

Handout

Of all the skills, writing is often the one that students like the least. Why is that? Is it because writing tends to focus more on accuracy? Or is it because it can be a lonely activity that leaves students feeling at best bored and at worst linguistically vulnerable? This session explores the differences between a product and process approach, and shows how you can support the development of students' writing skills through engaging and collaborative tasks.

Warm up: dictation

A 2 day in 5

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Favourite colour | 9. Favourite place |
| 2. Adjective for the weather clothing | 10. Favourite item of clothing |
| 3. Favourite actor/singer | 11. Favourite shop |
| 4. A friend's name | 12. Favourite action (-ing) |
| 5. Favourite month | 13. Favourite object |
| 6. Favourite transport | 14. Favourite drink |
| 7. Favourite animal | 15. An emotion |
| 8. Favourite food | |

It was a **2** day in **5**. I was in **9** and I was drinking some **14**. Suddenly the phone rang. It was **3** and friends. They were **15** because I was late. So, I put on my **1**, **10** and picked up my **13**. I made sure that **4**, the **7**, had some **8** and left. I quickly travelled by **6** and went to **11**. When I arrived, I was surprised to see my friends were **12** there!

Product versus process

A product approach to writing

This is a widely accepted approach, in which students are encouraged to copy the features of a model text, which is usually presented and analysed at an early stage.

Stage 1: Introduction to the topic

Students need to have their interest raised in the topic so that they are motivated to write. This includes activating their *schemata* (background knowledge of the topic) and encouraging them, through questions/pictures/short texts/etc. to respond in a personalised way to the subject they are going to write about.

Stage 2: Model Text

Model texts are read, and then features of the genre are highlighted. For example, if studying a formal letter, students' attention may be drawn to the importance of paragraphing and the language used to make formal requests.

Stage 3: Controlled practice

This consists of controlled practice of the highlighted features, usually in isolation. So if students are studying a formal letter, they may be asked to practise the language used to make formal requests, practising the 'I would be grateful if you would...' structure.

Stage 4: Organisation of ideas

This stage is very important. Those who favour this approach believe that the organisation of ideas is more important than the ideas themselves and as important as the control of language.

Stage 5: Production

The end result of the learning process. Students choose from a choice of comparable writing tasks. Individually, they use the skills structures and vocabulary they have been taught to produce the product, to show what they can do as fluent and competent users of the language.

Adapted from: Vanessa Steele, Product and Process Writing: a comparison www.teachingenglish.org

A process approach to writing

Although there are many ways of approaching process writing, it can be broken down into three stages:

Stage 1: Pre-writing

The teacher needs to stimulate students' creativity, to get them thinking how to approach the topic. In this stage, the most important thing is the flow of ideas, and it is not always necessary that students actually produce much (if any) written work. If they do, then the teacher can contribute with advice on how to improve their initial ideas.

- Brainstorming
- Planning
- Questioning
- Discussion and debate

Example of a pre-writing activity: writing in response to questions

1. Students get into groups of 8-10, in a circle.
2. Each one writes the title, or the first sentence of the task, on a sheet of paper.
3. All sheets of paper are passed to the right.
4. Each student writes a question about the title or sentence at the top of the sheet.
5. Students continue passing to the right and writing new questions until each sheet has returned to its owner.
6. Students must include answers to all the questions in their writing.

Stage 2: Focusing ideas

During this stage, students write without much attention to the accuracy of their work or the organisation. The most important feature is getting the ideas down on paper in a linear form. Having done this, the teacher (or other students) should concentrate on the content of the writing. Is it coherent? Is there anything missing? Anything extra?

- *Fast writing*
The students write quickly on a topic for five to ten minutes without worrying too much about correct language or punctuation.
- *Collaborative writing*
Working together in groups, sharing ideas. This is especially valuable as it involves other skills (speaking in particular).
- *First draft*
Input/feedback on language and rhetorical structure, then write first draft.

Examples of focusing ideas activity: *Writing a story in threes*

1. Give students the first sentence of the story, for example: *Once upon a time a poor old woman lived alone in a small house ...*

- A: describes the woman
- B: describes the house
- C: describes what was near the house

2. Then add a second sentence: *One day a young man knocked at the door*

- A: describes the young man
- B: says the reason for his visit
- C: describes the reaction of the old woman

3. They continue the story, each student adding a new sentence in turn.

4. Then they regroup (AAA, BBB, CCC) and read their stories to their new groups.
5. The activity can be extended in new groups, or stop here.

Circle writing

In groups of about eight to ten, students write a sentence and pass on. In this case our example is a short horror story (see sentences below), a genre that teenagers always have fun with.

Each pair starts with a blank piece of paper. Explain it's a horror story and show them the first prompt. They must write an opening sentence or two that must include that prompt. Allow time to discuss and write. Then they pass on their paper, take the new one, and write another couple of sentences with the second prompt that you now show them. They must be careful to make their new writing fit in with the paper they receive each time. And so it carries on till the sixth prompt ... you can ask them to finish their story in some way with this last prompt.

Variations:

- individually instead of in pairs
 - students suggest new prompts and the writing continues
 - the activity is done without students being told the genre
 - different genres are assigned to different pairs – they must try to stay in
 - genre (eg. a horror story, a fairy story, a news report, a detective story/whodunnit)
1.a dark and stormy night
 2. ... a huge wooden door ...
 3. ... a terrifying scream ...
 4. ... a pool of blood on the floor ...
 5. ... three hundred plastic yellow ducks...
 6. ... ran out screaming ...

Stage 3: Evaluating, structuring and editing

Now the writing is adapted to a readership. Students focus more on form and on producing a finished piece of work. The teacher can help with error correction and give organisational advice.

- *Self-editing*
Focus on evaluating own language – learn to improve through checking own text, looking for errors, weaknesses in organization of ideas etc..
- *Peer editing and proof-reading*
Here, the texts are interchanged and the editing is done by other students.
- *Redrafting*

Editing leads to revision of first draft, leading to a second (but not necessarily final draft).

Example of an editing checklist (accuracy-focused):

- Have you checked your spelling?
- Do all your verbs and subjects agree?
- Have you checked for any missing words?
- Have you checked your articles?
- Have you checked your word order?
- Have you used the correct tenses?
- Do your paragraphs link clearly?

Deconstructing and reconstructing more complex sentences:

Focusing on accuracy can be fun. Using a complex sentence like this one (from the Guardian newspaper), you can ask students to break it down into short sentences. They can then try and reconstruct one sentence from the 5 shorter ones.

Three newly recruited police dogs were sacked by Durham police because they weren't brave enough to do the job.

There were three police dogs.
They had just been recruited.
They were not brave.
They could not do their job.
Durham police sacked them.

References

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