Unit 10
Teaching Writing Skills

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1. Speech and Writing.

A recognition of the differences between speech and writing helps us understand the difficulties which learners encounter when they write. Byrne (1988, P.3) lists the differences between speech and writing as follows:

Speech	Writing
1. takes place in a context, which often makes references clear (e.g. 'that thing over there'.).	1. creates its own context and therefore has to be fully explicit.

2. speaker and listenere (s) in contact. Interact and exchange roles.	2. reader not present.
3. usually person addressed is specific.	3. reader not necessarily known to writer.
4. immediate feeback given and expected. a. verbal: questions, comments… murmurs, grunts. b. non-verbal: facial expressions.	4. no immediate feedback possible. Writer may try to anticipate reader's reactions and incorporate them into text.
5. speech is transitory. Intended to be understood immediately. If not, listener expected to interact.	5. writing is permanent. Can be reread as often as necessary and at own speed.

6. sentences often incomplete and sometimes ungrammatical. Hesitations and pauses common and usually some redundancy and repetition.	6. sentences expected to be carefully constructed, linked and organised to form a text.
7. range of devices (stress, intonation, pitch, speed) to help convey meaning.Facial expressions, body movements and gestures also used for this purpose.	7. devices to help convey meaning are punctuation, capitals and underlining (for emphasis). Sentence boundaries clearly indicated.

It will be seen from the above that the difficulty in writing can be attributed to psychological, linguistic and cognitive problems.

* Firstly, the process of writing itself seems to be a solitary activity[1].

* Secondly, in speech, the communication is sustained by the reaction of other participants who keep the channel open in a continuous process of interaction. We repeat, expand on and paraphrase as listeners react to what we say. In writing, we don't make use of these features[2].

* Thirdly, we grow up learning to speak and we speak most of the time about different matters relevant to us[3].

* Finally, the fact that writing is imposed on us causes a problem in terms of content or what to write on; we are all at a loss for ideas at one stage or another when we are obliged to write.

In the foreign language classroom writing imposes further problems. Learners have such a limited amount of language at their disposal that it makes it impossible to produce meaningful writing[4].

2. Purposes and Objectives.

Byrne (1988) lists the purposes of teaching writing as follows:

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[1] The writer, therefore, experiences psychological pressure of some sort because there is no possibility of immediate feedback from a present reader.

[2] We have to keep the channel of communication open through our choice of sentence structure and the way sentences are linked together so that the reader can interpret the text on his own.

[3] But writing is learnt in a process of instruction in which we have to master the written form of the language, learn certain structures and organise our ideas in such a way as to communicate with the reader.

[4] It follows that teachers should, therefore, introduce tasks which prevent the students from going beyond their linguistic attainment in the foreign language and provide them with activities which satisfy their intellectual level.

a. The introduction and practice of some form of writing enables us to provide for different learning styles and needs[1].

b. written work serves to provide learners with some tangible evidence that they are making progress in the language.

c. Exposure in the foreign language through more than one medium, especially if skills are properly integrated, appears to be more effective than relying on a single medium alone.

d. Writing provides variety in classroom activities, serving as a break from oral work. At the same time, it increases the amount of language contact through work that can be set out of class.

e. Writing is often needed for formal and informal testing. (pp. 6-7).

3. Approaches to Teaching Writing.

3.1. The Product Approach.

The product approach or the traditional approach to the teaching of writing grew out of the teaching of grammar. It emphasises the conscious application of grammatical rules in the construction of a piece of writing. Writing is used as a means of establishing syntactic patterns.

In order to consolidate the teaching of grammatical patterns, students can be asked, for example, to:

*   copy,

*   substitute,

*   transform,

*   check sentence boundaries,

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[1] Some learners, especially those who do not learn easily through oral practice alone, feel more secure if they are allowed to read and write in the language. For such students, writing is likely to be an aid to retention, if only because they feel more at ease and relaxed.

*   complete and combine sentences,

*   manipulate patterns and paragraphs of prose. In addition, dictation and translation exercises are used to establish grammatical patterns[1].

When the audio-lingual method replaced the grammar-translation method in the 1940s and 1950s, the emphasis shifted to the teaching of oral production, and writing was used to reinforce the structural patterns which were practised orally. Exercises teach writing skills focused on:

*   filling in missing words,

*   changing tense-forms,

*   or completing unfinished sentences.

Recently, texts for teaching writing skills have adopted the functional-notional approach. They list the typical language functions which students will need in writing their tasks:

*   defining,

*   classifying,

*   comparing,

*   contrasting,

*   describing,

*   developing cause and effect through linking devices, etc[2].

Yet, in all these tasks, teachers concentrate on the product. Their aim is to produce students who can write grammatically correct sentences linked with appropriate connectors.

Thus, the product approach emphasises accuracy in writing. It involves students in a conscious learning process to learn.

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[1] This is the position which the grammar-translation method prescribed.

[2] (Kelly, 1984).

*   the grammar,

*   syntactic structures,

*   vocabulary,

*   and language idioms.

The sentence is considered the main unit. Students need to have mastery of the sentence before they proceed to the paragraph, and mastery at the paragraph before they proceed to the essay.

Thus, teachers exercise control and set limits to the tasks of writing. Writing tasks become structured through three main stages: controlled, guided, and free writing.

In the controlled stage, the emphasis is placed on the production of accurate language in context[1].

As students become more confident with the controlled composition, the exercises tend to become more guided. Here, the teacher helps the students provide the written work either by written or oral assistance.

In the free stage, emphasis is placed on the content of the language.

*   the teacher only provides the title and leaves the rest for the students to do.

*   the amount of control is reduced,

*   students are asked to write meaningfully and they are given some opportunity for self-expression[2].

The teacher can bring the task to the level of the students. He can grade the task by:

*   limiting the length of the material to be produced,

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[1] For example, an exercise will be a paragraph with blanks to be filled in with appropriate words.
A controlled composition will be one in which the students produce more or less the same product as defined by the teacher.

[2] This move from controlled to free practice was the product of the audio-lingual method with its emphasis on a step-by-step approach.

*   providing guidance with pictures, or word prompts,

*   encouraging students to collaborate in the process of writing,

*   limiting the complexity of the written task, and

*   demanding that the task be completed either slowly or quickly.

3.2. The Process Approach.

This approach tries to recreate in the classroom the processes or stages through which a writer passes to produce a text. The writer passes through recursive stages of rehearsing, drafting, and revising which interact repeatedly to discover meaning[1]

The writer first:

1. formulates ideas and takes information.

2. he then drafts what he wants to say, and

3. revises what he has written in an elaborated version.

And the writer goes through these stages in a recursive rather than a linear structure. He goes back and forward changing directions by a process of interaction.

Processes of Writing: a cognitive model[2].

1. **Planning:** In this stage the writer sets goals and establishes a writing plan to reach his goals, the writer goes through three processes:

*   generating information about the topic from long-term memory,

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[1] (Murray, 1980 referred to in Kelly, 1984).

[2] Based on extensive research into (L_1) composition, Hayes and Flower (1981 referred to in Benaissa 1986) proposed a cognitive process model which divides writing into three processes.

*   organising the information into a writing plan, and

*   setting goals for the composing of the text.

2. **Translating:** This process transforms the material taken from the memory and the writing plan into an acceptable written text.

3. **Reviewing:** Here the writer reads and edits the text produced by the translating process[1].

The process approach

*   pays much attention to the meaning and the communication of ideas.

*   considers meaningful communication primary and grammatical accuracy peripheral.

*   tolerates grammatical mistakes and errors as long as the message is clear.

Finally, the process approach is one manifestation of the communicative approach which has gained wide use in classroom situations. Some of the areas which have received much attention in the process approach are:

*   The use of self-expression in writing,

*   a focus on fluent language use, and

*   the exchange of information.

Clearly, these are typical characteristics of the communicative approach.

4. Classroom Techniques.

The following examples taken from Byrne (1988) illustrate some of the points mentioned above and can be used in the classroom.

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[1] Hayes and Flower make it clear that these three stages of planning, translating and reviewing are recursive and allow for complex intermixing stages.

4.1. Copying activities.

Copying is a valuable exercise because it helps to teach spelling or to reinforce sentence structure. Students, for example, may be asked to copy down some sentences written on the board, or found in the book. Copying exercises might involve:

a. putting a list of words in alphabetical order.

b. putting a list of words in their correct sequence. For example days of the week, months, numbers.

c. putting words in categories[1].

4.2. Reinforcement Activities

Reinforcement activities are intended to reinforce the language learned orally[2];

Dictation can be used as a reinforcement activity since it is based on the language which the students are already familiar with[3].

4.3. Communication Activities.

*   The students write instructions which other students in the class (or the teacher!) have to carry out[4].

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[1] For example arranging a list of words under the headings:
Food   Animals Clothes
(Byrne, 1988, p. 35)

[2] For example completing a dialogue from a list of jumbled sentences.

[3] Dictation may be used in the conventional way which involves listening and the ability to transform what is heard into its written form. Alternatively, the teacher may provide the students with an outline in the form of an incomplete text, and ask the students to complete the text as they hear it read aloud by the teacher.

[4] For example:
Take your exercise book and put it on top of the cupboard.

*   They may also be asked to write a sequence of instructions to be carried out. This is a useful device for practising items such as First, … Next… After that[1], ..

*   Ask the students to write short messages to one another in the form of a note or short letter[2].

These messages must be answered by the students to whom they are addressed[3].

This activity can quickly generate a flow of correspondence round the class.

Writing letters and Notes:

Writing notes and letters give students some opportunity to stimulate their thinking and give them some freedom to write on their own[4].

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[1] For example:
First go to the front of the class. Then write something on the blackboard. After that, clean the blackboard.
(Byrne, 1988, p. 40)

[2] For example:
Dear Mary,
I like your new dress. Where did you buy it?
Yours,
Ann.

[3] For example:
Dear Ann,
Thank you for your note. I bought the dress at Corn Poppy. By the way, I like your new sweater. How much did it cost?
Yours,
Mary.
(Byrne, 1988, pp. 41-42)

[4] Use these notes to write a letter to a friend who wants advice about a holiday:
Go to…/ do not stay in the town itself/ find a quiet hotel just outside the town/ get a room with a good view/ make a booking as early as possible.
(Byrne, 1988, P. 52)

Another communication activity in which students are given some freedom to write on their own is conducting interviews[1].

It will be seen from the above exercises that students learn to write through a gradual process starting from copying exercises to writing on their own with some guidance from the teacher.

Classroom activities should prepare students for writing composition. This can be done by exploiting the text being discussed. Thus, after the lesson has been explained and discussed, students will be asked to write on the topic of the lesson in the form of a letter, a report, or a newspaper article[2].

5. Writing and Related Skills.

As we mentioned in the previous unit, writing can be integrated with other classroom activities such as listening, speaking, and reading.

Writing exercises which involve the "information-gap" technique are useful devices for teaching listening and speaking because they create a condition of unexpectedness. They allow for a flow of genuine information in the classroom in the sense that students tell each other things they do not know[3].

Writing exercises can also be linked to reading skills. A praticular characteristic of the communicative approach focuses on the ability to understand and convey information. Understanding implies the ability to extract some

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[1] Ask each students in the class to interview another student about some experience which he has, and to make notes. Each student should then write a rough version from his notes and show this to the person he interviewed before writing up the final version.
Byrne, 1988, (P. 63)

[2] The students here will be allowed more opportunities for self-expression. This will lead into the writing of compositions and essays as they advance. (see supplementary No. 11)

[3] However, such exercises do not ensure that the information is conveyed unless the students are required to utilize the information in writing.

information from a reading passage and to transfer that information to new situations[1].

As communicative reading practice involves understanding the information content, communicative writing entails the conveying of information content[2].

In short, information-gap exercises ensure the teaching of receptive skills like listening and reading. They enhance the students' productive skills such as speaking and writing. It should be remembered that the aim of any communicative activity is to get the message across, and this should be taken into consideration in the criterion for any communication.

Finally, it will be seen from the above that both the product and the process approaches to the teaching of writing should be given some consideration with much emphasis being placed on the latter.[3]

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[1] For example, the learner might be asked to read a passage on an advertisement for a job, and will be asked later to fill out an application form for that job. This is an example of a communicative approach to understanding reading.

[2] For example, the teacher might give the students two forms of complete application forms for a job, and then ask them to write an advertisement about that job. In both of these examples understanding and conveying information, there is an element of transfer. (A transfer from advertisement to application and from application to advertisement).

[3] It is suggested that students not be inhibited in the early stages of writing by becoming more concerned with accuracy. Instead, they should be encouraged to develop their creative composing skills in the language without due concern for grammatical knowledge.

Supplementary No. 11: The Composing Process

The process approach to the teaching of writing places much emphasis on the composing skill, on the way learners think to discover and express their ideas in a creative process.

Raimes (1983) suggests three techniques to promote the development of creative writing in the ESL classroom: giving assignments, marking papers, and providing readings.

Giving assignments involves the students in a process of writing and revision. They have time to think alone and with each other, to deal with the content and organisation of grammar, time to be involved in a process of pre-writing, writing, and revising by a process of interaction at the same time.

The teacher should not structure the assignment into separate activities like outline, introduction and conclusion. Instead, the teacher might give a list of ideas, ask students to write about them, observe, describe, define actions and objects which generate ideas. The teacher should choose the topics of the assignments that will motivate the students and invoke their ideas. It is through such meaningful writing that the students develop concern for grammatical syntax. It is believed that "cognitive stimulation is the best developer of syntax." (Moffett, 1968, p. 180). It is through such meaningful writing that the students develop concern for grammatical syntax. It is believed that "cognitive stimulation is the best developer of syntax." (Moffett, 1968, p. 180).

The teacher can predict the syntactic structures that a topic will generate and review that in classroom discussion before composition begins. It is better to write on something which has been discussed and thought out. Pre-writing activities such as pairwork or group discussion are necessary for effective writing.

The assignment can turn a class into a grammar class or an imitation class. The assignment can combine form and content, ideas and organisation, syntax and meaning, writing and revising in a process of writing and thinking. The assignment must provide a move from familiar to unfamiliar concepts.

At elementary levels, students can be given assignments to write on familiar and concrete objects: a book, a magazine, a car. At advanced levels, the assignments invite students to deal with causes, categories and relationships.

Another technique which will develop the creative use of writing is the marking of students' compositions. In marking students' papers, the teacher should not place much importance on correctness and the product of writing. Instead, emphasis should be placed on how students express their ideas, and how these are developed into a coherent piece of discourse. In addition students will realise the importance of writing if the teacher revises their task in classroom discussion rather than mark on paper as right or wrong. Praise and constructive criticism can help students revise and proof-read their ideas.

Examining reading materials is another technique designed to develop the students' ability to write compositions. It is through examining reading materials that the students' attention becomes focused on the construction of a written text. Exercises can be devised to ask students to determine the writer's intention, paraphrase, extract the meaning and relate what comes next to what has gone before. Such a close study of the text would involve the students in a process of creative writing.

Reading materials can be presented as a kind of cloze test with some words omitted. When students think of supplying the missing word, they think of the meaning of the text. In addition, this will teach them how to predict the author's choice of words, and how to predict much longer chunks of form and content. It is in this way that students learn a lot with other classroom activities such as listening, speaking, and reading.