Activities for Teaching Writing

*Education is basically an art, and the teacher expresses the highest concept of this art when he or she keeps it from becoming routinized and lethargic.*

Howard A. Ozmon, Samuel M. Craver
*Philosophical Foundations of Education*

*Teaching is a skill so complex that no single factor can fully explain or describe the qualities of an effective teacher.*

Allan C. Ornstein & Daniel U. Levine
*“Teacher Behavior Research: Overview and Outlook,”* Phi Delta Kappa

*Writing is basically a process of communicating something (content) on paper to an audience, If the writer has nothing to say, writing will not occur.*

Adewumi Oluwadiya
1. A Balanced Approach to the Teaching of Writing Skills

The teaching of writing at the intermediate level in foreign-language classrooms often reflects the teaching of basic sentence-level writing skills, with organizational skills added. In basic writing training, often a student is given an example sentence whose meaning is explained; then the grammar pattern is taught; finally, the student is asked to write similar sentences using different content. At the intermediate level, the student is given an example paragraph to read; the overall organizational pattern of the paragraph is explicated; finally, the student is told to write a similar paragraph about a different subject.

Shortcomings of the traditional approach

Practitioners of the modern approach to writing point out that the traditional approach is deficient in two important respects. First, the teacher views the student's writing as a product. She assumes that the student knows how to write and uses what the student produces as a test of that ability. Second, the teacher focuses on form, i.e., syntax, grammar, mechanics, and organization, rather than on content. The content is seen mainly as a vehicle for the correct expression of the grammatical and organizational patterns taught, and the correct choice of vocabulary.

The modern approach

Modern approaches to the teaching of writing involve a combination of the communicative approach and the process approach to writing. They are based on three assumptions:

1. People write to communicate with readers.
2. People write to accomplish specific purposes.
3. Writing is a complex process.

Thus, writing is seen as a communicative act. Students are asked to think of their audience, the reader, and their purpose for writing. Meaning is stressed, rather than form. And writing is seen as a process, which can be divided into three stages: prewriting, composing, and revision. Students are trained to use the methods that good writers use in writing. Below is an example of the process that good writers have been found to follow in writing:

- They identify why they are writing.
- They identify whom they are writing for.
- They gather material through observing, brainstorming, making notes or lists, talking to others, and reading.
- They plan how to go about the task and how to organize the material.
- They write a draft.
- They read the draft critically in terms of its content.
- They revise.
- They prepare more drafts and then a final version.
- They proofread for errors.
Towards a balanced approach to the teaching of writing skills

All approaches to writing overlap, and the teacher should not be so devoted to one approach that she excludes all others. A teacher should be eclectic, drawing from all methods available.

The diagram below shows what writers have to deal with as they produce a piece of writing.

- **SYNTAX**
  - Sentence structure,
  - Sentence boundaries, stylistic choices, etc.
- **CONTENT**
  - relevance, clarity,
  - originality,
  - Logic, etc.
- **GRAMMAR**
  - Rules for verbs,
  - agreement, articles,
  - pronouns, etc.
- **THE WRITER’S PROCESS**
  - getting ideas,
  - getting started,
  - Writing drafts revising
- **MECHANICS**
  - handwriting,
  - spelling,
  - punctuation, etc.
- **AUDIENCE**
  - the reader /s
- **ORGANIZATION**
  - paragraphs
  - topic and support
  - cohesion and unity
- **WORD CHOICE**
  - vocabulary
  - idiom, tone
- **PURPOSE**
  - the reason for writing,

Students need to think about the purpose of their writing and the interests and abilities of the people they are writing for. They need to learn the value of writing several drafts and developing their ideas. Raimes says that a student who is given the time for the process to work, along with the appropriate feedback, will discover new ideas, new sentences, and new words as he plans, writes a first draft, and revises what he has written for a second draft.

But students also need to learn the styles and formats for a variety of writing purposes, and the grammatical and lexical terms relevant to those purposes as well. In addition, they need to be trained to act as an audience for other writers.

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

**Characteristics of good writing materials**

The following principles can be used as guidelines for choosing, designing, or adapting materials for the teaching of intermediate-level writing skills.

1. Materials should be learning-centered rather than teaching-centered.
2. Materials should be creative.
3. Materials should be related to students' interests.
4. Materials should be task-based.
5. Materials should be practical and deal with real-life communication tasks.
Types of writing activities

There is no better way for intermediate-level students to see the value of writing as a form of communication than for them to produce the kind of practical writing that many people do in their everyday life.

Teaching principles and techniques

1. Although writing is the focus of attention in the writing classroom, it should always be supported by other skills.
2. The students should do as much of the work as possible, not the teacher.
3. Students work together through pair and group work to generate, discover and organize ideas.
4. Check that pair or group work is proceeding smoothly and provide on-the-spot correction
5. Students exchange their compositions so that they become readers of each other's work. This is an important part of the writing experience.
6. In correcting work, the teacher should:
   a. Introduce a correction code with symbols for the different types of errors.
   b. Focus on global rather than local errors.
   c. Let students know how successful they have been in achieving the aims.

Unit components

Each unit of a writing course should concentrate on one type of writing activity; for example, a letter of complaint, an accident report, etc. All the activities in the unit should lead up to the final writing activity. Here is one way that the activities in a unit can be organized.

1. **Input.** The unit should begin with a reading passage that is a good example of the type of writing you want the student to be able to produce.

2. **Language Practice.** After seeing an example of the types of language used in the reading passage, students can be given training in the production of the grammar, vocabulary, and organization needed for the writing purpose. This training is provided in four parts:
   a. Language summary: Students study charts which display the language patterns and use many of the vocabulary terms that apply to the type of writing taught.
   b. Controlled writing: Students are given exercises in which a great deal of the content and/or form is supplied.
   c. Outline: The student is presented with one or more patterns for the overall organization of a passage of the type of writing being studied.
   d. Guided writing: This provides further practice using the grammatical points or syntactic structures taught in the language summary, but gives the student more freedom to use the vocabulary, idioms, ideas, and organization introduced in the reading passage.

3. **Semi-free Writing.** This is a type of activity in which the students, singly or in pairs or in a group, use their own ideas to write a passage, although the ideas are controlled by the purpose that the teacher provides and by the need to use the grammatical and/or syntactic patterns taught.

4. **Revision.** After the composition is written, it will be given to another student or other students who make comments on the content and form. Then it is rewritten and submitted to the teacher for her comments. After the students revise the second draft, the third draft is handed in to the teacher as the final product.
2. Some Prewriting Techniques for Student Writers

The teaching of writing has undergone a dramatic change in recent times. There has been a shift from the traditional product-oriented approaches to a process-oriented approach.

The principal features of this approach are:

- a view of writing as a recursive process that can be taught;
- an emphasis on writing as a way of learning as well as communicating
- a willingness to draw on other disciplines, notably cognitive psychology and linguistics
- the incorporation of a rhetorical context, a view that writing assignments include a sense of audience, purpose, and occasion;
- a procedure for feedback that encourages the instructor to intervene during the process (formative evaluation), and so aid the student to improve his first or initial drafts;
- a method of evaluation that determines how well a written product adapts the goals of the writer to the needs of the reader as audience; and
- the principle that writing teachers should be people who write

We should try to be as eclectic as possible, with the aim of presenting an enriched process approach that borrows freely strategies and techniques that belong to the product-oriented approach.

What prewriting is

Prewriting can be defined as any structural experiences that influence active student participation in thinking, talking, writing, and working on the topic under focus in a writing lesson. Such activities or experiences, include the following:

- oral group     brainstorming
- looping         cubing
- debating        outlining
- oral reading    interviewing
- clustering      dialogue writing
- free-writing    fantasizing
- oral compositions classical invention
- silent reading  extensive or intensive lecturing
- use of pictures to stimulate students visits to places of interest in the school locality

Most of these prewriting activities can be successfully taught at all school levels. The most effective way to do this is to guide students through each of the activities in the classroom rather than just lecturing or telling them about the activities.

The importance of prewriting

Prewriting activities generate ideas; they encourage a free flow of thoughts and help students to discover both what they want to say and how to say it on paper. In other words, prewriting activities facilitate the planning for both the product and the process.

Prewriting techniques teach students to write down their ideas quickly in raw form, without undue concern about surface errors and form. This practice helps their fluency, as they are able to think and write at the same time, rather than think and then write.
Some prewriting techniques, activities, and strategies

Prewriting techniques should be seen and used as alternative ways of stimulating and motivating students to write more and better essays.

Oral Group / Individual Brainstorming.

This involves the use of leading questions to get students thinking about a topic or idea that is under focus. The questions could be written on the board and each student asked to think out answers to them. The teacher allows an interval of some minutes to let students think. Then he can randomly chooses students to tell the class their answers, reactions or responses to the questions. The teacher writes the answers on the board. These answers are then copied by each student for subsequent use in his essay as he deems fit.

Clustering.

Clustering enables the writer to map out his/her thoughts on a particular topic or subject and then to choose which ones to use. Clustering is a "non-linear brainstorming process that generates ideas, images and feelings around a stimulus word until a pattern becomes discernible.

1. The teacher explains what clustering is.
2. Circles the stimulus word(s) on the board and asks students to say all that comes to their minds.
3. Ask the students to cluster a second word for themselves and write a short paragraph using their clusters.
4. After writing, ask students to give a title to what they have written.

Looping.

This technique entails writing nonstop without fear of errors or self-censorship on anything that comes to one's mind on a particular topic. After writing for a while, the writer stops, reads, and reflects/ thinks about what he has written, and then sums it up in a single sentence. He can repeat this procedure two or more times to generate ideas or bits of texts for his writing.

Cubing.

This activity involves a swift or quick consideration of a subject from six points of view:

describe it   compare it   apply it
associate it   analyse it   argue for or against it

The students can be taken through a practical session where a subject is taken, and materials and ideas are generated from the six different perspectives then use at a later date.

Classical Invention.

A student using classical invention as a prewriting technique can ask and answer questions about the topic at hand that are grouped according to Aristotle's topics: definition, comparison, relationship, circumstance, and, testimony.
The teacher can give the following tips on how to use classical invention:

**Definition:** How does the dictionary define the object or notion or topic under focus?

**Comparison:** What is the topic, word, object, etc., similar to? Why?

**Relationship:** Ask questions about cause and effect.

**Circumstance:** Ask questions about feasibility or practicability.

**Testimony:** Ask questions about primary and secondary sources of occurrence or recording.

**Debating.**

This is the act of orally presenting two sides of an argument or topic. It can be used to generate ideas, thoughts, concepts, notions, and opinions about any topic under focus. All the advantages that go with active oral use of language by students make debating worthwhile for stimulating students to write. Oral language use enhances writing ability.

**Interviewing.**

Students are asked to interview someone sitting near them. Each student is given five minutes to ask questions and jot down notes about the other student's background and interests before reversing roles for another five minutes. Then they can be given 15 minutes to organise a rough draft of their notes. Next, they read their drafts to their partners for reactions and suggestions so that misconceptions can be corrected and information can be added or deleted.

**Visits to Places of Interest and Importance in the School Vicinity.**

Two or more teachers of different subjects can, along with the English-language teacher, organise trips to places of interest like the zoo, the local industries, and natural habitats in the next vicinity. Even important personalities in the society can be visited and interviewed for personality profiles for the school magazine. Before the actual visit, teachers should give students some guidelines on what to look out for during such visits. There should also be an indication of the types of topics the students will be required to write about at the end of the visits.

**Fantasizing / Meditating / Mind Transportation.**

These techniques are the same thing in practice. They require students to make a voyage into a fantasy world while they are sitting quietly in class. The teacher first requires students to put away all books or materials from their desk tops. Complete silence is required. Then the teacher offers possible topics, such as: If you had one wish, what would you choose? Etc. The teacher and students then sit quietly for some minutes to reflect on such questions. Next, the teacher asks students to write down all they fantasised or meditated about. These initial drafts are then responded to by peers and / or the teacher, then reworked and rewritten before being handed in for final assessment by the teacher.

**Lecturing.**

Lecturing involves the use of an "expert" in a field related to the topic under focus to do the lecturing rather than the English-language teacher himself. The teacher tells the students about the topic to be treated Then gets in touch with the "expert". Students read about the topic beforehand. On the day of the lecture, the class is set in a quiet atmosphere for the guest speaker. The students may write down a few tips from the lecture. At the end of the lecture, students ask questions, contribute their own ideas, and agree or disagree with the speaker's ideas or those of their peers. After this, the teacher thanks the guest speaker and ends the lesson by assigning the topic for homework. Topics like the following can be handled using the technique of lecturing:
Reading.

In a well-integrated English Language Arts programme, the four language skills are often interdependent even when treated in separate headings for ease of teaching. So silent reading or extensive reading is a useful tool for generating ideas for writing as well as a means of exposing the students to the vocabulary, idioms, conventions, and nuances of written language.

The possible uses of reading as a stimulating experience to teach writing across the curriculum and for generating materials to write on are diverse and inexhaustible. The teacher and his students should explore as many as they can and use them to enhance students' writing. Reading and writing are two skills that mirror each other, and they ought to be taught in such a way as to complement each other.

Group Discussion.

This is a technique most teachers are already familiar with and should use extensively in language classes. Its usefulness in a writing class is aptly stated by Oyetunde when he asserts that oral discussion, during which students are guided to generate ideas about the topic, should always precede any written assignment. This sensitizes students to the need to plan the content and organisation of their compositions. This oral presentation also enables the teacher to find out whether the students have the necessary vocabulary and language structures with which to express their ideas in writing. Group discussion of a topic as a prewriting activity is also useful because it provides the weaker students with ideas and materials to write on, as well as help get varied perspectives on the topic at hand.

Conclusion

Experienced writing teachers and scholars such as Smith, Rico, Flower, and Oyetunde advocate that the prewriting stage is crucial for success in writing for both native speakers and nonnative speakers. This is because during the prewriting stage the goals are to stimulate and motivate students to generate materials to write on. Prewriting techniques take students through oral, written, intellectual, auditory, kinesthetic, and experiential activities that can stimulate higher-level thinking as well as writing skills in students. According to Smith, time spent on this part of the writing process pays off in more finished and better compositions than the compositions created without a prewriting stage.

The prewriting activities/techniques outlined here are some of the most widely used and most effective at all levels in Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Teachers ought to take their students through the prewriting stage of the writing process if they are to enhance students' writing ability in schools.

References:

2. Thomas Kral, Creative Classroom Activities.