

## Writing at Intermediate Level: Viewing Writing as a Class Responsibility Process

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### □ ABSTRACT □

*This paper is motivated by the researcher's experiences in teaching writing at text level to freshman and sophomore students. The students' proficiency level in writing has always been unsatisfactory: it suffers weaknesses at different levels. The texts they write lack coherence, unity and grammatical accuracy, let alone punctuation and other mechanics of writing. The students performance reveals lack of guided practice whereby they acquire experiences in producing meaningful sentences that hang together in texts that develop specific topics. In order to mature in their writing tasks, the students need to be guided into the writing process when we do not move from one stage to another unless they have sufficient practice that highlights one of the writing aspects. This paper attempts to provide detailed steps in a guided writing process. The argument set forth derives from the writer's own experiences and the experiences of other researchers who have dealt with the topic of writing.*

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## الكتابة في المستوى المتوسط نظرة إلى الكتابة كمسؤولية صغية

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### □ الملخص □

إن الدافع لهذا البحث كان من خبرة الباحث في تدريس مادة الكتابة لمستوى السنة الأولى والثانية في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، جامعة آل البيت. فمهارة الطلبة في الكتابة كانت دائماً غير مرضية: ضعيفة على مختلف المستويات. وتعاني كتابة النصوص لديهم من عدم الترابط والوحدة وبقّة القواعد، إلى جانب إهمالهم علامات الترقيم وآليات الكتابة الأخرى. ويظهر أداء الطلبة النقص في تلقيهم التدريب الموجه اللازم لإكسابهم خبرات في كتابة جمل مترابطة في نصوص تعرض مواضيع متخصصة. ولمساعدة الطلبة في تطوير مهاراتهم الكتابية يجب أن نرشدهم إلى عملية الكتابة التي لا تتطلب الانتقال من مرحلة إلى أخرى، إلا إذا كان لديهم الخبرة الكافية التي تتطلبها أدوات الكتابة.

يعرض هذا البحث خطوات مفصلة لعملية الكتابة الموجهة. وتأتي هذه الفكرة من خبرة الباحث الخاصة ومن خبرات باحثين آخرين تعاملوا مع موضوع الكتابة.

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## I- Introduction

Writing has occupied a significant place in teaching and learning procedures in schools and universities. To be literate has always implied one's ability to read and write in the native language, and it is these skills which students have practiced in class. This view of native language learning was easily transferred to the foreign-language classroom, without considering its appropriateness or inappropriateness to a situation where the student does not have the spoken form of the language already at hand.

In this regard, Wilga M. Rivers (1980: 269-273) says. that to be able to write in a foreign language, the student must be trained systematically through five stages of development: copying, reproduction, recombination, guided writing, and free composition. These stages will overlap; practice of the activities of previous stages will continue as more complicated work is introduced.

The types of writing mentioned by Rivers (1980: 232) reflect the major area involved in the writing process. The student must learn the graphic system of the foreign language; he must learn to spell according to the conventions of the language; he must learn to have a good command of the structure of the language, so that what he writes is comprehensible; and he must learn to select from among possible combinations of words and phrases those which will convey the nuances he has in mind in the register which is most appropriate.

Writing is, then, an important skill that serves as a communicative function. It is an effective technique for reinforcing the oral language skills. It allows students to see how they are progressing as well as to get feedback from their teachers. It also allows teachers to monitor and diagnose language and thought problems that their students face.

So much research has been done on the linguistic aspects of language, such as phonetics, syntax, lexical items, and grammar. But a great deal remains to be done with regard to the writing skill of language.

According to Flower and Hayes (1980: 31-50), writing is a process which involves taking into account the elements of the context of situation. These include the purpose of writing, the occasion, and the reader, etc.... Being aware of such elements, the writer will be careful about selecting his Lexis, his syntactic structures, and his style of presentation. Knowledge of the significant role of contextual elements in the writing process emphasized the key notion of the writer-reader relationship. Writers write to readers while readers expect of the writer of the text an appropriate sociolinguistic event as represented in the text at hand.

Palmer (1980: 32-37) mentioned that one of the main problems teachers face in trying to make students understand and write in a foreign language is to teach them the discourse of the language to be learned. This involves making the learner aware of how a paragraph can be produced in the target language in a coherent well- organized form.

According to Flower and Hayes (1980: 31-50), a good writer is the one who is aware of rhetorical situation and the discourse of the language.

Proponents of the text's typological focus<sup>1</sup>, (e.g. de Beaugrande, 1980), Randquit (1985), Van Dijk (1977), Mosenthal (1985)) argue that writing at text level is a process of configuring a relationship that links the text components together whether that is a paragraph or a multi-paragraph text. According to Brown

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<sup>1</sup>See for further discussion of this point de Beaugrande (1980), *Linguistics and Cognitive Process*, PP; 125-41, and Mosenthal's "Defining the Expository Discourse, PP., 387-414.

(1987:22-27) a paragraph mainly is an ideational unit of thought wherein sentences come together as they are interrelated by surface and underlying relationship. Paragraphs can be short or long depending on what the writer wants to get across to the readers. The main factor in this respect is the paragraph's unity realized by a coherent development of the topic under discussion.

Halimah (1991) writes that writing is the application of grammatical rules, lexical items and rhetorical patterns needed by a learner to produce a text. Instructors of writing courses at Jordanian universities voice their complaint about the writing proficiency of their students since the instructors do not find real improvement in their students' writing. Also they complain that their students are not able to produce good persuasive and satisfactory writings although they have good command of the grammatical rules and the lexical items of English. Moreover, students are usually frustrated about writing classes since they do not receive the proper guidance once they get their assignment back.

In a similar context, Shakir (1991:402) comments on the ratings group of secondary school teachers of English who gave composition writing in English by their students. He writes, "...the majority of the teachers viewed grammaticality of sentences a major, and perhaps the most important factor for establishing coherence in a writing text". He analyzed the student's composition and found out that, besides grammatical errors, the text suffered from weaknesses more detrimental to coherence than those related to grammaticality and mechanics of writing.

In this paper I propose a framework for the teaching-writing skills to undergraduates in Jordanian universities, and will set forth a rationale for including writing as an integral and significant component of EFL courses. I believe that sophomores and junior students can be brought to understand the essentials of the writing process and produce appropriate writing on different topics without being held back by fear from errors - a case which usually leads to frustration on the part of both instructors and students alike. This can be achieved if the students are given the opportunity to understand the process of writing, and if their writing tasks, for at least a semester, are assisted by their teachers along the lines suggested below.

## **2- writing as a process:**

It is well known that writing is demanding on the teachers and the students alike. It is also well known that there are complaints that, generally, do the teachers of writing not provide guidance to their students as to how to handle writing tasks. However, before writing on any topic, the teacher and the students should go through a preparation stage, namely, prewriting. This stage is an essential part in the writing process.

### **2-1 Prewriting**

This stage can be considered as an activity which prepares the students to start the first draft. At this stage the teacher should train the students to identify why and who they are writing to. In addition, the teacher should concentrate on the different and effective types of prewriting, such as brainstorming vocabulary, brainstorming ideas, and supplying specific vocabularies. Identifying why and who they are writing to is necessary and effective for starting writing classes. The student may ask why we should write on a certain topic, who we are writing to and for what purpose. The students can have the opportunity at this stage to think of the topic, and the teacher should give the chance to students to discuss the topic among themselves .

Britton et al (1975: 18), and Shakir (1991: 399-411) speak of the role of the audience (to whom we are writing) and emphasize that the writer's awareness of the nature, attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions of the readers plays a key role in the writer's linguistic, lexical, and organizational choices. It also determines the writer's role (involved vs. distanced) in the presentation of the topic, and the degree of his explicitness or implicitness .

Prior to brainstorming to elicit ideas and vocabulary relevant to a given topic, students should undergo a significant stage of familiarizing themselves with how professional writers present ideas to their readers . This stage is known as 'awareness-building' (Shakir 1991 :408) process . At this stage, the teacher provides the students with a text written in good English and of suitable level of difficulty and style . The teacher starts by asking them to read the text and then answer questions related to:

- 1- How ideas are organized from general to specific/supporting.
- 2- What cohesion markers are used to related sentences.
- 3- What types of cohesion markers: addition, substitution, contrast, cause, effect, etc .
- 4- How the topic is developed: from general/topic sentences to substituting ones.
- 5-How vocabulary is selected to suit the topic.

After that the students will be required to re-write the text making use of their answers to the above questions . This should provide them with knowledge of how ideas are interconnected; how linking words function in a text; how vocabulary items are selected to choose the topic.

Brainstorming vocabulary is also necessary and effective for beginning writing classes. At this level, the students should be asked to provide vocabularies which could be used for writing about a specific topic, for example "smoking". The teacher should list all the vocabularies necessary for writing about this topic on the board. At the same time, the students will have the chance to ask about certain words or certain phrases. Often other fellow students can provide the answers to the questions of their peers. The teacher should provide the students with some written material about the topics which may also help in getting some new vocabularies about the topic. At this stage the students can start writing the first draft.

Brainstorming is another form of prewriting. At this level, the teacher should not suggest a specific topic for the students. Instead, the student should have the opportunity to write on something that has been read in class. This means that the teacher should give the students different materials to be read in the class and a specific topic. This form of brainstorming provides ideas and vocabularies that help the student in developing anal writing on a specific topic.

Yet another method of providing tool for writing is for the teacher to supply specific vocabularies. This can be done by showing the students some documentaries or educational aids, e.g. films, slides, etc. This kind of activity helps students respond positively in writing and it is a good way to expose the student to new words and expressions which not only develop the knowledge of the student, but also provide substance for writing. For beginning levels, a film documentary should be preceded by a brief introduction of the main ideas and some vocabularies, and a slide presentation should be preceded by some comments by the teacher. During the presentation, the student should watch and listen attentively and should be asked not to take notes. Meanwhile, the teacher should write on the board the main expressions and vocabularies, names, dates, and other information as they occur in the presentation. At this stage, the teacher should ask the students to start writing the first

draft immediately after the presentation. The topics that are chosen should take into account the student's interests and experiences.

The information that has been given to the students and which was written on the board can be considered as a skeleton for the writing tasks. These information can serve other purposes, such as to avoid any discussion, which may distract the students from thinking and writing and to reinforce the new vocabulary and information. In the course of practice students can develop their writing and become very fluent and skillful in this kind of writing. Moreover, the students would enjoy this process of writing, because it takes them from listening to writing in addition to the added dimension of visual aids on the board.

## **2.2 First draft**

As mentioned earlier, the first draft should be done immediately after the prewriting process and the teacher should not help students during the writing of the first draft. It is well known that the students may try to ask questions, but the teacher should not give any further help. This is the most difficult problem that appears in writing classes. It is well known that when the students use the tools provided and start writing, they find that they know more than what they had thought. This means that in order to make this process of writing work in a good way and become an effective strategy, the teacher should not answer questions because it is always easier to ask the teacher, "How do you say...?" than to think. While the students are writing the first draft, the teacher should write his own version, so that his composition becomes a model for the whole class.

When the students finish their writing, the teacher should collect the drafts and start correcting them. The attention here should be given to the content. This means that the teacher should comment only on the content. In this way the students will get immediate feedback on their writing and at the same time the teacher will also get the response of the students on the film or the slides that had been introduced earlier.

In the following class of writing, the teacher can follow up by a general discussion of the students' writing, and can review some of the grammatical structures that could be used for such a topic or give important structures that may help the students in their writing.

At this level of the process, the teacher can provide the students with more vocabularies, which may help them, and he/she can give some time to the students to ask questions about specific ideas or specific vocabularies. Often the peers may answer the questions. Once the first draft has been completed with the new vocabulary, we should move on to feedback.

Feedback is very important, because it is essential and it encourages the students to write. Feedback is essential when we write or do something that we believe to be debatable. This means that the students expect reaction to their writing. It is frustrating to write on a topic and to receive a failing mark, with no comments on your ideas, grammar, or way of organization of your topic. Some teachers may just underline some words, structures, or ideas with no explanation to the students. This will produce negative reaction by the students to their writing. The teacher should know that when the students write on a topic, they need an answer for the question "what did you think of what I wrote?". The answer should not be "very good", "fair", or "bad". It needs to be given through comments, explanation, and modifying few things of what the students have written.

One way of giving immediate feedback to the student is by asking for volunteers to read aloud in the class. Students' responses to read aloud depends on their confidence and on the success they have experienced before. If the teacher did not find any volunteers, he/she should read his/her own version, which he/she wrote during the session when the students were writing their assignment. The teacher should notice that his/her writing should be at a level that the students could understand. If students read aloud in the class, the teacher should be ready to encourage the students with some appreciative comments.

Oral comments are not good enough to students; they need written comments. Students should be taught, from the beginning of writing classes that they should respond positively to their peers, because this will encourage them to write and this will assist the class to develop their writing. The teacher should give careful guidance to the students about their responses to their classmates. He/She might elicit from his students a list of supportive and constructive comments. Any writer likes to hear things like "I love the detail of the story", "The description you gave is lovely". Students like to hear such supportive and appreciative comments. At the same time, the teacher can give some constructive criticism, such as to "explain why the car had the accident?" "I'd like to see more adjectives to describe the trip".

The aim of giving feedback is to make writers feel sure about their writing as well as to suggest ways of developing, expanding, and improving it. However, if the level of the students is more advanced, the content of writing should be more complex and suggestions or comments for expansion or revision should differ accordingly.

### **2.3 Second and Subsequent Drafts**

The students are now in a position to start writing the second draft, and it is expected that they should use some or all of the suggestions of their peers and their teacher, so as to expand and improve the first draft. However, the students may choose not to use all the suggestions, simply because they may feel that they are in control of what they write. It is important for them to formulate their own ideas and that they want to put these ideas on paper in a convincing manner.

At this stage, the teacher should ask the students to exchange their writing books and he/she should ask each one to write down his/her comments on the writing of his/her peer. Then, the teacher should go over these comments and compare them with his/her comments on the first draft. If the students make use of the comments and suggestions of the first draft, the teacher should give new comments on the second draft. This method has proved that students learn a lot from working together.

Proofreading is an important part in this process. A specific strategy should be given to the students, depending on the purpose of writing and the specified topic. This means that for a composition showing salience of certain grammatical structures, the teacher should suggest that the students check the form and use of these grammatical structures. For a text written to describe something in detail, the teacher should suggest that the students check the form, position and logical arrangement of adjectives. The students should be given the chance to proofread their own writing before having it rechecked by their peers. At this stage, the peers should write their own responses to the writing of their other peers, and the teacher can go over the responses to check that the students are benefiting from this activity. Doing so, the student can benefit from errors of his peers and they can overlook these errors in their own work. This kind of reading can help the students avoid the errors of others and, it can also help in improving their own writing.

Now the students are supposed to be ready to write their final drafts. They should be directed to concentrate on grammatical structures and on using appropriate expressions. The day they submit this draft, the teacher may give them another chance to go over it in the class as they may find some spelling mistakes or careless mistakes. The students should be given the chance to correct these mistakes.

The number of drafts can vary in beginning classes. The students may be given the chance to write the draft three or four times. In advanced classes, they have to complete the first draft after writing the main ideas and supportive ideas, because at this level, the students are taking some literary classes and they may be doing a great deal of writing. They might write summaries or comments on specific scenes or characters and then choose a specific subject to develop and expand into a more formal piece of writing.

#### **2.4 Grading**

This is a very important part in creating an atmosphere which supports the students' writing. The teacher should tell the students at the outset of the semester that they are going to use a process which will help them practice and improve their writing skills and this process will not pay a lot of attention to grading rather than they will be informed according to this process when a piece is to be graded. Furthermore, the students should be informed that it is necessary to grade all their writings. If the teacher feels that the students may not take practice writing seriously, he can ask the students to write on a general free topic or a specific topic for ten minutes at the beginning of every writing class. The teacher can select some of these writings and correct them. Next time, the teacher can select another group and go through the same exercise. Doing so, the teacher can also make the students feel that he is serious, and the teacher can judge the development of the writing of his students. At the same time, the teacher can ask the students to take some of these assignments and develop them into a more formal piece of writing. This type of activity gives the students more opportunity to develop their writing without being too worried about grades.

It is important to clarify to the students the methods of grading that will be used in correcting their writing. It is preferable to give 50% for content, and 50% for structures, organization, and development of the topic. The teacher should give a low grade for contents, because in writing teachers should not judge students for their ideas and opinions, but rather they should focus on how the topic is treated and developed. This method of grading should be followed not only in correcting the first draft, but also in evaluating the final draft. So far as grading the appropriateness of language is concerned, the method of grading should concentrate on the purpose of writing. This means that if the students are given a topic in order to practice and reinforce a specific structure, for example, "conditional sentences", the teacher should correct these structures and should remind his students of these structures at the proofreading stage. If the writing is given on a literary topic, the teacher will concentrate on important and general errors and mistakes. At the same time, the teacher should pay due attention to the organization and development of the topic since this is one of the ultimate goals of writing.

From the above discussion of grading, we can notice that while grading, teachers should pay attention to relevance of ideas, accuracy of language, and coherence and cohesion, because these are the most important factors of grading.



## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have examined the process of writing as a language learning exercise for students at the university level. I have looked carefully at the writing process itself, discussing each stage of the process, and then putting the effort of the students into practice by writing the final draft. Perhaps the most important result of the process has been to produce for the students a series of steps by which he/she can be prepared for writing the final draft.

It is appropriate, however to ask what the student may have gained by following this method of writing.

I would suggest that students who carry out such steps in writing will gain a great deal. In addition to those benefits I mentioned in the introduction, my experience with students has shown that this is a particular benefit to be gained from such close examination of the procedure mentioned above. Writing gets the students to consider elements of language both singly and simultaneously. The students must be concerned with every sentence, including its meaning, its structure, and its connotation. Yet he or she must also be concerned with the development and organization of each paragraph and its place in the topic as a whole. The student must also pay attention to coherence and cohesion, because these factors are very important in writing.

Students engaged in writing seem to be strongly self-motivated. The activity is a kind of puzzle, an essentially game-like search for perfection from the first sentence of the first draft till the students get to the last sentence of the final draft.

In conclusion, the benefits of writing for EFL students are impressionistic. Yet, I believe that other teachers may come to the same conclusions if they try my method. The main obstacle to the expansion of a semester's course I have already described above is the amount of labor involved in preparing each topic. There seems to be a need for writing a text book for Arab learners of English which should provide methods, model paragraphs, essays and papers written in English by both native writers and Arab writers. I hope that this gap would be filled in the course of the coming few years.

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