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Planning a writing lesson

Writing, unlike speaking, is not an ability we acquire naturally, even in our first language - it has to be taught. Unless L2 learners are explicitly taught how to write in the new language, their writing skills are likely to get left behind as their speaking progresses.



Author: Catherine Morley

But teaching writing is not just about grammar, spelling, or the mechanics of the Roman alphabet. Learners also need to be aware of and use the conventions of the genre in the new language.

- What is genre?
- Stages of a writing lesson
 - Generating ideas

- Focusing ideas
- Focus on a model text
- Organising ideas
- Writing
- Peer evaluation
- Reviewing
- Conclusion

What is genre?

A genre can be anything from a menu to a wedding invitation, from a newspaper article to an estate agent's description of a house. Pieces of writing of the same genre share some features, in terms of layout, level of formality, and language. These features are more fixed in formal genre, for example letters of complaint and essays, than in more 'creative' writing, such as poems or descriptions. The more formal genre often feature in exams, and may also be relevant to learners' present or future 'real-world' needs, such as university study or business. However, genre vary considerably between cultures, and even adult learners familiar with a range of genre in their L1 need to learn to use the conventions of those genre in English.

Stages of a writing lesson

I don't necessarily include all these stages in every writing lesson, and the emphasis given to each stage may differ according to the genre of the writing and / or the time available. Learners work in pairs or groups as much as possible, to share ideas and knowledge, and because this provides a good opportunity for practising the speaking, listening and reading skills.

Generating ideas

This is often the first stage of a process approach to writing. Even when producing a piece of writing of a highly conventional genre, such as a letter of complaint, using learners' own ideas can make the writing more memorable and meaningful.

- Before writing a letter of complaint, learners think about a situation when they have complained about faulty goods or bad service (or have felt like complaining), and tell a partner.
- As the first stage of preparing to write an essay, I give learners the essay title and pieces of scrap paper. They have 3 minutes to work alone, writing one idea on each piece of paper, before comparing in groups. Each group can then present their 3 best ideas to the class. It doesn't matter if the ideas aren't used in the final piece of writing, the important thing is to break through the barrier of '*I can't think of anything to write.*'

Focusing ideas

This is another stage taken from a process approach, and it involves thinking about which of the many ideas generated are the most important or relevant, and perhaps taking a particular point of view.

- As part of the essay-writing process, students in groups put the ideas generated in the previous stage onto a 'mind map'. The teacher then draws a mind-map on the board, using ideas from the different groups. At this stage he / she can also feed in some useful collocations - this gives the learners the tools to better express their own ideas.
- I tell my students to write individually for about 10 minutes, without stopping and without worrying about grammar or punctuation. If they don't know a particular word, they write it in their L1. This often helps learners to further develop some of the ideas used during the '*Generating ideas*' stage. Learners then compare together what they have written, and use a dictionary, the teacher or each other to find in English any words or phrases they wrote in their L1.

Focus on a model text

Once the students have generated their own ideas, and thought about which are the most important or relevant, I try to give them the tools to express those ideas in the most appropriate way. The examination of model texts is often prominent in product or genre approaches to writing, and will help raise learners' awareness of the conventions of typical texts of different genres in English.

- I give learners in groups several examples of a genre, and they use a genre analysis form to identify the features and language they have in common. This raises their awareness of the features of the genre and gives them some language 'chunks' they can use in their own writing.
Genre analysis form 54k ([/sites/teacheng/files/genre_form.pdf](/sites/teacheng/files/genre_form.pdf))
- Learners identify the function of different paragraphs in a piece of writing. For example, in a job application letter, the functions of the paragraphs might be something like;
 - reason for writing
 - how I found out about the job
 - relevant experience, skills and abilities
 - closing paragraph asking for an interview
- Learners are given an essay with the topic sentences taken out, and put them back in the right place. This raises their awareness of the organisation of the essay and the importance of topic sentences.

Organising ideas

Once learners have seen how the ideas are organised in typical examples of the genre, they can go about organising their own ideas in a similar way.

- Students in groups draft a plan of their work, including how many paragraphs and the main points of each paragraph. These can then be pinned up around the room for comment and comparison.
- When preparing to write an essay, students group some of the ideas produced earlier into main and supporting statements.

Writing

In a pure process approach, the writer goes through several drafts before producing a final version. In practical terms, and as part of a general English course, this is not always possible. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to let students know beforehand if you are going to ask them to write a second draft. Those with access to a word processor can then use it, to facilitate the redrafting process. The writing itself can be done alone, at home or in class, or collaboratively in pairs or groups.

Peer evaluation

Peer evaluation of writing helps learners to become aware of an audience other than the teacher. If students are to write a second draft, I ask other learners to comment on what they liked / didn't like about the piece of work, or what they found unclear, so that these comments can be incorporated into the second draft. The teacher can also respond at this stage by commenting on the content and the organisation of ideas, without yet giving a grade or correcting details of grammar and spelling.

Reviewing

When writing a final draft, students should be encouraged to check the details of grammar and spelling, which may have taken a back seat to ideas and organisation in the previous stages. Instead of correcting writing myself, I use codes to help students correct their own writing and learn from their mistakes.

Error correction code 43k (/sites/teacheng/files/error_code.pdf)

Conclusion

By going through some or all of these stages, learners use their own ideas to produce a piece of writing that uses the conventions of a genre appropriately and in so doing, they are asked to think about the audience's expectations of a piece of writing of a particular genre, and the impact of their writing on the reader.

If you have any ideas that you feel have successfully helped your students to develop their writing why not add them as a comment below and share them.

Further reading

A process genre approach to teaching writing by Badger, Richards and White. *ELT Journal*

Volume 54(2), pp. 153-160

Writing by T Hedge. Oxford University Press.

Writing by C Tribble. Oxford University Press

Process writing by R White and V Arndt. Longman

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(https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/genre_form.pdf)

53.52 KB



error_code.pdf

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42.89 KB

Comments



Submitted by Juliao Sergio ... on Sat, 07/17/2021 - 10:45

Permalink (/comment/208166#comment-208166)

Planning a Writing Lesson Plan (/comment/208166#comment-208166)

I believe this will make the lesson not only productive but also interesting. Thank you.

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Submitted by Norbersmanc on Fri, 02/12/2021 - 12:52

Permalink (/comment/207937#comment-207937)

Thanks for a very interesting (/comment/207937#comment-207937)

Thanks for a very interesting and useful article.

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Submitted by Jackieells on Sat, 02/29/2020 - 08:07

Permalink (/comment/207207#comment-207207)

Reader (/comment/207207#comment-207207)

Good post

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Submitted by Khuraman Safarova on Fri, 01/17/2014 - 19:34

Permalink (/comment/203327#comment-203327)

Planning a writing lesson (/comment/203327#comment-203327)

Writing may be helpful to let students remember the new words and small stories easiely,it is not boring. It may be dictation and different writing forms.I have some

interesting games about it. They are picture game, flower game, letter game, tic-tac and categorizing Category may be different. for ex. alphabet, animals, school objects professions and so on. Children love these games very much Alphabet category: A--apple, B--banana, C-cherry, D--date, ...

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Submitted by small9 on Fri, 05/03/2013 - 05:03

Permalink (/comment/178223#comment-178223)

Ideas first, then language (/comment/178223#comment-178223)

Thanks for sharing the plan~

I found in my class that it is always 'Ideas first, then language follows', similar to L1 writing.

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Submitted by Thaise Cruz Caires on Wed, 01/16/2013 - 16:06

Permalink (/comment/81938#comment-81938)

Adding info (/comment/81938#comment-81938)

Adding info to this amazing plan that, by the way, I'll use in my next class tomorrow... we can also add grammar rules to this plan, maybe when it's done: content words, functions, exponents and etc. That probably would make grammar teaching and learning not so boring or awkward! Do you agree with me? Good job.

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Submitted by nahla_shaw on Fri, 02/17/2012 - 19:53

Permalink (</comment/29936#comment-29936>)

reply (</comment/29936#comment-29936>)

Dear Catherine,

I found your article very useful and I love the advice you give. When I ask my students to write an essay, I tend to correct their mistakes for them and after reading the article I realized that I should be doing it the way you suggested. I learned from my mistakes by finding them out and correcting them not having them corrected for me.

Thank you for a wonderful article.

Nahla

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Submitted by rismal80 on Sun, 07/08/2012 - 23:18

Permalink (</comment/42026#comment-42026>)

Re : Planning a writing lesson (</comment/42026#comment-42026>)

Thanks for nice info.

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Submitted by eugeniapapaioannou on Tue, 01/03/2012 - 10:02

Permalink (</comment/19421#comment-19421>)

Re: Planning a writing lesson submitted by Catherine Morley (/comment/19421#comment-19421)

Dear Catherine,

I read your very interesting article on 'Planning a Writing Lesson'. I was glad to reconfirm all these stages that we have also been applying in my 2 Language Centres for the last 30 years and we are still developing! I'd like to contribute to the Error Correction Codes if I may by adding some symbols (as we call them) such as:

we wrong expression

P wrong punctuation

L1 mother tongue interference a inappropriate (i.e. etc. in an essay)

v wrong verb form (i.e. he have)

G wrong grammar (i.e. leafes instead of leaves)

R you repeat yourself (when the same point/idea is presented in another part of the essay)

st wrong style (i.e. informal words/abbreviations in formal writing)

^ add a word/a word is missing / leave a word out

We started using a list of symbols about 30 years ago following the international bibliography. Then we gradually added the above symbols for the following reasons: Symbol G (grammar error) defines the error and it becomes more specific for the learner; for some years we had used WW for wrong words/grammar errors but we found out during a teachers' meeting that the symbol WW was not adequate for all wrong words. Another symbol that is useful is L1 (mother tongue interference) as students tend to often express themselves in their mother tongue (expressions or words that, in our case, may make sense in Greek but are inaccurate in English). The symbol R (you repeat yourself) can help the learners see why a new paragraph (where they may still be presenting the same idea but with different vocabulary) does not get any credit and marksdwns their essay, especially when practising writing tasks part A for their Cambridge Examinations where the points are given in the topic and the students are required to develop all of them. The symbol ST (wrong style) has also proved very useful to alert them against using informal words/phrasal verbs when writing a formal essay/letter. The symbol A (inappropriate) was represented before by WW (wrong word) but we needed to emphasise that some words, such as etc or OK, in a writing task other than an informal letter or informal e-mail are unacceptable. It has worked very well with our students. The symbol ^ (add a

word/a word is missing) makes the learners think over about the expressions/sentences/clauses they have used in that particular line; sometimes the subject or the object of a verb are missing, which of course is GR (grammar error) but at the same time it makes their sentence or paragraph inaccurate or incomprehensible.

Thank you again for such an interesting article.

Eugenia Papaioannou, EFL teacher, Greece

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Submitted by Natalja Gorohova on Mon, 06/27/2011 - 03:50

Permalink (/comment/16158#comment-16158)

Student ideas come first! (/comment/16158#comment-16158)

Thank you, I've just received one of the most useful advice regarding the stages of teaching Writing.

In the approach you're describing, Focusing on a Model Text comes only after the students have generated, ranked/prioritised and drafted their own ideas. I was doing it the other way around, introducing the sample texts/tasks (Business Emails) before I even attempted to elicit any pre-existing knowledge the students might have on the subject.

The result was either making the subject only marginally relevant to the students, or making them feel that they're not contributing much to the lesson. Once you flip these writing stages around, the frustration of not being able to come up with original ideas is replaced by the sense of achievement, when their ideas are confirmed in the model texts.

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Submitted by Mohira on Fri, 06/03/2011 - 19:06

Permalink (/comment/15934#comment-15934)

Planning a writing lesson (/comment/15934#comment-15934)

I have read the article of "Planning a writing lesson" which was submitted by Catherine Morley on the 27th of April in 2011.

The article was devoted to the most important theme. So it is very useful for every teacher. One teaches language certainly he must teach how to create writings in this language. As the author mentioned this skill has to be taught even in the native language. Catherine wrote her article absolutely great as she could give the best plan how to conduct a writing lesson. I am entirely agree with her viewpoints. I've learnt some good things from her article. She gave her lesson plan accurately. There are a number of examples which help us to understand her points correctly. In the future I also want to use the author's plan to teach my students.

Thank you.

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