

Considerations Concerning EFL Writing Instruction



***Saksit Saengboon**



A frequent lament heard among EFL teachers is that distressingly large numbers of their students fail to acquire adequate writing skills. This lament has prevailed in the realm of writing sphere for years. As far as this problem is concerned, some teachers believe that students' inadequate ability to write is partly the result of a shift of focus in teaching approach from grammar translation and audiolingualism to communicative language teaching (CLT). That is, they erroneously criticize that CLT ignores grammatical accuracy and form. As a result, they argue with tunnel vision that to teach students how to write, teachers should stress grammatical accuracy and thus correct every grammatical mistake right at the outset of a writing class. This practice is considered by such teachers a magic pill which will enable their students to eventually become good writers. Worse yet, some other teachers whose commitment to improve students' writing abilities have become desperate. They thus believe that nothing could be done to enable such students to be proficient writers. This is because they have found solace in a seemingly sensible belief that impeccable writing is an inborn gift, a kind of genetic endowment.

While I am skeptical about the above assertions, I am certain that writing is a complex task. It is complex in the sense that it is not just a matter of "writing things down" (Omaggio, 1986 : 221). That is to say, it requires, among other things, purpose, thinking, drafting, knowledge of audience, rewriting and persistence. Clearly, writing is not easy.

Given that writing is a difficult task, a time-consuming one, what considerations should we EFL teachers be aware of, so that we will be able to make our students become better writers?

1. Achievement breeds achievement.

I am very convinced that instead of correcting mistakes in every nook and cranny of students' papers, we teachers should look for strengths in their writing and guide students as to how to utilize those strengths to improve inadequacy in their writings. In other words, we

**Instructor level 5, Language Center, National Institute of Development Administration : M.A. (English as a second Language) Univ. of Arizona.*

should not saturate students' papers with red ink so much that they would feel daunted, thus stopping learning, for what they write tends to be criticized for its shortcomings. But rather, what we should do is "...shift the focus of our comments on student papers to what is working so they can revise what isn't working" (Mittan, 1989, p. 207).

Some teachers who are fiercely loyal tyrannies of grammar and form may disagree with me on the ideas above. However, if we are to truly practise what CLT authorities preach, we would allow grammatical accuracy and correct form to come into play only when students revise and edit their papers (Kaplan, 1983, p. 250). What I am proposing here is that once students feel they are able to handle writing tasks, they will gain more confidence, thus imbuing themselves with enthusiasm to keep learning how to write and to be more willing to take risks. These are crucial factors that can enhance L2 learning (Brown, 1987, : 105). Just as it is true that parents' verbal abuse can lower children's self-esteem, teachers' over-correction would make students feel inadequate. The key point I am making here is achievement breeds achievement.

2. No one's writing is perfect.

Pessimistic though the above heading may sound, it is not far-fetched to claim that rarely can one find a consummate piece of prose ever produced by student writers. However, that no students can write perfect prose does not necessarily mean that they cannot learn how to write well. In reality, I find it difficult to define what perfect prose is, especially when we deal with the writing of EFL students. For one thing, different cultures have different rhetorical conventions. For example, while the writing of English speaking students is generally linear, Oriental students are prone to write circular prose (Kaplan, 1972, p. 245-262). Consequently, it is no surprise that a noticeable number of Oriental students may not write in English successfully, although they are armed with a good knowledge of English grammar.

Moreover, to write successful prose, let alone a perfect one, students have to take into account the importance of appropriate styles which differ from one situation to another (McKay, 1979, p. 80). As a matter of fact, there seems to be single criterion on which native speakers base their judgements of perfect writing. Hence,

there has recently been a movement towards "plain English" in official documents to attack "gobbledegook--the use of unnecessary complicated language by government departments, business..." (Crystal, 1988, p.266). In a nutshell, it is by no means possible to expect our students to write perfect papers, but trying to make our students write better is worth an effort.

3. A process-oriented approach to teaching should be stressed.

Given that writing is a multi-faceted skill, we should underscore the fact that one's ability to write succinctly can be acquired only when one undergoes a process of writing in which, as Zamel (1982) puts it, "writing is taught as a process of discovery which implies that revision becomes the main focus of the course and that the teacher, who traditionally provides feedback after the fact, intervenes to guide students through the process." (p. 205). In other words, students are taught how to explore ideas to write about, which can be accomplished through pre-writing, writing, and re-writing activities. Also, through this process students need not write comprehensive outlines, but rather encouraged to "...take more informal notes or jot down ideas..." and are reassured that "...they need not know from the outset what it is they are going to say..." (p. 205).

Moreover, this process-oriented approach to teaching EFL writing, as Raimes (1986) puts it, "... does not neglect product concerns, but approaches them by means of the students' writing, the students' processes, the students' content rather than by means of the teacher's prescriptions." (p. 163). This implies that grammatical accuracy and rhetorical forms are not neglected, because they are given attention in a re-writing or revision phase. In sum, through this process, students are believed to be on the right track that leads to ways of overcoming difficulties they encounter in their writing endeavours.

Based upon what I have written so far, it is obvious that writing well and the teaching of writing are difficult. While I have no doubts the importance of grammar, I also believe that writing instruction should not be confused with the teaching of grammar. In fact, the latter should be ancillary to the former. Although we teachers should assume authority in teaching to some extent, we cannot assert that what we are preaching is an absolute truth

to which students must adhere. This is because there is not and will never be such an inflexible truth in the EFL pedagogy.

To summarise, the ideas expressed in this paper should not be regarded as a panacea able to cure all flawed writings, considering that "...our understanding of the language learning process is partial..." (Freeman, 1989, p. 28). Actually, there is no hard and fast rule that students

can apply to brilliantly craft pieces of prose. Nevertheless, I am certain that by being willing to experiment with ideas and methods we have already had, we can make a difference, we can make things happen. Although we may not be able to make our students become literary award-winning figures, I am sure that we can produce better student writers.

This is no small achievement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, H.D. **Principles of Language Learning and Teaching**. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs : Prentice-Hall, 1987.
- Crystal, D. **The English Language**. London : The Penguin Group, 1988.
- Freeman, D. "Teacher Training, Development, and Decision Making : A Model of Teaching and Related Strategies for Language Teacher Education." **TESOL Quarterly**. No. 23, 1989. p. 28.
- Kaplan, R. "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education." **Readings on English as a Second Language**. Cambridge : Winthrop, 1972.
- "Reading and Writing, Technology and Planning : To Do What And With What And To Whom ?" **Georgetown University Round Table on Language and Linguistics 1983**. Washington, D.C. : Georgetown University, 1983.
- McKay, S. "Communicative Writing." **TESOL Quarterly**. No. 13, 1979. p. 80.
- Mitlan, R. "The Peer Review Process : Harnessing Students' Communicative Power." in **Richness in Writing**. New York : Longman, 1989.
- Omaggio, A. **Teaching Language in Context**. M.A. : Meinle & Heinle, 1986.
- Raimes, A. "Teaching ESL Writing : Fitting What We Do To What We Know." **The Writing Instructor** No. 5, 1986, p. 163.
- Zamle, V. "The Process of Discovering Meaning." **TESOL Quarterly**. No. 16, 1982. p. 205-206.