

TEACHING WRITING TO STUDENTS OF ECONOMICS

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The skill of writing is probably the most neglected in the secondary language classroom. There is often a large amount of written language practice, where students do grammar or vocabulary exercises: filling in blanks, transforming sentences, ordering words, practicing patterns. Even activities which at first sight appear to be enveloping the skill, such as the writing of letters and stories, are often transformed into written language practice by an approach to assessment which concentrates solely on accuracy and ignores message.

The writing process comprises several stages: generating ideas and information, organizing ideas, planning, grafting, improving, getting audience reaction, re-drafting. Students can be helped with different stages of the writing process, so that when they are working on their own they can approach writing with more confidence and write more effectively. This does not mean that, every time students write, each stage of the process needs to be focused on explicitly. It implies developing awareness and working on strategies systematically, so that all of the stages of writing are covered.

As well as looking at different stages in the process, we can start discussing with students the criteria to assess writing. To start with, this can be done by looking at more basic aspects of writing such as message, presentation, and accuracy. Then, it is possible to look at more complex areas such as organization, linking and appropriacy. The best way of increasing awareness about what is good and bad writing is by getting students to read and assess example compositions and then discuss them with the whole class. One way of doing this is by keeping copies of students' work from previous years (with names deleted).

As well as discussing criteria before getting students to start writing, it is important to prepare students for the writing task itself. There are various pre-writing activities which can focus on the topic and activate students' knowledge and experiences (e.g. discussions, reading texts, listening texts). One of the most important of these activities is developing students' awareness of audience, of who is going to read what they have written. One of the best ways is to get them to write to real people: to penfriends, to

other students or to you the teacher. When they are writing to an imaginary audience, as well as input such as letters to reply to, it can be useful to get students to imagine themselves what kind of person they are writing to and what kind of information this person would like to find out from the writer.

Along with audience awareness there is a need to focus on strategies for generating ideas and information. Students can be helped through guided writing tasks which provide input, but they also need to develop ways of generating ideas on their own. One way of doing this with factual writing is by including an information gathering stage, when students use information task sheets to find information they need for their project. Another strategy for the generation of ideas is the use of mind maps and networks to help brainstorming.

Having generated ideas, the next stage in the process is the organization of ideas and the structuring of what is going to be written. One of the best ways of doing this is by using tables, timelines or text flow charts, as they can be linked to prior reading tasks. At lower levels this can involve ordering ideas in short texts such as postcards or informal letters. At higher levels, work can be done on planning separate paragraphs and then on writing key sentences for each one.

The next stage is actually drafting and in the same way as the previous stages mentioned this can be done in pairs, groups or with the whole class. Drafting stories with the whole class can be done on the board (or if available on personal computers). In this way students can see the process and at the same time produce a piece of collective writing, which can be then shown to other classes.

Thus, the development of the skill of writing, communicating with other people through writing, can be done at all levels and is an essential part of communicative competence. Students need help when writing, which must come during the whole writing process and not only in the form of the teacher's corrections and comments on the final product.

References:

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