

Do Not Just Tell, Paint an Image: The Art of Descriptive Writing for Beginners

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Abstract

Teaching descriptive writing is a common practice in an ESL writing class. However, there is no general agreement to what kind of strategy is the most helpful and why it is helpful. This paper is a library research which examines the relationship between teachers' instructions and strategies in relation to writer's performance. The study explores the setbacks that the ESL writers face in descriptive compositions. The paper also elucidates and illustrates descriptive writing and its components. The study then analyzes a rubric which recounts the pathway to guiding ESL writers' master descriptive writing. The analysis, finally, suggests that implementation of several instructional strategies help an ESL writer, in particular, a beginner, to improve his or her confidence in writing a descriptive composition.

Key words: Descriptive writing, ESL writer, prewriting, brainstorming, sensory details, first draft, self-editing, peer review, teacher's evaluation, model composition.

Performance at the End of the Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels

Even after successful completion of secondary and Higher secondary levels, most ESL students lack stock of every day useable words, let alone vocabularies for expressing sensory details or feelings. They usually neither use English for spoken nor for writing until they step into tertiary level. At their university level, they find it difficult to adjust with the new medium of instruction. In terms of writing, they suffer from the blockage of waiting for the words to come. In some cases, even though they have some reasonable ideas about the content, they are unable to successfully produce those thoughts in English. According to Phyllis Crème (2003, p.6),

‘writers traditionally find writing difficult’. Consequently, whenever ESL writers undertake a

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writing task which requires meticulous use of words, they grow anxious. However, the best piece of composition is produced when the writer is at his/her lowest level of anxiety. Anxiety hampers natural flow of writing and leaves the ESL learners with confusion and emptiness. The ability to describe something convincingly serves a writer well in any kind of composition situation. Since descriptive writing is known to be as showy writing, in which the description is supposed to trigger the reader to visualize, ESL students find it difficult as they suffer from anxiety and lack stock of free flowing vocabularies.

Focus of This Paper

This paper is basically based on library research. The paper examines and investigates equipments and procedures that help ESL writers to arrange and organize their piece of descriptive composition successfully when they are unable to begin. In doing so, the paper primarily focuses on possible class room strategy that reduces ESL writers' panicky blocking of waiting helplessly for words to come. Then it moves on to examine if and to what extent successful completion of step by step procedure eventually turns ESL writers into sensory composers.

Descriptive Composition

The descriptive composition is a genre of writing that asks the students to describe something - object, person, place, experience, emotion, situation, etc. This genre allows for a great deal of artistic freedom and the goal of which is to paint an image that is vivid and moving in the mind of the reader.

Capturing an event through descriptive writing involves paying close attention to the details by using all of the five senses. Descriptive writing often makes use of figurative language such as analogies, similes and metaphors to help paint the picture in the readers' mind. It uses precise language. Specific adjectives, nouns and strong action verbs are used to give life to the pictures. Descriptive writing emphasizes overlooked items and uses words that engage and surprise the reader. Skilled writers organize their compositions like a video camera shoots a scene. It can pan from left to right, top to bottom, zoom in or zoom out.

Moreover, according to Bernwell and Dess (1995, p.128), “good descriptive writing should be such that combines both subjective and objective knowledge of the writer.’ In other words, both ‘factual’ as well as ‘author’s’ own interpretation is crucial in terms of descriptive writing.

Descriptive Writer

Furthermore, a good descriptive writer knows the art of omission and addition. ‘In doing descriptive writing, the writer learns what details to include and what to exclude.’ (Bernwell and Dess, 1995, p.129). The ultimate job of descriptive writer is to show, not to tell. He shows only those things which are essential for an impressive visualization in readers’ mind. Furthermore, he organizes his image either by time, visual field (left to right; top to bottom; small to large), details, or procedure.

Teaching Descriptive Writing – Focus on Reducing Anxiety

The first challenge in teaching descriptive writing is to reduce learner’s anxiety and make them enthusiastic. Many factors contribute to ESL writers’ anxiety: high expectations for writing across the curriculum, poor performance on English writing exams, lack of English vocabularies, and fear of doing spelling mistakes, confusion about grammar rules, teachers’ negative expectations, and concern for others’ perceptions. The anxiety ultimately leads ESL writers to avoidance, withdrawal, and procrastination in completing any writing task. Therefore, bringing enthusiasm in writing is important since this is one of the fundamentals for accomplishing any successful writing task. Unless the ‘real interest or ‘feelings’ are brought under consideration, the writers find it difficult to pin down their thoughts in paper. When ESL writer’s anxiety level is low, their feelings are ‘touched’, they feel enthusiastic, they tend to be totally involved in writing which often results in a production above their expected level.

Less Focus on Accuracy or Correctness of Grammar

With a view to lessening writers’ anxiety, an instructor takes a roundabout technique. He or she initiates teaching descriptive writing indirectly, or without having the writers know that they are going through a process of developing their descriptive writing skills. “Trying to get [ESL writers] writing right in every way can inhibit [them] from allowing [their] ideas to flow

freely and their language develop” (Crème, Phyllis and Mary R. Lea, 2003, p. 6). If the writer knows that they have to undertake a process of writing which requires extensive use of vocabularies, he naturally becomes scared because he becomes conscious about accuracy. ‘Focusing on accuracy is exactly the wrong place to look for writing improvement as there is little evidence to show that either syntactic complexity or grammatical accuracy are best measures of good writings’(Hyland, 2011, p.11).

Prewriting

There is no one way to teach descriptive writing. However, teacher can organize a set of task and guide his students through various steps. While doing this, he or she should concentrate on prewriting, drafting and reviewing. As a creative teacher, he or she has to be creative all through the process.

According to Donald Murry (1982), more than 70% time should be spent in prewriting. This is the ready- to-write stage (Tompkins, 1990). For descriptive writing, in particular, prewriting proves to be more important since this can provide ELS writers with the right visual aids. In this stage, it is important for the students to gather and organize ideas related to the topic.

In most of the cases, this stage becomes challenging for the teachers. Some teachers start with teaching writing structures, some talk about grammar rules and some other directly want their students to start writing. However, none of these approaches is fruitful since the first two turn ESL writers more anxious and the third one makes them frustrated because they do not know what to write.

Aid for Prewriting

The teacher instead can show an image of an object, animal, human being in a setting related to the topic or any natural scenery to the ESL writers. In addition, the teacher can share some stories or expose some related details so that writers receive some raw materials for a reasonable visualization. The writers then explore further and put some more colors in their visuals. Once the visuals are ready in their mind and they have enough ideas about the subject,

they are ready to step into the next challenge of looking for appropriate vocabularies, phrases and expressions.

Brainstorming

Students can initially start up with brainstorming. They jot down bunches of words related to the subject and then remember more similar words and write down some connected words. The teacher then writes some necessary words and phrases on the board or shows them in multimedia slides. Additionally, he or she approaches individual students with a view to aid them with some more useful and appropriate words and expressions. The process continues until the teacher is satisfied with students' performance. This process of gathering vocabularies, phrases and expressions provide students enough resources based on which they can step up to take a more difficult challenge of listing necessary words according to their sense perceptions.

Appropriate Vocabulary for Sensory Feelings

The next challenge is now to strengthen students' ability to figure out appropriate vocabularies for providing sensory details. Here, one of the best ways is to instruct students to make a table with headings of all senses: sight, auditory, smell, feel and taste. Students then rearrange words and phrases and expressions right under the respective headings. In addition, they remember and collect, from dictionary, some more words which they feel connected to the subject. Additionally, they share their words with their peers and discuss among themselves for new ways of expressions. However, the teacher works as a facilitator here. He or she helps them remember sensory words, presents clues and often provides them with new words and phrases. After successful completion of this challenge, students have enough resources to start writing their first draft.

First Draft

Students then start writing their first draft based on the visual aids, words, phrases and expressions they have gathered so far. Students begin to portray their image in mind freely. "These beginning drafts provide students and teachers with something to work with, and therefore spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure should not be stressed" (Poindexter and Oliver, 1998, p.421). Students should be "encouraged to get their words and

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ideas on paper and attempt to spell whatever words they want to use” (Stice et al., 1995, p. 216, quoted in Poindexter and Oliver, 1998, p.421). Donald Graves (1983) researched on children’s writing tendencies and recognized that children seemed to enjoy writing more on unassigned topics as opposed to teacher-assigned topics. The reason behind this tendency lies in the fear of doing mistakes and being corrected. “The previous well-known practice of having [ESL writers] turn in a single draft on an assigned topic to be graded and corrected by the teacher [is] no longer considered good teaching” (Stice et al., 1995, quoted in Poindexter and Oliver, 1998, p.420). Therefore, imposition of any structure, instructions on grammar rules and spelling check in drafting stage can dramatically reduce ESL writers’ ability to produce sensory details.

Self-editing

After successfully completing of the first draft, students revise and edit their piece of writing. Revising deals with the content, while, on the other hand, editing produces a readable text and deals with proofreading. However, at the initial stage revising and editing are often collapsed together. Students therefore read the composition carefully, add or delete words, modify sentences and look for better options. In this stage, it is important for them to understand cohesion and coherence in their writing. The teacher provides clues, helps his or her students to know and understand logical connections among sentences and well structured composition as a whole. Students then rewrite the composition, focus on some structural elements and present the piece of writing as a unified whole. The students, in addition, check spelling, correct grammar, punctuation and capitalization as well. All through the process they take help from dictionaries, grammar books, peers and teachers.

Peer Review

After preparing the final draft students go through the process of peer review. They exchange their composition with each other and provide feedback on the overall idea, organization, grammar and spelling. The teacher provides a check list to the students so that they know the items they are supposed to assess. However, there are opposing views regarding peer reviews. In the primary level it sometimes proves to be useless since the students do not have sufficient ideas to correct others. On the other hand, in secondary and tertiary levels peer reviews prove to be useful; in some cases peer reviews turn out to be close to the reviews of the

professors. In addition, it helps the ESL writers most often to figure out their own mistakes while reviewing their peer's composition. Moreover, the process provides them the scope to share each other's voices and ideas.

After the completion of this review process the students then focus on their own composition again with a view to refine and polish their writing based on the comments received from the peers. When the final revision is over, the composition is now ready to submit to the teacher for final comments.

Teacher's Evaluation

The teacher then reviews each of the compositions carefully and identifies pros and cons of the compositions. Instead of judging compositions according to the grades, he or she provides them detailed feedback. Feedback-giving is as an integral part of teaching writing which helps learners to become aware of any gaps that persist between their desired goals and their current knowledge. In the process of giving feedback, the teacher can maintain a student portfolio to keep copies of student's task along with the feedback. Writing portfolio is effective because it records student's effort, and their problem and progression over a period in time (Weigle, 2007). Writing portfolios also enable teachers with their ongoing feedback which is helpful both for learning and teaching (Gillespie, Ford, Gillespie, and Leavell, 1996; Dysthe, 2008). A copy of writing is finally given back to the students. They read carefully the teacher's comments and make necessary changes in their compositions.

Presentation of Model Compositions

After the successful completion of the whole procedure the teacher presents some model compositions. In some cases, teachers provide some famous extracts from the writings of renowned novelists. However, showing extracts from the writing of famous writers do not always motivate the ESL writers. Instead of carefully observing the piece of writing they rather give up thinking about it since they feel that they never can match up with that perfect piece of writing. As opposed to feeling inspired, ESL writers rather feel anxious and demotivated. Therefore, teachers, at the initial level, should provide model compositions written by the students instead of exposing them to the writings of famous writers. Students feel motivated

when they see quality writing from their peers. Moreover, students seem to believe that they can easily match up with that level of quality.

Reading Plays an Important Role

Students who read more have higher writing proficiency (Janopowios, 1986; Kaplan and Palhinda, 1981, Lee and Krashan, 2002). If teachers facilitate students to read motivating materials, well organized descriptive pieces of writings, if possible, written by their peers, this can dramatically increase their range of vocabularies, sense of organization, understanding of sentence structures and overall confidence.

Teacher's Role as a Facilitator

However, students would only be beneficiaries when the teacher is careful in certain aspects and act as an efficient facilitator. For instance, in choosing the picture which triggers student's visualization, the teacher has to be practical. He or she has to be careful and meticulous in choosing pictures that the students can relate to their lives, context, environment and society. If the picture chosen by the instructor is very foreign, the students would find it difficult to blend it with their thought process, resulting in negative output. Moreover, the teacher has to act promptly by providing them with apt vocabularies in ample amount, helping them in organizing words and thoughts according to the sensory feeling so that the ease of students remain intact giving them low affective filter, resulting in better output in return. However, teachers must remember one thing that, "writing is learnt, not taught, and the teacher's role is to be non-directive and facilitating, providing writers with the space to make their own meanings through encouraging, positive and cooperative environment with minimal interference" (Hyland, 2011, p.19).

To conclude, our goal in this paper was to summarize the aspects of descriptive writing and present procedures to help improve ESL writers' descriptive abilities, guide teachers with some strategies that can prove to be fruitful in guiding students successfully. However, the process of descriptive writing is complex and yet not so complex as to be beyond the reach of the ESL writers. Using the strategies described above, ESL writers will get enough confidence to

begin writing, will feel encouraged to revise and improve it and finally will not hesitate to expose their writing to the readers.

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