

# Relevance in Writing Activities

DR. JAMES P. PANDIAN  
MARA Institute of Technology  
Shah Alam

English language teachers in this country spend countless hours marking the never ending pile of exercise books. After about the seventh exercise book each book seems to take longer to correct, make greater demands on your energy and even your emotional stability ... and the whole exercise seems debilitating. But the next day the marking parade goes on. Essay after essay, precis after precis, summaries, comprehension exercises, vocabulary exercises, grammatical exercises, manipulations, conversions, even grammatical gymnastics — only to reap a poor harvest of continued student distortion of the English language, as they struggle to stitch together a few tortured English sentences. Teachers are disappointed, dismayed, discouraged and sometimes dejected.

The question is, how can we get better returns for these efforts? It is the contention of the writer that teachers often try to reap where they have not sown. Many of the expectations are quite unwarranted. Language teaching is very unlike angling. In angling, you can thread an earth worm through a hook and cast for a trout. In Language teaching cast an earth worm and you will reel in the same worm— looking a little more dead. There is nothing wrong in essays or precis per se, but writing skills cannot be developed in a void. Teachers give the students a couple of titles and then expect them to weave a story, or write a composition, or generally relate in an original and interesting manner an event, occasion or experience. Written work of this nature demands great dexterity. The question is, have the students been trained for this kind of work? More important, can they be trained? Obviously, the whole of the educational effort of man is a demonstration of the faith that instruction will produce certain desired results in the learner. That this is easily demonstrated in Mathematics or Science, History or Geography leads the language teacher to believe the same to be true of composition teaching, or teaching the art of precis-writing, or even letter-writing. Any teacher who believes the result of language teaching should be akin to the results one obtains in teaching simultaneous equations, is bound to come to grief. Manipulation of linguistic elements calls for a host of complex, interrelated skills, few of which can be taught in isolation. In the generation of sentences there is nothing mechanical. It is a demonstration of the

mastery of whole units of thought. The ability to string two sentences together and the ability to string ten sentences together does not require too much sophistication. But the step from one sentence to two related sentences is a giant leap for the learner because it is a stage which puts the learner in a communicating relationship with others who use the language. In other words, the ABC of language communication turns out to be the XYZ. In order to communicate in a language (however elementary it may appear), a 'great deal' of the language must be known. 'Know' a language means know *all* of its aspects at the same time. The strategy therefore, is not to feed the learner with one or two streaky structures or one or two infant doses, but to bombard him with the language the community uses. Give him the *whole* picture, not in little bits. The experience of language is always in wholes. Every incident is a complete entity, every single use of language calls for more than one 'participant' even if there is no response because the speaker *knows* the nature of the possible response.

It is therefore suggested, that if the students do write a "few tortured sentences", they are doing the teacher a great favour. They are not writing because they want to write, they are writing because they were asked to write a few sentences about ".....". It is not that they do not have anything to say. They have a great many things to say. Watch them. Listen to them sometimes (when you have convinced yourself that you must stop talking).

Writing activities have to be chosen with great care. They can demoralise the teacher and destroy the learner. Too many writing activities are unimaginative and bear little relevance to the world of the learner. The former Johore Professor of English (at the University of Singapore), D.J. Enright used to caution young aspiring writers, "Before you write, make sure you have a story to tell. More important, the man you are going to write a story about ..... make sure he has in fact a story in him." The writing tasks the students are set must generate their own fuel. Student cannot write about something they do not know, something they have not prepared for, something they cannot feel or have an opinion about. When a student is confronted with half a dozen topics on

the blackboard every Monday morning, life can be pretty bewildering. It is as frightening and outrageous as rudely waking the teacher up at 3.00 a.m. on a Monday morning and transporting him to the Hilton banquet hall (pyjamas and all), and requesting him to propose a toast in French!

The biggest problem of course is with the way the English programme is organised generally. Research is sharply critical (National Council of Teachers of English, London 1952) of teaching methods devoting separate months, parts of months, or days of the week to grammar and composition, to reading, writing, vocabulary work, or to speech activities in an unrelated fashion. The programme should be so organised as to provide experiences which involve all facets of language in their normal relations. It is not true to say that students are not using the language daily in meaningful situations. Consider this statement from Harold Rosen in *Language, the Learner and the School*, Penguin 1969:

“Schools are language-saturated institutions. They are places where books are thumbed, summarized and ‘revised’, notes are dictated, made, kept and learnt, essays are prepared, written and marked, examination questions are composed and the attendant judgements made. Teachers explain, lecture, question, exhort, reprimand and make jokes. Pupils listen, reply, make observations, call out, mutter, whisper and make jokes. Small knots gather round over books, lathes, easels and retorts, or over nothing in classrooms, labs, workshops, craftrooms, corridors and toilets to chatter, discuss, argue, quarrel, plan, plot, teach each other, using words to stroke or strike. There are foundation-stones, notice-boards, blackboards, pin-up boards, circulars full of injunctions, warnings, records of triumphs, mottoes, cuttings, compositions and graffiti. As the school day unfolds law and lore become established, puzzled over or rejected.”

The writing activities must be related to these other activities of the learners. This is the starting point. This has always been the starting point. What they talk about, what they argue about are subjects which are likely to be reflected better in their written efforts. If the actual substance of their talk, discussion, etc. appears sub-standard, trivial or irrelevant, this must appear so to the young learner, first as an oral experience. What will induce a young learner to read, so that his reading will serve as a source of ideas for his writing? To be told that he is wrong about his facts. “Me? Wrong? I’ll prove to you I’m not wrong. I read it myself.” That is the response he should seek. The value of writing as a means of clarifying, organising, and applying ideas gained from both discussion and reading cannot be disputed.

The trouble is that, the teacher has his eyes on the

examination. There is nothing wrong with that — every teacher wants all his pupils to succeed. But the tragedy is the belief that in fact you can train your students to pass the language examinations. Examinations can motivate some students for a little while, but that would depend on the nature of the examination. To a majority of students, the language experience is different. W.R. Lee, the editor of *English Language Teaching*, wrote some years ago in an article entitled “some points about aims and means in the Foreign-language Course”:

“The learner’s aims are not necessarily the same as the teacher’s, and neither are likely to be identical with the community’s. Children do not see language learning in the same way as adults do.

For children the aim, if it can be called that, may be to please the teacher, to finish a task, to play once more an enjoyable language-game, to grasp what seems to be an interesting story: the goal lies in the immediate future, since children cannot usually see far ahead. From the height of our adult superiority, need we look down on this attitude? To be able to enjoy the very exercise of skill in a foreign language, so that communication with others who use it comes with ease — this is surely one of the most reasonable of goals.”

The results of language learning are not apparent at once, and students whether young or old cannot usually picture to themselves a distant goal and plod patiently, through thick and thin, towards it. A language lesson is a happening, an event and an experience. A great deal of the learning is unconscious. How often has a teacher come to the staff room early in the morning and told a few of his colleagues a good joke, only to be told the same joke by the end of the day by someone who was not in the staff room! Students are doing the same thing a thousand times over. In making any adequate response (orally or in writing) a host of factors are involved—the maturity of the learner, his experience of the subject (direct and indirect), his intelligence—all of which determine the nature of that response. There is a constellation of skills which characterise him as a language user. To put it in a nut shell, all writing activities must have a bearing on the learner’s growth. Through their writing children after project information about themselves that can aid the teacher in guiding their learning.

Writing activities, if they are to be useful must provide adequate opportunities for self-development, for self-expression in other related areas so that the students can appreciate their own talents, and use language to serve their ends. It is useful to bear in mind this fact, that language is inextricably bound up with all the learning that goes on in school, and it is language that puts at the learners own disposal his own intelligence.