Writing skills in English language teaching methodology

A.A. Tautenbaeva, A.B. Seitsh - Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences and Master student of Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Institute of Magistracy and PhD Doctorate Education

Writing as a skill is very important in teaching and learning a foreign language; it helps pupils to assimilate letters and sounds of the English language, its vocabulary and grammar, and to develop habits and skills in pronunciation, speaking, and reading.

The practical value of writing is great because it can fix patterns of all kinds (graphemes, words, phrases and sentences) in pupils' memory, thus producing a powerful effect on their mind. That is why the school syllabus reads: "Writing is a mighty means of teaching a foreign language". Writing includes penmanship, spelling, and composition.

What is writing?
The skills-based approach views writing as a collection of separate skills, including letter formation, spelling, punctuation, grammar, organization, and the like. This approach also views writing as a product-oriented task. In this respect, McLaughlin state that writing, like many other complex tasks, requires "learners organize a set of related subtasks and their components". In contrast, the whole-language approach views writing as a meaning-making process which is governed by purpose and audience rather than by compositional rules.

From the author's point of view, a thorough definition of writing should involve both skills and meaning. This is precisely the perspective taken by Krashen who states:

Writing competence is necessary, but is not sufficient. Writers who are competent, who have acquired the code, may still be unable to display their competence because of inefficient composing processes. Efficient composing processes, writing "performance", can be developed via sheer practice as well as instruction.
The importance of writing

In the area of EFL, writing has many uses and functions. To begin with, the ability to write acceptable scientific English is essential for post-graduate students who must write their dissertations in English. Moreover, writing EFL allows for communication to large numbers of people all over the world. It also provides students with physical evidence of their achievement. This in turn helps them to determine what they know and what they don’t know. As Irmscher notes, "in our minds, we can feel ourselves. Not on paper, if no thought is in our minds, nothing comes out. Mental fuzziness translates into words only as fuzziness or meaninglessess."

Writing can also enhance students’ thinking skills. As Irmscher notes, "Writing stimulates thinking, chiefly because it forces us to concentrate and organize. Talking, too, but writing allows more time for introspection and deliberation" (loc. cit.).

Additionally, writing can enhance students’ vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. Finally, writing skills often needed for formal and informal testing.

The teaching and learning of writing

The skills-oriented teachers teach writing in fragmented pieces with the assumption that students cannot compose until they master the subskills that stem from writing. These subskills are taught explicitly through the use of techniques such as the following:

1) Copying model compositions;
2) Organizing a set of disorganized notes into topic areas with topic sentences and secondary points;
3) Rearranging scrambled sentences to make up a paragraph;
4) Predicting the method(s) of developing a topic sentence;
5) Analyzing a passage with the help of questions such as the following:
   - Which sentence states the main idea?
   - What sentences directly support the main idea?
   - What method did the writer use to develop the main idea?
6) Filling in the missing connectives in a composition;
7) Filling in the missing words or sentences in a composition;
8) Combining a set of sentences to make up a composition;
9) Writing topic sentences to given paragraphs;
10) Reading a passage and answering the questions about it in complete sentences to make up a paragraph;
11) Making a summary of a reading or listening passage using one’s own words as far as possible;
12) Rewriting a passage from another person’s point of view;
13) Changing a narrative into a dialog;
14) Changing a dialog into a narrative.

The whole language teachers teach writing by immersing students in the process of writing. In whole language classrooms, students write whole compositions and share them with the teacher or other people from the start. The following techniques are consistent with the whole-language perspective.

1) Dialogue journal writing

Dialogue journal is a long-term written conversation between a student and the teacher in or out of classroom. Students write on any topic and the teacher writes back to each student, making comments and offering opinions.

Teachers do not correct journals in the traditional sense. Rather they respond by asking questions and commenting on the content. Such responses drive the process and endow the activity with meaning.

The dialogue journal partner does not have to be the teacher and that students may be paired with each other. Rather than leaving dialogue journal topics completely open-ended, the teacher can use it to focus the discussion on a certain topic.

In classes with word processors that are easily accessible to all students, the journal may be on a disk passed back and forth if schools have access to electronic mail, message can be sent without the exchange of disks. With access to computer networks, students can keep dialogue journals with other students in different parts of the world.

The benefits of dialogue journal writing in general include individualizing the teaching of writing, using writing and reading for real communication, making students more process-oriented, bridging the gap between speaking and writing, developing students' awareness of the real purposes of reading and writing, helping students become more relaxed as writers, promoting autonomous learning, improving vocabulary and punctuation skills, raising self-confidence, helping students become more fluent writers, and increasing opportunities for interaction between students and teachers and among students themselves.

In addition to the above benefits, electronic dialogue journals enable students to send in their journals at any time of day or night and the recipient to answer at his/her convenience. Moreover, in a study on the difference between the discourse in dialogue journals written on paper and those sent via e-mail, Wang (1993) found that ESL students who used e-mail wrote more text, asked more questions, and used more language functions than students who wrote on paper.

According to the author's point of view, the use of dialogue journals with EFL students should move from
correspondence between students and teacher to correspondence among students themselves, and from controlled to open-ended topics.

2) Letter writing

Letter writing is another technique for immersing students in writing to a real audience for a real purpose. Students use this technique when they want to communicate through writing with someone inside or outside the school. After writing their letters, students deliver or mail them for hope that they will be answered. Respondents accepts students' letters and comments on meaning rather than on form.

The most important reason for using letter writing is that students enjoy writing and receiving letters. Another reason is that descriptive, expository, persuasive, expressive, and narrative forms of writing can be practiced in letters, whether intended for real use or not.

In an effort to understand young children's abilities as letter writers, whether or not very young native English-speaking children could sustain a letter-writing dialogue. The researchers found that children, from the beginning, functioned totally efficiently and appropriately as correspondents. As the exchange progressed, children showed that they could generate novel topics, sustain topics, and when appropriate, close topics. Letter dialogue writing improved students' writing skills as well as their self-esteem.

3) Process writing

Hailst-Taylor (1994), in her book, Whole Language Strategies for ESL Students, describes process writing in the following way:

Process writing is an approach which encourages ESL youngsters (and adults) to communicate their own written messages while simultaneously developing their literacy skills; rather than delaying involvement in the writing process, as advocated in the past, until students have perfected their abilities in handwriting, reading, phonics, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In process writing, the communication of the message is paramount and therefore the developing, but inaccurate, attempts at handwriting, spelling and grammar are accepted.

Process writing, as described above, can improve students' writing because it encourages them to write and to continue writing whatever their ability level.

Process writing also refers to the process a writer engages in when constructing meaning. This process can be divided into three major stages: pre-writing, writing and post-writing. The pre-writing stage involves planning, outlining, brainstorming, gathering information, etc. The writing stage involves the actual wording and structuring of the information into written discourse. The post-writing stage involves proofreading, editing, publishing, etc.

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in writing showed that "teachers' encouragement of... process-related activities was strongly related to average writing proficiency".

The comprehensive approach holds that the process and product of writing are complementary and that a combination of both can boost writing proficiency above the levels that occur with either alone. In support of this view, Hairston (1982) states:

We cannot teach students to write by looking only at what they have written. We must also understand how the product came into being, and why it assumed the form that it did. We have to understand what goes on during the act of writing. (p. 84).

Oponents of the skills-based approach claim that the teaching of writing subskills is often uninteresting. As Rose (1982) points out "Parts of the problem in teaching children the mechanics of writing is that the teaching is often uninteresting. Teachers themselves may have a distaste for the elements of grammar and punctuation" (p. 384). Such opponents add that an overemphasis on writing conventions may go get in the way of communicating meaning. As Newman (1985) puts it:

An overemphasis on accurate spelling, punctuation, and neat handwriting can actually produce a situation in which children come to see the conventions of writing as more important than the meaning they are trying to convey. (p. 28)

On the other hand, proponents of the whole-language approach claim that students cannot convey meaning without writing conventions.

From the foregoing, it is clear that just like the skills-based approach, the whole-language approach is necessary, but not sufficient for writing acquisition. Therefore, the comprehensive approach suggests the following three basic steps as a procedure for teaching writing to foreign language students:

(1) Presentation of writing skills. In this step, the teacher explains some vocabulary, a grammatical rule, a punctuation rule and a spelling rule. Such skills should provide the basis for the other two steps.

(2) Guided writing. In this step, students read a model composition. Then, under the guidance of their teacher, they use the skills explained to them in step one as well as the skills they acquired by themselves in summarizing this model composition or changing it from a narrative to a dialog or vice versa.

(3) Independent writing. In this step, each student independently writes a whole composition on a self-selected topic using the writing process. She then discusses what she has written other students in the class.


Түйіндеу: Макалада жатыр ағылшын тілін үйрету адамдардың жауап қақтарында. Қазіргі таңда өкі құрылыс, қызықтыру және құрметтің жауап қақтарында жатыр ағылшын тілін үйрету қажет. Осы адамдардың өз болуы және олардың өзінің қызметтеріне қарама-қарсы қақтары ғана болмайды. Тілін үйрету қажет, ол өз ісіне, өз қызметіне, өз ғана құрметтің жауап қақтарында жатыр ағылшын тілін үйрету қажет.

Түйін сөзден: өкі құрылыс, құрметтің жауап қақтарын, қызықтыру, құрмет. Орфография.

Анатомия: Қазіргі таңда өкі құрылыс, қызықтыру және құрметтің жауап қақтарында жатыр ағылшын тілін үйрету қажет. Осы адамдардың өз болуы және олардың өзінің қызметтеріне қарама-қарсы қақтары ғана болмайды. Тілін үйрету қажет, ол өз ісіне, өз қызметіне, өз ғана құрметтің жауап қақтарында жатыр ағылшын тілін үйрету қажет.

Ключевые слова: өкі құрылыс, қызықтыру, құрметтің жауап қақтары, құрмет, қызықтыру, орфография.