

Teaching writing in EFL classes : Designing materials and responding to students' writings

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Introduction

This paper presents some strategies in designing materials and in responding to students' writing, based on my teaching experience limited to the needs of the first year students in the Department of English. The strategies are focused on the interaction between the components of writing proficiency. I will first present those components as outlined by Canale and Swain (1980). I will then describe how teachers can effectively design a course where those components interact. I will stress the importance of a teacher student interaction with the teacher intervening at various points while the students write their assignments. I will also propose some activities that teachers may use in their classes, and can adapt to the needs of their students.

Writing is an essential skill needed to complete and accomplish a degree in English as a foreign language. Students soon discover that their success depends to a great extent on their ability to write well. Most students, to the frustration of their teachers, show a poor level of proficiency in writing skills every year. Teachers of first year writing courses in the English Department of Algiers have during the previous two years discussed their frustration at professional meetings.

Those discussions proved that part of student failure in writing is caused by the syllabus which is focused on grammatical correctness. The teachers proposed some basic changes to the syllabus and adopted an approach that focuses on all aspects of the learner's writing proficiency including grammatical and communicative competencies. The approach adopted is based on the interaction between the components of writing proficiency.

In this paper¹, I will first present those components as outlined by Canale and Swain (1980) and described by Scarcella and Oxford in *The Tapestry of Language Learning* (1992). I will then describe how teachers can effectively design a course where those components interact, inspired by my own experience in teaching writing to first year classes, adopting the new syllabus and the proposed approach. I will also propose some activities that teachers may use in their classes, and can adapt to the needs of their students.

1. The components of writing proficiency

Grammatical Competence :

Grammatical competence involves becoming competent in using the grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and mechanics of the language.

Sociolinguistic competence :

This type of competence enables the learners to vary their use of the language with respect to a number of variables, including the topic, the genre, the audience and the purpose.

Discourse competence :

This type of competence enables learners to organize their texts cohesively and coherently.

Strategic competence :

This type of competence enables learners to use such strategies as brainstorming organising, writing, revising, and editing to complete the writing process towards effective academic papers.

2. Teaching Writing : Designing materials and responding to students' writing

A course of writing based on the interaction between the components of writing proficiency can be designed to help students explore topics related to one of the rhetorical patterns-narration, description, explanation, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and persuasion-through activities focused on

1. This paper is mainly addressed to the teachers of first year writing classes who may find difficulties in adopting the approach based on the interaction between the rhetorical model, the grammatical element and the element of content or style proposed in the syllabus. Some of the sample activities proposed may likewise be adapted to teach other classes (second and third year writing classes).

three major components. Therefore, each course unit may consist of activities aimed at providing adequate strategies and necessary structures to write paragraphs of one of the rhetorical models; activities aimed to help students overcome problems with language use and mechanics (including grammar, syntax, vocabulary and mechanics); and activities aimed to improve the content and the style, namely the organisation of ideas coherently.

Teachers should build in and out of class activities that will help prepare students for an assignment designed as a central activity in each course unit. The activities may deal according to the students' need with sentence exercises, controlled and guided composition tasks, paragraph analysis and free writing. The assignment is an in class writing task designed to elicit the principles of the unit. Students should produce a paper (a paragraph or an essay) that they will complete through many steps: brainstorming, writing (drafting), revising (content and organisation), and editing (grammatical inaccuracies).

Responding to students' papers offers other possibilities of practice stemming from the students' needs as demonstrated by their own writing, as it may be a means of continuous evaluation. The teacher evaluates the progress of students from the first to the last step and gives a grade for the final draft. The grades of the assignments may be averaged with the grades of the two written examinations.

3. Sample writing activities

The sample activities I propose¹ here are focused on description as a rhetorical model, on writing effective topic sentences, and on writing accurate types of sentences-simple, compound, complex, and compound complex. I include some tasks based on using pictures, on a paragraph assembly, or on sentence combining to write a paragraph, dictation and paragraph completion. The passages I include are selected to provide for the structures of description that students may acquire through doing. The activities evolve through tasks aimed at more practice on topic sentences and types of sentences².

1. The sample activities I propose are adapted from many books that I include in the bibliography. The passages selected are taken from those references.

2. The sample activities I propose can be adapted by teachers with any of the rhetorical models of the syllabus. For instance, using a picture sequence is a good means to practice writing narratives, and using maps offers many possibilities to practice comparison contrast models.

Using pictures

Using pictures is one of the effective techniques of description. So as an early activity, students may be asked to draw a picture (of a bedroom for instance). While students draw on their copybooks, the teacher may draw the same item on the blackboard.

They may be asked to write down the words that could be used to label the items in this room.

In small groups, they may discuss and write down what other words and phrases they will need to describe this room.

Students may then be asked to write a topic sentence of a paragraph describing this room.

Students may exchange topic sentences to check the structure and evaluate the content of each others' sentences. This task may be accompanied by two peer review sheets, one containing the six requirements of a written sentence (Raimes, 1998) and the other the six rules for composing effective topic sentences. The peer review sheets focus the reviewers' attention on specific areas of the author's text.

Peer review 1 : The six basic requirements of a written sentence

- Does the sentence begin with a capital letter?
- Does the sentence end with a punctuation mark (a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point)?
- Does it contain a subject?
- Does it contain a predicate containing a complete verb phrase?
- Has the sentence a standard word order (commonly subject-verb-object or complement)?
- Has the sentence an independent clause, that is, a core idea that can stand alone with its own subject and verb?

Peer review 2 : The six basic requirements of an effective topic sentence

- Is the topic sentence limited and correctly focused on the topic assigned?
- Is the topic sentence about one topic?

- Is the topic sentence arguable (expresses an opinion), and does it include signals which indicate the method of development and writer's purpose?
- Is the topic sentence a complete sentence in statement form?
- Is the topic sentence too specific and factual?
- Is the topic sentence too general and difficult to support?

While students write and peer review topic sentences, teachers may walk around the classroom to read students' sentences which would certainly vary from simple, to compound and complex. Three students may be asked to write their sentences-of different types-on the blackboard. The teacher may use the students' writing to introduce the types of sentences, and the rules of punctuation in compound and complex sentences.

Paragraph assembly

Order the following sentences to write a paragraph. Omit the numbers. Then answer the questions below.

- It is next to the door.
 - The room is only 10' X 14', but the furniture is conveniently placed.
 - As you walk through the door, you see the desk on the right side of the long wall.
 - In the far left corner of the room, there is a chest of drawers.
 - On the right-hand wall there are two windows, which make the room very light and airy.
 - The rest of the short wall on the left is occupied by the bed.
 - Debbie Johnson's bedroom in her home in Catskill is small but practical.
 - Then, on the wall next to the bed there is a big closet with two shelves and space to hang clothes.
 - To the left of the desk, there is a bookcase with four shelves.
- Identify and evaluate the topic sentence.
 - What is the type (simple, compound, or complex) of the topic sentence?

Sentence Combining

Use the words in between brackets to combine the following sentences. Omit the numbers and write a paragraph. Then answer the questions below.

- Kelly's office is really very small.
 - Kelly's office has just enough space to hold the necessary furniture and her personal belongings. (but)
 - The office is painted pale beige.
 - The office contains three large ivory wall cabinets where she keeps all the important office supplies. (and)
 - Right near the cabinets, there is a sturdy dark wooden table.
 - The table holds a large old grey Smith Corona typewriter. (which)
 - On one side, you will see a paper clips box, a grey telephone, and a small file box.
 - The box contains doctors' and patients' phone numbers and addresses. (which)
 - On the other, there is a small candies box.
 - The box is full of delicious Italian chocolates. (which)
- Identify and evaluate the topic sentence.
 - What is the type of the topic sentence?
 - Find two other possible ways to link the clauses of the topic sentence without changing its type.
 - Could the clauses of the second sentence be linked in another way?

Dictation

Write the paragraph dictated, and then look at the handout and compare what you have written with the paragraph in the box. Count your spelling, punctuation and capitalisation mistakes. Then, answer the questions below.

Great Britain (GB) is an island that lies off the north-west coast of Europe. The nearest country is France which is 20 miles away and from which Great Britain is separated by the English Channel. The island is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and the North Sea to the east. It comprises the mainlands of England, Wales and Scotland, that is, three countries. Scotland is in the north while Wales is in the west. Ireland, which is also an island, lies off the west coast of Great Britain. It consists of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Great Britain together with Northern Ireland constitutes the United Kingdom (UK). Thus, we can say that the United Kingdom is composed of four countries. The largest of these is England

which is divided into 45 administrative counties. The capital city is London which is situated in south-east England.

- Identify and evaluate the topic sentence.
- What is the type of the topic sentence?
- Find and underline the dependent clauses.
- Underline all occurrences of the words *which*. Then look at the uses of *that*. If you could replace *that* with *which*, underline *that*.
- Note the difference between *that* in the first sentence and *that* in the sentence "thus, we can say that the United Kingdom is composed of four countries."
- In the following sentence from the passage "Scotland is in the North while Wales is in the west," underline the independent clause. What is the relation of the other clause to the independent clause? What could you use to replace *while* in the sentence? Can you change the position of the independent clause in this sentence? If yes, what other changes should follow?

Of course, answering the questions of the two previous activities requires that teachers explain the different possibilities to write compound sentences, using co-ordinators, connectors, or semicolons. It also requires that they explain the different types of subordinate clauses in complex sentences with focus on the punctuation required from one sentence to the other.

Paragraph completion

Teachers may prepare two or three descriptive paragraphs, omit the topic sentences, ask students to complete the passages, and then compare their sentences with each other's then with the original text. The same paragraphs can then serve as a material for further tasks and practice on sentence types.

Free writing

Choose one of the subjects below, and write continuously for few minutes without concern for correct sentences, spelling, grammar, or punctuation. With three members of your class, compare your free writing exercises by using the questions below. (Subjects: home town, favourite city in the world, a famous monument, ideal room)

- What ideas did you generate?
- Which of these ideas can be produced into a paragraph?
- What differences do you note between your free writing and that of others?
- What different ideas did others produce?
- Why might these differences occur?

While students fulfil those activities, teachers may walk around the class to check the “lay out” of the rewritten passages in the students’ copybooks. They should remind students individually to indent the first line of every paragraph.

Sentence exercises

Teachers may also include sentence exercises. The sentences may be chosen as to provide the students with more rhetorical structures of description. The tasks may be focused on dealing with problems of sentence structure (run-on sentences and fragments), finding dependent clauses and identifying the types of subordinate clauses, practicing on punctuation in complex sentences, and evaluating topic sentences. Students’ free writing activity may be used by the teacher as a source for sentence exercises. Teachers may select both weak and effective sentences for practice.

4. Writing papers: a process of self discovery

When teachers find that their students have acquired enough structures of description and can write and punctuate effectively the three types of sentences as well as topic sentences, they may require from their students to write a paragraph or an essay focused on description. The writing task is as previously explained a process of many steps performed through teacher student interaction, with the teacher intervening at various points while the students write their papers. It can be reinforced by activities aimed to help students improve their papers gradually and to give teachers more opportunities to provide students with positive feedback.

Activities that stem from the students’ needs and abilities as demonstrated by their own writing may follow the different stages of the writing process. Before each stage, teachers may provide their students with necessary advice aimed to elicit the principles of the unit. Teachers may require that students adopt the “advice sheets” provided from one unit to the other as checklists that they use to check their free writing tasks.

In the prewriting stage consisting of the collection of ideas, teachers may prepare activities to acquaint students with the different forms of prewriting—brainstorming, free writing, questioning, outlining, and mapping. This stage has in fact been largely reinforced by the activities which precede the assignment.

The revision stage may be reinforced by peer review activities where students read and comment on each others' writing. Those activities are mainly aimed at improving students' writing through revision, and at building their critical thinking by increasing their abilities to identify, and solve problems with content and organization.

The editing phase may be reinforced by rewriting activities using students' ungrammatical statements prepared by the teacher after reading students' drafts. While writing the draft of the editing phase, teachers may require from their students to rewrite in reference to the handout given at the beginning of the year, containing the correction symbols used to mark their errors and the explanation of the error types referred to by symbols.

Teachers may notice that this writing task needs at least a fortnight to reach completion. So, teachers may start a new course unit, and then come back to the revision and the editing steps. Distancing the steps of the writing process aims to give students time to write. "A student who is given the time for the process to work, along with the appropriate feedback from readers such as the teacher or other students, will discover new ideas, new sentences, and new words as he plans, writes a first draft, and revises what he has written for a second draft," (Raimes, 1983)

Prewriting

1. Prewriting advice

Follow these rules to write your first draft:

- Don't worry about mistakes.
- Don't erase anything. Cross out words or parts you don't need.
- Don't worry about vocabulary. Leave a blank or use a word from your language if you can't think of the word in English. (Ingram & King, 1987)

2. Sample prewriting activities (for a paragraph writing task)

- Jot down all the related ideas you can think of about the topic of the assignment within a ten minute session.

- Look at your list of ideas then group the related ideas together. Provide a title for each group of related ideas.
- Choose among the groups of ideas you formed one that you most want to communicate.
- Write a brief outline for the paragraph you will write.
- Write down three sentences to sum up your ideas.
- Choose the sentence that you may feel ready to support and write a draft of a paragraph. You may select supporting ideas from the brainstorming list. You may also add specific details not mentioned on the brainstorming list while writing your paragraph.

Revising

1. Sample revision advice

Follow these rules to write your second draft:

- Remember that each paragraph should develop one idea.
- Underline the topic sentence of each paragraph.
- Provide at least two supporting ideas and at least two examples to develop the main idea in each paragraph.
- Use adequate transitional words to link your sentences.
- Remember that your introduction should contain a hook, a thesis statement, and the main points.
- Remember to conclude with a summary of the paragraphs in the body, a restatement of the thesis, and a final comment.

Teachers may focus the advice on those elements of content and or style illustrated in the course unit.

2. Sample activities for revision

- Revising organization
- Outlining: Exchange your paragraph (first draft) with a peer friend and see whether you can write an outline out of what your friend has written. If you find troubles in outlining, explain to the writer what is not working. (This activity can be fulfilled by the writer who may be asked to review his own writing in order to make him look at what he has written critically).
- Revising content

- Class revision: students may evaluate their own topic sentences typed by the teacher. The task may be: Evaluate the following topic sentences. Identify those that are weak and what is wrong with them. Offer suggestions on how to correct the problem.
- Self-revising: students may be given some questions to revise their own writing. The task may be: List your supporting ideas, then list your sub-supporting ideas. Do you think your description can make your readers feel that they are looking at a photograph while reading your composition? Do you think that you need to add something to have this effect on your readers, what would it be?
- Peer reviewing: Answer the following questions to review each others' drafts of paragraphs.
 - Is each paragraph about one idea? What sentence states the main idea in each paragraph?
 - Does the information provided in each paragraph move from the general to the specific?
 - Are the details used to support the topic all important? Do you think that the writer should provide more support to make the content convincing? Do you think that some detail is irrelevant and should be left out?
 - Has the writer used any transition words (however, on one hand, on the other hand, in addition, in fact, etc.)? Are they used effectively?
 - Is the content convincing? Why or why not?
 - What does the writer do especially well?
 - Make three suggestions to the writer?

Editing

1. **Sample editing advice (focused on the grammatical principles of the unit)**
 - Use a colored pen to separate between your sentences.
 - Check that each sentence starts with a capital letter and has end punctuation.
 - Circle all the subjects.
 - Underline all the verb phrases.
 - Use brackets to identify all the independent clauses. Underline with a coloured pen the dependent clauses. If there is more than one dependent clause in a sentence, mark them (a), (b), (c).

- Revise the punctuation separating the clauses in sentences.
- If you have difficulty finding an independent clause or identifying the verb or its subject, take that as a warning sign. There may be something wrong with the structure of the sentence.

2. Sample activities for editing

- Class editing:

Teachers may type one or two of the students' drafts, provide a list of problems linked to the grammatical elements in focus, then ask the students to identify and suggest corrections to the problems. The same draft may be used to highlight the effective use of some structures in the draft. Through such an activity, students may learn from each other's mistakes and strengths altogether.

Teachers may also type some of the students' sentences, distribute them to the class, and then ask the students to identify the well-constructed correctly punctuated sentences, and identify then correct the sentences with problems.

- Group editing

Teachers may also prepare a list of the problems encountered in the students' drafts and make the students work in groups to identify the problems in the drafts. Each student should later on correct his own problems.

- Self-editing

Each student can proofread his draft helped by a checklist (editing advice sheets) and the handout of the correction symbols explaining the errors marked on his paper.

Assessing papers: a means of continuous and objective evaluation

For purposes of continuous evaluation, the students' papers should be graded. The grades of the assignments may be averaged with the grades of the two written examinations. This method of assessment allows teachers to keep an eye open on their learners developing abilities, and offers students the opportunity to be objectively and justly evaluated. To grade objectively, teachers may classify and count the errors of their students.

The classification may follow the rules of writing proficiency or the categories of errors:

Language use: grammar (verb agreement, prepositions, articles, etc.), syntax (fragments, splice/run-on etc.), word choice (diction/wrong word/slang, etc.), mechanics (punctuation, capitalization, spelling, etc.)

Content: clarity, relevance, support, originality

Style: unity, coherence, emphasis, sentence variety

Organization: paragraphs, topic and support

To make their students recognize their weaknesses, teachers may provide a detailed description of the grade. So, they may copy the categories cited above on the students' papers, give a mark, obtained through counting errors, for each category alone. The final grade is obtained by averaging those marks.

Conclusion: Final advice

Individual follow up tasks

Teachers may finally prepare follow up exercises with keys to help in weak areas. Each student may be provided a handout with the tasks that may help him overcome his own problems, for practice and self-evaluation at home. Teachers may also require from their students to grade themselves. The same strategy can be adopted with books, especially those grammar books with keys. Teachers can check the achievement of the tasks in few minutes through a simple walk around the class.

For motivation purposes:

- the best paper may be typed and shown off in a class magazine;
- the student who progresses from one paper to the other gets a plus mark;
- the student who achieves regularly the follow up tasks gets a plus mark.

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