any other kind of message (the teacher can act as a postal worker) which has to be answered. They can be involved, under our supervision, in *live chat*sessions on the Internet, or we can organise *pen pal*exchanges with students in other countries (often called mousepals or *keypals*when done via the Internet).

**4.8.Writing in other genres**

There are countless different genres that students can write in apart from those mentioned so far. We can have students write personal *narratives*and other stories. We can prepare them for this by looking at the way other writers do it. We can analyse first lines of novels and then have students write their own attention-grabbing lines. We can get students to complete stories that are only half told. For many of these activities, getting the students to think together before they attempt the task **-** *brainstorming*ideas - will be a major factor in their success.  
 Students can write discursive essays in which they assemble arguments both *for and against*a proposition, work out a coherent order for their arguments, study various models for such an essay and then write their own.

All these ideas depend for their success on students having a chance to share ideas, look at examples of the genre, plan their writing and then draft and edit it.

5**.Correcting written work**

Most students find it very dispiriting if they get a piece of written work back and it is covered in red ink, underlinings and crossings-out. It is a powerful visual statement of the fact that their written English is terrible.

Of course, some pieces of written work are completely full of mistakes, but even in these cases, **over-correction** can have a very demotivating effect. Rather than this, the teacher has to achieve a balance between being accurate and truthful, on the one hand, and treating students sensitively and sympathetically, on the other.

One way of avoiding the ‘over-correction’ problem is for teachers to tell their students that for a particular piece of work they are only going to correct mistakes of punctuation, or only spelling or only grammar, etc. This has two advantages: it makes students concentrate on that particular aspect, and it cuts down on the *correction*.

Another technique which many teachers use is to agree on a list of written symbols (S = spelling, WO = word order, etc). When they come across a mistake, they underline it discreetly and write the symbol in the margin. This makes correction look less damaging. Where students write with electronic media, teachers can use editing tools  
such as Track Changes. These make it easier for students to write correct versions of their originals. However, such applications should be used carefully since they, too, can be very discouraging.  
 The way we react to students’ writing will depend on what kind of writing it is. When students hand us final pieces of work, we may correct it using techniques such as the ones above. However, while students are actually involved in the writing process, correction will not help them learn to edit their own work, whereas *responding*(telling students what you think, teasing out alternatives and making suggestions) will. But whatever kind of writing students have been doing, we need to react not just to the form of what they have written, but also to the content (what they have written about). We also need to make sure that students do not just put corrected work into their folders without fully understanding why we have reacted as we have, and without doing their best to put things right.

**6.Handwriting**

Now that so much writing is done with electronic media, it may seem perverse to worry about handwriting. Nevertheless, many people around the world still write with pens and pencils, and so we will need to help any students who have problems of legibility.  
 Many nationalities do not use the same kind of script as English, so for students from those cultures, writing in English is doubly difficult: they are fighting to express themselves at the same time as trying (when they are not using a computer keyboard) to work out a completely new writing system.  
 Teachers cannot ask students to change their handwriting style, but they can encourage neatness and legibility. Especially when students are intending to take pen-and-paper exams, such things are crucial. Special classes or group sessions may have to be arranged to help students who are having problems with English script. They can be shown examples of certain letters, and the teacher can demonstrate the strokes necessary for making those shapes.