Using E-mail in EFL Writing Classes

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Introduction

This article suggests the benefits of using e-mail in EFL story writing classes. The objectives of this article are (1) to have the students understand the role of cohesive markers and (2) to have them create entire stories on their own using cohesive markers. It requires about 4 class hours and teaching aids such as a computer and e-mail system, an overhead projector and pictures drawn by the teacher or scrapped from magazines.

Rationale

We grew up listening to various stories. Most of these stories are interesting and have good plots because they have been refined by time and many story tellers. Many people express their thoughts by means of stories. Sometimes children invent their own stories on the basis of existing ones they have heard. The story-based EFL program has already proven successfulin many language teaching situations. It is also one of the most favorite ways for teaching languages in the classroom.

Cohesive markers are very important for writing a well-framed story. And vice versa, stories are the most useful vehicle for teaching cohesive markers. After a few sessions of teaching cohesive markers, students are ready to have several writing sessions for their own stories. Most EFL students are good readers and are fairly good at analyzing and explaining grammatical rules of cohesive markers, but studying cohesive markers may not be interesting for them.

Yet, the prospect of writing stories the next class may invoke active and positive responses from the students. They have read many stories but many of them have never written a story by themselves. If the teacher follows the process suggested here students may write amazing stories in just a few days to present to their classes.

Cohesive Markers

The cohesive marker is one of the most important factors in a narrative. They help readers follow the structure or form of a reading. They function as traffic signs on the road. By paying more attention to these markers and by knowing how they operate, readers can use the cohesive markers to make the reading easier to understand. In this article cohesive markers are defined as elements that tie a sentence to another sentence and establish a discourse. For example, it includes pro-forms, place and time relators, determiners, and other discourse references (Decklerck, 1991; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1990).

Students will work with cohesive ties and linking words and phrases that show orders for recognizing the logical sequence of a narrative. They will also gain the ability to use cohesive markers when they write a discourse.

E-mail and Writing

Research shows that e-mail is a very useful vehicle for teaching English (Lee, 1998; Warschauer, 1995). E-mail can furnish teacher-student, student-student communications including formal and informal consultations, exchange of dialogue journals and writing conferencing (Belisle, 1996). It is not easy for students to consult a teacher because of shyness or lack of time. Just give the students the teacher's e-mail address and let them know that questions and comments are welcome. They will find that it is one of the easiest ways to access to the teacher and to express their thoughts to him/her. They can tell or ask the teacher more freely what they want and what they would like to express without interrupting the teacher when he/she is busy.

In EFL writing classrooms, the messages that the teacher sends back to students are very important to them (Zamel, 1981).

Feedback in L2 language instruction has two functions: reinforcement and information. E-mail can perform both of these. E-mail is concerned with the clear and unambiguous transmission of messages, and stresses a two-way communication channel. The computer and e-mail mode assumes the existence of a dynamic system in which an individual and instantaneous feedback provides specific and relevant information. The system can affect and alter the learning behavior of the students. Speed, power, and flexibility of the computer and e-mail can effectively facilitate second language writing (Chapelle, 1990). In EFL writing classes e-mail is a very useful and powerful vehicle for teaching. It enables the teacher to monitor the process of the students' writings to save class time for the teacher's assignments and comments (Belisle, 1996).

Warschauer (1995) presents another three benefits of e-mail. First, e-mail provides students with an excellent opportunity for real and natural communication. Most students, especially those living in EFL situations, lack sufficient opportunities for communicating in English. E-mail can put students in contact with native speakers or other English learners around the world instantaneously and provide authentic contexts and motivations for communication. Second, e-mail supplies opportunities for independent learning which is essential for L2 writing. The use of e-mail involves a wide range of skills including knowing how to use a personal computer, knowing how to navigate through the immense resource that is often called cyberspace, and becoming familiar with the special register of e-mail communication. Mastering these skills can empower the students to use e-mail and other types of telecommunications for the rest of their lives. Third, e-mail allows the students to communi! cate easily with hundreds of students. It can provide information, contact, and stimulation, supplying the teacher with more effective and enjoyable teaching situations. In brief, e-mail enables students to have many opportunities for communication, collaboration, and information. It leads the students to a new world of experience.

Procedures

Step 1. Organizing a story

1. After a few classes on cohesive markers the teacher introduces the following activity by telling students that the piece they will be working on it is a version of the beginning of a story. Students may look at the sentences silently to see if they recognize the story, and if so, the teacher will have them tell about it in English.
2. Students will work individually or in groups rearranging sentences in a logical order. The teacher can help them by saying that sentence (h) is the only one that mentions a person's name; thus, it is the logical first sentence.
3. When individuals or groups finish, they compare their answers either individually or in groups. It is very important to encourage the students to explain why they ordered their sentences the way they did; they should be able to explain the connections between the cohesive markers. It is best if they actually see the reorganized story on the board or on OHP so that arrows can be used to show the ties between the sentences.

Example

The following sentences come from the opening paragraph of a story, but they are in the wrong order. Your task is to put them in a logical order. Check the words and phrases that will help you decide the order.

- a) The wagon was the finest in the town.
- b) To get to his meeting on time, he had to pay a man to drive him to a small railroad junction to catch his train.
- c) The road was very tough and stony there.
- d) There weren't many trains at that time.
- e) After dipping down steeply, it led across a narrow bridge over a crack.
- f) A young man had come for Mr. Smith, driving his wagon.
- g) As they began to go down a hill, the man slowed down the horses and looked ahead.
- h) Many many years ago Mr. Smith was asked to make a speech in Washington, DC.

The Answer

- h) Many many years ago Mr. Smith was asked to make a speech in Washington, DC.
- d) There weren't many trains **at that time**.
- b) To get to his meeting on time, he had to pay a man to drive him to a small railroad junction to catch his **train**.
- f) **A young man** had come for Mr. Smith, driving his wagon.

- a) **The wagon** was the finest in the town.
- g) As they began to go down the hill, **the man** slowed down the horses and looked ahead.
- c) **The road** was very tough and stony there.
- e) After dipping down steeply, **it** led across a narrow bridge over a crack.

Step 2. Adding details to the given story

Before the class the teacher prepares the map of Washington, DC. The pictures are related to the story and should stimulate the students to enrich the story. The teacher can ask some questions to the students to add more details to the given story as follows. The teacher can stimulate the students to specify the story by asking some questions about the story as follows. The teacher prepares the map of Washington, DC. The pictures are related to the story and should stimulate the students to specify the story.
(the original sentence)
Many years ago Mr. Smith was asked to make a speech in Washington, DC.
(teacher's questions)

1. Many years ago? When? Specify as you like.
2. In Washington? Specify the place he was going to make a speech.
   Students try to answer the teacher's questions. They can specify the first sentence as follows.
   (an example of the beginning part of the story after specifying)
   In 1864, a man named Mr. Smith lived in Virginia. One day he was asked to make a speech at Georgetown University in Washington, DC.

Step 3. Feedback from the teacher (1)

The teacher corrects the e-mailed second step of the story and sends it to the students individually through 'reply.' Many students are encouraged to have their own e-mail addresses to develop their own stories and get feedback from the teacher on time.

Step 4. Presenting pictures

The teacher prepares pictures from travel guides or monthly magazines. The pictures has no explicit sequence so that students can choose the sequence with little limitation. They write their own stories individually or in groups. After talking about the pictures, the teacher distributes the copies of the pictures. The assignment is to choose six out of the eight pictures and arrange them as they like. Then, write down their own stories according to their own sequence of the pictures. Before writing the students should brainstorm the plot of the story. Then they should write their refined stories and send them to the teacher through e-mail again.

Step 5. Feedback from the teacher (2)

The teacher corrects the e-mailed story and sends it to the students individually through 'reply.' In addition, the teacher comments on the content and the linguistic features of the writing.

Step 6. Presenting the pictures

The teacher prepares a board and a cellophane tape to attach the pictures. Before the students present the finished stories in front of the class, they are instructed to arrange and attach the pictures on the board according to their own sequence of the stories. The orders of the pictures are changed whenever each group presents their stories. After the presentation, each team revises the stories to make them more extensive and more interesting.

Step 7. Publishing their stories

Publishing is one of the most important process for the writers. The finished stories are gathered in the teacher's homepage or they can be printed out as a pamphlet. Not only the students but all the members of the school can read the anthology of stories.

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