

## **Incorporating the facilitative feedback strategies together with the process approach to improve students' writing.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores why writing is complex and what challenges an instructor must meet to teach it well. It argues that although everyone can and should learn to write, teaching writing well remains one of the key tasks facing our universities today as they work to meet high standards and expectations for learning.

This paper proposes the idea that a teacher can help motivate students in the writing class through the type of feedback he or she provides to students written works. This idea, which is partly based on findings of previous studies (Caudery, 1995), and partly on the my classroom experience, report that students feel better motivated to engage in writing activities when they perceive their teachers to be more interested in what they have to say than in their language accuracy. The paper contends that by using the facilitative feedback strategies in combination with the different steps of the process approach to writing, teachers can help students improve their essay writing and revision skills. In this approach, teachers give comments in the form of ideas, opinions and suggestions making sure that all stages of the writing process are addressed and that students gain the skills and confidence to improve their writing (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005).

**Keywords:** Students' writing, Facilitative feedback strategies; Revision skills

## **1. Introduction**

Every day, we need to write in order to complete our tasks, whether we are filling out a form at the doctor's office or writing an important letter. Employees in many kinds of jobs are required to write on a daily basis. Perhaps they are taking phone messages and doing administrative work, or writing research reports and newspaper articles. Doctors and nurses write medical reports on patients; accountants and business managers create financial reports; engineers and software technicians write instruction sheets and user manuals; nearly every worker in all business fields composes emails and other forms of written communication for customers, clients, and co-workers. Writing is frequently the final stage in communication when we want to leave no room for doubt, which is why we write and sign contracts, leases, and treaties when we make important decisions.

Writing, in all its varied forms and purposes, is a complex process. It calls upon us to make a great effort to shape experience and feeling into something another person can read and understand. That need, to feel, to understand, to know that what one thinks or feels matters, is universal. Many people, students in particular, view the whole process as mysterious and inaccessible.

It's important to remember that writing can be as difficult a subject to teach and assess as it is to learn. Many students have trouble writing with clarity, coherence, and organization, and this can discourage them from writing if they feel frustrated. That's where the instructor's involvement can make a big difference. Encouraging students to develop strong writing skills at an early stage in their education, and to become better writers as they advance in their studies, can have a lifelong positive impact on their writing, and may make writing an easier and more enjoyable process. The question arises, therefore, as to what techniques the teacher should use to help students improve their writing skills.

## **2. Students and writing**

It is commonly said that writing is one of the most difficult skills to learn in a second language, the reason for this is that writing is a very complex process which involves the students engaging with a number of factors which students can find challenging (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Crystal, 1997). As an English language instructor, I often use writing to evaluate students' abilities and language level when teaching short stories, for example, by asking them to describe a character, the setting of the story, or the theme. This way of assessing students' language level, has led to many problems within my classes, where many students struggle with sentence structure and vocabulary, sometimes

they have poor essay organization and unfocused ideas. Other students experience more complex problems such as errors in the use of vocabulary –thinking that a word means the same in whatever context– paragraphing and ,most of the time, punctuation. As a result they fail to clearly set out main ideas to support the topic, let alone clarify their point of view with examples, facts and explanation.

The key to learning to write is feeling confident in your abilities and many students do not enjoy writing because they feel that if they cannot do it correctly the first time then they will never get it right. Due to their inability to progress students often become demotivated or, in some extreme cases, drop out of the course. It is for these reasons that I have decided to investigate the topic of teaching writing in the hope of finding a solution to some of the barriers that low level students encounter when producing written work.

Traditionally, the teaching of writing assumed a one draft only mentality. The aim was to get it done, have the required number of pages, and move along. Students were forced into instant writing with one-shot drafts being corrected in a single sitting (Hedge, 1993). The emphasis has shifted from analyzing finished products to looking at what students think and do as they write. Writing is now viewed as a multistage process. Rather than focusing on spelling, grammar, and other writing conventions, emphasis should be on the actual act of producing a piece of writing. We should concentrate on writing as a recursive process in which students have the opportunity to plan, draft, edit, and revise their work (Boyle and Peregory, 2005 ). Grammatical changes and conventional editing occur during the revision or editing stage. Therefore, since grammar and conventions are not the focus of writing, the process approach to writing may be adapted for use with our university students. Facilitative feedback, an interactive strategy to improve students' writing, can be used within this context. Facilitative feedback can be used during the prewriting stage with the teacher's, and sometimes classmates, suggestions and comments about specific linguistic errors related to grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Facilitative feedback focuses as well on showing students shortcomings in their writing , such as poor development of ideas, content. In this way students can see more clearly their mistakes and find ways to improve them.

Learning to write, like learning to do many other things, requires practice and time, and all students are capable of becoming good writers given enough practice and time. The Process Writing method values the talents and growth of individual students and makes them want to continue writing because they feel good about their abilities. This approach together with facilitative

feedback from teachers, empowers students with the tools to build an essay, consciously improving their skills during each step of the process.

### **3. The Process Approach to Writing**

The process approach to writing aims to produce flexible writers who can tackle a task from a variety of angles. It is based on the idea that the process of writing is more important than just the end product. Tribble defines the 'process approach' as... "an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models". (Tribble, 1996). Thus, the focus shifts from the final product itself to the different stages the writer goes through in order to create this product. The emphasis should be on generating ideas, organizing and presenting them in an acceptable way, rewriting first and second drafts in the light of facilitative feedback from teachers and sometimes even from peers. By breaking down the task as a whole into its constituent parts writing can seem greatly less daunting and more manageable to the student.

Researchers and educators have identified several logical steps that most educators should follow when using a process approach to writing. Various headings have been given to the different stages in the writing process, possibly the most exhaustive being White and Arndt's... "generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and re-viewing" (White and Arndt, 1991). These stages generally involve different forms of brainstorming, selecting and ordering ideas, planning, drafting, redrafting and revising and editing. Furthermore, as Raimes comments, the process is... "not linear at all" but 'recursive' (Raimes, 1985). As in Tribble's words... "at any point in the preparation of a text, writers can loop backwards or forwards to whichever of the activities involved in text composition they may find useful". (Tribble, 1996). This not only provides the student and the teacher with a practical and manageable framework within which to work through the writing process, but also allows for greater flexibility, depending on each individual task and the personality and preferences of each individual student.

#### **3.1. Prewriting**

It is thought that the students' inability to write often stems from a lack of ideas to begin with, therefore by allowing them time to generate ideas and explore useful vocabulary before writing, will result in much better composition (White and Arndt, 1991). In my experience allowing students time to generate lexis before writing is beneficial, particularly for second language students of

English (as is the case at our university), whereby their vocabulary is limited. Murray (2003) states that, "Prewriting usually takes about 85% of the writer's time." If prewriting is to take about 85% of the total process time, then this is the part of the process students need the most guidance with.

At this stage the teacher can work with the whole class using the facilitative feedback strategy by engaging students in whole-class brainstorming reflecting on meaningful pictures, creating timelines, sharing experience, engaging in class discussions to decide topics on which to write (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005). The teacher can facilitate the writing process by having students brainstorm individually or in small groups with a specific prompt, such as, "Make a list of important people in your life,". She/he may help by providing students with topics based upon learning experiences they have had in the classroom, experiences at home, or experiences they have had in the world. It is important to develop topics with which the students have had some experience so that writing becomes the process of capturing those experiences on paper. When students spend some time thinking about what to write, which words to use, and how to use those words to say what they want to say, they see that their writing turns into something in which they can take ownership and feel good about.

Even though prewriting may sometimes be a time-consuming activity, and does not always guarantee brilliant results, it should never be overlooked. Many teachers have neglected this stage when in fact it is the most crucial in the writing process. I believe that just as athletes need to warm-up before a game, students also need to warm-up before they can start writing. When they're done they can start writing rather than try to remember what they want to write. Pre-writing is a terrific memory stimulator, it reminds students of what they already know and helps them to make connections they might not otherwise make. It helps them get past the sterile, static, surface responses so that they can burn through to the insightful and fresh substance of what they really want to say. If students have more of an opportunity to think about and explore their writing topics long before they create a rough draft, then their rough drafts should be better. Every successive step of the writing process might be improved by investing more time early on in the process.

### **3.2. Re-writing**

An important component of the writing process is its recursive nature, which allows students to revise their work continually (Raimes, 1985). During this stage the teacher should act as a facilitator of the writing process. If the teacher tries to make comments and corrections on the final version of the student's paper, the teacher would be exhausted and the student would be discouraged. One

alternative can be giving facilitative feedback while the student is planning and organizing his ideas, the teacher can comment on the unity and coherence of ideas, or while the student is writing his draft, the teacher can proofread for word-order, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, articles, preposition, spelling mistakes and so on. This gradual checking and correcting, can minimize the exhaustive red marks on the student's paper. Another advantage of such corrections, is that the student sees these comments when the writing experience is still fresh in his mind (Sommers, 1982).

In this way the student reads over all the text and chooses the ideas, sentences, and paragraphs that best express the concepts to be included in the essay. Usually many of the ideas and sentences produced in the prewriting stage just don't work in the final essay, so they are discarded. This is also the organizational stage where the student makes decisions on the best order for the ideas. In this way students not only revise what they are writing, but also revisit their goals and plans for writing, this allows them to take into account new ideas and thoughts and to have the opportunity to incorporate them into their writing. I believe that students have much more extensive knowledge about a topic than that reflected in their typical writings, and that when students stop writing it is not because they run out of things to say, but because they do not yet have adequate methods of articulating what they know. Because most of the time word choice is idiomatic or conventionally agreed upon, the teacher can facilitate this stage by providing the students with correct vocabulary choices.

### **3.3. Drafting**

This is the stage when the teacher gives the students facilitative feedback by instructing them to:

- write their draft while their prewriting is still fresh in their minds
- set the right tone by giving opening paragraphs special attention
- refer to their plan for the main part of their writing, but to be flexible as a more interesting route may unfold as they write
- get their ideas down on paper without letting concern about correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar get in the way of composing. When students are not worried about grammar or spelling, stress is reduced allowing them to focus more productively on organizing and expressing their thoughts and ideas (Boyle and Peregory, 2005).

During the drafting stage, some students will have difficulty getting started while others will plunge right in. Some will draw pictures and make doodles on their papers, while others will write continuously and seemingly without effort. It is important for teachers to remember that students are

not to be hampered with the mechanics of writing. A "free flow" of ideas is encouraged. Students need to be aware that first drafts are not finished products and that any piece of writing can be improved. At this stage teachers must not tell students what they believe their level to be but, must provide the right feedback to enable students to see for themselves. Students who do not write well should not be fooled into believing that they do. Commenting only on the positive aspects of a student paper will only create a false sense of confidence in the student. Comments on how to improve poor areas in writing both on paper and in person can help students understand just what their writing is in need of (Straub, 1996; Ferris, 2003).

Once this stage has been satisfactorily completed then the teacher must move on to reassure students that it will be possible to improve their writing.

### **3.4. Revising and Editing**

Have students work independently at this stage. Confer with students individually as they write, offering praise and suggestions while observing areas with which students might be struggling and which might warrant separate supervision time. The teacher can also suggest some changes or additions about the development of ideas and content of the essay; these comments and suggestions can help students indirectly understand shortcomings in their writing as well as ways to improve them. Show students how to revise specific aspects of their writing to make it more coherent and clear, do a think aloud about how you could add more details and make it clearer. Teach students to reread their own work more than once as they think about whether it really conveys what they want to their reader. Reading their work aloud to classmates can also be helpful. When using facilitative feedback during this stage, teachers need to convey the idea that a good piece of writing should be presented in a good, and thoughtful way, and that the material should be delivered through meaningful and understandable vocabulary, facts, and examples. As you may see, the teacher at this point is a crucial element in the students' writing process because it is at this stage that the student needs an external motivator. Once motivation has taken the student step by step toward higher achievement and self-confidence, fear and insecurity will have been replaced with courage and students will feel the need to show what they can do (Brown, 2001).

Following are some errors that teachers should point out when providing facilitative feedback during this stage:

**Errors that interfere with meaning:**

- Verb tense
- Word order
- Confusing word choice
- Confusing spelling

**Errors that are less likely to interfere with meaning:**

- Article mistakes
- Preposition mistakes
- Pronoun agreement
- Comma splices
- Minor spelling mistakes

**The top ten errors seen in my classroom:**

- Articles: persistent mistake by Arabic learners
- Prepositions: persistent mistake by Arabic learners
- Infinitives: which verbs take the infinitive
- Using wrong parts of speech: nouns/adverbs/adjectives
- Agreement: subject-verb, pronoun, tense
- Verb tense and forms: choosing the proper tense and form
- Active and passive voices
- Sentences structure: fragments, run-ons, convoluted sentences
- Punctuation: absence of punctuation
- Style: only developed with experience in the target language.

Most teachers work through these three stages with their students to produce an essay, but not necessarily in the same way. Some teacher prefer to spend a great deal of time on pre-writing activities, helping students to develop ideas and planning the details of the writing. When students spend more time on this stage, the next two stages usually take less time and proceed more smoothly. Some students may find it easier to compose nearly everything in their heads before writing it down. Others may be ready to write only after discussing the topic with their teacher and/or classmates. The teacher, as a facilitator, will try out different strategies allowing the students to choose the most effective writing process she/he feels comfortable with (Giberson, 2002).

No single strategy for teaching writing will prove effective for all students. Furthermore, the above strategies do not constitute a writing curriculum. Teachers should aim to supplement their current

writing practices and curricula with a mix of the aforementioned writing practices. The optimal mixture of practices should be tailored to best meet the writing needs of the class, as well as the needs of individual students. It is especially important to monitor the success of each technique implemented to be sure that it is working as intended, and to make adjustments as needed.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As any instructor of English language will tell you, students of the same level will have varying abilities in writing. Not every student can become a writer. However, everyone can learn to write better and to write, well organized, flowing essays with clear language. Focusing on grammar and sentence structure is not the key to making better writers of our students. Students must be given what any writer needs, an understanding of their capacity to write, motivation, self-confidence and courage. Process Writing, in combination with the facilitative feedback strategies, provided by the teacher, will assist these students, whatever their ability level, improve their writing. Once a student understands the process and trusts that the teacher will accept and approve of their work, their ability to write improves dramatically. Writing is a process which can be facilitated by collaboration with others and teachers can do this by focusing on the student as a person by trying to understand his needs, by valuing his efforts and improvement no matter how slow. When teachers have high expectations without much warmth or expect more than a student's maturity allows, students may feel anxious and perceive their teacher as critical and unsupportive. An optimal balance of facilitative support and expectations from teachers will result in increasing self regulation by the student and less need for perpetual support, which in turn will lead the student from insecurity to success.

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