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Stimulating Writing through Project-Based Tasks

LEARNING TO WRITE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS AN UPHILL STRUGGLE FOR MOST students. Even with simple writing exercises, students often lose interest and do not complete them. Research on this issue indicates that creating a good piece of writing is considered an extremely difficult skill, even in one's own native language (Nunan 1999). One reason that writing is so difficult relates to the fact that, in addition to knowing the appropriate grammar and vocabulary, a writer's ideas must be presented clearly and in an organized fashion. This is an obstacle for second language learners and a dilemma for language instructors, who must look for successful ways to teach the skill.

Because writing is such a difficult skill to master, students often experience a lack of motivation, which is a notable characteristic of some second language learners. Motivation is a complex construct, and there are many factors that might inspire students to master a foreign language. For example, students might

want to learn English for their careers, to study abroad, or for self-fulfillment, factors that teachers can use to motivate students. In addition, all students have particular needs and interests, which teachers also can take advantage of to create motivating writing lessons and activities. In fact, research from practicing teachers shows the benefit of focusing on students' needs and interests when developing language lessons because students then respond positively to meaningful learning that engages their interests and feelings (Nunan 1999; Ur 1996). According to Brooks and Grundy (1990, 45), "when feelings are touched learners are totally involved in the writing and appear at times to be writing above their capability."

A classroom project, when well-planned, is a good way to motivate students to write because it offers the opportunity to match tasks with interesting topics that are relevant to the students. This article will discuss some specific ways that project work can help students become active, involved participants in writing tasks. In addition, I will describe a successful writing task I implemented as a project for a group of advanced students.

Principles of project work

Project work contains many features that are inherently motivating for the teaching of writing. Arends (1998) describes the following project-work criteria that are essential to create motivation among students:

1. *Tasks are organized around socially important problems and questions that are personally important for students.* As this relates to writing, students should select topics that resonate with what is important in their lives. Students will then be motivated to produce writing that is, according to Brown (1994, 324–25), "real, meaningful, and communicative in the best sense of the term."

2. *Students should conduct authentic investigations that find real solutions to real problems.* When students feel that they are engaged in a task that actually contributes to solving a problem, they will become more involved in the composition process.

3. *Students should investigate many subjects, such as politics, history, and science,*

among others. The nature of much writing is multidisciplinary, as a theme can be approached from a variety of perspectives represented by various fields of knowledge. As students use different subjects to analyze problems, their motivation and interest will increase.

4. *Tasks should require students to create artifacts and exhibits that represent or explain solutions to a problem.* A piece of writing that seeks real solutions to real problems is an *artifact* in the sense that it is something people can touch, hold, and apply in a useful way. Such writing is naturally motivating, as it is applicable to real issues with importance beyond the classroom.

5. *Tasks are characterized by students collaborating with each other in pairs and small groups.* While writing is a skill that people often do individually, peer collaboration and group work can be extremely stimulating for students, especially when they have a chance to freely express themselves.

Another principle of project work is the inclusion of all four skills, and a writing project easily offers opportunities for students to engage in reading, speaking, and listening. For example, reading is closely related to writing, and especially the type of writing that requires library or Internet research. Also, the collaboration that occurs in a project requires students to discuss issues, analyze problems, and provide feedback about other students' work, which involves much speaking and listening in English.

This is desirable because, according to Brown (1994, 218), integrating the four skills within language instruction while maintaining a main focus on the unique characteristics of a single skill will add richness to a lesson and give "students greater motivation that converts to better retention of effective speaking, listening, reading, and writing."

With these principles of project work in mind, teachers can implement a successful writing project; however, they should first make sure they are familiar with the process approach to writing instruction.

The process approach

The process approach focuses on the stages a writer goes through to create a text, instead

of focusing on the final product. In other words, the process approach recognizes that "most people progress through a number of untidy drafts before reaching a final version," as they develop their thoughts and add new ideas (Ur 1996, 168). The process approach recognizes that students often discover what they want to say as they think and write about a topic. That is why Ur (1996, 169) recommends that teachers "accept messy drafts as a positive, even essential, stage in writing," and urges teachers "to treat early drafts as transition stages."

In the process approach, content and organization are more important than correction of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation, which occurs gradually and thoughtfully throughout the writing process. As Ur (1996, 171) states, the correcting of these types of mistakes "is part of the language instruction, but too much of it can be discouraging and demoralizing."

Some of the basic writing processes students go through include those described below.

1. *Idea generation* entails discussing a topic in class and in pairs and groups, and also includes *brainstorming* about the topic, or noting down the various elements that come to mind as students reflect on the topic.

2. *Freewriting (or fastwriting)* is "an initial exploration of the ideas that you have about a topic" (Brown 1994, 334). At this point students begin to develop their ideas and establish a viewpoint about an issue. According to Brown (1994), students should freewrite by writing whatever comes to mind about a topic for ten minutes without stopping, judging ideas, or worrying about spelling and grammar.

3. *Drafting* requires students to begin structuring their writing and making it coherent.

4. *Peer editing* and *peer evaluation* allow students to share their drafts with each other to invite discussion and receive helpful feedback for *revision.*

5. A *final draft* is produced after successive stages of drafting, editing, and revising.

It is important to note that this process is nonlinear, and students may revisit stages 1 to 4 several times before a text is complete.

The project: Writing a problem/solution essay

The following project was developed for a class of forty-five advanced English learners and was implemented in six class hours over a two-week period. The objective was to enhance student motivation through project-based learning to compose a short problem/solution essay of three or more pages. Activities took place both in and out of the classroom, and students worked independently, in large and small groups, and in pairs.

In this project, students develop a problem/solution essay in three steps that match the three-part logical organization of the essay: the first step describes the problem; the second step identifies the causes of the problem; and the third step proposes a solution to the problem. The students develop a draft of each part and at the end have a chance to revise and polish the complete essay. Students at the advanced level should be familiar with the basic conventions of composition, including the development of a thesis statement, the logical sequence of ideas, topic sentences, transitions, and paragraph unity. The teacher, of course, must be familiar with these conventions in order to serve as a guide and to explain procedures and clarify questions if they arise.

Introduction to the project

An initial class discussion introduces the topic so that students can reflect on what they know about it. For this project poverty was chosen as the topic because in Ethiopia poverty has real social and cultural implications for the students, and exploring how it affects their community is a meaningful activity that should motivate them to become involved in the writing task.

The teacher introduces the topic with the following statement: "Poverty is a critical issue in Ethiopia, where 60 percent of the population languishes below the poverty level. But do we really know what poverty is, the causes, or solutions to the problem?"

Step 1: Describing the problem (2 hours)

A. To begin, students brainstorm to commit their initial ideas to paper, which requires them to make a list about how they would describe poverty. Some questions to help them begin the process are:

• *What is your definition of poverty?*

- *What do you think about the way poverty is measured?*
- *What is a life of poverty like?*
- *How many countries in the word are poor?*
- *How many people in the world live in poverty?*
- *What characteristics do poverty-stricken countries have in common?*
- *Why do we categorize Ethiopia as one of the poorest countries in the world?*

Students can begin freewriting at this point to develop some of their ideas about the nature of poverty.

B. Students divide into small groups (three to five students in each group) and work together over three to five days, both in and out of class, to research the topic of poverty and join in collaborative discussions to enhance their knowledge of the issue. Information can be collected from popular journals, newspapers, library books, and from the Internet. Students can also interview classmates, roommates, and ordinary citizens. Some of the information that might be useful to gather are common indices that reflect a nation's standard of living, including:

- average income of citizens
- mortality rates, including infant mortality
- expenditures on health care, food, and housing
- educational statistics, including literacy rate
- access to government services
- percentage of the population in rural and urban environments

Group work at this stage includes the development of interview and questionnaire instruments, which are prepared by using the questions students have discussed and researched while thinking about the causes and solutions to the problem. Students consider possible subjects for the instruments, such as economists, well-read academics, friends, and persons living in poverty. The teacher can assist by introducing or reviewing the methods of developing questionnaires and interview instruments (see Bell [1993] for a guide on how to develop, administer, and analyze questionnaires and interviews). These instruments will be useful when students conduct field research by contacting a variety of people, such as classmates, roommates, male and female workers and professionals, and especially persons living in poverty, who represent 80 percent of Ethiopians.

C. At the end of Step 1, students use the results of their notes, brainstorming, research, and discussions to write two or three paragraphs in which they first introduce the issue of poverty, and then they relate it to the degree of poverty in their country.

Step 2: Determining the causes of the problem
(2 hours)

A. Students brainstorm individually about the causes of poverty. Building on their research, they think critically about why Ethiopia is unable to break the chain of poverty, and they consider: What is the main cause of poverty? Students begin freewriting at this point to develop their ideas about the causes of poverty.

B. Students work in pairs and exchange their first drafts from Step 1 to do peer editing and revision. At this point they also review the questionnaire or interview instrument they are developing. They then compare their notes on the causes of poverty with each other, and arrange the causes in order of importance.

C. Each pair of students joins another pair, and each one of the four students takes a turn discussing his or her thoughts on the causes of poverty. Students add to their notes and arrange all the causes in order of importance.

D. Based on the research, brainstorming, and discussions in group work, students begin drafting three to four paragraphs that explain the causes of poverty.

E. Students pair up again and exchange their drafts on the causes of poverty to do peer editing and revision.

F. Students work individually again, considering the feedback they have received and using it to revise the draft on the causes of poverty.

Step 3: Proposing a solution to the problem
(2 hours)

A. Students have now described, discussed, and researched the problem and the causes

of poverty. In Step 3 they research possible solutions that could improve living standards and reduce poverty. To begin, students brainstorm about the solutions to poverty. They build on the research they have done so far and think critically about how Ethiopia can break the cycle of poverty. Some of the questions that might help them begin the process are:

- *How do developing countries become developed countries?*
- *What is the role of international organizations in reducing poverty?*
- *What are some obstacles that countries face in getting out of poverty?*
- *What are some things that citizens can do to help?*

At this point, students use their notes to begin freewriting and developing their ideas regarding the solutions to poverty.

B. Students use their questionnaires or interviews to collect data from different sources. Once the data is collected, they compile it in an organized fashion for use in their papers.

C. Students once again work collaboratively in pairs to discuss the solutions they have thought about and researched. They list possible solutions in order of importance.

D. Students work individually to draft two to three paragraphs in which they suggest solutions that could help Ethiopia get out of poverty. They use the results from the research, discussions, and the data from the questionnaires and interviews to present evidence and reasons for the solutions.

E. Students pair up again and exchange their drafts to do peer editing and revision.

F. Students combine all three drafts together (description of problem, cause of problem, solution to problem) and revise the complete text. They then take time to sit in groups and exchange papers as well as opinions about the texts. Finally, students will do a final revision and submit their papers.

Outcome of the writing project

The aim of this project was to motivate students to write using project work, which included establishing a relevant topic, working collaboratively, and engaging in four-skill language practice. A central focus of the writing task was to offer students the opportunity to write about something authentic and relevant to their lives. In the course of completing the project work, students were able to grapple with the issue of poverty through individual and group activities and to get involved in real situations, including learning directly about the living conditions of Ethiopians. They also conducted individual research and developed and administered questionnaires and interviews to other members of the community, including persons from the most poverty-stricken part of Ethiopian society. As a result, students produced insightful analyses depicting the roots of the problem as historical (war), cultural (extravagant expenditures during weddings), political (absence of democracy), and climatic (drought).

The students also came up with the following ways to alleviate poverty:

- "The government should encourage investment."
- "Educating the society will be helpful to overcome cultural and religious obstacles."
- "As Ethiopia has a number of rivers, they can be utilized to reduce famine."
- "The present wasteful culture must be replaced by economical uses of resources."
- "Let consultations between old and new generations begin right now."
- "We need to make use of indigenous knowledge for certain local problems."

The majority of feedback I obtained from students both during and after the project was very positive. During all steps of the project, students performed purposefully and were emotionally involved. They asked for more time when whole-class discussions were scheduled to begin and sometimes would not leave when class was over because they did not want to disrupt the momentum of their work. Even students who were ordinarily reticent became actively engaged in the project and were highly motivated. During the project, students required a high level of teacher intervention, which is another indication of the high level of motivation. Although I planned to let students complete the writing tasks on their own, they frequently requested my help. I did not decline any requested interventions because (1) the number of requests was higher than I had ever witnessed, and (2) I believe that stu-

dents must be encouraged gradually to be independent and self-reliant.

Students succeeded in this writing project because they were motivated by the relevant topic and the opportunities for collaboration and interaction with others. The students' ability to learn was reflected in their essays. The success students had with this project has ramifications for future learning and makes it probable that the skills the students acquired will help them with their next writing project and in their independent efforts to write. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), learners who are motivated become successful and confident learners, with positive attitudes about their ability to learn.

As Arends (1998) suggests, it is clearly important to have a real audience for the final written product. However, in this case, students completed their essays for a grade, and the instructor and classmates were the main audience for the final written product. Student motivation would have been even greater if a real-life purpose for the writing had been specified at the start of the project. For example, I could have suggested that students send copies of their finished essays to the experts they interviewed, a newspaper, or to an appropriate organization or government entity.

In addition to my own observations, I used a short questionnaire to obtain data about how students felt about the writing project. I asked them to indicate agreement or disagreement with ten statements that focused on the relevance of the project, the clarity of the tasks and activities, and their satisfaction with the types of tasks included. The students' responses on the questionnaire (see Appendix) indicated that they were satisfied with all aspects of project.

Conclusion

Learning to write in a foreign language is a demanding task that can easily leave students unmotivated. To combat this problem, teachers can apply their knowledge of current theories and methods to make writing instruction more successful. For example, familiarity with the process approach to writing allows a teacher to help students recognize the steps they go through to create a written text, which should lead to less stressful and more motivated writing. Additionally, an understanding of how to apply the principles of project work to a writing task lets the teacher incorporate elements that are sure to stimulate students to express themselves on paper: a relevant topic and an authentic purpose for writing; collaboration with their peers; use of all four skills; and a variety of activities to gather information, such as researching different disciplines and interviewing different people. The end result is motivated students who are pleased that they have created something that is useful and has meaning. Therefore, those instructors who apply project-based learning will certainly experience increased student motivation and the success it brings to teaching writing in a second language.

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Please make a check mark to show your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

No.	STATEMENTS	AGREE	DISAGREE
1.	Poverty is the most relevant and worthy issue to discuss in Ethiopia.	43	2
2.	The way the tasks in the project were designed is interesting.	40	5
3.	Work at each step was set up clearly.	39	6
4.	Some of the tasks were confusing.	7	38
5.	I found nothing different from previous tasks I know for the course.	2	43
6.	I participated better during collaborative engagements.	39	6
7.	I was not involved emotionally and cognitively during individual engagements.	7	38
8.	Similar tasks should be set up during this course.	41	4
9.	The project work has little to do with practicing advanced writing.	2	43
10.	I was working throughout the project simply to complete the task; the poverty topic did not touch my feelings.	1	44