

L2 Writing: A Luxury?

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Abstract

Writing remains to be a cornerstone for all EFL learners particularly Iranian university students of English-related fields (IUSEF). This deficiency in writing becomes even more magnified when they are asked to prepare outlines and summaries on class lectures and/or when they have to take essay-type tests on courses such as linguistics or poetry. The curriculum of these English-related fields provides three separate courses of “advanced writing”, “letter writing”, and “essay writing”; nevertheless, even seniors seem to be caught in the different ends of the maze of English writing. This paper will reappraise the nature of writing, its kinds, and the skills that IUSEF need in order to meet their short-term and long-term writing objectives. It will also elaborate on teaching techniques based on pair and teamwork. Finally, emphasizing the use of L1 for low proficient writers, the paper will introduce some productive learning strategies that students should be taught and encouraged to use in planning, drafting, and editing their writings.

Key terms:

transcription, composition, academic writing, general writing, task-based writing, paired writing

What is writing?

The term “writing” is mentioned as frequently as the other three skills in ELT literature, having attracted sufficient attention from both researchers and

practitioners. Nevertheless, it seems that there is still a serious misconception as to what the essence of writing is and what range of activities it covers. Generally, the word “writing” envisages all sorts of paragraph from descriptive to discursive. This may be the result of having a traditional view to language including the writing skill. However, those influenced by modern trendy views of “communicative language teaching” would think of writing as filling out forms, writing e-mails, notes, memos, lists, and diaries. Writing as a highly interactional activity may or may not include all the abovementioned cases since every individual learner has different writing needs and thus may not necessarily benefit from a comprehensive writing course moving from frequent everyday life instances of writing to highly specialized ones.

What is certain, however, is that even all kinds of writing tasks even the simplest ones tap on the individual’s knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. In writing a shopping list, one has to know the name of items to be bought, the specifying adjectives if necessary, and the scale with which each item is measured. Obviously, the knowledge of sound-symbol relationships is taken for granted here. Figure 1 presents a shopping list prepared by an adult English language learner in a class activity:

Figure 1

Apples 2 kilos
 Potatos* 3 kilos
 3 Soaps*
 2 blue pens
 A4 paper 1 package*

* unacceptable item

Tasks involving the production of sentences require yet a higher knowledge in word choice and sentence structure. Guided exercises such as sentence completion, open-ended reading comprehension questions, and sentence paraphrasing are designed to enhance the knowledge of grammar, but in practice, they increase learners' ability in producing language within the limitations of a certain semantic and syntactic domain.

Raimes (1983) argues that in a text-like piece of writing or what Burton and Humphries (1992, p 12) refer to as "planned writing", writers have to deal with different features:

Figure 2

Purpose	The reason for writing
Audience	The reader/s
Writer's processes	getting ideas, getting started, writing drafts, revising
Content	relevance, clarity, originality, logic, etc
Syntax	sentence structure, boundaries, stylistic choices
Grammar	rules for verbs, agreement, articles, pronouns, etc
Mechanics	handwriting, spelling, punctuation, etc
Organization	paragraphs, topic and support, cohesion and unity
Word choice	vocabulary, idiom, tone

Smith (1982, cited in Andrews 2001) views writing from a different perspective, drawing a distinction between *composition* and *transcription*. He sees the authorial acts of composing in words different from the secretarial business of getting words onto the page.

Figure 3

Composition	Transcription
Getting ideas	Physical effort of writing or typing
Shaping and rearranging ideas	Paragraphs and other sub-units of text
Grammar/style	Punctuation
Selecting words	Spelling
	Capitalization, etc
	Legibility

The distinction is particularly useful “because it enables a pedagogic approach to the teaching of writing that is sensitive to the different stages in the act of writing” (Andrews, 2001, p 41). It is needless to say that all the above stages do not come into play in certain occasions of writing such as jotting down a cooking recipe or quick penning of a personal letter.

Now, it is time to raise the next question.

What should be taught?

IUSEF (Iranian university students of English related fields) like all the other EFL/ESL learners around the globe are expected to meet their communicative needs when indulged in writing. What has to be closely examined here is the so-called “communicative needs” of such learners. A dichotomous classification may be the most appropriate:

1. short-term objectives which are usually of an academic nature
2. long-term objectives which can be academic, occupational and/or general

Figure 4

Short-term objectives	Long-term objectives
Note making while reading /listening Summarizing Taking knowledge essay-type tests Writing reports Writing term projects	Entering graduate schools Writing scientific articles Writing reports at work Writing letters, memos, diaries, etc

One may add more items to each of the two sets of objectives or even propose a different classification, but what is of significance here is the realization that

IUSEF have different writing needs some of which have to be met before the others.

In practice, however, IUSEF, having passed 8 credits of grammar, sit for the so-called “advanced writing” class. Under the influence of the process-based approach to writing, instructors introduce different elements of a topic sentence, helping them write all sorts of them until they are ready to “support” their topic sentence with different kinds of material such as examples, statistics, and anecdotes. Then, they usually move on to writing different kinds of paragraph from descriptive to more difficult ones requiring students to think of the content in a more or less creative way. A writing class like this may sound healthy and successful compared to the traditional approach which required students to write on one topic after the other without ever telling them how! But, in practice, students remain to be poor writers even when they are graduating.

This major failure in the writing skill of IUSEF may be due to different reasons, but they can be summarized in three:

1. Students’ level of grammatical and vocabulary knowledge is far from close to the one appropriate for attending a writing class,
2. Productive teaching techniques are either ignored completely or half implemented, and
3. The course jumps hastily on high level writing activities, skipping the more useful and frequent ones.

The first problem is a separate issue concerned with the content and method of instruction in grammar classes which is to be discussed and hopefully alleviated

in another set of studies. The second and third problems, being the main concern of this paper, will be tackled in what follows.

How writing should be approached?

Raimes (1983) provides a concise history of the general approaches to teaching writing with their corresponding activities:

The controlled-to-free approach: Initiated at the time of the audio-lingual method, this technique has a sequential approach to writing in the sense that it requires students to start with manipulating sentences (forming questions, negative statements, substituting, etc) so that they master different sentence patterns with regard to their building blocks. Then paragraphs are given to students to copy, and then to manipulate grammatically as a whole so that they can closely examine the interconnectedness of sentences of a paragraph and how they change with regard to a particular element such as tense, audience, and purpose. Under the direct supervision of the teacher and within the framework of an already-existing paragraph, it is relatively easy for students to write and yet avoid errors. Free writing, expressing one's own ideas, will start only when the students have reached a high intermediate level of proficiency in the areas of grammar, syntax, and mechanics.

The free writing approach: This approach has been adopted by those teachers who believe in the quantity rather than the quality of writing. The idea behind this approach is that the concentration should be put on the content rather than the form, and once students are relatively easy with putting their thoughts on the paper, they can start attending to the form as well. To implement this view, teachers ask their students to write anything on any topic they like, without

worrying about the grammar, punctuation, or spelling. After some sessions, the students find it less difficult to pour their thoughts on the paper and would feel confident. Such papers are not usually corrected by the teacher but read to the class with some comments on the content and organization.

The paragraph-pattern approach: The principle underlying this approach is the idea that in different cultures people construct and organize their communication in different ways; as a result, it is crucial that instead of accuracy of grammar and fluency of content, the organization of the ideas be emphasized at early stages of teaching writing. To reach this primary objective, scrambled sentences are put into paragraph order, model paragraphs are analyzed into their topic sentences and general/specific ideas, and finally lexicosyntactic elements making the necessary inter-sentential connections are identified. It is argued that students' awareness of paragraph organization would automatically put the material to be learned in an appropriate order.

The grammar-syntax-organization approach: Out of experience, many teachers strongly oppose any approach in which only some aspects of writing are taken into account. They argue that theoretically it may be possible to identify different sub-skills involved in the process of writing, but in practice, they cannot be learned one by one. So they propose an approach in which organization as well as grammar and syntax are emphasized. Writing instructions on how a certain instrument, with a clear chronological order, is used would require the students to attend to all aspects of writing at the same time.

The communicative approach: Following the general trends of communication, this approach before anything else sets an objective, an audience, and a setting for the writing task. Under this framework, a typical topic of “describe your room” will change to an assignment like:

- Your cousin, who is about your age and lives in Canada, is visiting you this summer for the first time and she is going to stay with you. Write an e-mail describing your room.

The teacher can make it even more realistic, asking students to exchange the letters and write back to each other, asking questions and giving comments.

The process approach: On top of all these approaches, what seems to be missing is the realization of a very delicate issue and that is “what one writes does not necessarily have to be the final draft”. When students are assured that they can revise their writing as many times as they feel necessary, then they write with less anxiety, attend to features of writing one at a time, and closely observe the gradual improvement of the piece they are writing. According to Silva (1990, cited in Macaro 2001, p 128), process-based writing provides:

A positive, encouraging, and collaborative environment within which students, with ample time and minimal interference, can work through composing processes. The teacher’s role is to help students develop viable strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing and planning structure and procedure), for drafting (encouraging multiple drafts), for revising (adding, deleting, modifying and rearranging ideas); and for

editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics).

This rather alternative approach employing a wide range of teaching techniques particularly opposes the traditional view of product-based “one-shot” writing.

How should IUSEF be taught?

Based on the three-phase teaching of **presentation, practice, and production**, Baker and Westrup (2000) seem to have reached an efficient concoction of different approaches to writing and have suggested a series of activities which “will build up students’ confidence by moving from controlled to guided activities” (p 70). Only when the students are over with writing grammatically correct sentences, are they ready to indulge in freer writing which again requires direct supervision of the teacher to elaborate on the process of writing. For teaching IUSEF, instructors of the advanced writing course are advised to allocate the first few sessions to these kinds of preparatory activities and then emerge them into independent writing which typically starts right from the beginning of writing courses. The pace of the preparatory stage can be adjusted with the students’ level of proficiency and motivation.

Controlled practice

Copying correct sentences: Copying a complete paragraph or isolated sentences can familiarize students with orthography, vocabulary, and structure of the new language. It is particularly helpful when the L2 has a different script. The paragraph or sentences could be on the board or in their book to copy. To further motivate and involve students, they could be asked to suggest sentences

which could be written on the board and corrected with the help of the teacher and the students and be finally copied.

Matching beginnings and endings of sentences: A number of sentences (about five) could be selected from a course book, or made up by the teacher. Then they have to be broken into two halves, and be written on the left and right side of the board in an unscrambled fashion. Matched halves making complete sentences can be copied by the students.

Figure 5

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. I went to the shop... | A. ... to ask for a favor. |
| 2. I washed my clothes ... | B. ... to get lots of sleep. |
| 3. I went to bed early ... | C. ... to buy some bread. |
| 4. I talked to my friend ... | D. ... to go to the party. |

Substitution drills: This activity gives students a basic correct sentence to learn from, but they have to make some choices in order to make complete and correct sentences. A series of sentences describing a picture could be written with choices on certain slots to help students appreciate their semantic and syntactic values.

[The other day/Last night] Mum took us to the [theater/cinema] to see a [film/play]. [Luckily,/Unfortunately,] we [were able to/couldn't] get good seats [because/but] the [theater/cinema] was almost [empty/full].

Sequencing jumbled words: Words of a sentence could be written on the board in random order. Students, individually or in a group, should put them in correct order.

Guided practice

This group of activities requires students to be more active in the sense that there are more choices to be made and more language to be produced.

Gap-fill sentence: Completing a short paragraph using the list of its deleted words.

Changing sentences: Making some changes with regard to tense, subject, number, etc.

Completing sentences: Completing sentences with their first few words given, allowing for all kinds of correct suggestions.

Figure 6

I am
I like
I have
I live

Parallel sentences: following model sentences to write a meaningful and true piece.

Figure 7

My name is Alia and I am 21. I have three brothers and we live next to a beautiful park.
My name is

Freer practice

At this stage, students are capable of writing simple and compound sentences with relative ease; however, they still need help with regard to the content of their writing. Teachers can introduce one or a series of pictures and discuss the sequence of events and the difficult vocabularies with the students. Then students should write the story in their words. Communicative activities such as

paraphrasing, summarizing, note-taking, and preparing outlines whose content is more or less provided can best help students experience early forms of independent writing (Rashtchi and Keyvanfar, 2002).

Independent writing

Although it is a common practice to introduce different “meta-genres” (Andrews, 2001, p 45) or modes of writing (such as narrative, description, argument, and definition) and require students to write within their framework the author strongly opposes this widely accepted tradition. The question raised here is: To what extent are these kinds of writing communicative and authentic? That is, how often do we find ourselves in a situation that we have to write for example an argument paragraph, observing all the principles of writing a topic sentence, major and minor supporting sentences, and a conclusion? The point the author is trying to make here is that authentic writing tasks do not have all the qualities of the so-called “model” paragraphs that students are strictly required to follow. If this is so, students can start writing independently on any topic letting their thoughts and ideas flow on the paper. With an acceptable degree of fluency and accuracy in this kind of writing, students will be able to organize and express their ideas within a certain mold.

In any case, there are certain guidelines that instructors are recommended to follow, conducting a planned writing class:

Brainstorming: The foremost factor in successful writing is *generating ideas*. The topic must be thought about and ideas created in the mind of the writer before they can be expressed through words on paper. “Harnessing the power of your brain and applying its energy to the topic in question is sometimes called

brainstorming” (Burton and Humphries, 1992, p 12). Brainstorming can be done in the class with the supervision of the teacher and later used as a technique employed individually by students. The teacher can write the topic in the middle of the board and ask students to think about it for two to three minutes and then tell the teacher whatever comes to their mind. S/he can write them anywhere on the board. Some ideas will follow in sequence, some will be random, and some will start a new train of thought. After the class has reached enough ideas, it can start organizing them. There are three steps:

1. Highlight the titles: Box the words that would summarize a group of ideas. If such a word is not already suggested, think of one and put it on the board.
2. Count the concepts: Number the titled concept according to their priority.
3. Encase the ideas: Ring ideas that fit under a certain title.

Paired writing: PW, particularly recommended by Topping (2001), is founded on process approach to writing. It is an exciting technique requiring pairs working together to generate a piece of writing for a purpose. Topping (2001, p 142) believes that “two individuals produce better quality writing together than they each would if working separately”. The system is designed to be supportive and eliminate the fear of failure. As the best copy is a joint effort of the pair, criticism as well as praise from external evaluators is shared. PW is usually conducted in pairs where one member (the helper) is more skilful at writing than the other (the writer). “In this case, the method is usually targeted on writing tasks somewhat beyond the current independent writing competence

of the less able partner, but within their zone of proximal development” (Topping, 2001, p 143). PW consists of 6 steps:

1. Ideas generation and mapping: This could be done as group work through the process of brainstorming conducted by the teacher or the helper can raise stimulation questions with Who? What? Why? How? And the like. The helper must make one-word rough notes of the writer’s answers. Then ideas must be reviewed and appropriate relationships (temporal, cause-effect or order of significance) must be mapped between them.
2. Drafting: At this stage, the sequence of the content is put down in continuous prose, with no concern for spelling, pronunciation, or grammatical perfection. It is advisable to have double-spaced writing for subsequent editing. The writer may write it all or make the fair copy of what he asked the helper to write.
3. Reading: The helper reads the draft out loud as they both look at the text. The writer then reads the text while the helper makes necessary corrections in pronunciation.
4. Editing: It is at this stage that the writer attempts to make some modifications while both look at the draft together. Editing can be based on four criteria of meaning, organization, spelling, and punctuation. The helper then points out any areas or problems that the writer has missed. Looking up words in a dictionary and checking grammatical structures are strongly recommended.

5. Best copy: The writer or the helper may write or keyboard the best version of the corrected draft.
6. Evaluate: External evaluation by another pair, or the teacher provides guidelines for further modifications of the piece.

Use of L1 in L2 Writing

Macaro (2001) based on a series of studies on the use of L1 in the process of L2 writing, makes two surprising remarks:

1. On personal topics, the experience of which is acquired in L1, forcing students to plan in L2 would inhibit their preferred (and possibly successful) writing strategy.
2. It seems that despite teachers' emphasis on L2 thinking, beginner and intermediate students think and plan in L1 anyway.

A recent study called the Oxford Writing Strategies Project (ibid, p 171) confirms the aforementioned findings and proposes a number of strategies, some of which are presented below. Interestingly enough, the following list also contains the most productive strategies mentioned throughout this paper:

- Advance preparation: brainstorming.
- Getting in the right frame of mind: not allowing anxiety to take over; working collaboratively with a friend.
- Resourcing: using a dictionary, textbook, or previous work done.
- Generating via translation: using L1 to produce a phrase or sentence.
- Prompting a specific check: reminding oneself of possible cases of negative L1 to L2 transfer.

- Monitoring: checking to see if it makes sense with regard to common-sense, content, and coherence; and whether it sounds and looks alright (auditory and visual monitoring).
- Back-translating: checking if it makes sense when translated back into L1.
- Personalized monitoring: reminding oneself of the mistakes one usually makes.

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