

The Process Writing Method

By

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Six years ago, while beginning my teacher education program, I came across a book called *Whole Language Strategies for ESL Students* by Gail Heald-Taylor (1994). In her book Heald-Taylor describes an approach to writing called Process Writing. Now that I am getting ready to begin my fifth year teaching, I have realized that I have not only continued to use this approach, but have found it to be one of my most valuable tools to improve the writing of my English as a Second Language (ESL) students. I have used this approach with ESL students in grades 3-5 and beginning, intermediate, and advanced Adult ESL students at the community college level. In this article I am going to summarize Heald-Taylor's Process Writing approach with the addition of illustrations from my own experience at the elementary and community college level. The Process Writing Method would be a valuable tool for any ESL teacher who wants to improve the writing of their students.

Process Writing Method

Heald-Taylor (1986) describes her method in the following way:

"Process Writing is an approach which encourages ESL youngsters to communicate their own written messages while simultaneously developing their literacy skills in speaking and reading rather than delaying involvement in the writing process, as advocated in the past, until students have perfected their abilities in handwriting, reading, phonetics, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In Process Writing the communication of the message is paramount and therefore the developing, but inaccurate, attempts at handwriting, spelling, and grammar are accepted, know that within the process of regular writing opportunities students will gain control of these sub-skills. These skills are further developed in individual and small group conference interviews."

Getting Started

ESL students are ready to begin writing as soon as they are able to speak in social and classroom situations, especially if they are initiating the conversations. The beginning writer will often use a variety of approaches when writing from illustrations, wiggles, invented spellings, or other representations of words. It is important that the student is able to discuss with the ESL teacher what those representations mean in order for the instructor to help the ESL student develop their writing skills.

Materials

Every student will need a writing dairy notebook, which later will be replaced with a writing folder in which ESL students will keep their completed work and works in progress. Students will also need a daily journal with about 30 pages of lined or unlined paper. Unlined paper is especially useful for the beginning writer, who may communicate their messages using illustrations or wiggles. The daily journal is intended for students to make journal entries on a daily basis. Students are asked to write on one side of the page. The other side is for comments made by the teacher and for translation. Having students write in a daily journal is extremely useful in that you have a daily record of the student's growth. These are very useful to use over the course of a school year. Teachers can pinpoint specific areas that students need assistance in. I have also found these very

useful during parent-teacher conferences or problem solving team meeting. This allows the teacher to show what specific areas they have been working on with the student, what strategies they have used, and the results of the work done. At the end of the school year, students often value their journals because they can visually see the growth they have achieved. Journals can also be saved to show growth over multiple years.

Illustrations

Many of the ESL students I have had in my classes have preferred to draw pictures first because they can include many concepts that they would not be able to express verbally. Drawings and illustrations are a very important part of beginning writing. However, not all students will draw first. Many will prefer to write before they draw a picture. Illustrations are a way for ESL students to understand new concepts or vocabulary in a context that makes the new concepts or vocabulary meaningful and more readily internalized by the learner. Illustrations also enable ESL students to link new concepts and vocabulary to prior knowledge by visually showing the connection between different concepts. I have had many students who have had a love and a talent for art, which helped develop their love of writing because they could see the connection between how writing can influence art and how art can influence their writing.

The First Lesson

The very first lesson will be a modeling of how to develop and write a story. Modeling the process helps to ensure that the students grasp the assignment. The class will begin by developing a class story with the students assisting in the development and the writing of the story. The story can be written on the chalkboard, chart paper, or on overhead transparencies. Give the students the option of what to write about and ask them what you should write for the very first sentence. Have the students try to say the sentence out loud and have the author try to write the sentence on the chalkboard, chart paper, or overhead transparencies. The student may only know one of the letters of a word or may not know the word at all. If the student does not know the word or a large portion of a word, have the student write a line or wobble to represent the word or partial word. Ask the rest of the class to assist in completing the words and sentence. In these beginning stories, grammar and syntax may not always be perfect. Accepting the language a student uses at the time is very important. Over time, as the student has more opportunity to develop language, the student will improve in their language ability. Accepting the varying ability levels of is very important. All students should feel good about wanting to participate and feel successful about the progress they are making in writing. It is also very important that you teach your students to be accepting of the different ability levels in the class, especially for the Adult ESL student. In my experience, adults are much more affected by the criticism of their classmate than young students. Adult students who do not feel good about their writing will not write or want to share their writing. All students need to feel good about the progress they have made.

On Their Own

Everyday ESL students need to be encouraged to work on writing their own stories and making entries in their diaries. Students need to know that they must practice writing every day. They need to understand that it is okay to make mistakes in their stories and journal and not to get stuck on worrying whether or not their writing is perfect. In my class, I explain to my students that writing like anything else they want to get better at requires practice. Having a pencil on paper is the only way that students will improve their writing. This is also an area where teachers have a problem. Many teachers see more writing as more work they have to grade and correct. If students write stories and diary entries daily, at the end of the week this may seem like a lot of grading for the teacher to do. Teachers need to be okay with not having to grade and correct every piece of writing a student creates. Students and parents also need to understand that not every piece of writing will be corrected and graded. Here is an example of how to relate this to other aspects of life. If your student is involved in a sport, they will attend practice all week long, however, the wins and losses that occur during practice are not recorded. Practice is a time to make mistakes and

get better. Game days are the only event that really "counts" on the win/loss column. It is the same way with writing. Students need the opportunity to practice, to make mistakes and get better. Then they take what they have learned and apply it on "Game Day" or in education "Test Day." Using this approach a teacher will not become overwhelmed by grading a never-ending stack of paper.

Translation

When students complete their stories many of them will have lines, wiggles, invented spelling, and other representations for words. Take this opportunity to have the student "read" their stories to you. While the student is reading their story, use the blank side of the paper to write the translation of their story in the proper form. Go over the translation of the story with the student pointing out what they did correctly. Knowing what they did correctly allows students to feel good about what they are doing right and shows them what they need to work on without focusing on the negative.

"What Should I Write About?"

In the beginning, many students will have a difficult time deciding on a topic to write about. At first, the teacher may need to provide students with topics based upon learning experiences they have had in the classroom, experiences at home, or experiences they have had in the world. It is important to develop topics with which the students have had some experience. This allows the student to draw upon prior knowledge to connect with the writing topic. This will expand the base of vocabulary that a student has to draw from in the development of their story. Students need to "see" the connection between writing and other subjects. By developing an understanding of the connection between subjects, students will not only progress in the development of their writing but also in the other subject areas.

Student-Teacher Writing Conferences

Teachers need to set up individual conference interview with their ESL students to support their writing development. Heald-Taylor states,

"In conference interviews students are invited to further develop their stories, to add more information, to include descriptive language, to order information, and to develop skills in phonetics, spelling, grammar, and punctuation."

Heald-Taylor describes two types of conferences, the content conference and the skill conference. In the content conference, the teacher asks the student for more information about their story. Some students will respond verbally and some will add additional information to the story. It is important not to push students in to the drafting and revising process. They will do this on their own when they are ready. It is also important for the teacher not to revise or edit their work for them. When a teacher does this the writing is no longer the students writing. It has become the teacher's creation. During the skill conference, the student and teacher will focus on writing skills such as phonetics, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. It is important that the teacher only focuses on one skill at a time until that skill is learned. Allow the students to guide the direction of skill focus by allowing them to incorporate knowledge they have already learned. Students are more likely to internalize new skills if they can make connections to prior knowledge.

Why Process Writing Works

As any ESL teacher will tell you, ESL students of the same age and grade level will have varying abilities in writing. Process Writing will assist ESL students, whatever their ability level, improve their writing. Once an ESL student understands the process and trust that the teacher will accept and approve of their invented symbols and spelling, the ability to write improves dramatically. The key to learning to write is feeling confident in your abilities. Many students do

not enjoy writing because they feel that if they cannot do it correctly the first time then they will never get it. Learning to write like learning to do many things requires practice and time. All students are capable to becoming excellent writers given enough practice and time. The Process Writing method values the talents and growth of individual writers and makes them want to continue writing because they feel good about their abilities. The Process Writing method is an approach that has help me developed many youngsters and adults into wonderful writers.

Reference

- Heald-Taylor, Gail. *Whole Language Strategies for ESL Students*. Carlsbad: Domine Press, Inc., 1994.

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