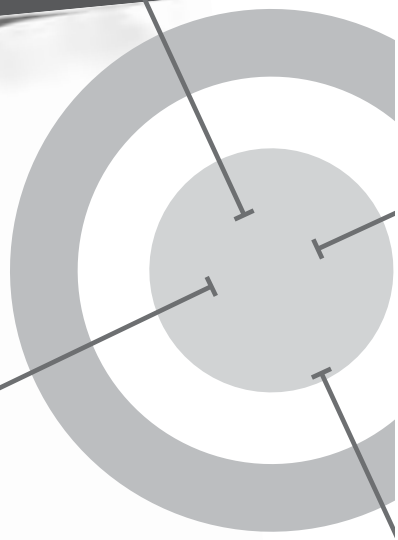


Teaching and Learning in Close-up



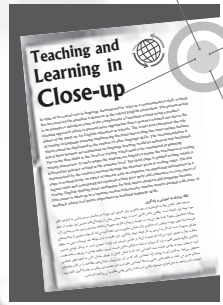
In spite of its crucial role in language learning and its value as a communicative skill, writing has not received the attention it deserves in the school English curriculum. The present article is an attempt to introduce some of the complexities of teaching writing using a product-oriented approach which is deemed more appropriate than a process-oriented one due to the nature of the goals set for English education in schools. The writer first introduces the role of writing in language learning emphasizing the point that writing has some unique features which cannot be duplicated in the context of other language skills. The recommendation is that if these features are capitalized on language learning would be enhanced and facilitated. The writer then shifts to the levels of writing which need to be considered in planning writing instruction. At early stages the students are helped to master the mechanics of writing followed by practice writing at the sentence level. The third stage is guided writing which is characterized by the control exercised through the structure given to writing tasks. The last stage is writing freely on topics of interest with an emphasis on organizing information in a logical order and considering the elements which give unity and coherence to every piece of writing. English spelling poses challenges for both native speakers and language learners. This issues is taken up in a separate section followed by another section dealing with issue of feedback which is of prime importance in teaching language skills.

نگاه نزدیک به آموزش و یادگیری

با وجود نقش کلیدی مهارت «نوشتن» در روند یادگیری زبان خارجی، این مهارت در برنامه‌ی درسی مدارس به اندازه‌ی کافی مورد توجه قرار نگرفته است. مقاله‌ی حاضر تلاشی است در جهت معرفی بعضی از پیچیدگی‌های تدریس این مهارت از منظر رویکرد «محصول محور» که به نظر می‌رسد، در مقایسه با رویکرد «فرایند محور»، با اهداف برنامه‌ی درسی تناسب بیشتری دارد. نویسنده ابتدا نقش مهارت نوشتن را در یادگیری زبان خارجی مطرح و بر این نکته تأکید می‌کند که مهارت نوشتن از مشخصه‌های ویژه‌ای برخوردار است که اگر به درستی به کار گرفته شوند، یادگیری زبان تقویت و آسان خواهد شد. نویسنده سپس به سطوح متفاوت مهارت نوشتن اشاره می‌کند که توجه به آن‌ها در طراحی تدریس این مهارت ضروری است. در مراحل اولیه‌ی تدریس، یادگیری چگونه نوشتن اهمیت دارد که می‌باید در ادامه با فراهم ساختن فرصت تمرین، چگونه نوشتن در چارچوب جمله تقویت شود. مرحله‌ی سوم به نوشتن هدایت شده اختصاص دارد که با اعمال کنترل از طریق سازمان دادن به فعالیت‌های نوشته‌ای مشخص می‌شود. مرحله‌ی آخر به نوشتن آزاد اختصاص دارد که در آن، زبان‌آموزان سازمان‌دهی اطلاعات را در قالب نوشته‌ای منسجم تمرین می‌کنند. در مقاله بخش خاصی به املا اختصاص یافته است تا بر اهمیت این چالش در روند یادگیری تأکید شود. نحوه‌ی دادن بازخورد به زبان‌آموزان، موضوع دیگری است که در بخش نهایی مقاله به آن پرداخته شده است.

The Writing Skill

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Introduction

As one of the four skills, writing has traditionally occupied a place in most English language syllabuses. Even so, arguments are sometimes put forward for not teaching students to write because it is felt that a command of the spoken language and of reading is more important. For many students, this may be true, but today, given the importance of English as an international language, more people need to learn to write in English for occupational or academic purposes. Thus in terms of student needs, writing may be seen to occupy an equal position side along the other language skills (Harmer, 2004).

There are other reasons why writing merits a place in the language syllabus. To begin with, writing remains the commonest

way of examining student performance in English. Virtually all public examinations include a composition, while even gap-filling tests require some competence in the written language. Consequently, the ability to write remains a key to examination success (Brown, 2001). Furthermore, in the eyes of both parents and students, ability to write may be associated with evidence of having learned the language. Writing is tangible, parents and students can see what has been done and what has been achieved. So it has high "face validity".

In the classroom, writing may be used as one of the techniques to add variety and interest to the lesson. In addition, writing lends itself to integration with other activities in the classroom; thus, a reading activity may lead into discussion from which a

piece of writing evolves, while dictation is a well known example of integrating listening with writing. The teacher can also use writing to provide a break for himself as it is difficult to maintain an unflagging pace through lesson after lesson in which both students and teacher are constantly active.

The teacher may also use writing as a testing device, not necessarily to grade the students, but rather to provide feedback on what the students have learned. A written exercise or a composition will be completed without the potential distraction and hidden prompting which can occur with spoken language practice, while the teacher also has the opportunity of reading and marking the work in relative tranquility. Student writing can provide useful evidence of successes and failures in learning, of confusions, and errors, and the teacher can diagnose individual as well as general problems on the basis of such written work.

Finally, writing requires thought, discipline, and concentration. Writing involves committing something to a relatively permanent form. It is a record by which we are judged by whoever reads what we have written (Raimes, 1983). Quite apart from matters such as handwriting, spelling, and grammar, our reader will judge us by style and the content and logic of what we have written. So writing demands care thought. For this reason alone it merits a place in the syllabus (Kroll, 2001).

Levels of Writing

Rivers (Rivers and Temperley, 1978) and Chastain (1988) have both claimed that there are different stages in writing. In Iran where English is taught as a foreign language it is also possible to pose four stages in teaching writing.

Stage1:

This is the very beginning stage and the learner should learn how to form the letters in the alphabetic system. The next stage is for the learner to learn to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases and reproduce some from memory. He should be able to write simple fixed expressions, to write names, numbers, dates, nationality, and other simple autobiographical information as well as some short phrases and simple lists. At this stage the learner needs to learn about penmanship.

Stage2:

The second stage starts with the learner being able to meet limited practical writing needs. The material the learner produces consists of learned vocabulary and structures organized in simple sentences. The student can answer reading comprehension questions in short sentences, the content of which is taken from the text. He can unscramble sentences and combine them to scope of limited language experience. The learner should learn to write short messages, postcards, and take down simple notes, such as telephone messages.

Stage 3:

At this stage the writing of more than one sentence is taught. The learner starts to write paragraphs. In the beginning, this is in the form of controlled writing where learners change the pronouns, grammatical features or tenses in a given paragraph. The next stage is directed writing where a paragraph is written about an interview, about a sequence of events, a story told by the teacher, report of lecture notes nor an exercise in which a series of questions are answered. Later on the students move on to guided writing where they may write situational compositions. They are informed about a detailed set of circumstances which requires a written response. For example, thanking someone for their efforts. They may be asked to reply to letters written by other students who are playing the role of different characters.

Stage 4:

At this stage the learner can produce paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting sentences. This is later on expanded into several paragraphs and the learner can write research papers. The student writer can present arguments or points view accurately and effectively. An underlying organization, such as chronological ordering, logical ordering, cause and effect, comparison, and thematic development is learned.

Different students based upon their degrees of proficiency are at different levels of writing. However, no matter where the

students are on this continuum, they need to spell words correctly.

Spelling

One of the important components of writing is spelling. Unless the words that make up the actual text are spelled correctly, the text may lose its meaning and communicative ability. As to all areas of language learning there are no simple solutions to this issue. The approach to teaching spelling depends on the learner's background. For the illiterate learner, instruction might be similar to that used for English-speaking children. For children learning English, a regular elementary school spelling series may be appropriate; however, a series should be selected which adequately reflects the nature of English spelling (Cornell, 1971 cited in Cornell, 1979).

For the literate beginning learner, many particular features of English will need to be mastered. However, the teacher may be able to take advantage of the student's native-language knowledge of the nature of spelling, particularly when the student can write a European language. For example the German speaker who can spell *Hand* in German should have little difficulty spelling *hand* in English; the French speaker who can spell *air* and *nation* in French should be able to spell *air* and *nation* in English. Often the relations between systems of spelling in two languages are less direct, but could be used in spelling instruction. For example, the Spanish speaker who

can spell *accidente* and *rapido* in Spanish only needs to learn not to include the final vowel when spelling *accident* and *rapid* in English. However, Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) found that students whose mother tongue uses the Roman alphabet made significantly more errors than students whose native language does not use the Roman alphabet. Therefore, Iranian students who use the Arabic alphabet have an advantage in this respect. This is because errors due to transfer from the mother tongue may appear less in their spelling. Yet, the problem that Iranian students face is learning the Roman script which is very different from the Arabic script and may take a while. When the Roman script is learned, however, they will make fewer spelling mistakes than those learners whose language uses the Roman script.

Most literate EFL students do not need instruction in the complete range of the English spelling system. For them, diagnostic testing may be most useful. One approach used effectively with students beyond the early grades is the test-study method (Gates, 1931 cited in Cronell, 1979): a preliminary spelling test is given and those words misspelled are specifically studied. However, rather than simply testing and studying random lists of words, a better approach is testing words that illustrate various spellings. Then students performing poorly on specific spellings could receive instruction and practice on their problems.

All students who have a basic knowledge

of English spelling should learn to use a dictionary (a) to find the spellings of words in which there are sounds with two or more possible spellings; and (b) to check words when they are unsure of the spellings. Literate students may be familiar with dictionary use from their native language, but they may need instruction in using an English dictionary to locate spellings of unknown words. Students without experience in dictionary use will need instruction; many dictionaries for elementary school children have extensive sections on how to use a dictionary, which may be helpful for foreign language learners.

Teaching spelling is not the same as teaching composition. When the emphasis is on getting the students to write, too much concern with the spelling of individual words may inhibit their fluency and expression of ideas. Correct spelling in composition should be a concern when editing written work; then students can carefully check their spelling.

Correction

Correction can be done in three different ways, namely; self-correction, peer-correction and teacher-correction. Self-correction is when students correct their own work based on what they have been taught in class or using a check-list. Peer-correction is when peers correct each other's work. This can be done based upon a check-list or the teacher's instructions. Teacher correction is when

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the teacher corrects the students' work. Most students are more comfortable with teacher correction and feel that this sort of correction is more accurate and reliable. However, studies show that peer correction can be extremely effective (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009) for both the student giving and the student receiving the correction. Therefore, the students will benefit more from peer correction and they should be encouraged to do so inside the class with the guidance of the teacher or outside the class as part of their writing assignment.

In order to carry out correction, the student or teacher needs to know what points to focus on. The first step is to focus on the general neatness of the written material. In very simple words, does the paper look neat? The student writer must have observed margins. There must be a straight or justified margin on the left hand side of the paper and a ragged margin on the right hand side. All paragraphs need to be indented. The next step is the handwriting. Beauty is not of chief importance, what

should be observed is legibility. The handwriting of the student must be easy to read for anyone at any level. Teachers can read almost any kind of handwriting; therefore, their ability to read the written text is not a criterion. The next step is punctuation. The beginning of all sentences and all proper nouns should be capitalized and all sentences are supposed to end with a punctuation mark: a full stop or question mark. The sentence or text is made up of a series of words so it is essential that all words are spelled correctly; therefore, the next step is to check the spelling of all words. If the writing has been done on a word processor, the spelling of many words are corrected by the machine, however, it cannot correct all the words. Therefore, a lot of attention should be given to spelling so that any misspelled words overlooked by the machine are corrected. After this step is completed, the reader must check the grammar of the sentences or text. All sentences need to be read carefully and the grammar of all sentences along with the collocations of words must be checked for accuracy. If the writing being checked is a paragraph, the next stage is to check for items that make up a paragraph. The paragraph needs to have a topic sentence, supporting sentences and an concluding sentence. In texts of one paragraph or longer, the unity and coherence of the text have to be checked as well. If the text is more than one paragraph, the elements making up the text, such as the thesis statement, blueprint, central paragraphs, conclusion, and the

specific organization of the text must all be checked. These are points to keep in mind when writing is corrected by the writer, by a peer or by the teacher. However, the list takes into account mistakes that learners can make from very preliminary stages to very advanced stages. The items on the list should be used based upon the level of the learner and what the student writer has been taught in class. For this system to work with ease it is best to use a set of symbols characterizing different types of error (e.g., sp. for spelling error) and to familiarize students with these at the beginning of the course.

In addition students should be asked to set out assignments in such a way as to leave the reader room for commentary. It is essential to encourage students to keep all assignments in the same file. This allows for a check to be made on recurrent errors. A single paper written by a student on a given topic at a particular time cannot, as is well-known, be considered a valid basis for evaluating their achievement (Nunan, 1999).

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be concluded that writing is different for different levels and stages. In the very preliminary stage writing means to be able to write the letters of the alphabet and later to write words and very short phrases and expressions. Writing ability then matures into writing sentences. In the next stage, writing involves the

ability to write paragraphs. Paragraphs are guided to begin with and then the writer is gradually able to take over more control. In the fourth stage writing involves writing more than one paragraph with a specific organization and the writer can argue for a specific topic. Therefore, just like any other skill writing at different stages involves different tasks.

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