Effective Writing Instruction - Determinants and Detriments

T. Lilly Golda
Assistant Professor of English
A.P.C. Mahalaxmi College for Women
Thoothukudi
golda.albert@gmail.com

Writing is at the centre of academic experience and at certain levels it extends beyond that too. Language teachers are faced with the job of assisting students to write well. Historically, when writing was explicitly taught in higher education, the emphasis was on students' writing as final texts or 'products'. Teaching writing – whether in formal writing classes or as an activity within discipline-based courses – often entailed presenting students with models of good writing, and asking them to imitate those exemplars. Often, little analysis occurred of the various rhetorical aspects of the texts or the social contexts in which the texts functioned. The focus instead was on specific features of the written texts: for example, spelling, text structure, vocabulary and style. In addition, little attention was typically paid to the process of writing, including the conscious and unconscious decisions that writers make in order to communicate for different purposes and to different audiences. In an era in which students may have been more homogenous and shared previous educational experiences and social backgrounds, the assumption was often made that students could pick up how to do academic writing through this process of imitation. There is an abiding concern with the nature of students' composing processes, and how teachers across the grade levels might more effectively gear instruction to individual needs, backgrounds, and interests. Hence, process-oriented instructional approaches have become common, with teachers providing opportunities to brainstorm ideas, complete initial rough

drafts, receive peer and teacher feedback, and revise and proofread. As Connor (1996) observes, there has been a paradigm shift in the teaching of second language writing over the past few decades:

> The emphasis is no longer on the product. Instead, writing is taught as a process, in which each stage – pre-writing, composing, and editing – is important. In addition, writing is not considered a solitary act; it involves teachers, peers, and other readers. The responses of other readers are a vital part of writing considering considered as a social construction of meaning. The second language teacher who is familiar with the teaching of writing as a process does not teach her students to write through model compositions. Instead, she focuses on helping students make revisions in students' drafts from the beginning to the final editing. (p. 168)

In order to teach effectively, a language teacher should have the following language-specific competencies. These include the ability to do the following kind of things:

- To comprehend texts accurately
- To provide good language models
- To maintain use of the target language in the classroom
- To maintain fluent use of the target language
- To give explanations and instructions in the target language
- To provide examples of words and grammatical structures and give accurate explanations
- To select target-language resources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, the Internet)
- To monitor his or her own speech and writing for accuracy
- To give correct feedback on learner language
- To provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty

- To provide language-enrichment experiences for learners

Grammatical problems in writing are another problem teachers identify among students while teaching writing. Teachers often face problems with sentence formatting and grammatical requirements needed for writing to be coherent. Activities and practice material focusing on recognizing and using words with the correct spelling are key elements of instructing students in English as a second language.

Explicit writing instruction must be integral to the course, as part of the course content and as a significant, recurring activity. Through instruction, students should learn about writing, including its structures and functions, and should practise writing in a variety of modes and settings appropriate to the discipline. The forms and types of writing instruction that will be used in the course should be explained in the syllabus or supporting teaching materials. According to Hyland (2003), an emphasis on language structure as a basis for teaching writing is typically a four-stage process:

1. Familiarization: Learners are taught certain grammar and vocabulary, usually through a text.
2. Controlled Writing: Learners manipulate fixed patterns, often from substitution tables.
3. Guided Writing: Learners imitate model texts.
4. Free Writing: Learners use the patterns they have developed to write an essay, letter, and so forth. (p.p.3, 4)

The goal of writing instruction can never be just training in explicitness and accuracy because written texts are always responses to a particular communicative setting (Hyland, 2003, p.5). Ostensibly, students are unwilling to write because of the anxiety they have about their ability to construct sentences and paragraphs. Therefore, as Harmer (2004) says, “with students like

this who lack familiarity or confidence with writing (or need enthusiasm for it), we need to spend some time building the writing habit – that is making students feel comfortable as writers in English and so gaining their willing participation in more creative or extended activities' (p.61).

Given the challenges posed by the teaching-learning process of writing, language teachers should be well-prepared to face them. Before the commencement of the class, the teacher should ask himself / herself the following questions:

- What level are my students?
- Why are they taking this course?
- Do they need writing skills for specific reasons? (business correspondence, college application letters, etc.).
- What do you expect them to produce? (a short email for beginners; an essay for an examination).
- What is the focus of the exercise? (structure, tense usage or vocabulary).

Once the teacher gets a clear idea about the skills students need to develop, the next step is a wide variety of writing tasks that may be assigned to students to help them hone their writing skills. But careful consideration of the questions answered above should help the teacher narrow down his / her options and begin to focus on how to involve the students in the activity thus promoting a positive, long-term learning experience. As in correction, the teacher must choose the most appropriate manner for the specified writing area. If formal business letter in English is required, it is of little use to employ a free expression type of exercise. Likewise, when working on descriptive language, attention to writing skills might be given to presentation and coherence of points.

In every language class, the teacher plays a great role in making the writing tasks as achievable and productive as possible. The teacher should:

- Make the written tasks a frequent occurrence to reduce anxiety around them.
- Make the tasks meaningful to students personally and in general.
- Give appropriate teacher feedback and give the students a chance to revise their drafts (as this promotes self-correction and noticing). Feedback should focus on improving the students' work, not correction for correction's sake.
- Give the students time to reflect on the writing process (what worked, what didn't, what was enjoyable, etc.).
- Do not always grade the tasks; students should not be writing solely for credit
- Establish real-life situations to engage the students (i.e., set up an email pen pal system between another school, etc.).

Above all, the teacher should know that a learner might know how a language ought to be spoken or written without any flaw but only when he is able to use it in a real context it can be understood that the individual is a master in it.

Works Cited

Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harmer, Jeremy (2004). *How to teach writing*. Harlow: Longman.

Hyland, Ken. (2003). *Second language writing*. CUP.

****