

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 10 October 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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Teaching Writing - Shifting the Focus from Semantics to Thematic Studies

V. Vasanthi, Ph.D.

Introduction

Teaching Writing is perhaps the most challenging of all the cumbersome tasks a language teacher carries out in a class room. It is challenging due to the fact that fumbling for words is a common phenomenon both among students and well learned people alike in some instances. It needs a lot of motivation, innovation and a new approach to shift this process from a superficial level to a deeper one. This research paper proposes to identify some common and traditional practices followed widely, acknowledging their merits and listing their demerits and proposing a new approach to this problem.

Teaching is an art and every teacher is unique in his approach and chooses to go about the process in his own way. A teacher often explores various methods, experiments many theories and finally chooses and follows some best practices in the process. But there are some common principles or practices which every teacher incorporates consciously or inadvertently to make a beginning. These practices can be called as those basic and fundamental practices which cannot be done away with and it is only after these, innovations can be brought in.

This research article will trace these processes carefully and analyse those different stages which carry the process beyond accounting for success and where the training apparently fails and succumbs owing to several reasons. The reasons for the failure may be not necessarily attributed to the teacher and there may be other factors like disinterest on the part of students owing to their physiological and psychological conditions, cognitive ability and

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some external factors in the environment. These factors are beyond the scope of this study and this article discusses the shortcomings in the methodology employed and the rectification of the same.

Some Fundamental Methods Used

Even though an entire research can be based on analysing some fundamental practices, owing to the exhausting and impossible nature of this task and in view of dwelling on the identification of drawbacks in some practices and recommendation of some remedies, let us concentrate on some of these general practices. Some of the most common methods used in teaching writing are:

1. Paragraph writing.
2. Précis writing or summarisation
3. Letter writing.

Paragraph Writing

Paragraph Writing is the most important and indispensable method which is being used for centuries by the English teaching fraternity and any new method without this fundamental building block is impossible. It is indeed very difficult to design any written activity without it being a paragraph writing in any stage of the activity. All forms of writing incorporate the basic principles of paragraph writing.

Very widely used methodology in this genre is giving some topics, helping the students to form a topic sentence and adding supporting information and some times, depending on the topic, furnishing the details using what where, when how and who questions. The student will be convinced of the ease with which a topic sentence can be written and may go on up to a phase and improvise and hone his writing skills by writing more paragraphs on different topics. After this phase, he may reach a standstill or a dead lock, beyond which he may find it difficult to carry beyond.

Some reasons for this stage of dead lock can be discerned as under:

1. Disinterest towards the topic.
2. Lack of details.
3. Lack of knowledge on the sentence structure and grammar and vocabulary.
4. Lack of drilling and practice
5. Lack of Contribution by the teacher.
6. The activity does not lead to another challenging venture and stops abruptly.

Précis Writing

This is yet another important tool in the hands of the English teacher and a very efficient one which has been proved effective by the test of time. In this the given text is reduced to hints and a fresh paragraph is constructed with the help of hints.

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The benefits that a student reaps out of this are manifold and this activity not only improves his writing but also develops a set of language skills in him. The fear of writing which haunts the students in a class is absent in this case and the students are convinced that this is an easy task and they unconsciously contribute to writing in a small way. Their approach is positive and emerges successful in abridging the paragraph given already. With an example given in his hands he is guided in developing the hints into a small paragraph.

In this method, the student learns the structure of the sentence and grammar and concentrates on sentence building. He concentrates on a different way of writing the same idea to avoid producing a replica of the original passage. Yet, this method poses one great problem. The writing is confined within a box and the student is not given freedom to write what he wants and curbs the scope of creative thinking and writing.

Letter writing

This is a different genre altogether and business letters develop the objective way of writing where as the informal letters develop the creativity. Letters of application, business correspondence are again of varied nature and follow a certain format which often intimidates the students. Informal letters on the other hand mostly deal with trivial issues and are not exploited to the maximum.

Theory of Change

In all the above said activities, isolated topics are normally given and sometimes the activities turn out to be successful. But in many cases, emphasis is laid on writing and not on the topic. A student is conscious of these processes and sometimes gets bored of these altogether. This study is based on teaching writing to a set of students with the same level of knowledge and aptitude using all of the above said activities, but in a different way.

The focus here is shifted from a conscious writing to a discussion of an issue which has a social relevance or a theme. Religious fanaticism and terrorist attacks is the chosen subject of discussion in this research and a writing activity using this theme has been illustrated. Even though language class rooms have already changed and adapted to many recent trends and brought in a lot of social issues in the map, this article aims to point out how by improvising some older practices in a new vein may bring success. Therefore, it can be said that it is one of the new approaches to teach writing.

The New Approach

The fundamental principle of this approach is that the attention and emphasis are laid on the theme and the students are not made conscious of what they are writing. Some drawbacks have been identified in the three fundamental methods discussed earlier in this paper and it will now move on to address the same by improvising them following the process presented here.

The three activities namely précis writing , paragraph writing and letter writing have been perceived in a different dimension and the issue of religious fanaticism and terrorism has been applied to teach writing in this article.

Précis Writing

Précis writing is taught in many ways and this article will deal with reducing the given material into hints and reconstructing the précis from the hints. Any article or news story on the issue can be given to the students to be reduced to hints and recover the main ideas to obtain a précis. This will familiarize the students with the topic or the issue concerned and this benefits them in many ways and some of the benefits are; allaying the tension and fear before a writing activity, getting guided by an example in their hands and orienting themselves towards the topic before they embark on writing a paragraph on the topic.

Paragraph Writing

The paragraph written on any current issue resembles an opinion article on that issue. Yet, the principles of paragraph writing can be used nevertheless to produce a desirable result among the students. The topic sentence for the paragraph can be constructed by just stating the issue. The teacher can spend some time helping the students to write the same in the class and the ability of the students to form correct sentences will determine the time to be spent on the same.

The teacher's role in this exercise is very important because the students will look forward to the contribution of the teacher to form a sentence in the class and demonstrate the same.

Hence the teacher will have to chalk the topic sentence on the board for the students. A topic sentence thus written should be catering to the level of the students and encourage them to write. Hence any difficult word or jargon should be avoided. At the same time, if the class comprises of students with a better language skill, the teacher should write a sentence which would enthuse the students to write better.

Let us assume that the students of the class possess considerable knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, the following is a topic sentence to begin the process in the class room. A topic sentence of such kind has been given below:

Religious fanaticism is one of the evils that could afflict the entire world and bring it to the brink of destruction in a very short span of time.

Once a topic sentence is written on the board, time should be taken by the teacher to make the students accomplish this task with ease and comfort. It is important to motivate the students and support them in the process and care should be taken to avoid influencing them with the topic sentence written on the board. In order to achieve this effect and to broaden the area of writing, alternative topic sentences can be written. These different topic sentences on the same issue will alleviate the tension over starting a paragraph which remains a challenge for even some of the greatest writers.

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The benefits of writing alternative topic sentences also produce other desirable effects, the two most important of those being conceiving the paragraph in a different point of view and deviating from the main topic. The former expands the thought process and broadens the scope for writing while the latter paves way for the students to choose a topic which they prefer to write on, thereby making the exercise a student friendly one.

One such alternative topic sentences leading to other fresh areas of discussion has been illustrated as under:

1. Religion is perhaps one of the most personal affairs of humankind, which should only influence an individual and not an entire nation.

In this alternative, the paragraph takes a turn and the topic may deviate towards the discussion of some popular religions and their principles. The same sentence may also be used to discuss the ideas of secularism and communalism as found in several countries. Thus it can be seen that the topic sentence and their alternatives determine the course of the writing.

The basic structure of any written material can be found to have a distinct beginning, middle and an end. Therefore, it's now time for the teacher to move on to the middle part of the paragraph, where some supporting details are added to build the thought process. There are several ways to go about this and some have been discussed in this article.

Some Suggested Steps

1. The student may be asked to gather his ideas and write them separately and then arrange them in an acceptable order.
2. The student may be asked to write one thought after another, where one leads to the other using words like 'but', 'however', 'where as' and so on.
3. A set of hints may be given on the board to help students write sentences by expanding them.
4. The six important questions, viz., *who*, *when*, *where*, *what*, *why* and *how* can be asked in some topics and the answers would provide the paragraph with the necessary information.

The conclusion of a paragraph is also important and sometimes most of the writing classes fail on account of the process coming to a standstill where the conclusion is ignored. Sometimes, the student loses interest and sometimes the activity is broken and resumed in the next session. Care should be taken not to neglect the conclusion and sometimes the writing activity can be continued beyond a single paragraph.

Some Suggested Steps to Draw and Write Conclusions

The conclusion could be planned in many ways and two of such methods have been discussed as under:

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1. The recommendation or a remedy, which would address the issue can be written. For example, in this issue that this article deals with, the conclusion could be, “It is, therefore, time that the world learns some etiquette on tolerance and personalisation of religion”

2. Other way of concluding the paragraph could be accomplished by making the students rephrase the topic sentence using words like ‘thus’ or ‘therefore’.

The concluding note could leave room for fresh discussion and lead the students towards new topics on which paragraphs can be written. An assignment on these, with a short time span will hone the writing skills of the students. Some topics can be brainstormed in the class based on the concluding sentence.

Letter Writing

After the paragraph writing, it is now time to move on to the letter writing session where the writing activity can be carried beyond, adding a new dimension and creating fresh scope for innovation and development. The students may be ushered into both formal and informal letter writing to accomplish desired results. In case of a formal writing, the activity can be planned in so many contexts. Some have been discussed with connection to the chosen topic in this article and can be listed as under:

1. Write a letter to the editor of any leading newspaper on your opinion of the issue.
2. Write a letter to your friend living abroad describing the situation prevailing in your state on the issues of religious groups and their public activities.

Further Improvisation

The discussion can be kept alive and in the final stage, a creative writing assignment can be given to carry them forward to a more challenging and satisfying activity. Some pictures describing the religious conflicts can be flashed in the class room and the students may be asked to write a story on it or a news story in this regard can be converted into a story.

Conclusion

Thus, the challenge of teaching writing can be coped with to a particular extent by providing a platform for discussion and some improvisations can be made to some traditional methods used in a language class room.

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