How Important is it for Students to Be Able to Write Well?

The aim of this work is to highlight some of the main features of written communication and the importance to help students develop the writing skill in the learning of English as a Foreign Language.

Before language was developed, non-verbal codes were used to convey information by means of symbols which were presented, first by means of pictorial art, and further in time, by writing. Most primitive cultures believed in the power of written language, which was clearly involved with religious beliefs, superstitions and mystical ideas since words were seen as all-powerful. Some historians believe that writing is from 3500 BC: Sumerians inscriptions in Mesopotamia and early Egyptian inscriptions. Nowadays, it is evident the influence of the written component on the oral component as an attempt to preserve and memorise for the future the narratives of the past.

It is expected that a piece of writing is “correct” since the writer has time to check or correct what s/he has written. Writers cannot use tactics or strategies such as hesitate, change subject or use body movement. But instead the writer must be clearer and use stylistic techniques and logical organization. Spelling is also vital. In the case of Spanish students, they find English spelling difficult, though both languages have Roman script. Take as examples the beginning and ending clusters that do not exist in the Spanish language: pp, mm, ff, tt, zz, th, gh, ph, sh, hn... Other special features of writing are the organization of sentences into paragraphs, the organization of paragraphs into the text, cohesion, coherence and genre analysis.

Learners must be aware of the different types of writing, the different types of written error or linking devices, and reflect on the writing process itself. Writing errors are not likely to happen since the writer has time to check or correct the text. But errors are nowadays considered as part of the learning process since errors also occur naturally in the acquisition of the first language and help students develop the learning to learn competence. Teachers can help students develop the writing skill by providing them with activities dealing with general techniques useful to text creation and evaluation, as well as organizational frameworks which reflect the sociocultural and linguistic conventions that native speakers use when they write. In addition, vocabulary is important because words carry the content of what we want to say. Grammar is the vehicle for writing but the writer cannot say a lot with grammar alone. Reading a lot of natural English is one of the premises to increase personal vocabulary. No doubt that learning vocabulary is not just words since there are some central premises to use vocabulary in written communication: meaning, collocation, and expressions. However, the first thing students want to know when they find a new word is its meaning. It is evident that a new word is useless unless the student knows how to use it. “False friends” are also a drawback because they have the same, or nearly the same, spelling in English and
in Spanish languages but the meanings are different, e.g. lecture: “conferencia”, *lectura. When students write in their first language, they use the words they know and their ability to use them. And this can also be reflected on second language learning by presenting vocabulary in context and resorting to the mother tongue only when necessary.

Second language learners must face with social and cognitive challenges since writing requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing and analysing ideas. In fact, one of the most difficult problems they have to overcome is how to operate successfully in a specific type of discourse that implies knowledge of the textual conventions, expectations, and formulaic expressions. Students must be encouraged to develop learning strategies such as the following: (i) Metacognitive strategies that are used to plan the organization of written discourse; (ii) Cognitive strategies such as transferring or using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task, using imagery or new vocabulary; (iii) Social/affective strategies which focus on the cooperation with peers, thus, in peer revision lessons. The most important reason to help students develop the writing skill is the value or usefulness that text types provide students to write effectively for different purposes in real world.

Writing in a second language is a complex process involving the ability to communicate in a foreign language, and the ability to construct a text to express one’s ideas effectively in writing.

But writing is an asset for the second language learner, especially in this new information technology society since writing serves as a basis of communication for a number of different reasons: education, job application, web content writing, access to information in the Internet, new business communication, scientific research, bureaucracy, political affairs, writers, slogans, pedagogical purposes, access to European countries... Writing provides the second language classroom with optimum framework to answer to diversity due to multiple intelligences, especially for those students who find it difficult to learn through oral practice alone. Hence, writing activities serve two main functions. Firstly, such activities are highly motivating, especially ICT activities. Secondly, writing activities are useful because of the limit of time available, for instance for PAU exams or reinforce the oral contents. Political and advertising slogans have also become a significant “tool” of persuasion. Therefore the force of the written word is useful to know how to write short phrases for promoting one’s small business, or even for participating in campaigns. In addition, second or foreign language learning is an evident need to communicate with other countries, at oral or written levels, since Spain is member of the European Community and citizens must be ready to fill in documents, job applications... Hence, the importance of the European Language Portfolio, described by the Common European Framework (CEF), to strength the language students’ responsibility for their own learning, including receptive and productive skills, amongst other aspects. Finding a job is a hard “work”, especially during the crisis, since employers often have a lot of curriculums vitae or job applications to read. Thus, the most attractive and fine writings are selected to compete with one another. Also, scientific research requires formal writing and second language plays an important role when several countries work on the same scientific research. Some web masters require contents in formal writing and writers can even publish their books in digital format through the net providing good quality writing to delight the readers all over the world. Not to mention the use of the e-mail, the chat or the blog to communicate to employees, feelings or ideas directly, and almost immediately. Participating in forums also requires writing and they are becoming “a meeting point” to get ideas for repairing a
computer or for sharing information about the latest news or specific subjects without having to leave home or travelling. It is evident that digital formats are highly tied to the written word, therefore, students must be prepared for such challenge acquiring this basic competence for life, whether at home or at work.

To conclude, the development of the writing skill is of paramount importance for second language learners since writing can be an entertainment, but also a priceless “tool” to communicate with other people and to approach to other cultures, which is one of the premises of many current educational systems, and the Linguistic Competence in LOE also advocates for successful communication, in both oral and written forms.

“Whatever is good to know is difficult to learn” Greek proverb.

Many thanks to:

My patient brothers Tenesor and Jesús Mendoza Díaz for their careful reading and useful suggestions.

Publicaciones Didácticas: http://publicacionesdidacticas.com

Clip Art Collection for the images used in this work: http://office.microsoft.com/es-es/clipart/default.aspx

Google: http://images.google.es/.

Bibliografía


Google: http://images.google.es/

My own experience and material.

Publicaciones Didácticas: http://publicacionesdidacticas.com

Clip Art Collection for the images used in this work: http://office.microsoft.com/es-es/clipart/default.aspx

Google: http://images.google.es/