Teaching writing

Introduction

When compared with speaking (S), writing (W) is far from it in importance. While in mother tongue, S is acquired, W is learned. Writing - hard enough even in mother tongue, so rather daunting a task in a foreign language. Thus, helping students to develop writing skills is a demanding enterprise for teachers.

Looking at it from students’ angle - typically in their teens, or younger. Writing skills may not be well developed in their mother tongue either. Their immature L1 writing skills imply: considerable input and practice in “higher order concerns” - development of ideas, organization, etc. – is needed.

In most school types, difficult to predict what writing skills students will need in their future professions → teachers focus on more immediate goals - preparing learners for socially prestigious language exams and final school leaving exam: ‘érettségi’. Washback effect - exams with their tasks influence the content of the teaching of writing.

Development of the writing skill

Development of writing skill - gradual process.

Writing subskills – of two types:
1. lower order subskills: first one of these to master: copying. Then dictation, and ‘writing-down’ or ‘writing-in-the-language’ exercises – whereby SS manipulate simple sentence structures. Aim: consolidating students’ spelling habits in the target language, (copying, dictation), and ‘Writing-down’ exercises help students retain and recycle newly learnt language items. Ur (1996) calls these writing as a means activities, as the primary aim is to develop other aspects of language through W.

2. higher-order subskills: teaching of W normally means ‘free writing’, i.e. when learners write a letter, composition or essay, write for developing writing skills. In this case we talk about W as an end, as we focus on W for W’s sake.

The stage of free writing is usually reached through the intermediary steps of ‘guided writing’, where students are given e.g. a skeleton letter that they have to fill in or they can rely on prompts which help them generate ideas and/or organize their thoughts. Ideally, students should be given ample initial guidance and this guidance should diminish over time.

Facets of writing activity

Communicative

Except for some types of writing (e.g. shopping lists, diaries, lecture notes) we do not write for ourselves, most of our writing - a kind of communication displaced in time and space. Writing is a communication process → writer needs to recognize the other side, the reader.

Successful communication in W pre-supposes a readership awareness, reflected in several aspects of the choices writers make. → Writing style should involve a sensitivity to readers and their knowledge, beliefs and expectations. Amount and kind of information included depend on consciousness of various features of readership.

Purposive

(Technical term for purposeful)
Similarly to the other skills, writing as a kind of communication is purposive. We write because we want to inform our audience about an occurrence or our views on a given topic, etc. It is important that students should have a clear purpose before they get down to the task of actual writing.

Another major issue is the selection of relevant information. Amount and kind of information the writer includes depend on context.

Accordingly, the writer must provide the reader with context as a guide to the correct interpretation. Hungarian students seem to have problems with this aspect of writing. This may be due to the fact that they are not experienced writers.

**Particular form of language and language use**

As we saw in relation to listening, also reading and speaking, significant difference between spoken and written language, each having an identifiable code of its own. A learner's success in learning to write depends in part on his or her mastery of the code's resources. Extensive reading within a subject area may provide a beginning writer with primary models from which writing skills can be inferred.

*Exposure to and analysis of genres* helps students cope with the task - they are exposed to a few typical models of the genre before producing a piece of writing of their own. This is especially true in the case of formal letters, whose language is highly formulaic and idiomatic.

**Cognitive**

Writing involves general problem-solving mental activities besides linguistic skills. The problems we encounter and the way we solve them - more or less different because of the idiosyncratic features of our individual cognitive systems.

Writing - simultaneous handling of several separate subprocesses - developing content, coherence, readership awareness, linguistic choices → short-term memory is put under particular strain. One way our limited capacities can cope with the processing demands → develop regularized/routinized subprocesses such as standard phrasing and methods of organization. Put it simply: practice a lot.

**Writing in L2**

Writers in L1 - relatively fully developed oral language system, as a basis for developing a writing system. L2 learners do not bring with them a fully developed second language system. At the same time they do bring with them already developed literacy skills in their first language. Tendency to simply map first language (L1) literacy skills onto a second language system which is not fully developed.

**Varieties of English**

Important consideration: target culture - British English, American English, international English? When teaching writing to non-native students of English, we are confronted with the problem - what kind of 'standard' to teach. One of the questions arising is whether there is a difference in the writing conventions of British and American writers, and, if there is, what this difference is.

Apart from examples of differences in layout of letters, organization of factual information in curriculum vitae, formulation of date, differences in spelling and vocabulary, there is little research
available. However, English writing tends to be information-oriented with a responsibility on the part of the writer to accommodate the reader.

Teaching writing
As was seen, writing is communicative. In real life, we communicate in the written mode because we have a purpose: we either want to inform (by narrating/describing/explaining something) or persuade our readers (by arguing for or against something). For successful communication, we need to meet our readers’ expectations towards our writing. Only possible, if we are aware of expectations.

Example: I am writing a letter of apology to someone, because I cannot go to the party they are giving, I should know my reader expects me to offer a weighty reason for me not going.

Consequently, purpose and audience are two major issues to be considered for the teaching of writing. Students must be set a clear purpose for writing tasks. Their audience, the reader(s) they are writing to - whether real or simulated, must also be clearly defined.

To make task more realistic - organise the writing activity so that the students also get some response to their writing. This response ideally should be of two kinds: response/feedback on the content, and on the layout, organisation and language of writing. Both should come from T, ideally also from peers. This fosters peer co-operation and positive group dynamics – both important in CLT.

Communicative competence in writing
‘communication displaced in time’ - readers cannot ask for immediate clarifications. → → clarity – a major strength of good writers, to make our meaning as clear as possible is a major concern for teaching writing.

Clarity - partly dependent on relevance of information to be given. Inefficient writers often have problems with it, tend to include a lot of irrelevant elements while omitting some relevant ones, which disrupts internal coherence.

Internal coherence in composition makes it easier for readers to follow our train of thought and clearly decode our intended message.

Coherence - enhanced by discourse markers of cohesion, cohesive devices, students should also have practice in their use. Gap-fill exercises are suitable for this purpose, but it is also useful if such features of some good pieces of writing are analysed in class.

As we remember, most oral communication is spontaneous - errors, false beginnings, hesitations are tolerated as long as they do not disturb comprehensibility or disrupt sense.

In writing, however, such inaccuracies not acceptable. linguistic accuracy and social appropriacy are even more important in writing than in speaking.

Linguistic accuracy – usually worked on separately from ‘free writing’ activities, but useful to help students develop in self-correction. Before given any peer/teacher feedback on their pieces of writing, students should be encouraged to first spot inaccuracies themselves.

Besides linguistic accuracy, the rules of social appropriacy must be observed. Reflected in choice of register appropriate for a particular piece of writing, i.e. how formal or informal we can be. Usually, informal letters not a serious problem to students, as those are closest to spoken language they are more familiar with.
formal letters - highly idiomatic and formulaic language, difficult to students. → → genre analysis approach: Prior to actual writing, students exposed to a variety of good models representing the particular genre we are dealing with. Students identify e.g. typical layout and organisation rules of the genre, observe characteristic language patterns and idioms, features that express the different degrees of formality.

Stages of the writing process
first stage - brainstorming. During this students give their ideas free flow and make a note of anything that comes to their minds. Write down key-words to remind them of the idea later. First, students work on their own. Any idea is welcome; nothing should be evaluated or discarded. They should not get stuck with any language problems. If flow of ideas dried up, SS pool their ideas to generate more content.

2nd stage - organizing ideas. Decide which ideas of previous stage to keep or discard as irrelevant. Then remaining ideas organised into logical sequence.
Form to take: peer co-operation or lockstep discussion.

3rd st: With previous stage, most of the content already generated - what they want to say and in which order. Next stage, drafting can come.

SS should attend to text generation globally, i.e. on the sentence and discourse level, not to worry about finer nuances of the appropriacy of individual words as yet.

4th st: revising and editing. SS revise globally first (checking organisation and sequencing of ideas, attending to appropriacy of cohesive devices) and make necessary changes. Then they revise locally. This time attend to appropriacy of individual words. Encouraging students as early on as possible to use monolingual dictionaries is advisable. Correcting possible grammatical mistakes also belongs to this stage.

Finally – proofreading. SS attend to spelling and punctuation here.

The stages of drafting, revising, editing and proofreading can be done as homework for a more efficient exploitation of classroom time. Students then bring to the class the first draft they are satisfied with.

Next – SS are given feedback on their drafts, preferably first by peers, then by T. It is useful to negotiate feedback so that SS have a clear understanding of what is unclear/wrong/inaccurate in their compositions.

Problems and inaccuracies should only be indicated and students try to correct themselves. Still, they should also be allowed to rely on peers’ and/or teacher’s help on how to improve the necessary aspects if they feel they are not competent enough to cope.

Following feedback, students re-write their compositions trying to eliminate indicated problems as well as they can. This can again be done as homework so that students can work at their own pace at home without taking up class time.