

Teaching ESL/EFL Students to Write Better

Yesim Cimcoz

[hcimcoz \[at\] iris.com.tr](mailto:hcimcoz@iris.com.tr)

A majority of students dislike writing. When faced with a writing task, most students will react with comments like, "oh no not again" or "this is so boring". A teacher who does not try to see the real message behind these comments could easily become discouraged. Eventually, both the teacher and the students will 'hate writing'. To prevent this from happening the teacher should consider what students actually mean when they say "boring", and the possibility that students are actually expressing their insecurity and lack of confidence in completing the task. Writing is a skill that has not been accorded the attention it deserves in high school education. Students have not been taught to make their ideas flow on paper. They don't know how to write, feel stupid when they can't find the right words, fear criticism and want to avoid the emotional turmoil experienced when faced with a topic and a blank piece of paper. Teachers who want to help their students gain confidence in writing should try to follow a writing process that takes the student from insecurity to success.

Coming to Terms with Reality

The first stage that students must go through is that of 'coming to terms with reality'. It is very important that students be made aware of what their actual level of writing is at present. It is also crucial that at this stage teachers must not tell students what they believe their level to be but must provide the right feedback to enable students to see for themselves. Students who do not write well should not be fooled into believing that they do. At this stage, commenting only on the positive aspects of a student paper will only create a false sense of confidence in the student. Comments on how to improve poor areas in writing both on paper and in person can help students understand just what their writing is in need of. Once this stage has been satisfactorily completed then the teacher must move on to reassure students that it will be possible to improve their writing.

Reassurance

Reassurance is the stage where students are made to understand that poor writing is not a curse, can be improved and most of all is not something for which they should punish themselves. The message given by the teacher should be -- now we know what the problem is let's deal with it! As you may notice, the teacher at this point is a crucial element in the students' writing process because it is at this stage that the student needs an external motivator.

Motivation

Motivation is probably the longest stage in this process. Tasks which allow students to narrow down their expectations and move step by step toward the final goal of success, will show them what they can do rather than what they can't. Each task should be set at a level higher than the previous one, thus with each task students will build confidence and become motivated to move on to the next step. Motivating students is somewhat like being parents to a baby that has taken a first step. A first baby step brings with it claps and screams of joy even though the step is not perfect. A positive reaction from parents will get the baby to attempt another step, just as a positive reaction from the teacher will get students to go a step further. Without realizing it with each step the student will gain courage.

Once motivation has taken the student step by step toward higher achievement and self-confidence, fear and insecurity will have been replaced with courage and students will feel the need to show what they can do. Maintaining student courage at a specific level is very important. If students have been pushed toward unattainable goals then they will have gained a false sense of courage and their initial attempt at the final goal will bring disappointment to both the teacher and the student. If all steps in the motivation stage were attainable given the student's ability, then by the time students have reached the final goal they will have the necessary courage to attempt writing that final essay.

The Initial Attempt at the Final Essay

Although the student has gained the courage to write, the initial attempt at the final essay will be scary and some students may make mistakes. As a result of these mistakes, it is possible for the student to revert back to fossilized methods previously learned. What the teacher must look for at this stage are the good sentences scattered throughout the paper, an easy flow of ideas or clear signs or organization. These positive aspects of the paper are what must be stressed to the student and a comparison must be made between the initial writing and the final essay to show where improvement is evident.

Success in writing for each student should be measured by individual realistic goals set at the onset of the process. These goals should be attainable by the student given the student's capacity to write. At this stage students should no longer be comparing their writing to those of people who have a better grasp of the art. It is also important that students understand that the level of writing they have achieved in English may not equal their ability to write in a native language. With time and effort that may be the next goal for the student to aim for.

Not everyone can become a writer. However, everyone can learn to write better and to write, well organized, flowing essays with clear language. Focusing on grammar and sentence structure is not the key to making better writers of our students. Students must be given what any writer needs, an understanding of their capacity to write, motivation, self-confidence and courage.

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