

FEATURES OF TEACHING NARRATIVE WRITING TO EFL LEARNERS

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Although students’ literacy knowledge and ability are at the core of education, too often the way knowledge and ability develop and change is overlooked. It is, of course, important to understand the knowledge, structures and strategies that are called on during literacy activities; however, it is at least as important to know how knowledge shifts and grows over time. This applies to both learners of own mother tongue and learners of English as a foreign language.

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A narrative text tells an imaginary story, although some narratives may be based on facts. Narratives are written in many different forms and each form has distinctive characteristics.

The main purpose of a narrative is to entertain and engage the reader in an imaginative experience.

There are many types of narrative texts: folktales, fairytales, fables, myths, legends, science-fiction, short stories, picture-story books and ballads, but also narration of past events, past experiences, incident reports, trip reports and other forms of military writing that may include narration etc., which are usually evaluated at STANAG testing. Narrative is a generic word, although it is known that each form of narrative has unique features in addition to the generic structure, so it may be both formal and informal. Teachers will adapt the information to the particular form of narrative being investigated.

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Reasons for Writing

Why writing is considered a problem among the English language students? I am sure that both teachers and students would admit that the times when they had to write something can be characterized as periods of sighing, pencil-chewing, foot-shuffling atmosphere. The answer comes straight: it is not easy to write. And this is because writing does not have the expressive possibilities of speech mode. A speaker can revise ideas or clarify them. An examination of the writing process reveals that the way we approach the writing task and the form our writing takes depends on the purpose, context and audience.

When teaching English we try to build communicative potential in our students, meaning that students learn to understand other people, to talk to them, read what they have written and write to them. Regarding EFL students, learning to communicate equals, in a way, with placing yourself in a new cultural setting. This has to be seen as the ability to transmit messages to a person who is not in front of us, listening to our words and looking at our gestures. In addition, according to Karl Attard¹ narrative writing has gained momentum as “The use of narratives in the social sciences has drastically increased throughout recent decades. They are mainly used as a way of collecting data and as a way of promoting professional development.”

So, we can say students write to communicate with the reader, to express ideas without the pressure of face-to-face communication, to explore a subject, to record experience, to become familiar with the conventions of written English discourse.

What Are the Needs of the Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds?

How well are the EFL students dealing with the demands we place on them as writers? Many of them experience success in some or most areas of writing and are confident and enthusiastic writers; many more show frustration and limited success. The latter have particular needs as writers which must be met if they are going to experience greater success in writing and learning English.

To become effective writers in English students need well developed oral language skills in English. They have to be aware of the differences between the oral and written modes of language. We have to admit that there is some interdependence between the development of the written language

¹ K. Attard, *The role of narrative writing in improving professional practice?*, Educational Action Research, Volume 20, Issue 1, 2012 Special Issue: Narrative Inquiry and Action Research, p. 161.

skills and oral language skills. Teachers can broaden the depth of students' knowledge and skills in English by setting up activities which require students to interact orally in meaningful and purposeful ways. Not only will this improve students' oral competence but will also develop their competence in writing as well.

Written language is not simply speech written down. To continue my idea stated at the beginning of this article, in case of oral language the participants are part of the context. They know what they are talking about and can use incomplete sentences and self-corrections. The language text is constructed by both of them. In case of written language the writer constructs the text alone and must provide details about the context for the reader. Sentences have to be complete and you as the writer have to make the text coherent and able to stand alone. Compared with speech, effective writing requires a highly developed organization of ideas and information, accuracy so that there will be no ambiguity of meaning, complex grammatical devices, and a careful choice of vocabulary. So students have to be told not to write as they speak. Teachers can use some examples to make their students better understand the difference between the oral language and the written language.

Teachers should motivate their students to write by giving them the opportunity to write about things they are already familiar with, 'real life', authentic writing tasks which are relevant to their interests and experiences. It is beneficial for students to read various texts types a lot so that they can develop awareness of what makes a good writing. But writing a lot is also a must. Assigning students something to write about should not be seen only as a homework activity. If students have practice in writing in supportive atmosphere of the classroom, even the poorer writers would feel confident and motivated to write more.

The Role of the Teacher

Teaching writing may be a difficult process depending on what genre you teach: exposition, explanations, reports, procedures, recounts and narrative. I must add that the difficulty might not appear in applying this or that approach, but in students receiving the message, understanding what they have to do.

A question that could seem weird is why students prefer to write personal recounts and narratives to the prejudice of reports, expositions and other genres? One of the reasons for this appears to be the reflection in these genres of the students' conceptual development; another one can be the fact that they are the written genres that resemble oral language. It is also true that the language use the teachers present and the literature they provide result in the predominance of narrative type texts.

Writing is an amazingly complex activity. The writer is simultaneously involved with thinking of what to write, coherence and cohesion of the text, spelling, grammar including punctuation, layout, tone and register, organization and selection of appropriate content for an intended audience. It is impossible, even if for skilled and talented writers, to control all aspects of writing at once. Students need a clear framework within which they can express their ideas, thus reducing the complexity of the task and the demands on their working memory. They also need to be able to focus on one or two aspects at one time so that they can practice new skills until they become automatic. If, for instance, students are taught about how to describe the plot, they need to be put in the situation of being explained what plot really means and given exercises on how to build a plot, what so-called ingredients a writer needs when constructing a successful plot. From this point on, for two or three sessions, students will not learn about anything anymore, they will stay focused on dealing with plot.

The teacher who demands neat writing, correct punctuation and perfect spelling while students are learning to master new skills runs the risk of promoting the continuation of short, boring texts written by students who have no interest in the message, but only in what the teacher demands. Students cannot manage all the demands of written language concurrently.

Opportunity to interact with the teacher and peers is an essential part of learning to write. Students need to be encouraged to question, compare, modify and share with peers throughout the writing process. The talk generated in problem-solving sessions provides crucial information for students about the writing process and gives teachers an insight into students’ understandings.

Teachers are largely responsible for creating a supportive and positive climate. The classroom needs to be a place where students are secure in the knowledge that their efforts are valued and problem solving is encouraged. There must be time for students to reflect on their learning, to represent it in a way that is meaningful to them and to report to others what they learned.

I thought of some questions which teachers should bear in mind and think of when they have to reflect on their contribution to a desirable classroom climate. I will call it “the SHOULD list”, but for achieving a successful narrative writing class teachers have to call it “the MUST list”.

- Do I believe that all students can learn to write?
- How do I show that I am a caring teacher who understands that all students need to experience success as they engage in learning activities?
- How can I act as facilitator and co-learner?
(rather than a source of knowledge)

- Am I always aware of the students’ self esteem and self image?
- What activities am I providing that enable students to engage at their phase of development?
- Do I provide frequent demonstrations of what real readers and writers do?
- Am I providing models of processes and products through a range of different activities?
- Do I give immediate and suitable feedback?
- Are the students becoming independent learners?
- Do the students set and review personal goals and engage in the evaluation of their own progress?
- Do the students work collaboratively and cooperate?
- Do the students understand what they are learning, why they are learning and how they are learning?

Six Traits of Narrative Writing

Unlike the informational forms of writing (expositions, procedures, explanations, reports) that are detached from the writer as they are pure noting of some “cold” facts, in a noteworthy piece of narrative we hear the author’s voice, a voice appropriate for the topic, purpose and audience. The writer seems deeply committed to the topic and there is an exceptional sense of “writing being read”.

The writing is expressive engaging and sincere, we can spot an effective level of closeness to or distance from the audience. The writer seems to be aware of the reader and of how to communicate the message most effectively whereas the reader may discern the writer behind the words and feel a sense of interaction.

When a piece has voice, the reader can hear the natural rhythm and syntax of the narrator’s spoken language coming through the written words.

Since voice is born out of passion, understanding and deep commitment to share something with an audience on a particular topic, students need the freedom to select their writing topics and ideas. If we, teachers, continually provide topics for students, writing becomes an assignment. They begin to write for us, to please us, rather than to communicate. In these situations a student’s voice is lost. We teach them strategies for writing narratives, but have to let them choose the topic they like.

No matter what topic our students choose to write about, the question they continuously have to bear in their minds is “Is my writing interesting?” We always tell our students “Your story has to grab the reader’s attention” and we should constantly add that this can be possible if they use supporting

pieces of information that help writing come alive: details. By using them, what students write is exceptionally clear, focused, main ideas stand out and the reader can visualize the setting. Details can help a reader sense what the main character is feeling or thinking.

No one likes to read a piece of dull, interesting writing. It is amazing for our students to learn that just a few carefully chosen details can add new meaning and reader-appeal to their writing. Using details does not only mean adjectives, but also vivid verbs or specific nouns.

Understandably, all the students want their stories to be enjoyable and easy to be read. To achieve this they have to master fluency in writing. It refers to the natural flow of the language. We permanently have to teach our students to ask themselves when writing "Does one sentence flow into another?" If this happens, it means that our students' thoughts also flow from one to another smoothly and make sense.

Fluency in writing is dependent on a learner's language development, reading abilities and speech patterns. The more fluent he or she is in speaking, the more fluent he or she will be in writing; if he or she does not read word by word, his or her writing will be also fluent. Our students have to grow simultaneously as speakers, listeners, readers and writers.

Proceeding with our description of the six most important traits of a successful piece of narrative, we as teachers have to guide our students in using the most appropriate vocabulary. They again have to continuously think of a question when advancing with their piece of writing: "Do the words I use paint a specific picture?" If our students as writers-to-be use precise language, they will get distinct images to offer to their audience.

As EFL students, they will enjoy improving their vocabulary, in the end being proud of their achievement. The words need to be carefully chosen and thoughtfully placed for impact. Powerful words energize the writing, even slang and ordinary words, if used, seem purposeful and are effective. In order to get a clear image in the reader's mind, each student has to have an "action list" to look at when write. Here are some of the points on the list:

- Use a student dictionary or thesaurus to find more specific language
- Make a list of words that do not paint precise pictures and avoid their use (ex: nice, stuff, a lot, pretty etc)
- Read one sentence at a time from your writing and ask, "Are the words specific?"
- Set a goal to use four to six pieces of specific vocabulary in all your writing
- Ask friends to read your writing and tell you two or three weak and general words that can be improved.

Our students’ writing has also to show what is happening. It has to show the audience what was said, how it was said, how someone moved, what they saw. It has to take the audience to the scene, make it come alive for them. If the text tells what happens, it keeps the audience away, it does not involve them. We need to teach our students that in a noteworthy narrative they have to:

- describe the character’s actions rather than just say how she or he feels,
- use active verbs,
- describe a specific setting,
- show what the character is thinking,
- use some of the five senses to paint a picture of what is happening,
- eliminate dull phrases, make each word count.
- know that exact quotes let the reader “hear” what is being said
- know that showing internal reactions helps the reader “feel” the emotion of the piece.

The strong control of conventions (spelling, paragraph breaks, grammar and usage) is one of the most important traits of a piece of writing. It can sound like waste of time talking about them, but by using them we effectively enhance communication. We do not have to forget that the students we refer to in this book are EFL students, so there might be some errors but minor ones – if we consider the best students in a class – that do not impede readability. If the strategy called ‘paragraph breaks’ is skillfully manipulated it can reinforce the organizational structure of the narrative. Equally, the correct grammar and usage will contribute to clarity and style.

The organization of the narrative is definitely important and enhances the central idea(s) and its development. The order and structure move the reader through the text easily. The sequencing has to be effective, creative, the organizational structure should fit the topic, and the writing should be easy to follow. A remarkable narrative should be attractive from the very first part of it.

Conclusion

If we as teachers inspire students with the taste of reading, listening and thoughtfully study examples of pieces of writing, they will find out that there are the so-called leads, the first words an audience reads, the invitation to readers to become involved and read more. But even if we talk about these leads we do not have to place so much importance on the first words students write that they struggle and fret before putting the pencil to paper. Students have to be given the opportunity to let free their passion and commitment to write.

The role of teacher is therefore crucial in shaping the taste for reading and writing. The teacher will assist students in organizing their work, in understanding the structure of the text and extracting the topic, the main ideas, and the specific details in order to fully grasp the meaning. Conversely, learners will be able to create organized texts with appropriate structure and register.

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