

"Teaching Writing to Young Learners"

A Report

Submitted to the Department of English and Humanities

Of

BRAC University

Submitted By

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**In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree**

Of

Bachelor of Arts in English



**BRAC University
August 2007**

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BRAC University, Dhaka

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Mrs. Hamida Ali who gave me the chance to do my internship in her esteemed institution to attain practical knowledge which was the base of this report. Throughout the preparation of this report I have got the full support and guidance of all the faculty members of the Department of English and Humanities of BRAC University. I am grateful to my supervisor Shenin Ziauddin and I offer my gratitude for her effort and useful suggestions behind writing this paper. She had been very generous while checking all the mistakes and provided instant feedback which truly helped me. I am also thankful to Ms. Nazmeen Huq , Ms. Shaheena Chowdhary ,Mr. Mahmudul Haque, Ms. Asma Anis Khan and Ms. Ruhma Chowdhary for being my inspiration to do my major in language and Linguistics. Without them I would not be able to work in this field. Special thanks to Prof. Firdous Azim, Chairperson, Department of English and Humanities, for her constant support while doing the internship. I would also like to thank Prof. Syed Manzoorul Islam. Prof. Kaiser Huq, Ms. Shuchi Karim, Ms. Tabassum Zaman, Ms. Sahana Bajpayee and Ms. Sohana Manzoor from whom I have learnt many things all through my graduation period. Their efforts and encouragements will be always with me throughout my life.

Table of Content

1. Introduction:-----	4
2. Literature Review-----	5
3. Implementation of theories into practice-----	9
3.1. Class observation and preparation of lesson plans before teaching-----	9
3.2. Techniques applied while teaching writing-----	10
3.3. Error correction and feedback-----	12
4. Recommendation:-----	13
5. Conclusion:-----	14
6. Bibliography-----	15

1. Introduction:

Language is the salient way of expressing our thoughts. We use language for planning our lives and exchanging our ideas. Globalization has given rise to English as a global language and learning it has become inevitable to communicate with the world. In many countries including Bangladesh, English is the second language and it is a compulsory subject in our curriculum from the elementary level. It is an endemic part of our life and in today's world we will not be able to survive without English. Recent studies have revealed some evidence that young learners learn second language better compared to adult learners. In our country, though students are taught English at an early age, they cannot achieve fluency and accuracy in English which now a days is pre-requisite for higher studies, getting a decent job and above all for business. The effective way to make a learner proficient in English is to develop all the four basic language skills-listening, reading, speaking and writing. Listening and reading are the receptive skills and work as an input for the learners and gradually prepare the learners for the productive skills, speaking and writing. Amongst all four skills teaching writing is most challenging, more specifically teaching writing to young learners is a genuine challenge for the teachers. It is an imperative language skill, which need to be developed from an early age. Young learners do not feel motivated to write rather they like to speak more in an ESL class. In our educational system students do not get enough chance to write according to their own wish. In some schools, they have creative writing classes where students get the chance for free writing. The objective behind it is to make the students independent and activate their

thought process. From teachers' side it is important to select the right lesson and design it according to the age group. If the students do not like the lesson, the whole class will be unproductive. Teachers have to take care of student's motivation, their level of writing and preferred way of learning before preparing any task. It is difficult to draw young learner's attention and keep it focused for longer time. For doing this a teacher has to follow some teaching methods as well as teaching techniques to facilitate effective learning. To develop my paper, I will first look at the theories of teaching and learning writing, how learners can be motivated in class, and what triggered their mind to write. This paper will focus on the theories applied in the classroom from my own teaching experience followed by some effective criterion of teaching writing to young learners and how a teacher can help the learner to develop the writing skill at an early age.

2. Literature review:

Writing is an integral skill of successful second language learning. McDonough and Shaw (2004: pg-152) defined writing as a vehicle for language practice and further added that it attempts to communicate with the writer's ideas and thought. Students have to go through a structured process of writing. In classroom, writing activities can be done in-group or individually. According to learner's level teachers can design the writing task. McDonough and Shaw (2004: pg-155) have stated a process of writing according to which teachers should guide the learners- "gathering ideas, working on drafts and preparing final version" that will establish a collaborative and interactive framework. To make the process fruitful teacher should make the learners motivated.

For learning or teaching second language to young learners, motivation is an important factor to achieve success. Various studies have shown that motivation is strongly related to achievement in language learning. Naiman (1978) (sited: Ur, 2005: pg-275), author of a classic study of successful language learning, defined certain typical characteristics of motivated second language learners irrespective of their age. Some of this are-

1. **Positive task orientation:** Learner is willing to tackle tasks and challenges, and has confidence in his or her success.
2. **Ego involvement:** The learner finds it important to succeed in learning in order to maintain and promote his or her own self-image.
3. **Need for achievement:** The learner has a need to achieve, to overcome difficulties and succeed in what he or she sets out to do.
4. **High aspiration:** The learner is ambitious, goes for demanding challenges, high proficiency, and top grades.

Besides motivation, young learners have other learning strategies that teachers have to consider while teaching. Teachers' duty is to identify specific learning strategies what a group of learners or individual learners already have and at the same time help them to adopt different strategies. According to Vivian Cook (1996: pg-106) there are some good learning strategies –

1. Find a learning style that suits you
2. Involve yourself in the language learning process
3. Develop an awareness of language both as system and as communication
4. Pay constant attention to expanding your language knowledge.

The process of learning second language should be initiated at an early age as it is proved that young learners are better learners than adult learners. Cook (1996) claimed, "People who start learning English as an adult never managed to learn it properly and other who learns it as a child is indistinguishable from the natives", which supports Lenneberg's *critical period hypothesis* theory.

Ur (2005: pg-286) suggests "for schoolchildren learning a foreign language will be well only if the teacher find a way to activate and encourage their desire to invest effort in the learning activity". For young learners extrinsic or instrumental motivation works well where teachers play a vital role and they need to focus on the nature of motivation students have. Penny Ur (2005: pg-278) has found some sources of extrinsic motivation that works for young learners while learning second language. Some are discussed below:

- **Success and its rewards:** This is the single most important feature in raising extrinsic motivation. Learners who have succeeded in past tasks will be more willing to engage with the next one.
- **Tests:** The motivating power of tests appears clear, learners who know they are going to be tested on specific material next week will normally be more motivated to study it carefully.
- **Competition:** Learners will often be motivated to give their best not for the sake of learning itself but in order to bear their opponents in a competition.

Penny Ur (2005: pg- 286) has done a research on how a learner's age influences language learning. Assumptions made by her are given below:

- Young children learn languages better than the older ones.
- Foreign language learning in school should be started at an early age as possible.
- It is easier to interest and motivate children than adults.

As writing is a productive skill, picture is the most effective source, which is mainly visual stimulus to motivate young learners for teaching writing. Andrew Wright (2004) pointed out some important role that pictures play to help the teachers to teach writing. According to him picture can motivate learners to pay attention and take part in the lesson, it brings the context of any situation through which they can express their ideas, and most importantly pictures can be described in many ways that will develop learner's writing and organization skill as well.

Furthermore teachers can give a choice to the students so that they can choose their own topic. Before setting the task for elementary level students, according to Jeremy Harmer (1998), "teacher should make it sure that students have enough language competency to complete the task". At the same time teachers should be alert while checking the task. If teachers do excessive correction in elementary level it may have a negative impact. Harmer (1998) also points out, "over correction could have a demotivating effect on the students" and suggests, "Teachers can tell the students that for a particular piece of writing they will correct mistakes of particular aspects of language like- grammar, punctuation, spelling or organization." From teaching writing to correcting it, the whole process is amalgamated which gradually develop the writing skill of second language learners.

3. Implementation of theories into practice:

As an intern I worked in a school where I taught English language for three months to gain practical knowledge about language teaching. It was a part of my learning process and I taught a certain age group ranging from 6-8 years. I also observed some higher-level classes. The objective behind the internship was to implement the theories we had learnt and to see how those theories worked in real classroom setting. In this section I will focus on different stages of my teaching experience backed up by theories and techniques.

3.1 Class observation and preparation of lesson plans before teaching:

Primarily I taught grammar and after few weeks I also started teaching creative writing in std-1 and 2, which remained challenging all the way through my internship. It was evident to me that students were not very enthusiastic or motivated in creative writing class, which was the basic requirement to learn any language skill. At first I followed the instructions and tasks provided by the coordinator. On the whole they designed tasks for creative writing class comprised of picture writing and short paragraph writing. I observed one class to see their teaching procedure before teaching any class. The teacher gave each student a sheet of paper containing six sequenced pictures. She described the pictures to the students in such a way that it had become a story, which was appreciative. After the explanation students were asked to write eight to ten sentences describing those pictures. Some words were given below the pictures to help the students. The instruction was not clear to the students and the teacher did not check whether students understood the

instructions or not. In fact students did not ask for any help. Instead students sitting behind the class started coloring the pictures. The instructor was well behaved and it was taken for granted that learners were too young to write much. Very few students actually wrote and the teacher appreciated that. When I started teaching I prepared some lesson with pictures and chose some topic for their paragraph writing like- my home, my favorite cartoon or games, my friend and my pet. I was very cautious while choosing the topic, as it would be the first step of getting students' attention in the class. While teaching in language class I had identified that most of the students were eager to engage themselves in any task as it was very important to them to maintain their own self-image. They were extremely competitive to each other and strived for success. Unfortunately in creative writing class they behaved another way. Their extrinsic motivation became low compared to other classes as they were not challenged in that task. Before designing the task I concentrated on certain issues regarding students' involvement and reward.

3.2 Techniques applied while teaching writing:

When I started teaching picture writing (Std-1), I involved the students from the beginning to talk about the pictures. I used adapted material, mostly from the picture books and I simplified them according to the students' level. It was easier for me to motivate them at first. After getting response about the picture I gradually engaged the students through classroom discussion. From that discussion I wrote their thoughts and responses on the board so that they would take help while writing. They participated actively in the class though some of the students were still reluctant. In other classes (Std-2) I taught paragraph

writing for example- 'My Home'. To engage students I asked some warm up questions. After that I did brainstorming to get the ideas and asked students to come and write whatever they think about their home. I even asked one of them to draw a picture of a home. The whole class was engaged in the task and I built up a strong rapport with them. When they talked among themselves I monitored them and found that they were making few mistakes apart from the vocabulary. From the beginning I concentrated on process writing where students had to activate their brain in order to write about anything. In our time, teachers focused on product writing (finished work) rather concentrating on process. Process writing allows learners to develop their writing gradually. Byrne (1988), (sited in: McDonough and Shaw, 2004) suggested some stages of process writing:

List ideas → make an outline → write a draft → correct and improve → write final version.

In both the classes students listed the ideas successfully and they did it with ease but they did not feel motivated to write it down. I encouraged them to write and announced them that three best writers would be rewarded in each week. But it took time to inspire them to write down whatever they could. Eventually, it worked well than before since all of them were involved in the learning process and they challenged themselves. I even asked the students to choose their own topic. Progressively they started writing in few weeks and they enjoyed the creative writing class. Even if they had done a lot of errors, I insisted them to write as much as they could to break their silence about writing before commenting or checking their final work.

3.3 Error correction and feedback :

While checking the script, I had found some common errors. For example- My ***mother*** ***cook*** rice for me. They hardly add any- s/es with the verb, though in the grammar class they had learnt it. Some other frequent errors made by the students that I had pointed out are – most of the time they added *-ing* with the verb, they did not add- ed with the regular verb when it was past, even sometimes added- ed when it is not needed. All these elements were taught in the grammar class. Still it happened since they did not practice free writing at home. Moreover, these elements were taught discreetly. In the grammar class they just practiced the work sheets containing several grammar items provided by the teacher but they did not know how to use it in writing. To make the students aware I wrote several comments so that they could go through their errors but eventually that did not work well. I observed them for couple of weeks to get the result but they made the same errors. I was a bit distressed as I did not over correct their copies and I knew that over correction would not work. I talked with my supervisor and she told me that had to correct the copies carefully and line by line. I realized that students were habituated of over correction and they did not feel like to correct their checked work. In fact they were not motivated enough to improve their writing skill. Though I checked only one kind of grammar at a time, they did not note that and did not rewrite it. However my supervisor was not very pleased as I did not check all the errors. Despite the fact that I made the class interactive and interesting than before, there were problems regarding error correction and feedback as the learners were too young to realize.

4. Recommendation:

Young learners are energetic, lively and it is easier to motivate and every language teacher should make the best use of it. Throughout my internship I worked on several aspects of language teaching and found that to make the students confident and competent in writing, providing feedback was the most crucial factor. Students responded well on the topic for writing but they were not eager to write. Furthermore, they did not correct their write up though I encouraged them. In that case providing effective feedback is one of the important tasks for ESL teacher. Materials used for writing were rather well designed to engage the students but the problem lied with giving feedback. . Initially I provided written feedback which according to Ken Hyland (2003) played a central role in most L2 writing class. He added, "Many students see their teacher's feedback as crucial to their improvements as writers". Before commenting on written work, first teacher has to remove the stigma of overcorrection from students' mind which undermines the students. The nature of response also varies according to learner's level. To make the students aware of their errors teacher can allocate one class every alternate week for grammar correction combined with classroom discussion between teacher-students which will be valued by students as well as effective for them. Teachers should make a balance between positive and negative feedback. Besides written comments, teacher can also engage students to check each others copy which is referred as peer feedback by Ken Hyland (2003). Teacher can point out some common errors and according to that students can check their copies. This process will make them responsible to correct their work. On top of that they will be able to judge the written work and in the end this practice will make them independent. In our present

classroom environment this practice can easily be done as it does not require any extra facilities. It only needs a manageable class size not more than 25 students. What it requires is teachers' dedication towards their work and sincerity to ensure effective implementation of proposed solutions for successful teaching writing to young learners.

5. Conclusion:

This paper is all about engaging students in writing class for successful learning and it is the reflection of my internship. In this report I have focused on the teaching procedure to young learners for writing and how it differs from teaching adults. To improve writing skill it needs practice and constant attention especially to young learners who are sensitive towards learning. Teachers have to deal with them adroitly. In the elementary level, teachers play a vital role to develop writing skill. While checking the scripts teachers have to be lenient as because they are the only sources of motivation for the young learners. Learners' motivation plays prime role to engage the students into classroom activity which is the most challenging work for the teacher. Whenever teachers provide positive feedback and support learners' ideas, it works greatly. Learners' self esteem goes up automatically and they participate. Giving feedback remains a problem as different students take the feedback in a different way. To solve the problem in this paper I have proposed some recommendations to improve the writing skill which are quite easily applicable in our classroom environment. Teachers just need to take care of the learners' need, what kind of feedback they need rather overcorrecting them which work well. Without writing skill second language learning will remain incomplete and to ensure that students have to learn it from an early age.

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