

Let's Talk About Writing

The Learner

The Test

The Words and Sentences

Objectives

- Understand the impact of metacognitive skills on learner performance.
- Identify techniques for getting learners to talk about themselves as writers.
- Identify techniques for getting learners to talk about performance assessment and rubrics.
- Identify self-correction techniques that get learners to talk about their writing.
- Recognize that the Functional Writing Assessment can help learners take control of their learning by defining goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them.

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Metacognitive Skills



Metacognition refers to people's abilities to predict their performances on various tasks (e.g., how well they will be able to remember various stimuli) and to monitor their current levels of mastery and understanding.

NRC p.12

The role of the teacher is to get learners to:

- *Predict*
- *Plan*
- *Monitor*
- *Reflect*
- *Talk about*

Teachers must draw out and work with the preexisting understandings that their students bring with them and they must teach some subject matter in depth, providing many examples in which the same concept is at work and providing a firm foundation for factual knowledge.

The teaching of metacognitive skills should be integrated into the curriculum in a variety of subject areas. (NRC p.21)

Let's Talk about the Learner

Current research on how people learn suggests that teachers should “draw out and work with the preexisting understandings that their students bring with them to class.” In other words, teachers need to recognize how learners perceive their own abilities and needs before instruction begins. If learners can identify their abilities and needs they are better able to take control of their own learning by defining goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them. The following strategies can be used to get learners to talk about themselves as writers.

Questionnaires or Surveys

Level-appropriate questionnaires help learners give their opinions about writing and reveal some things about how they see themselves as writers. Teachers (or higher level students) can tabulate responses and summarize the opinions of the class.

Level A Opinions about Writing		
Name _____	Date _____	
I think good writers...	circle	
1. Are good readers	always	sometimes
2. Use the dictionary	always	sometimes
3. Went to high school	always	sometimes
4. Practice everyday	always	sometimes
5. Feel nervous	always	sometimes
6. Make mistakes	always	sometimes
I need writing to:		

Level B Opinions about Writing		
Name _____	Date _____	
I think good writers...	circle one	
1. Are good spellers	always	sometimes
2. Feel anxious	always	sometimes
3. Need help	always	sometimes
4. Get good grades	always	sometimes
5. Know vocabulary	always	sometimes
6. Use the dictionary	always	sometimes
7. Are well educated	always	sometimes
8. Know punctuation	always	sometimes
The hardest thing about writing for me is:		
The easiest thing about writing for me is:		

Name _____	Date _____			
I know how to write...				
letters	notes	forms	memos	cards
I need to learn how to write...				
letters	notes	forms	memos	cards

If learners log progress or collect samples of their own writing in portfolios during the course of study, they monitor their own progress and recognize strengths.

Name _____	Date _____
I can	
<input type="checkbox"/> use periods at the end of a sentence.	
<input type="checkbox"/> use question marks at the end of questions.	
<input type="checkbox"/> find a word in the dictionary.	
<input type="checkbox"/> use capital letters at the beginning of a sentence.	
<input type="checkbox"/> proof read my writing.	
My favorite word this week is _____	
I want to learn more about _____	

Guess Who and Guess Why

This activity is appropriate for beginning ESL learners who may not have enough English for questionnaires or portfolios. On 3x5 cards learners list all the naming words they know that refer to their identity (*wife, mother, student, Mexican, female, etc.*) On the back of the card learners finish the sentence: I need to write for _____ (*my boss, my children, my GED, my husband, my school etc.*) The teacher collects the cards and a learner with strong literacy skills or the teacher reads while the class tries to guess the identity of the writer.

Pre-writing Activity or Lead-in

Writing is easier if learners are prepared for the task. Teachers should provide activities that “warm up” the learners by asking them to think about the topic or practice the language that will be needed for writing. Often, talking about a topic before writing encourages learners to talk about their experiences and their perspective. For example: “You’ll be writing about safety in the workplace. Are there any safety signs at your job? Are there safety rules at your job?” No matter what the topic, teachers can elicit language, vocabulary, or ideas that stimulate writing.

Mountains and More Mountains

Learners can often easily identify their writing goals, but it’s more difficult to forecast barriers to reaching those goals. If learners articulate possible barriers, they’ll be more likely to surmount them during the course of study. Often barriers can be discussed using stories about other students or using visuals.

The teacher shows a picture of a person, introduces the character, and tells his story. “This is Antonio. He comes to school to get his GED. He needs to work on his writing skills. (Show a sample questionnaire completed by Antonio.) He says, there are mountains to cross before he will write better.” Then, the teacher writes Antonio’s mountains on the board – *no education in Mexico, working late, no time to study etc.* Without solving Antonio’s problems, learners then name their mountains. Ask learners to name some supports that might help Antonio climb the mountains, then they can name their own supports.

Let's Talk About the Test

Understanding Performance Assessment

Sometimes it's difficult for learners to understand how success in writing is measured with a test. A simple comparison can be made using a familiar and fun tool – *Dancing with the Stars*. Tape one or two performances from this popular TV show and include the judges' decision making process.

Follow these steps using the clips:

1. Show one couple's performance then stop the tape.
2. Ask: *How would you score the couple? Write your score 1-10 on a paper. Hold it up. Why did you give that score? Be specific.*
3. Return to the tape and watch the judges' scores. Stop the tape.
4. Restate what "qualities" the judges identified.
5. Complete 1-5 with one other couple from the show.
6. Explain how rubrics from a performance assessment measure writing like judges score the dancers. Like dancing, writing is personal, individual and creative. Like good dancing, writing has standards. Writing is judged using rubrics that describe good writing.

Understanding Rubrics

Learners often like to know how their writing is being evaluated. Share simplified rubrics with learners who can practice interpreting their scores, recognizing errors, and rating their own work.

Content ★★★★★	Clear statements about the topic Many details, examples, explanations
Organization ★★★	Clear order, simple sentences Topic sentences and details in paragraphs Transition words (first, then, finally)
Word Choice ★★★	Using the right word and amount written Variety, creative use of words
Grammar/Sentences ★★	Correct tenses, correct word endings Simple and complex sentences
Spelling/Capitalization/Punctuation ★	Few or no errors, proof reading, correcting errors

Stretch the Test

Use the simplified rubrics to rate learners' writing throughout the course of study, not just at post-test time. If learners spend 15-20 minutes per class period writing, each paper can be collected and informally scored. Score in only one category for one week, then switch the focus to another category until learners have exposure to all the measures.

If learners have had exposure to the rubrics over a period of time, their post test experience is not as uncomfortable and they learn what makes good writing.

Let's Talk about the Words and Sentences

Learner Self-Correction

Expert writers make mechanical and word choice errors, but they also monitor their own understanding carefully. They want to know where the errors are and they want to fix them. If teachers correct learner errors in writing samples, there is no opportunity for self-monitoring; therefore there is no motivation to fix the errors and no motivation to write better. Self-correction is a metacognitive skill that stays with adult learners long after they leave programs.

To Correct or Not to Correct?

Why leave some errors uncorrected in student writing samples:

- Too many errors in one task
- Some errors don't interfere with meaning
- Errors may not reflect/represent learner abilities
- Focus on content, meaning, communication is paramount in beginning writing instruction
- Motivation and self-confidence are encouraged

When to indicate or mark errors on a student writing sample:

- When meaning is compromised
- When understanding is hampered
- When errors are consistent
- When asked for by the learner
- After a task is completed in total
- Independently, between the teacher and the learner

Why include self-correction as part of writing instruction?

- Learning how to learn
- Greater learner confidence
- Foster learning and facilitate long term memory
- Encourage self-trust
- Preventative against future errors or making the same errors over and over again
- Learner transfer is facilitated

Self Correction Techniques

- Proofreading checklist
- Teacher modeling and teacher notes
- Discussion or applying grammar rules
- Compare and contrast
- Margin notes

S: *I have many goods frends.*

T: "Adjectives are always singular. Read the first sentence. Find the error."

T: *I have many good friends too.*

T: "Look at the word "friend" on page 27. Write the word again."

Do Learners develop bad habits if they aren't corrected?

What is clear from the research on error correction and development is that correction in the form of overt correction does little good in the long run. Overt corrections might cause temporary improved performance but they don't cause an actual change in the underlying implicit system and they don't cause lasting changes in the output-processing procedures.

-- Van Patten p.85

Pre and Free writing

This simple technique can be used with advanced learners who continually worry about mechanics and say that their writing is poor because they aren't good at grammar, punctuation or spelling.

1. Ask students to divide a piece of paper in two lengthwise.
2. Tell them that they'll be writing a dialogue between two speakers. Speaker A's part of the conversation will be written with one hand and Speaker B's part will be written with the other.
3. Explain that this may be difficult. Demonstrate on the board so that students can see that it's difficult for everyone.
4. After about 3-4 minutes circulate and ask students to share their papers with others. As the class tries to read the conversations, they see the importance of content and meaning vs. mechanics.
5. Ask several leading questions that encourage students to talk about their writing and questions that address comprehension of the dialogue.

Proofreading

After learners complete a writing assignment (narrative or document) ask them to proofread their work before they turn it in or before the instructor reads it. At the bottom of every writing assignment ask learners to copy this sentence, *I read my writing. I corrected ___ errors.*

If learners keep writing assignments in a folder or portfolio, they can look back on the number and type of errors found. Teachers and learners can talk about the value of proofreading and how it affects writing.

Resources

Comings, Parrella, Soricone (2000). Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports.
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