

## Alternative Strategies for EFL Writing Instruction

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In teaching a second or foreign language, a communicative approach is more effective than a grammar approach based on drills and practice. Many activities for developing oral and listening communication in English are available in books, journals, and other sources. When it comes to writing instruction, it is difficult to find activities based on meaningful exchanges of ideas and experiences. Too often writing activities in ESL/EFL texts are drills with only one correct answer or simple formulas. The lack of personal involvement in writing exercises does not promote real learning.

Writing varies considerably from speaking. It is not just a transcription of oral language. When writing, especially for business or academic purposes ideas are presented and developed differently, language is more precise, and a more formal voice is used. The most important difference is that there is no audience to give immediate verbal or non-verbal feedback asking for clarification or further details. Writing has to stand on its own.

The advantage of writing over oral communication is that once ideas are written, they can be changed, edited, or improved so that the writer can verify that

what is expressed in text, is what was intended. It is also a permanent form of communication transcending space and time.

Many different skills are involved in writing. In this paper, I am going to explain different strategies to build vocabulary, develop fluency, and write with precision. The exercises presented allow individuals to use their own ideas and experiences in their writing.

The strategies are divided into three levels, working with words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Most of the ideas have been adapted from activities presented at Summer Writing Institute for Teachers at San Diego State University in San Diego, California in July 1998. They were developed by Drs. Leif Fearn and Nancy Farnan, and are available in their book titled Interactions, published by Houghton Mifflin.

### **Words**

When working at the word level, vocabulary and spelling skills are developed. We all have two kinds of vocabulary: an active vocabulary and a

passive vocabulary. Our active vocabulary consists of the words we commonly use in speaking and writing. These are words we feel confident using. Our passive vocabulary is made up of words that we understand when listening and reading, but we are not exactly sure how to use them, or we do not know their precise meaning. Our goal in vocabulary development is to transfer words from passive to active vocabulary.

Spelling is an important skill, but it only matters in written communication. Spelling has no function in oral language. Memorizing lists of words to spell has not been proven to be beneficial. The words students should spell correctly are the words they know and use. The following exercises are activities that encourage students to use words in new ways, and to concentrate on the written form.

A. A word pyramid. Students build a pyramid starting with a one-letter word. They then write a two-letter word containing the letter, and continue making words according to the teacher's indications. See an example in Figure 1.

A  
AT

DAY  
MAKE  
WATER

Figure 1

B. Form a sequence of words between two different words. For example you

write the following on the blackboard:

1. mouse \_\_\_\_\_ elephant

2. cold \_\_\_\_\_ hot

C. With a scale A=1, B=2, C=3, etc., find a word that is worth more than 75 points. Find which day of the week or which month has the most value. Find a word worth exactly 100 points. Teachers can use their own creativity to adapt this activity to different situations or targeted vocabulary.

D. Creative spelling test. Students number their papers from 1 to 5. The teacher dictates:

1. Write a word that ends in "f".
2. Write a color that has the letter "u".
3. Write a 5-letter word that has a "p".
4. Write a word that has 3 t's
5. Write a synonym (or antonym for big)

This exercise can easily be adapted to the level or topics that the teacher wants to highlight.

### Sentences

The basic unit of language is the sentence. It is important that students acquire a sense of a complete sentence with much oral repetition. Teachers need to emphasize that every sentence expresses a complete idea. While working at the sentence level, teachers can set controls for the number of words or placement of certain words so that students learn to manipulate the language. The following activities are based on sentences:

A. Write a sentence that only has 4 words, and the first word is “rain”. Then write a four-word sentence with rain in the second position, continue with rain in the third, then fourth position. The teacher can decide whether or not to allow the use of plurals of verb endings.

B. Write a sentence with the same number as letters in your name, and with each word beginning with a letter from your name. See the example.

Maria: My angry rabbit is attacking.

C. Write a sentence with 7 words with “elephant” in the third position and flower in the sixth position as shown.:

\_\_\_\_\_ elephant \_\_\_\_\_ flower  
\_\_\_\_\_

The big elephant has a flower pot.

This exercise is especially useful because it can be used to reinforce any vocabulary or grammar lesson.

The teacher can substitute words to generate specific tenses or structures.

Other examples:

\_\_\_\_\_ he \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ yesterday

(This should generate a question in the past tense, although some students will surprise you.)

If \_\_\_\_\_ blue \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ book

D. Write a sentence that has exactly four t's, or a sentence with 5 vowels, or whatever the teacher imagines.

Example: She likes to talk to Tom everyday

## Paragraphs

While students are developing their writing ability, it is advisable to start with short pieces. This allows students to slowly build fluency and confidence. Teachers can limit either the number of words or the time allowed. When faced with limits, students need to concentrate on the use of a precise language. When working with writing exercises, students should be allowed to write several drafts in order to refine their ideas. With short texts, students also have more opportunity to share their writing and to give and get feedback from peers. Teacher feedback is especially useful on the first drafts. (It also cuts down on the time teachers need to spend correcting.) The following ideas can be used to work at paragraph level.

A. The teacher gives a list of passengers on a train: a retired teacher, a teenager dressed like a hippie, a man dressed in a nice suit with a briefcase, a ten-year-old boy with a backpack, a young woman with a low neck-line and a lot of makeup. Choose 2 of the passengers. Describe how they meet using a maximum of 50 words.

B. In your mind imagine a bird flying somewhere in a natural setting. Look around and notice the details in the scenery. Use your senses. Now draw a picture using words. You have 2 minutes to write.

C. Imagine there was a big party at your house last night. Paint a picture using words that communicate how your living room looked this morning. Use exactly 25 words.

D. Write a sentence that contains these 3 ideas in the order given: a person, a vehicle, the weather, a vehicle, and a character. Add other ideas. Now reorganize the ideas in 2 sentences. Add another idea. End with a sentence that contains a feeling.

### Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to demonstrate alternative strategies in ESL writing instruction. These strategies help students use their own ideas and experience and develop confidence in writing. They can be used to build vocabulary and to reinforce specific structures. Teaching writing in English is a complicated activity and there are many aspects that are beyond the scope of this presentation. Hopefully the strategies presented here will be of practical use to teachers.

### References

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