

Encouraging Engineering Students to Write Simple Essays

Thevy Rajaretnam
MARA University of Technology (UiTM)
theyv [at] tm.net.my

This teaching technique can be used to encourage students enrolled in a proficiency course in any institution of higher learning to write simple cohesive essays. The objective of this technique is to provide a conducive environment in which students can enjoy learning to write a variety of text types - letters, presentations, articles and reviews.

Background

The teaching technique described here was used on a class of 26 diploma level students in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, MARA University of Technology, Malaysia. As diploma level students, they are required to undergo the Preparatory English Program, a course that is designed not only to remedy the students' weakness in the use of English but also to raise their proficiency level.

During the fourteen-week program, (six contact hours per week) they are taught basic grammar, reading skills and writing skills. The aim of the writing component is to prepare students to write error-free sentences and logical, cohesive essays with grammatical accuracy.

Preparation

In the first three weeks of the program, remedial work was carried out to improve the students' mastery of some basic grammar rules. Using a reference-cum-practice grammar book complete with an answer key, the students were taught how to use the book as independent learners.

They were given a choice in the approach they could use when working on the selected chapters. One approach was they could attempt the practice exercises, check the answers against the answer key and then read the relevant grammar points for which their answers were wrong. The other alternative was for them to read the grammar points, attempt the practice exercises and then check the answers against the answer key. If any student required further help, he or she then asked the lecturer for clarification. The lecturer would then explain to the student individually.

In the fourth week, the students began to write simple expository and descriptive essays of about 200 words each.

The Approach

A product/process approach was used. In the early stages they began by writing on topics they were familiar with so that they had the content to write about. They were also provided the schema or the background knowledge necessary to write on a given topic. The schema came through three ways - the lecturer, peers or examples of the genre they have to imitate.

As far as possible, students were from the beginning trained to see writing as a genuine activity. They wrote for a purpose and for an audience and as such their products included letters, articles, presentations and reviews.

They were given time to brainstorm for ideas, draft the products, revise them and have them edited

before the final products were submitted for grading. Initially students were given a choice on whether they prefer revision and editing by their peers or by their lecturer. They chose to have their work revised and edited by the lecturer.

So, all drafts were written on transparencies using waterproof pens. Each writing assignment was projected on the screen and the lecturer edited the work line by line, explaining why she has to make the changes. After having conducted revision and editing using this approach, the lecturer then began first to underline the parts of the sentences that needed to be edited. The students themselves suggested how these could be improved. In time, most of the suggestions came from the students themselves.

Throughout the various stages in the writing process, students were allowed to work in a non-threatening environment. They worked in groups of four or five. They used dictionaries. They consulted their peers in the other groups. They chose the people they wanted to work with. They were allowed to sit anywhere in the classroom and the lecturer did not walk around to monitor the students' progress. Instead, they would call for the lecturer if they needed her advice or help. The lecturer would then walk to the group, sit with them and help them. After which she would return to her seat and wait for other groups to call for her.

A total of six topics were used. It took about two to four contact hours per week to complete one activity. The remaining contact hours were used to teach the other components in the syllabus. By the time the six topics had been covered, it was the ninth week of the semester. From the tenth to the fourteenth week, the students began to work individually on examination-type grammar, reading and writing activities.

The Topics

The six topics used to help students to write simple, cohesive 200-word essays with grammatical accuracy are as follows.

Assignment 1

Getting to know you

Since this is your first writing activity, write a letter to your lecturer telling her about yourself and the members in your group. Try and limit yourself to about 150 to 200 words.

Assignment 2

Copies of an article entitled "Cane ... no pain, no gain" from The New Straits Times (one of the local English Language dailies) dated June 30, 2000 about a spate of incidents of criminal acts involving school children were distributed to the students. As part of this article, the journalists had also interviewed some famous local personalities regarding their childhood experiences when they were caned for having committed some misdeed. They also were asked to explain how the canning has affected their lives. The frank responses of these personalities were quoted in the article.

The students read this article and then shared their own experiences with the class. The lecturer too shared her experiences, much to the amusement of the students.

The following situation was then given to the students.

Lately, there has been an increase in criminal acts involving school children. Some say that bringing back the cane will put an end to the acts of crime. Have you been caned in school? Has it in any way affected your life? In groups of four, brainstorm, discuss and write about your experiences. Your article is meant for publication in your faculty's student journal.

Assignment 3

Various types of dictionaries from the students were collected and displayed for the students to see. These included monolingual, bilingual and pocket-sized dictionaries by different publishers. A lively discussion was carried out regarding the many uses of the dictionary. As a result of the discussion, the following outline was conceived and used as a guideline to write a presentation.

- Introduction
 - types
 - sizes
 - publishers
- Development: uses of a dictionary
 - translation
 - meaning
 - grammar
 - spelling
 - pronunciation
 - history of the word (etymology)
- Conclusion
 - importance of a dictionary among undergraduates
 - when reading reference books
 - when writing assignments

The following situation was then given.

You have been asked to present a paper on the multiple uses of a dictionary to your class. In groups of four, discuss, plan and draft your paper. Your paper should not exceed 200 words.

Assignment 4

Students were told in advance to watch the movie *The Patriot* starring Mel Gibson. A week before the writing activity, copies of reviews published in two different English Language dailies were distributed to the students. Students read the reviews and came prepared to share their opinions about the movie. A lively discussion took place before the following situation was given.

You have watched the movie *The Patriot*. As reporters in charge of the entertainment section of the campus journal, write a short review of the movie in about 200 words.

Assignment 5

Copies of a passage on the importance of coral reefs and the role they play in the lives of mankind were distributed to the students. The students read the passage and discussed the issues involved. Where necessary, the lecturer explained the content to the students. Then, the following situation was given.

Read the passage on the importance of coral reefs and the role they play in the lives of mankind. Then write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper explaining why coral reefs should be preserved.

Assignment 6

The students were given two weeks to read one of the short stories in the book *Six American Stories*, abridged and simplified by Norman Wymer and published by Thomson ELT in 1995. Before the writing assignment, the lecturer briefly explained how to write a book review. The following outline was then written on the whiteboard.

- What is the title of the story and who wrote it?
- What is the story about (synopsis)

- Is it available in hard copy/paperback?
- Is it an abridged or unabridged version of the original story?
- Is the language used simple enough to understand and appreciate?
- Who should read it?
- Why is it worth reading?

The situation given was as follows.

You have been asked to post a review of one of the short stories in the book entitled Six American Stories, abridged and simplified by Norman Wymer and published by Thomson ELT, 1995 on the website of your local Residents' Council Book Club. Your review should be written in about 200 words.

Conclusion

The students generally enjoyed the writing sessions. They were very enthusiastic about the writing assignments. There were no problems as far as absenteeism was concerned. The students who were more proficient felt very challenged while those who were less proficient felt the need to try their level best so as to be able to keep up with their peers.

This approach to help students write simple essays can be used to teach the writing component in any proficiency course. It can be modified by the teacher to suit her or his classroom situation, depending on the level of proficiency of the students, the type of materials available and the number of hours allotted for the course.

References

- Gaudart, Hyacinth, Richard Hughes and Jessie Michael. 1996; Towards Better English Grammar, Fajar Bakti.
- Badger, Richard and Goodith White. 2000; A Process Genre Approach to Teaching Writing, ELT Journal, Vol. 54, No. 2
- Sovova, Lilia and Richard Donato. 1991; Group Activities in a Language Classroom, Forum, Vol. XXIX, No. 2
- Leeds, Bruce (ed). 1995. Writing in a Second Language: Insights from First and Second Language Teaching and Research, Longman

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VII, No. 12, December 2001

<http://iteslj.org/>

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Rajaretnam-Writing.html>