

THE WRITING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY L2 LEARNERS AND HOW TO MINIMIZE THEM

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ABSTRACT: *I have chosen to look at the importance of writing skills and how to help learners write clearly and concisely using the correct grammar and structure. Traditionally, written English is given less emphasis than spoken. As a teacher of Arab learners at University level, I have found that they try to think simultaneously about many facets of writing. Word order, mixed tenses, spelling, and punctuation are just a few of the challenges L1 learners face. Add to this the challenge of the cursive system and we begin to understand why they make so many mistakes. My article suggests how we can develop learners writing skills from an early age.*

KEYWORDS: writing difficulties, L2 learners, first language

INTRODUCTION

Writing is unfortunately very commonly used as a means of evaluation so it is not surprising that many people feel they are being judged when someone reads what they have written. Learning to write coherently and in a way which is appropriate for one's purpose and audience is something which many people never manage in their first language, despite the fact that a substantial part of the educational process is devoted to the development of such skills. The process is every bit as difficult in a second language. Grabe and Kaplan (1996)

While some fluent adult writers think of writing as a difficult process, L2 learners should not initially have the same attitude and the teacher should try to ensure that writing is not seen as a frustrating and unrewarding skill. On contrary, learners should be encouraged to feel that writing is an important and effective means of self- expression, communication and information gathering. Grabe and Kaplan (1996)

L2 learners are often overwhelmed when asked to complete a writing task. Even at the beginning, some learners will have difficulty getting started. In order to make a writing task less threatening the following suggestions are useful to help learners who are struggling to find their way and for them to find writing interesting as well as giving them a sense of accomplishment so that they will be better motivated for the next writing task.

TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS TO AID L2 LEARNERS WITH WRITING

- 1) Getting ideas by brainstorming and discussion (i.e. planning and making idea maps)
- 2) Writing ideas in note form
- 3) Using questions to plan writing
- 4) Writing a draft-learners can be allowed to make rough drafts before producing the final draft
- 5) Improving the draft

- 6) Devising and correcting checklists before handing in final draft
- 7) Comparing/ sharing ideas with other peer groups whilst writing
- 8) Exchanging and reading each other's work

In practice, many of the difficulties which learners encounter in writing are often resolved through discussion while they are writing for example, it is my experience that learners frequently correct and revise their own work after having had the opportunity to read and compare with another learners work. Through working in groups or in pairs to produce a piece of writing, learners have an opportunity to ask each other and the teacher if need be about spelling, vocabulary, grammar and the best ways of expressing things.

I have chosen to look at the importance of writing skills for Arab L2 learners and the achievement of appropriate writing because writing skills are often either overlooked or shied away from due to the complexities faced by Arabic learners.

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- 9) Getting ideas by brainstorming and discussion (i.e. planning and making idea maps)
This in turn allows for creative licence and enables students to express themselves in a way they would feel restricted by with formal essay designs
- 10) Writing ideas in note form
- 11) Using questions to plan writing
- 12) Writing a draft-learners can be allowed to make rough drafts before producing the final draft
- 13) Improving the draft
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I have chosen to look at the importance of writing skills for Arab L2 learners and the achievement of appropriate writing because writing skills are arguably the most difficult to master out of the four areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing and I feel less attention is paid to this area of English study for Arabic speakers.

In my experience teachers often assign writing tasks as homework. They choose not to devote class time to something which they believe can be done just as effectively at home. They often prefer to focus on oral and aural work which cannot be easily practiced at home. Also, as learners need different amounts of time, it is easier for the teacher to set the writing as homework rather than have learners finishing at different times. Furthermore teachers may feel uncomfortable teaching writing. Handwriting, punctuation and writing style is personal and said to reflect the writer's personality. Teachers are unwilling to impose their own style on their learners. Additionally as I previously mentioned, writing was not considered important until recently, so many teachers have had no instruction onto how to teach it. Finally, teachers are used to feeling needed in the classroom. Conventionally, quiet activities like reading (excluding reading aloud) and writing have less interaction and teachers have complained that they are not interesting and engaging to teach.

The main reasons for setting writing as homework rather than a class activity one is based on teacher as opposed to learner needs. Moreover, solitary writing ignores the process especially at lower levels where learners strive for guidance and proper assistance with spelling, vocabulary and grammar and the best way of expressing things. Additionally interactive writing tasks also give learners a unique opportunity to get feedback from their readers on how far this message has been understood. Writing alone at home also means learners have no access to peer-correction or to extra stimuli if they have writers block. They would have no chance to reformulate their ideas.

"Learning to write in L1 or L2 is extremely difficult. Even educated native speakers have difficulty, hence the abundance of books on the subject". Humphreys (2003)

"Learning to write well is a difficult, lengthy process, one that induces anxiety and frustration in many learners" Richards (1990)

Writing and speaking are both productive skills, but unlike speaking, learners do not get an immediate reaction from their audience. Speaking practices in the classroom are more often fluency practice emphasising communication, while writing tasks are typically marked as accuracy practice, with little emphasis on communication. The abundance of red annotation over a learner's work only adds to their anxiety and frustration. Teachers should not attempt to deal with all errors, but should focus on those which cause most difficulty to the reader. Errors may be indicated by underlining, and the learner should attempt to work out their errors and

try and correct them. Learners to learners discussion in which they compare and correct errors can be helpful.

Another technique is to take a section of a learner's written text and rewrite it. The rewritten version can then be distributed to the class together with the original, and comparison can be made between the two versions. Some very fruitful discussions can emerge from such comparisons, which will deal not simply with matters of expression but a whole host of other matters. Particularly beneficial discussions can emerge from such comparisons which will not deal with simply with matters of expression, but with the ideas, the ways in which different texts have been organised and the viewpoint adopted by the writers. An alternative way of marking student's written work is to use symbols in the margin to indicate that there is a mistake in that line rather than correcting the mistake for them.

THE USE OF SYMBOLS WHEN MARKING LEARNERS' WRITTEN WORK

*well done

Wo Word order

T Tense

Pr Preposition

P Punctuation

O organisation

Sp Spelling

V Vocabulary

I contend that it is a mistake not to teach writing in the classroom. As Harmer argues, the reasons for teaching writing to students of English as foreign language include reinforcement, language development, learning style, and, most importantly, writing as a skill in its own right. (Harmer 1998)

There are many reasons students learn English and be they intrinsic or extrinsic; literacy in English is still something students should strive for.

There are many methodologies upon teaching writing: Product, Process, and the Genre approach. Put very simply, the product approach focuses on the end result. Learners copy and practice whilst imitating a given model. It is a controlled language practice. Process Approach focuses on the process of writing. It involves freer brainstorming, selecting key vocabulary and ideas. Multiple drafts are written at the content and the organisation and frequently refers to a check list. It is only at the final stage when the language comes paramount and the teacher will then get involved. The Genre approach is an approximate blend of the previous two approaches. Students study a particular model, noting the text type, layout, vocabulary used, the register of the language and the structure of the text. Students then use multiple drafts and peer correction to write their own text in the same genre.

The product approach is the more traditional approach, having grown out of the audio lingual approach. I believe it encourages weaker learners as the use of the model allows them to avoid making errors providing they are adept at copying and substituting. The primary emphasis is on providing practice in producing different kinds of texts. Techniques of controlled composition or 'guided writing' are used as they do not require the learner to do any actual composition. Techniques used in a product approach often begin with controlled writing exercises and gradually move toward freer writing once the writer has memorised the structure to be followed. Murray (1980)

I firmly believe the Product approach best suits L2 learners, as they need scaffolding, particularly when their L1 has a different script, orthography and punctuation. It is also an ideal approach for students with low learner autonomy and a strong sense of teacher authority. It appeals more to analytic learners with a low tolerance of ambiguity. In my experience, the product approach promotes learners self-confidence because they can see their own accurate pieces of writing. It especially appeals to students who are more comfortable with rote learning (i.e. memorization based on repetition) It facilitates the sometimes bewildering jump from the grammar translation method employed in Asia to the communicative method favoured in Europe.

However proponents of the Process approach point to flaws with the product approach.

Critics of the product approach argue that there is little, if any, genuine communication in the learning process, that the emphasis on the finished product completely ignores the composing process and does not reflect the way the people write in their L1. Finally, they say that it is extremely difficult for a native speaker to, let alone an L2 learner to produce a perfect model. However I would argue that just because something is not difficult to attain, it does not follow that we should attempt to attain it. I agree, however, that teachers should consider this more before getting their red pen out.

The process approach firmly focuses on the writer and the stages of writing. Rather than attempting to copy the product, this approach attempts to copy the process a good or skilled writer uses. Skilled writers, according to (Lapp, 1984)

FEEDBACK FROM LEARNERS'

"Spend time thinking about the task and how they will approach it..."

"Spend time reviewing what they will write..."

"Often pause for reviewing and revising during the first draft"

This highlights one of the processes main disadvantages: it is time consuming and may interfere with other course/student objectives. Harmer, (2004)

It has been argued that this approach is also undermined by writing tests, which are under strict time constraints and focus on the product. Nor does it address the needs of learners who will have to write for an unknown audience, e.g. in ESP. Reid disputes this claim, saying:

“A false dichotomy between ‘process’ and product arose in the L2 literature. In reality, most L2 students were being taught process writing strategies to achieve effective written communication (products) with difference occurring in emphasis.

I think as a learning tool for learners with excellent learner autonomy, it is a great approach to mastering the Process Approach in that students are not given one model to emulate, but rather several examples to compare and contrast. Students can then see unifying fundamental expectations within a particular context, as well as how different readers have different expectations of a particular text, depending on the relation 2 (28nship with the writer. This approach requires dedicated research. Tribble suggests learners spend a week looking at a variety of examples within a specific genre to preclude the actual writing. He calls this: “Data collection” procedure. Tribble (1998)

As with the process approach, the main disadvantage is time. Again I do not believe it is an appropriate approach for a beginners or elementary group with little training or autonomy. In my experience, elementary students are concerned with speed. They resent revision, wanting to rush through the textbook and onto the next course levels, regardless of what they have learnt. Reading and comparing. Some feedback from current Arabic students reinforces this fact :

“I really want to learn how to improve my English and it frustrates me how long it takes to learn to write. The spelling is confusing because of the phonetic differences and when I see how many corrections I have it makes me feel bad.” Walid, Egypt, studying at the British Council.

“More practice with writing would be useful as it takes so much longer to learn to write than to read and listen. I find it useful to follow other writing tasks and like to practice following some samples and dialogues.” Samir, currently studying Engineering at University in Egypt.

“When I am writing it amazes me how many English words end the same way , for example that bomb, tomb, comb all end in 'omb' but don't rhyme, is just one example of many that shows how difficult English spelling is.”

“Learning English has been one of the most difficult tasks I have ever done in my life. What makes it so challenging is I have to be persistent, self-motivated and self-disciplined. In my opinion persistence is the most important and vital factor for learning English because only by practicing, perfection can be acquired. And practicing is nothing more than doing one task regularly until I get it right. In addition to that during my English studies, I either had some personal experiences or learned from various teachers how to learn English.” Nafis, Brighton, attending a one year Intensive English course before a post-graduate degree.

In conclusion, we can see that there are a myriad of difficulties which Arab learners face when learning to write English successfully. Likewise there are many methods which help to develop writing, including taking into consideration their level. The use of an English -English dictionary, the use of cue cards which new words can be written on, and practiced after each lecture. Learners can be encouraged to use websites such as the BBC which offer English interactive activities These are a great help, helping autonomous learning, and also, where

possible, a period of studying abroad in an English speaking country with the exposure to a totally English speaking environment helps enormously. Students should be nurtured through their learning and encouraged so they see learning English as a delight and not a chore. An added activity that could very much help beginner L2 learners is when learning a new word: discuss and think of its other forms. For example: Beautiful (adjective), beauty (noun), beautifully (adverb). It should also be advised for L2 learners to use English whenever they can. (I always give the example of excelling in a certain sport-practice makes perfect-and that applies to language.) The teacher, however, should also discourage translating into English from Arabic. Always ask learners to try and think in English to improve their fluency and hence improve their writing. Similarly a teacher should encourage talking as the most natural way to learn grammar as this is where learners have the most difficulty. Learners can also be encouraged to keep an English diary or journal. Begin by writing a few sentences a day and then get into the habit of writing more. Journals also become an outlet through which learners can express their feelings. One of the most useful things I found when teaching writing was telling learners to write a sentence or two for every new word they acquire as that would make it much easier to remember. Motivation and encouragement are also important factors in teaching writing to L2 learners. Ways to increase motivation can include short writing periods, “competitions” for the best beginning, sharing a paper, and writing with students, pointing at good starts and good organisation, and presenting rewards for the best final papers. (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996) A particularly effective way to encourage learners to write is to show them that not everything needs to be graded and evaluated. At beginning levels of writing level group discussions prior to writing is highly encouraged as it gives the grounds and additional knowledge for writing. Discussion groups allow learners to support one another and it will lead to cooperative group learning. Last but certainly not least teachers should encourage reading.

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