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# QUESTION-BASED WRITING PROCESS:

## *A reflection and a proposal to L2 writing*

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This article focuses on the problem of writing as it has been traditionally approached without reference to the learners' interests and expectations. Also, due to the fact that it demands considerable time and effort it has been relegated as homework. Due to this, compositions include a series of problems that show that learners rely on their native language. As a result of this, their writings lack coherence and cohesion. To minimize this problem a question-based writing process is suggested. This is based on referential and display questions, as these have been found to be of value in provoking ideas. This particular situation is interesting in that it elicits the writer's own ideas and feelings. Thus, when students answer their questions they become aware of the value of the answers in the thoughtful organization of their writings.

Teaching is an art. Effective teachers facilitate learners' learning by providing highly engaging learning experiences which are both motivating and challenging to learners. Effective teachers know that learner attitudes and academic achievement are enhanced when learning experiences take into account the learners' talents, needs and interests.

It is difficult to motivate learners to write at an elementary English Course. To start writing a text in English, learners face the problem of generating ideas, of conveying meaning in an organized way and of editing. (See Brumfit, C. and Mitchell, R. 1989).

This paper will first describe the problems teachers encounter when teaching writing. Then, a Question-Based writing process will be proposed as a way to help learners cope with writing, and finally some conclusions will be drawn.

Writing, as one important skill, may be considered "boring" for some learners no matter their age or proficiency level. For instance

some learners may not find a purpose in writing, their lack of interest maybe an indicator that teaching is out of context. Sometimes writing is taught without a particular reference to the learners' interests or expectations.

Second, being writing an activity that demands so much time and personal effort, and considering it as an individual endeavor, it tends to be relegated as homework. Learners are required to produce -on their own- writings, but they are not always given real purposes, real audiences, and the teacher risks becoming a linguistics guide in the process, and a judge in the final product. Therefore, the teacher is not the audience that gives writers authentic reasons to write. What is more, feedback is usually done by the teacher in terms of marks, so there is no authentic motivation when writing.

English compositions show a series of problems that reveal that learners rely on their native language grammar and syntax; the texts often show a lack of analytical and organizational skills, and in many cases a lack of coherence and cohesion, that make the text really difficult to follow.

Writing involves cognitive skills and an intellectual effort is needed. Writing, as a consequence, is “ far from being a simple matter of transcribing language into written symbols” ( White and Arndt, 1991). Writing must be a way to organize ideas, it is a means to improve analytical and organizational skills which should be developed in order to acquire knowledge. Teaching learners to write, and help them to reach this goal is a great benefit not only in terms of their English proficiency but in terms of their cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. Chamot and O'Malley (1992) view metacognitive strategies as those that involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of learning while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the learning activity. Metacognitive strategies can be applied to virtually all types of learning tasks, whereas cognitive strategies are more directly related to a specific task or learning objective and may not be applicable to different types of learning tasks” (Wenden and Rubin, 1987).

## QUESTION-BASED WRITING PROCESS

A **QUESTION-BASED WRITING PROCESS** aims to guide learners step by step. It has proved useful for my learners and it is hoped that it helps the readers of this article. first the issue of teacher questions will be presented.

Teacher questions play an important role in class activities. Some language researchers have considered two kinds of questions: **referential** (the teacher does not know the answers) and **display** (the teacher already knows the answer). They have been an important tool to reinforce practice in target language, and have been proved to be efficient in oral activities and practice.

Questions can be used in writing activities to generate ideas. "Questions, being the basis of a Socratic dialogue and of problem-solving can be an important prompt for writers. Indeed, one of the skills of a good writer is to think of interesting questions to ask because they yield interesting answers" (White and Arndt, 1991: 22). On the other hand, referential questions will be useful to help learners interact with the topic they are working on. Through referential questions, prepared by the teacher, and provided to the learners in the writing class, learners will feel they have many good ideas to write down, they will feel confident towards the topic because they could bring to their minds not only thoughts but ways to express the use of the target language. The writing of their own ideas may help them to gain self-confidence and recreate their possible worlds. By the time learners answer the questions they will realize how useful they are when writing, and finally they could also receive training to include questions as a main part when writing a text, they will find it really useful to move and organize their thoughts.

## THE PROCESS

Generating ideas through **referential questions** can be an activity carried out from the beginning of a writing process. In the brainstorming step, learners are asked to write down all their ideas about the topic, but in this early step, the teacher must prepare

questions to be answered by the learners, in this way, learners are encouraged to generate more ideas than if they are just left alone. Brainstorming can be used as a tool not only for content but also for organizing content. In this step, the use of the learner's own ideas, those of his/her classmates' and the teacher's is a good way to decide on the content of a text and of its structure. Referential questions do not attempt to produce similar texts derived from answering the same questions, instead there will be as many answers as writers involved in the activity.

Generating ideas and organizing them involve cognitive strategies for it includes “three main kinds of memory store: **Episodic memory**, which is devoted to events, experiences and visual and auditory images, **Semantic memory**, which is devoted to information, ideas, attitudes and values, and **Unconscious memory**, which includes emotions and feelings”. (White and Arndt, 1991). After learners answer the referential questions provided by the teacher, they must check them and find a way to organize them in meaningful content, it is a **self-assessment** that involves metacognitive learning strategies. A writing exercise is presented later in the paper to illustrate the ideas presented.

## **PROCEDURE**

The different writing steps to be followed in a writing activity will be stated. As it is the beginning of the training to write, the teacher will suggest the general topic, but the more experienced the learners, the more independent they are expected to be in each step. In order to explain each step of this proposal, an example of topic and based-question writing process will be used, to be developed with intermediate learners.

### **Finding out the Reasons to Write**

The first thing to decide through a discussion with learners is why to write a text? It is very important to discuss with the learners once again why it is important to write texts before choosing a topic. Agree with your learners over about the idea that “ the capacity of written language to transcend time and space... to be able to share ideas, arouse feelings,

persuade and convince other people” (White and Arndt, 1991) are strong reasons to write.

In order to avoid negative attitudes towards writing activities, it is important to talk as much as necessary with learners about the importance in having training in writing. They must realize the real importance of this skill: it is a challenging activity that stimulates them to have training in organized thinking; it will engage learners into creative processes. It requires a mental activity that involves learning experience.

### **Choosing the Topic – and the Kind of Text.**

The teacher and the learners should decide together what the writing will be about. The topic and the kind of text will depend on their age, interests and level. In this early step, the teacher may suggest a problem, issue or situation for he/she already knows the learners.

According to the learners’ age, level, and context they will agree on the general topic that would motivate them to think about their milieu, themselves, their families, friends, relatives, teachers, classmates; their place of birth, city, country, etc. In more advanced classes topics related to their feelings, relationships, experiences with others, with problems, etc may be useful, too. And in high proficiency classes searching topics that affect their interests, their careers, their dreams, their thoughts about life, death, etc. would be useful, too. After having decided on the topic, they together must discuss for a while the kind of text that is going to be written.

To illustrate the steps of this proposal, an example of a general topic given by a teacher is provided: “Imagine you are a reporter in an important newspaper in the city. You are asked to write about a person who is a kind of an anonymous hero. He/she must be someone you know really well. “Write about the person you love the most. Include his/her personal information; his/her daily routine and his/her likes and dislikes. Give as many details as possible”.

## **PRE-WRITING**

Each learner has to state an idea to answer the questions posed. Then he/she has to write down some reasons to support the choice. In this step, they work alone, and later they share their ideas in pairs, and then in threes. Until this point the teacher does not know the learners' topic.

### **Brainstorming to Generate Ideas**

Learners must answer these questions: it is important to use just words or phrases, learners aren't allowed to write down complete sentences in pre-writing. In this step, a dictionary could be used to look up specific vocabulary if necessary.

Sample procedure and questions:

#### **1. Write down the name of the person you love the most**

- What's your relationship with him/her?
- Why do you love that person?

#### **2. About his/her personal information**

- How old is he/she?
- What does he/she do?
- How does he/she like his/her job?
- Where is he/she from? Where is that place located? What is it like? How do you like it? How does the person like it?
- Who does he/she live with?

#### **3. About his/her routine**

- What time does he/she usually get up?
- What does he/she have for breakfast?
- What time does he/she leave home?
- How does he/she go to work?
- What time does he/she have lunch?
- Where does he/she have lunch?
- What time does he/she finish working?

- What does he/she do in the evening?

#### 4. About his/her appearance and personality

- What does he/she look like?
- What is he/she like?

### Writing a Topic Sentence

Now it is time to start the first paragraph. A sentence that introduces the topic of the paragraph is called a topic sentence. It generally comes at the beginning of the paragraph. Ask learners to state their topic using a complete sentence. Then, ask them to select a word or phrase from their pre-writing list to write about in a complete sentence. Based on their ideas, the following general questions will help them to state their sentences: “Who is the person who you love the most? What is the relationship between you and that person? The answers to these questions will help them to give strong reasons to support their choice. This way they stated the ideas for the first paragraph.

Learners state their choice in a complete sentence, that is going to be developed through the text. They will use appropriate structures and vocabulary to mean what they really want to. The following are some possible choices:

“The person who I love the most is....., my mother”.

“I can’t imagine my life without my mother who is the person who I love the most”.

### Organizing Ideas in Paragraphs

Learners read and start writing in complete sentences. After they finish this task, the teacher asks them: Is it possible to organize the sentences according to their meanings? Which sentences refer to, develop, or support one idea? In this step learners are involved in a self-assessment process and at the same time they are looking for coherence and cohesion. After they organize their ideas, the teacher

provides some transitional words or phrases that may be useful: “Look at your ideas, and check if it is possible to support or to join your ideas in a paragraph using these words where necessary: *first, second, third, finally, next, after that, until, eventually, before, just before, after, on Saturday, in the morning, at six o’clock, in the meantime*, etc. The words provided by the teacher depend on the kind of texts learners are writing.

The teacher questions learners about the meaning and complexity of the paragraphs and invites them to decide on whether a change would be appropriate. “Is there any unnecessary repetition? Do all the statements develop what you want to state? Once more, learners move towards a self-assessment activity. Learners are the first critics of their texts based on the teacher’s guide.

## Writing-Conclusions

To conclude the text learners may write a concluding sentence that summarizes what has been said in a paragraph or in the whole text. It involves in some ways an idea about the importance of the main idea developed in the text. Learners suggest ways of making the central idea more prominent. The teacher provides questions to be answered as conclusions. The questions must be directly related to the topic and the kind of text.

In order to wrap up the text, the teacher asks learners to state a phrase/phrases that they think will reinforce what has been supported in the text. “Which one could be a good idea to close your text? To answer it, go back and check your thesis or opening idea. Through a new sentence learners must reinforce that their choice is the right one. Here are some examples of what some learners have written:

*“Because of these reasons I choose my mother as the person I love the most”.*

*“As you can see my mother is the best person in the world.”.*

## Meaning Overview

The teacher asks learners to read the text. Ask them to analyze if the topic sentence does introduce their subject. If it doesn’t ask them to



rewrite it. Then, ask learners to check whether they want to put in another new sentence or remove a written one. Ask them, finally if they want to change the order in some of the sentences.

Ask learners to check the organization of their ideas in the text, to check if they find sentences that could be placed in another part of the text, ask learners to move them to a new place. Can you find nouns, adjectives or adverbs like *usually, often, sometimes, never*, that express your ideas more exactly? Is it possible to add adjectives or adverbs to define your ideas clearly? Is there any place where some connectors *like indeed, extremely, really, fortunately*, etc., could reinforce meaning?

## Form Overview

The teacher asks learners to check every sentence in terms of grammar. Coherence and cohesion is expected when the activities have been conducted. Learners should be able to correct themselves or with one another in terms of form. In this step, learners can ask their classmates or the teacher if they have any doubt about a specific structure.

Learners must concentrate in the way they used grammar in their texts. Now they can check if through the structures used they mean what they really want to mean. If not, it is time to correct them.

Finally, it is possible to conclude with the following aspects:

- Following logical writing steps may help writers gain confidence and may contribute to increasing the learners' self-esteem.
- Learning how to write helps clarify learner's ideas and enhance their capacities to create texts.
- Writing must be seen by learners as a process and as a challenge in which the learners' knowledge is put to the test.
- Writing should also become a social activity where learners and teachers interact and share ideas.
- Referential questions work as a mechanism to activate learner's previous knowledge.

- Writing should be seen as an integral part of language in which the other skills contribute.

For the role of writing in a language program see Yalden J. 1987.

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