

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING WRITING SKILL FOR MCU STUDENTS IN ADVANCED ENGLISH COURSE

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Abstract

MCU students have different writing needs depending on their language stage and the purpose of their writing. The teacher should consider how to accomplish their needs through various methods and techniques that they use in the writing lessons. In order to decide on the most suitable way to handle the writing task, the teacher should consider which approach to choose for their writing lesson. This paper deals with the methods and techniques of teaching writing collected from Ann Raimes , Jeremy Harmer , Ron White and Valerie Arndt , and Don Byrne. It also focuses of “good writing” because they need to perform well in the written examinations of advance English course.

Introduction

Writing, unlike other skills, cannot be left to itself or just naturally picked up, it has to be taught and learnt by doing, practicing, improving. Currently, every MCU students must study advance English with the goal of being able to use English in order to communicate in their daily life. Mahachula longkornrajavidyalaya University offers advance English subject with a specialization in reading and writing skills, in which writing remains a basic

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requirement. In “Long-term working memory in text production” Kellogg^{an} said that writing skill is a major cognitive challenge, because it is at once a test of memory, language, and thinking ability. It demands rapid retrieval of domain-specific knowledge about the topic from long-term memory. A high degree of verbal ability is necessary to generate cohesive text that clearly expresses the ideational content^{ac}. Writing ability further depends on the ability to think clearly about substantive matters^{ae}

Additionally, MCU students have different writing needs depending on their language stage and the purpose of their writing. The teacher should consider how to accomplish their needs through various methods and techniques that they use in the writing lessons. In order to decide on the most suitable way to handle the writing task, the teacher should consider which approach to choose for their writing lesson. This paper deals with the methods and techniques of teaching writing collected from Ann Raimes^b, Jeremy Harmer^{cj}, Ron White and Valerie Arndt^{cs}, and Don Byrne.^{ca} It also focuses of “good writing” because they need to perform well in the written examinations of advance English course.

^{an} Kellogg, R. T., **Long-term working memory in text production**, *Memory & Cognition*, 2011, p. 43-52.

^{ac} McCutchen, D., **Writing as a linguistic problem**, *Educational Psychologist*, 1984, 226-238.

^{ae} Nickerson, R. S., Perkins, D. N., & Smith, E. E., **The teaching of thinking**. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1985.

^b Raimes, A, **Techniques in Teaching Writing**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

^{cj} Harmer, J., **The Practice of English Language Teaching**, 3rd ed, London and New York: Longman, 2001.

^{cs} White, R., & Arndt, V.. **Process Writing**, Harlow: Longman Group UK Limited, 1991.

^{ca} Byrne, D. **Teaching Writing Skills**. London and New York: Longman. 1988.

During pre-writing stage

1) Choosing topics

The teacher should also have in mind that students themselves are great sources of topics, which can positively influence their writing process as they feel actively engaged and their intrinsic motivation works as a real fuel for their writing journey, suggests Raimes^{๑๐}. In her view, rather than looking for a number of topics, finding a few excellent ones that are of students' interest and building "a whole series of assignments around them" is recommended^{๑๑}.

1) Generating ideas

It has already been discussed that generating ideas is one of the most demanding tasks for students. Raimes^{๑๒} encourages that finding and communicating ideas is more effective if students are allowed to cooperate and if they are given opportunity to speak, to listen, to read, and to write, all in a series of activities rather than in one isolated exercise. White and Arndt^{๑๓} distinguish two main kinds of discovery techniques for creating ideas: guided (using prompts for generating ideas, e.g. questions) and unguided (generating ideas by writers themselves, e.g. brainstorming). However, some of the activities in the following list can be used as a guide in order to generate ideas:

• Brainstorming

Brainstorming is one of the most effective ways of gathering ideas. It involves quick thinking without inhibition; it suppresses censorship and is suitable for individual or, even better, group work. Brainstorming by the teacher is used as a demonstration of the technique if unfamiliar to students. Brainstorming by students is a group work benefiting form and contributing to

^{๑๐} Ibid., p. 13.

^{๑๑} Ibid., p.15.

^{๑๒} Ibid., p. 13-15.

^{๑๓} Ibid., p.18.

cooperative way of learning. Harmer calls this cooperative model of generating ideas “Buzz groups”.

- **Questions**

A basic problem-solving prompt for the writer, are good to ask as they yield interesting answers that might become foundation of the text-to-be. They can be invented by students themselves or given by the teacher in sets which help students to look at the topic from different angles. Another important aspect of asking right questions is focusing on what the reader needs to know, i.e. the writer should consciously consider what information is shared with the reader and what should therefore be conveyed.^{๑๔}

- **Note-making**

A helpful technique that can be either structured (guided) or unstructured (unguided). With the first mentioned, students make organized, categorized notes, e.g. spidergrams, mind maps, whilst with the latter, they write down ideas similarly as in brainstorming – without organizing them.

- **Visual material**

It plays an essential role in the writing process as it represents a shared experience of all students of the class, claims Raimes^{๑๕} and adds that visuals draw students’ attention, focus them on the same thing, and strengthen their interest. They can bear the form of pictures, photos, drawings, posters, cartoons, diagrams, graphs, tables, maps, and even realia (i.e. physical objects). Raimes then follows with some general strategies of using pictures in the class and lists possible ways of using them.^{๑๖} White and Arndt suggest that pictures can be used as singles or as sequences which bring more divergent interpretations and offer variety of outcomes. Also, completing incomplete maps and plans can offer a great room for creativity.^{๑๗}

^{๑๔} Ibid., p. 22-32.

^{๑๕} Ibid., p.27.

^{๑๖} Ibid., p.28-37.

^{๑๗} Ibid., p.35-41.

- **Role plays and simulations**

It widely used techniques that are open-ended in the range of ideas they may offer and therefore provide a great stimulus for generating ideas.

- **Reading material**

Likewise pictures, accounts for shared content in the classroom and supports communicative activities, points out Raimes. In addition, she highlights that reading, both intensive and extensive, has significantly beneficial contribution to the writing process for it actively engages students with new language and culture.

- **Whole group discussion**

this kind of eliciting ideas, sharing useful vocabulary and grammar, and engaging students with their own opinions and/or experiences, helps generating ideas prior to the writing stage.^{๑๘}

- **For and against**

An activity which helps students to come up with ideas regarding the topic. This task can be carried out individually, in pairs or preferably in two buzz groups, one group thinking about positive reasons/advantages, the other one writing down negative reasons/disadvantages. After a time limit the ideas are shared in class and written on the board.^{๑๙}

Analysing genres

This method is particularly suitable for Genre Approach. If students are writing in a particular genre, they first need to be exposed to a great variety of models and analyse them, argues Harmer^{๒๐} and suggests that models of concrete genres are a great source to notice: specific vocabulary and phrases, linking words, punctuation, paragraphing, layout, other characteristic features.

^{๑๘} Ibid., p.88.

^{๑๙} Ibid., p.97.

^{๒๐} Ibid., p. 91.

The best methods therefore are real examples of the targeted genre (e.g. advertisement, formal letter, newspaper article, recipe, etc.)

- Linking words – activity in which students are given texts with first few linking words underlined and the rest removed. They discuss the meaning of the words, how they link ideas and how they are punctuated. Students then fill in blanks with most suitable linking words.^{๑๑}

- Punctuation – students inspect punctuation marks, capital letters and apostrophes in the given model and discuss their rules.^{๑๒}

4) Focusing on purpose, reader and form

White and Arndt^{๑๓} argue that the expression of the main idea is closely connected to (a) the writer's purpose for writing the particular piece of text, (b) taking into account the reader, and (c) the form the text is going to take. Following activities are beneficial for practicing these aspects.

- **Discovering main ideas** – may not happen easily and it often is the case that the writer discovers their key point during the drafting stage. One of three techniques, recommended by the authors, that help the writer find their focus is Fastwriting (basic procedure of which has been outlined above in Free-Writing Approach). Compared to brainstorming, this type of activity develops not only ideas but relates them. Loopwriting is an upgraded fastwriting activity with a summarizing sentence after each paragraph used as an opening sentence for a new loop. Conferencing is a consultation between the writer and the reader (teacher or colleague student). It is used for clarifying and explaining the writer's point to the reader.^{๑๔}

- **Considering purpose** – a core aspect of the writer's effort to be taken into account.^{๑๕} “Understanding the importance of purpose in writing is an

^{๑๑} Withrow, J, **Effective Writing**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987

^{๑๒} Ibid., p.13.

^{๑๓} Ibid., p.44-45.

^{๑๔} Ibid., p. 46-48.

^{๑๕} Ibid., p.16.

essential part of the writing process,” claim White and Arndt^{๒๖} and explain that it forms the basis for the writer’s decisions on the content and the way of expressing it. It involves methods of detecting the writer’s reason, selecting and rejecting ideas, sifting data, transforming (sharing) personal experiences, and establishing (communicating clearly) a viewpoint.

- Considering audience

Considering audience is the most important aspect to be considered while composing a text.^{๒๗} The writer is to take a role of a critical reader in order to be effective in conveying their message. White and Arndt also claim that certain activities in writing classes can help writers to tailor their writings so as to suit potential readers: reconstructing (deducing the sort of) a reader, clarifying information to unfamiliar reader, or sharing ‘expert’ knowledge to laymen.^{๒๘}

- Showing attitude

An activity in which students supply removed attitude words (e.g. obviously, personally, etc.)^{๒๙}

- Considering form

The last but not least aspect to be focused on by the writer when creating a piece of writing, involves knowledge how different types of texts are conventionally structured in different forms. Since it is important that the writer matches the expectations of the reader concerning the appropriate form, there are some activities that teachers might find useful in their writing classes: comparing (analyzing) characteristics of text-types and then varying (experimenting with) text forms.^{๓๐}

5) Organizing texts

^{๒๖} Ibid.,p.42.

^{๒๗} Ibid., p.17.

^{๒๘} Ibid., p.69-74.

^{๒๙} Ibid.,p.48.

^{๓๐} Ibid., p.75-77.

Raimes^{๑๑๑} claims that “how we write in English has many conventions” which make writing culturally determined, just as eating habits or social interaction. The English way of thinking, dealing with topic, putting ideas in structures and connecting them is different from other cultures and therefore does not predetermine a successful writer in L1 to be successful in L2 in the same way. If willing to be effective, claim White and Arndt^{๑๑๒}, the writer should adopt skills of organizing thoughts, grouping ideas and sequencing them. These activities can help improve and practise organising the text:

- Outline

Raimes^{๑๑๑} claims that before writing a text the writer should have a brief plan of their writing, which usually follows pre-writing activities such as brainstorming, list-making, reading, discussing, etc. This device works as a guide for the writer during their writing phase as well as after when the writer has to review their work.

- Ordering information

Ordering information into clusters or categories involve grouping ideas into frameworks (spidergrams, tables, schemes) or paragraphs, using statement prompts (words, phrases), considering priorities for arranging information.

In addition, White & Arndt^{๑๑๔} claim that students can put sentences cut in strips in the correct order according to ‘cohesive ties’. Students can also work in groups and select the most relevant ideas from the list or reject them. Then they group information in paragraphs and finally decide on the best order of paragraphs.

- Experimenting with arrangements

Experimenting with arrangements helps writers to understand that there might not be the one and only way to organise the information, but more. This

^{๑๑๑} Ibid., p.115-116.

^{๑๑๒} Ibid.,p.78-79.

^{๑๑๓} Ibid., p.116-121.

^{๑๑๔} Ibid., p.79-88

๑๑๒ วารสารมหาวิทยาลัย วิทยาเขตแพร่ ปีที่ ๑๔ ฉบับที่ ๑ (มกราคม-มิถุนายน ๒๕๖๒)

also prepares the writer to adjust and change the arrangement in order to achieve best results.^{๓๕}

- Relating structure to focal idea

Relating structure to focal idea shows that the main idea can give the writer a good lead how to structure the text. White and Arndt^{๓๖} suggest practising this aspect on texts in which the reader expects certain elements but not in a fixed order, e.g. telling personal anecdotes (stories) or writing about people's lives and achievements.

6) Controlled writing

The technique of controlled writing is based on Controlled-to-Free Approach which focuses on accuracy and where the content and form are supplied by the teacher. In contrast to free writing, when students generate, organize and express own ideas in own sentences, in controlled writing students follow, continue, manipulate or complete. Raimes^{๓๗} suggests that this technique can be used as a prep stage to free writing as it helps students grow mature in writing, and that it is suitable at all levels, but most beneficial at early stage of language learning. Raimes also introduces five basic types of frequently assigned controlled tasks, each of them focusing on and practising a different area of language according to students' needs. They are:

- Controlled composition

It works with given passage. Students make only grammatical or structural changes (e.g. singular into plural, present into past, active into passive, etc.). The focus is on accuracy as there are only right answers. Raimes suggests that this activity is good for reinforcing grammar, vocabulary, syntax.

- Questions and answers

^{๓๕} Ibid., p.89-93.

^{๓๖} Ibid., p.94-98.

^{๓๗} Ibid., p.95.

There is no text to write but questions to answer. This activity allows more freedom in structuring sentences.

- Guided composition

Students discuss the activity; they make notes, share and plan before writing. This activity, again, is a bit freer than previous one; students' products might be similar but will not be the same.

- Sentence combining

Sentence combining focuses not on content but on choices about structure. Students for example join words and structures or work with positions of particular information in the text, which improves their ability in using sentence structure, length of their writing and variety.

- Following models

Students use a passage of a text as a model and practise writing on a similar topic following it or on the same topic but for different audience. This kind of guided writing is primarily focused on form and only after that on ideas. To avoid unnatural copying, the model can serve as a simple resource or example rather than an ideal to stick to.

- Parallel writing

Students create their own pieces of work based on reading a text and writing a similar text on their own topics.

2.2.2 During composing stage

While the activities listed above help developing writing skills mainly during the pre-writing stage, the following are methods and activities that can be used primarily in the course of the writing stage.

1) Writing drafts

Once the writer has gone through the previous 'pre-writing' stages, they can now embark on writing a first draft which is more reader-based and therefore of more significant concern for the writer, for after having considered the best way of selecting and organizing ideas, the writer now starts thinking about how to attract and keep the reader's attention. What White and Arndt hold as fundamental of this process stage, are revision and rewriting. They

support this core opinion by claiming: “We would advocate running through the ‘write-revise-rewrite’ cycle at least once , twice through the cycle is recommended.” Practice shows that even more than three drafts, when publishing an important text, are a norm. Fortunately enough, nowadays writers can use labour-saving word processor which makes their re-writing much more congenial and easier.^{๓๘}

- Drafting by the teacher

A demonstration activity implemented by White and Arndt to help students view the process; through this, in addition, they can see that writing can be difficult even for teachers.

- Beginning, adding and ending

White and Arndt present activities considering effective ways of opening, supplying info and completing texts, through which the students can develop their writing skills and thus can gain more confidence in their difficult tasks.

- Comparing texts

Comparing texts gives students opportunity to compare two texts written on the same subject, one poorly and the other one written well. After students have read both texts, they discuss which one is better, and why. The activity can follow in two possible variations: students are tasked to either rewrite the poor text or add another passage to the well-written text.

- Writing based on reading material

Writing based on reading material helps and exposes target vocabulary, organization flow, sentence patterns and background information to students who through reading get in interaction with the writer of the text. Raimes^{๓๙} also puts forward a plentiful list of various reading activities on content and form, including tasks focusing on cohesive links, punctuation, sentence arrangement, and more.

- Writing based on conversation or visual material

^{๓๘} Ibid., p.14.

^{๓๙} Ibid., p.51-63.

Writing based on conversation or visual material is a useful task for students to practice writing according to real situation. Students write a text based on provided information which can serve as a model for actual writing.

- Practicing writing

Practicing writing is an activity in which students are given topics from which they choose one and write their own texts. They can follow texts or parts of them as models. This task helps students integrate all skills they have already learnt; students practice writing complete, cohesive texts.

2) Evaluating drafts

White and Arndt^{๔๐} object that it is commonly, and wrongly at the same time, assumed that the task of students is to write and the task of teachers to evaluate. On the contrary, writers have to learn to accept responsibility for their writing and become their own critics, able to sensibly assess their product and make appropriate improvements during the drafting stage.

- Self-editing

Raimes^{๔๑} suggests that self-editing is a valuable technique used by the writer, who now becomes a reader, to critically view their piece of writing in order to make adjustments and corrections. It is advised to edit the draft at the right stage – after some time of rest, as a fresher eye can see more inconsistencies, misspellings or incompleteness. White and Arndt recommend this activity as suitable for critical viewing of own work. An inseparable part of this method is developing criteria for evaluation, which can be carried out in the form of a checklist with questions to be answered about the writing.

- Students' responses to a student's writing

Students' responses to a student's writing are considered to be the way of responding to reading another student's piece of work while using a guideline such as a checklist to follow and see what needs to be checked. This attitude might help as advocated by Harmer^{๔๒} who argues that students at the

^{๔๐} Ibid., p.116.

^{๔๑} Ibid., p.149-150.

^{๔๒} Ibid., p.8.

age of adolescence might view the teacher as a potential enemy if not tact enough in terms of criticism. Peer-approval, however, is important to them. White and Arndt agree that the writer should be read by many other people, which not only gives them an intrinsic motivation to make a greater effort, but develops the competence of becoming more critical readers of own work as well.

- Responding to the text

Responding to the text should be done by a reader, not a marker, being primarily concerned with the meaning and purpose of the writing, rather than other, linguistic, stylistic or formal features. This requires of the reader some self-control, tact and sensitivity. To support and enhance this practice, the teacher and students should train their skills in responding to other people's work. Patterns of responding to the observed text, suggested by White and Arndt^{๔๓}, are teacher to student, teacher to class, and student to student; possible ways are written form of a letter or list of notes.

- Dealing with errors

The teacher (as a reader) should focus on expressed ideas and conveyed message first, it is important, argues Raimes^{๔๔}, not only to evaluate these features, but help the writer to correct mistakes. It is very much helpful if the teacher uses a system of indicating errors, which students are aware of and which help them to revise and correct their drafts prior to submitting the final works.

- Conferencing

Conferencing is considered to be a procedure in which the reader and the writer discuss the written piece. It can be carried out during or after composition and shows personal attention to the writer, which proves more beneficial than written response not only in that individual attitude but also because of face-to-face interaction/dialogue/discussion over the areas that need to be clarified.

^{๔๓} Ibid., p.124-131.

^{๔๔} Ibid.,p. 152.

This can be done either as a set of questions to be asked while continuing and improving the draft, or as responding to the student's self-evaluation.

2.2.3 Re-viewing final versions

Once the writer has gone through all previous process stages, the writing has come to the point of almost final version. What now remains is to look at the text once again with “a new pair of eyes,” as White and Arndt advise. They suggest following points to consider, with two objectives in mind: to improve critical viewing and provide students with linguistic tools for writing.

- Checking the context

Checking the context based on an overall assessment of the text and on how successful the writer has been with handling the issue of considering the purpose, audience and form at the focusing stage. This can be carried out with the help of ‘context checklist’ in pairs or groups, assessing other students’ drafts.

- Checking connections

Checking connections is considered to be an important part of this stage. The writer is assumed to write in a clear and understandable way for the reader; thus, now it comes to the part of testing logical and cohesive links. Activities for improving this area include categorizing cohesive devices into ‘connectives chart,’ text-analysing and text-reconstructing exercises.

- Checking divisions

Checking divisions helps the writer review how clear and logical the graphical division of their thoughts and arguments is. With the help of segmenting, paragraphing, cutting-and-pasting activities, the students can develop their skills of organizing their written piece more effectively.

- Assessing impact of the chosen language on the reader's mind and heart

Assessing impact of the chosen language on the reader's mind and heart is a work of a real writer who knows how to choose expressions and structures to make the right impression. In their book, White & Arndt present activities

focused on conveying mood, attitude, feeling; signalling an opinion; highlighting the focal idea; and adjusting the style.

Conclusion

In order to make progress, MCU students need good teaching that includes various kinds of writing techniques, regular opportunities to develop their skills, and effective writing assessment that leads them to understand how best to improve their work. The effective writer will reach a stage when the mechanical aspects of writing, such as spelling and punctuation, become second nature to them and they are able to give all their attention to experimenting with language and form to engage and inform their readers.

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