

Using Writing Strategies to Improve Students' Writing

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Abstract

As writing is the most difficult skill for EFL learners to acquire, this article is to encourage language teachers who teach writing to introduce writing strategies to their students.

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Introduction

A condition in which a person has writing difficulty in many aspects such as clarity, accuracy and spelling is called “dysgraphia” (Westwood, 2004). According to Heydari and Bagheri (2012), writing is a complex process even in the first language. Besides, it is undoubtedly more complicated to write in a foreign language.

It may be easier for second or foreign language learners to speak a language; however, it is not that easy for them to write. It is quite common to witness this in classrooms when we teach students writing. Students with writing difficulty will not be interested in a writing class since they cannot or are very slow to transform their ideas into text; in other words, they lack fluency in turning ideas to text.

The way they avoid writing could result in a lack of practice and no improvement in writing (Westwood, 2004). In addition, the inadequacy of knowledge in grammar and vocabulary could lead to the ineffective writing of an EFL writer(Olsen, 1999).

Apart from the aforementioned, there are evidences showing the relationship between writers’ beliefs on writing and the strategies they use while writing (Lavelle &Bushrow, 2007).

Writing Strategies

Research studies for the past three decades have been conducted more on the L1 field. The conclusions confirm that writers use all types of writing strategies. According to Lavelle &Bushrow (2007), a five-factor writing structure writers use are: elaborative, low self-efficacy, no revision, scientist and task oriented. While in the L2 field, writers use a six-factor analytically-created composing strategy taxonomy, which includes memory-related, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective (Khaldieh, 2000).

According to Ding (2008), two approaches to initiate novice or less proficiency writers to practice writing are cognitive apprenticeship and social apprenticeship. For the cognitive apprenticeship, students make use of modeling, scaffolding, coaching, and collaboration to improve their learning in formal settings, while for the social apprenticeship, students socialize, interact and collaborate with experts, colleagues, and peers in informal settings to attain their disciplinary knowledge and experiences. In short, writers with different proficiency levels tend to use different writing strategies.

This article; therefore, intends to remind language teachers who teach writing to encourage their students to use writing strategies as much as possible if both the teachers and the students themselves want to improve their writing skills.

In the L2 field, there are three sets of writing strategies (Cabrejas Penuelas, 2012). Firstly, a three-factor structure or the three macro-writing processes refers to planning, formulation or transcription, and revision (Hirose & Sasaki, 1994). Secondly, a four-factor structure or metacognitive strategies include planning, monitoring, evaluating, and resourcing (Victori, 1997). Lastly, a six-factor analytically-created composing strategy taxonomy involves memory-related, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective strategies (Khaldieh, 2000). The last set is adopted from Oxford's Inventory Learning Strategies (1990).

How to apply writing strategies

The following are details of strategies, adapted from Cabrejas Penuelas (2012) and Oxford (1990). Teachers are highly recommended to introduce these strategies to their students, making them actively engaged by using them during writing tasks.

For the Memory strategies, the teachers should activate their students to:

1. Relate their composition topics to their background knowledge.
2. Use new words in a sentence so that they can remember them.
3. Memorize new English words by writing them down several times.
4. Revise their old compositions so as not to forget the mistakes they made and how to

solve them. For the Cognitive strategies, the teachers should encourage their students to:

5. Try out different ideas either orally or in writing to find out what they want to say.

6. Reread frequently in an attempt to find out what they want to say.

7. Review previous sections of the text when they find a mismatch between their written texts and the ideas they want to express.

8. Reformulate linguistic expressions when they are not sure they are right.

9. Try to put their meanings on paper as quickly as possible so as not to forget

their ideas even if they experience spelling or grammatical problems.

10. Write different drafts of their compositions.

11. Read books or good writers' compositions to improve their writing.

12. Move paragraphs around in an attempt to organize their writing in a more coherent way.

13. Compare their compositions with their plans or outlines to see how well they match or to consider changes.

14. Put aside their writing for a few days to reconsider their thoughts with a fresh mind.

15. Read their compositions aloud to "feel" their sound.

16. Use transition words ("thus", "however", "nevertheless" and so on) in their compositions that would help their readers to understand their points.

17. Choose words and expressions that are formal when they write formally and informal forms when they write informally. For the Compensation strategies, the teachers should introduce their students to:

18. Use synonyms when they can't find the words they mean.

19. Use dictionaries to find out words that they don't know how to express in English.

20. Repeat in an attempt to keep their writing going.

21. Make guesses when they can't find the exact words that they need.
22. Use sources when they don't have enough ideas to complete their compositions.
23. Make short pauses while writing their compositions to consider what they have written so far. For the Metacognitive strategies, the teachers suggest their students to:
24. Make decisions about the contents, organizations of their compositions and the linguistic expressions and how they should do about them before starting to write or while writing.
25. Plan their compositions in advance or while writing either mentally or in writing.
26. Plan the contents and organizations of their compositions.
27. Go back to their plans to consider the ideas they have written down and to reformulate them if they feel they are flawed.
28. Set themselves long-term and short-term goals for improving their writing.
29. Think whether or not their ideas are clear as they are on paper.
30. Frequently think of their audiences so as to adjust their texts to their needs.
31. Pay attention to aspects such as thesis statements, topic and supporting sentences.
32. Write with a specific purpose in mind (i.e. to convince, inform, narrate an event and so on).
33. Be concerned with their lack of writing fluency and do something about it.
34. Follow a certain organization in their compositions that would help their readers understand their points.
35. Have a set of priorities when revising their compositions: first, ideas and

organization and then grammar and spelling concerns.

36. Know the characteristics of good essays.

37. Be aware of the effectiveness of the strategies that they employ for their writing. For the Affective strategies, the teachers should encourage their students

38. Find a better solution to a linguistic problem in their compositions.

39. Reward themselves when they are given a good grade in their compositions.

40. Motivate themselves to keep writing by saying “come on”, “go on”, “you can do it”.

41. Write a diary to express how they feel about their writing.

42. Try to overcome feelings of frustration, sadness, etc. when their writing is not as good as they would like to.

43. Have confidence in their own capacity for writing. For the Social strategies, the teachers should support their students to:

44. Seek assistance when they have linguistic problems that they cannot solve or they ask other persons to revise their compositions.

45. Seek opportunities to improve their writing, such as writing frequently for other people (emails, chat, letters, and others).

46. Give their writing to friends or others who are good at writing so that they can have opinions about their writing.

47. Compare their compositions with their classmates' compositions.

The 47-item writing strategies mentioned above seem too overwhelming for the teachers to do in one lesson. In fact, they can be separately introduced during each writing stage, namely, planning, organizing, drafting, revising and evaluating. The teachers should keep their students informed of these writing strategies in every teaching period to make their students consciously aware of the strategies and able to use them appropriately.

Conclusion

We can see that all writing strategies mentioned are very common and practical for our students to employ. Therefore, it is the teachers' primary concern to teach our students these writing strategies and to reinforce them to use these strategies whenever they are engaged in writing tasks. If doing so, our students will be cognitively, metacognitively, affectively and socially aware of these writing strategies and eventually they will be able to use them automatically. The key success lies in the teachers' roles.

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