PUTTING HEART AND ART INTO THE CRAFT OF WRITING

Lucille Dass
Centre for English Language, KDU College, Penang

ABSTRACT

This paper advocates the use of a humanistic approach in the teaching of writing in order to create learners who are empowered in their learning. Drawing from the findings of recent research, the author shares an experience-based perspective as a teacher-writer and encourages teachers to personally engage in the art of writing in order to gain further insight into writing methodology. Several activities that directly engage learners in meaningful writing experiences are also presented.

Introduction

> *My task... is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear,*
> *to make you feel, ...to make you see.*
>
> Joseph Conrad

While preparing to write this chapter I took my cue from Neman's (1980) book entitled "Teaching Students to Write." A major part of my three-decade long teaching experience has been anchored in humanistic methodology which recognises the learner as central to the learning process. I therefore note a difference between *teaching students to write* and *teaching writing to students.* The difference lies in the focus and approach adopted in the writing classroom. With the ongoing call to empower students in their learning, a humanistic perception of learning combines well with the communicative teaching approach to yield a measure of satisfaction and success for our ESL student writers. Communicative teaching focuses on integrated language teaching for relevant and meaningful communicative practice which, when extended to the writing classroom, is well situated to show the link between oral, reading and writing skills in real life use. Person-centred communicative teaching provides authentic meaningfulness in terms of purpose and audience for a piece of writing. In the words of Barton (1994:110-111), "writing is seen as having a main purpose of communicating messages from one human being to others." Indeed, ESL learners need to see both interactional and transactional writing as necessary acts of communication in real life.
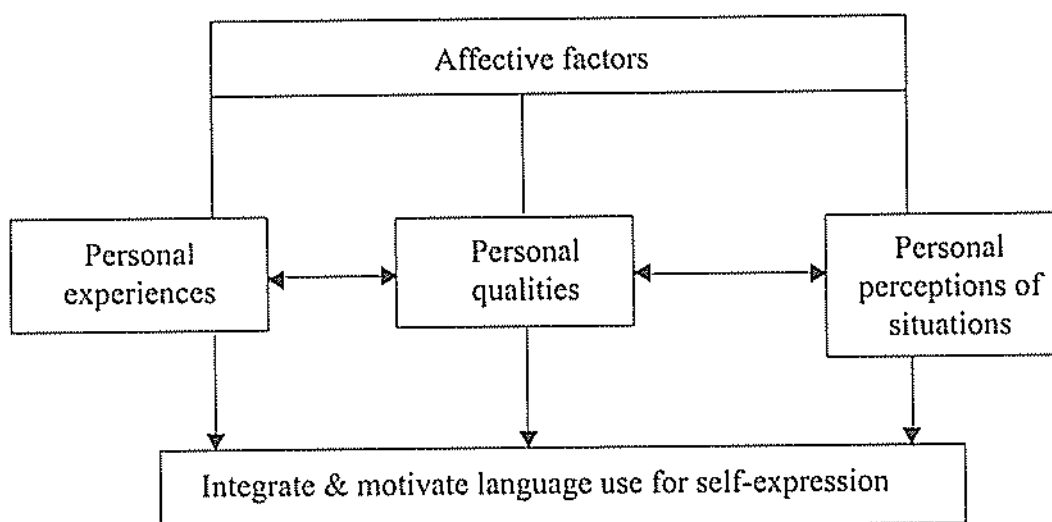
Figure 1: Framework of learning

The affective dimensions of the humanistic perception of education add value and balance to the cognitive processes that are already dominant in the classroom. These affective measures focus on the learners' experiences, qualities and perceptions of situations and integrate these into a framework of learning as outlined in Figure 1. Nowhere is this more evidently needed as a motivational factor than in the teaching of writing. Teaching writing as process in itself reflects humanistic principles because it emphasises total learner involvement. A humanistic perception of learners' literacy practices recognises their need for self-expression and the need to create anxiety-free contexts for learners to explore the process of composition. Through this process learners will learn to draw on an experience (direct or vicarious), compose, negotiate meaning and revise their writing to give it shape and a personal stamp (L. Dass, 1999). As with the other linguistic components of speaking, reading and listening, Mayher *et al* (1983) reflect that writing draws on the resources of that most human of attributes – our language system. The infinite potential for expression in the human language motivates and gives rise to an equally immeasurable potential for fun and meaningful exploration of written expression in the classroom.

The Naturalness of Writing

The communicative and interactive nature of writing makes it most appropriate to be taught as communication. Teaching writing as communication creates an excellent opportunity for learners to learn language by using it. No matter how small the store of language already acquired, the developmental nature of writing can encourage learners to activate this latent range and extend its use by performing simple yet

interesting and interest-related writing tasks at an early stage. This also helps to minimise, if not remove, the anxieties inherent in the writing situation at an early stage. Such a view is in tandem with humanistic education which is concerned with a person's *being* and *becoming*.

However, as Morais (2000) rightly points out, many teachers, and by extension ESL student writers, remain misguided in both notion and practice that an improvement in the knowledge of the language (competence) will enhance their actual use of the language (performance) and so defer writing. Morais also refers to other findings such as Zamel (1982), Raimes (1979) and Taylor (1976) who agree that such an assumption denies low level students the opportunity to explore the process of composing. When these learners engage in the process of composing with whatever amount of language already acquired, they are thinking and actually putting together language for use as communication. Why do we so easily forget that writing like reading is a developmental process that begins in early childhood with "scribbling?"

Teaching children to read involves providing reading readiness opportunities through preschool years to enable them to develop their ability to read. This, for example, is achieved through a combination of daily incidental (informal) and school-based activities (semi-formal) to demonstrate and to develop concepts related to the many aspects of reading to encourage children to explore reading on their own. The very same heuristics are basic to teaching children to write. It is a known fact that reading and writing (while not neglecting the other skills) are mutually supportive. Why then is writing considered such a formidable task? Perhaps our write-approach is not quite right. Writing is a process of creation that rises from within and so is intimately bound with the self. It is therefore as much a psychological experience as it is a craft to be learned. There is both pain and joy in its conception and delivery. While the correction of errors is a necessity to learn the craft of writing, the self-image and self-confidence takes a beating when a person's writing is subjected to error correction and criticism, no matter how well intentioned. Those who write can attest to this and will agree with Neman (1980:3) that "The extreme sensitivity about one's writing is almost universal." There is also sufficient research to prove that a learner's self-concept and expectations of his performance affect his actual performance (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968 cited in Neman, 1980).

The Writing Teacher's Perspective

Neman (1980) also notes that the adoption of a "traditional" approach in teaching writing as a craft through correction and criticism with its focus on the finished

product is to deny the psychological implications inherent in the process of writing. Even if we choose to disregard the psychological damage and the humane perspective, Neman cites studies to show that the "correctionist" approach is counter-productive.

Since writing is developmental in nature teachers can enhance its development by enabling students to experience the process in a meaningful way through functional, purposeful use, through experimentation and risk taking, from having audiences respond to student writing and from sharing what is involved in being a writer. It is strongly recommended that the teaching of writing starts from the self – teachers who teach writing should write for themselves in order to experience the act of writing and become aware of factors that affect, the heuristics involved, and ideas that work to support, or frustrate their efforts. This is because writing is by nature a process that involves drafting, revision and editing to produce a good end-piece. As a writing teacher myself, my concern lies in what can be done to progressively build on students' experiences and existing knowledge in the form of purposeful activities and exploration that will enhance and extend their use of language through writing – in a climate of encouragement.

Jane *et al.* (1983: 61) cite Berke (1976: 10) who notes that since the composition process "begins in the mind and the way the mind looks *out* upon its subject matter and *in* upon itself, writers should be encouraged to read widely for subject matter." According to Winterowd (1975: 2 cited in Jane *et al.*), material for writing can come from three resources: the writer, the context and the message. He notes that it is common for writers to look first *within* themselves to find material. They may examine their experiences, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and feelings for ideas to write about. This analytical engagement with the self, which involves "talking" to oneself, could result in the form of "free writing." In my experience student writers also respond well to visuals, a musical piece, food, selected objects, or even a certain smell, through which they engage in processes of association, relating sensory impressions to previous experiences, or simply responding to the sensations experienced at the moment. This involves a personalised experience in creative imagination and connection – an exercise that allows students to recreate what is in their minds through an experiential process of making connections.

According to Wright (1987), essentially, a teacher has two mutually supportive major roles in the classroom: the 'enabling' or management function – the social side which involves creating positive conditions for learning to take place, and the instructional function which involves imparting, by a variety of means, knowledge to learners – the task oriented side of teaching. Given that writing is generally perceived as difficult, the writing teacher's attitude towards, and perception of her

students as writers, will affect their progress and success. A teacher who is herself a writer will recognise that success motivates and so assign appropriate tasks that are within the ability level of her students and so gradually raise students' expectations of their own writing. In addition, as already noted, it is helpful for teachers of writing to share their own writing by actually showing students (through their drafts) the complexities involved for example, drafting, revising, the heuristic aids used – changes made, lines crossed out, notes in the margin etc. so that students can actually see and understand that revision is central, natural and ongoing to the writing process and not an isolated act given as punishment for incomplete or unsuccessful writing attempts.

Teachers of writing will agree with Raimes (1983: 11) that "There is no one way to teach writing." In opting for an eclectic approach teachers are trying to fulfil both their enabling and instructional function in the classroom context by creating a "positive socio-emotional sphere of influence in the classroom" (Kuldip Kaur, 2003: 58). This also helps to maximise student participation in the preparatory processes that lead naturally into writing.

Crafting Art and Heart into Writing Tasks

When planning and setting writing tasks I've usually borne in mind the essence of a quote by Winterowd that "Topics should not shackle the mind. They should liberate." The written language is an art form manifested through a creative process that involves the intelligence of feelings (affective domain) as much as the faculty of thinking (cognitive domain). However, the affective dimension, which is an integral motivating factor for the expressive act, is often ignored or overlooked. Crafting art and heart into a writing task is to integrate learner experience (personal or vicarious) for total involvement of the learner (heart, mind and body) in the writing process as reflected in Figure 1. An affective experience involves a personal response to a situation or incident, adds a measure of reality and meaningfulness to the incident described, and engages the student writer. Research indicates that learning becomes meaningful when students are affectively engaged because emotions are dynamic parts of ourselves (Hargreaves, 1998). Humanizing the writing experience by making it personally engaging brings about a 'feel good' factor that helps break down barriers, making students willing to revise their work based on constructive feedback received. To set up meaningful writing tasks we need to ask ourselves honestly *what it is that we often write?* Exam and academic exercises aside, we need to think of things we actually write – for a real purpose, and things that are fun and interesting to do in writing. The incorporation of these real life writing activities as tasks in the writing

classroom is made possible by a teacher who thinks both with her heart and her mind, one who accepts and believes that whatever the nature of writing, it surely contributes to the acquisition of language in the learners. With this thinking in place, a sense of liberation follows and children can create thank-you notes for gifts or favours received; greeting cards for all seasons; messages; postcards; love letters to family and friends; instructions; notices or e-mails. These are not only personalised and exciting to do; they are also things students will do sooner or later in their lives since the major function of language use is interactional – " to establish and maintain social relationships" (Brown & Yule, 1983:1, cited in Ding Jianmin, 1999) –. Such activities offer students a smorgasbord to whet their appetite for writing. Watkins (2003: 16) makes a relevant point when he says:

> *What learners may actually need writing for and what we ask them to do, do not always coincide. For example, ... is it worth teaching narrative writing, getting students to produce reviews of films and so on? These are things they will probably never do in their first language, let alone in a second or third one.*

A language rich experience is decidedly an aide to writing, preferably, one that activates mind, heart and body. For this to happen, teachers need to recognise the value of "percolating" to the writing process. It is a term Mayher *et al.* (1983) use to describe all pre-writing activity. It is something that happens throughout the writing process and includes thinking, talking, reading about what one is writing, as well as practical activities such as dramatics, role playing, and even drawing. It is also possible to include a sensory experience through outdoor activities such as nature walks and aesthetic appreciation activities such as listening to music, songs and poetry. When students experience sights, sounds, scents and textures and translate these into language experience, they draw from within to add meaning to life. In the process of doing this they become intensely aware of how their writing connects them to life's experiences and helps them build meaning into it through a personal response to the environment or situation. It is then that writing ceases to be just an academic exercise in the traditional sense and assumes the modern dimension wherein student writers are motivated to create their own texts through a process of discovery and they write because they are convinced they have something to say and share with someone, even if it is with their own selves. This is purpose, recognised as the single most important intrinsic motivator for writing.

I end with five examples of structured processes, non-restrictive in form or design, that enable students to generate context appropriate content or raw material

that can be reworked according to purpose and audience, giving it the desired shape. These activities (personal compilation; L. Dass, 1999: 110-118) that come with CAKE appeal (Cognitive, Affective, Kinaesthetic, Engagingly Enabling) are among those I have used with success in my writing class. I rate the success of the processes and activities below in terms of the interest and joy shown by the participants (both students and teachers), together with the measure of their involvement in the activities. It is suggested that the individual teacher adapt these activities for the level intended.

1.   Personalised messages

Encourage students to design greeting or invitation cards and write a brief process account of the activity. If necessary, the teacher can assist in the writing process by guiding students to trace the steps involved in creating the card. For example, pose some questions:

- Who was the card intended for?
- What occasion was it for?
- What type of card (shape/design) did you want to create? Why?
- What did you do first?
- What materials did you use to create the card?
- Why did you choose a particular coloured paper?
- When are you going to deliver the card?

For a more enriching "percolating" experience, have students talk about it to others in their group. This is because attempts to develop writing skills are ultimately tied up with the use of other language and learning skills. Teachers need to continually help students make the connection between writing and other language learning skills such as listening, speaking, reading, note taking, observing, reporting, reflecting, imagining, sketching, journal keeping and interpreting – all of which include writing.

2.   Peek-a-boo! (based on Kim's game)

- Arrange at least 8-10 unrelated objects (ordinary and known) on the table (or in a box) and cover with a sheet.
- Students come out in groups to "peek" under the sheet/inside the box. When all have peeked, teacher signal starts them to recall and write, or sketch (to add interest) on an individual basis the maximum number of objects they noticed, within a time limit.

- Remove sheet. Students self-check.
- Students form small groups to "talk back".
- In own group brainstorm all possible uses for selected objects.
- In small groups compose a meaningful piece of writing that features at least five of the objects in it. Include illustration to enhance it.
- Students can read it out to the class or display their compositions on the wall.

Once again, effort is made to provide students with a rich language percolating experience to inform and enhance their writing.

3. *We mime, you write!*

- *Make appropriate situation cards.*
- Divide class into small groups of volunteer "performers" and "interpreters".
- "Interpreters" select a scribe each.
- "Performers" select a situation card each. Performing groups take turns to mime situation contained in the cards.
- During each mime notes can be made. After each mime allow groups (interpreters) to buzz briefly and interpret the mimed action. The scribe records the interpretation. (During the same time the next performing group can practise their mime at the back of the class).
- When completed, "Interpreters" check their group response with the "Performers" and tally the scores.
- "Performers" are redistributed to join "Interpreters." Each group selects one mime situation and develops it into a story in the form of a conversation, or a drama script, a comic strip, (number of frames to be determined by teacher) or a narrative. These can later be performed.
  Note: Several variations are possible.

4. *Nature walk*

- Tell students to bring along their writing materials. Tell them to observe and take note of what they see and like during the nature walk (to establish context for writing).
- Teacher guides the walk around the school compound/garden, taking them to a chosen spot. Ask questions to elicit observations: What do you see? Describe what you see. How do you feel about the view/what you see?

- Elicit also suitable language content. For example: When you describe something/a scene, what type of words do you usually use? (lexical, structural and content preparation).
- Divide students into small groups. Let them wander around the area and choose a spot the group likes best. Still within the group, their individual task is to write a brief description (or sentences) of the chosen scene/spot.
- Groups come together at a specified spot when teacher signal stops them. They exchange their written pieces with one another. Looking into the written pieces they select expressions they like and list these.
- The written pieces are returned to their owners. Volunteers read out listed expressions. Others are free to note down any of these expressions if they like (more lexical, structural and content preparation).
- Take home/in class task: In your journal write at least two paragraphs beginning: "During the English period today, our class went for a short nature walk…"

5. *Colour creations*
   - Distribute bits of coloured paper – one colour per group.
   - Within a set time limit students write as many "items" as they can think of that are associated with that colour. ("Items" can be things, feelings, thoughts, ideas).
   - Share with class and add to entries.
   - Make two columns – positive and negative. List the colour-related information as perceived. For example: green – jealousy (negative); green – new life (positive) etc.
   - Think of appropriate follow up writing activities … a poem or a song perhaps?

The above are just a few examples of how teachers can humanize the writing experience by making it person-centred, joyful and appropriate in its context. The activities are sufficiently recreational to function as 'warm-ups' for writing and equally substantive in themselves to inspire students to generate their own texts. This ensures that students are spared the pain of writing in a vacuum. Involving them in teacher-devised language rich processes that integrate thinking, feeling, and responding through creative imagination is one way of transforming and extending student capacity: from being mere scribes to *becoming* authors. It is only as authors that students will be inspired to put their heart and art into their craft.

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