

Teaching writing in the FET phase

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If I waited for perfection I would never write a word.
Margaret Atwood

Everyone can learn to be a good writer. Writing, like any other skill will only improve if you do it regularly; preferably daily. Much of the writing done in schools involves limited opportunities for students to become skilled writers. School writing often involves completion of worksheets and comprehension texts. This kind of writing will not develop writers. Writing is about generating ideas and thoughts and carefully thinking about how best to present them to achieve your purpose for a specific audience. Teaching writing well involves getting the learners to read, to share their thinking and plan how, why and what they will write and then spend time crafting and recrafting.

There are some important considerations to be made when teaching writing in schools. Learners enjoy writing when:

- They write on topics that are meaningful to them
- They are allowed to talk about their ideas before and during writing
- They have a real purpose in writing
- They have a real audience – someone other than the teacher who will read their writing
- They have a forum or space to share what they have written with colleagues in the class and the broader school/community
- They get to read/listen to what their teacher has written
- They know that their teacher will give them feedback on the contents of their writing and not only on superficial language and formatting errors.

A fun way of getting students to understand audience and purpose is for them to log on (or the teacher can do this) to a pen pal site. These sites work with emails or by post (snail mail). Students get to write to other students all over the world. Here are two such sites:

http://www.studentsoftheworld.info/menu_pres.html

<http://www.mylanguageexchange.com/Penpals.asp>

Here are some ideas to guide your learners:

1. Improving narrative and descriptive texts (show, don't tell)

When writing narrative or descriptive texts, follow the advice of many writers who say writers should **show** the reader and **not tell** the reader. Look at the following two texts to understand this:

The mother walked into her son's room which was very untidy.

versus

The mother gingerly opened her son's door. She noticed the unmade bed with the crumpled sheet and the grubby duvet hanging off the bed's edge. Unwashed clothes lay bundled all over the floor. A stale smell, a mixture of unwashed laundry, old food and sweat hung in the air. A hint of smoke reached her nostrils. Dirty cups and bowls lay on the desk and piles of books and papers covered every possible surface.

Now ask the learners to rewrite the following **'telling sentence'** to make it more **'showing'**. They should draw on their own experiences and visualise what their peers said, did, what it smelt like, felt like, sounded like...

It was the first day back at school after the summer holidays. Everyone was excited.

2. Encourage your learners to read like writers

One of the most effective ways to improve writing is to consciously read examples of well written texts and then analyse what has made them good. This process of analysing requires that we re-read texts a few times and then zoom in on the WHY and the HOW (Anderson, 2011). Once we have identified techniques and considered the choices the writer has made, then we should apply these techniques to our own writing. As Theodore Roethke says, 'imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps *the* method of learning to write' (in Anderson, 2011: 25).

Let's look at the following text which is the opening to a wonderful teenager's novel, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry:

It was almost December, and Jonas was beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word, Jonas thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Frightened was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had flown over the community twice. He had seen it both times. Squinting towards the sky, he had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed.

Some questions to think about with regards to the choices that Lois Lowry has made in this extract from her novel:

1. What has the author told us about the character of Jonas?
2. What does the author not tell us that we are expected to infer from this text?
3. Why does the author begin her novel with how Jonas is feeling (and not who he is)?
4. Why does the author repeat 'frightened' so many times? What is the effect of this?
5. What is unusual about the author's sentence construction?
6. What are possible reasons why the author has used these unusual sentences?
7. How does the author capture the effects of the speed of the jet?

Now ask your learners to write a beginning to a short story. In it they must copy some of the aspects discussed above such as:

- Introduce a character by focusing on what he/she is feeling
- Allow the character to question the choice of words of this feeling and provide an example of when they felt this
- The example should be written in a way that the reader can picture the scene
- Experiment with the use of unusual sentence constructions such as using only one or two words in a sentence.

3. Use a process approach to teach a specific genre, for example a review

CAPS requires Senior and FET phase learners to write reviews. Rather than write a review of a book, ask your learners to write a review of a friend's Facebook Page. (The friend will have to give permission, of course!) After having analysed some of the features of a review (for example, reviews briefly inform the

reader what the book/film/ website is about, its main purpose, and then provide an opinion as to the merits and shortcomings). With your learners discuss the various features of Facebook (profiles, updates, pictures, tagging, groups, events...) and collaboratively compile a review of one. This collaboration could be done on the blackboard, a flipchart or computer. It's important that the learners, together with their teacher, go through the process of writing a genre. Thereafter learners can be asked to write their own drafts independently.

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