

### Figure 1: Checklist for Preparing Writing Tasks

#### Does the task:

- [ ] require writers to compose a piece of connected discourse?
- [ ] establish a clear purpose for communicating, especially by indicating the intended reader and a context for the task?
- [ ] motivate writers to communicate their knowledge and perception of the topic?
- [ ] reflect the kind of writing students will normally be expected to do in their academic programs or the real world?
- [ ] provide a subject that will interest students of this age, sex, educational level, field of study, and cultural background?
- [ ] present a topic about which these students will have knowledge?
- [ ] appear to be the right level of difficulty for students of this proficiency range?
- [ ] provide a topic that is free of hidden elements of bias?
- [ ] present a clearly defined task that cannot easily be misinterpreted?
- [ ] provide a topic that is broad enough for every writer to approach from some angle?
- [ ] use as few words as possible, and definitions if necessary?
- [ ] give clear and concise instructions that indicate also the time allowed for writing and the approximate number of words or length of the composition expected?
- [ ] present a writable and readable topic, pretested with students similar to the test group?
- [ ] include as many modes of discourse as are appropriate to the purpose of the test and to the actual writing needs of the students?
- [ ] provide at least two writing occasions, in order to produce an adequate sample of a student's ability?
- [ ] require all students to write on the same topic, unless skill at choosing a topic is part of the abilities being tested?
- [ ] allow enough writing time for a reasonable performance?
- [ ] provide ruled paper for writing?
- [ ] use a coding system for identifying writers so that authorship will be anonymous during the evaluation?
- [ ] Is the writing task appropriate to the specific purpose(s) of this test?

(Taken from Hadley (1993, 332) with source from Jacobs et al. (1981, 22).)

tasks that require students to write postcards or letters to an imaginary friend in the target culture and that elicit certain grammatical structures or vocabulary. The following writing prompts elicit use of the present tense of the indicative, including affirmative, negative, interrogative, or reflexive forms, as well as vocabulary associated with letter writing and vacations:

Imagine you are on vacation at your favorite resort. Write a postcard or short letter explaining what you are doing, what you like about the place, who you are meeting, and similar details.

Your best friend at another school has a new roommate who comes from (country where target language is spoken). Write a letter to your friend, including a list of questions you would like him or her to ask this exchange student about life in his or her country. (Hadley, 1993, 313–314).

While narrative and descriptive tasks can be valuable for developing communicative language skills, they do not necessarily involve complex cognitive functioning. That is, students do not have to grapple with ideas or concepts. *Expository* or *argumentative* tasks, on the other hand, are more cognitively demanding. Expository tasks consist of collecting information and understanding it well enough to explain cause and effect, likeness and contrast, problems and solutions. Argumentative tasks involve similar demands, but include convincing, persuading, supporting, and refuting. According to Schultz (1991a, 1991b), and Kern and Schultz (1992), students should practice argumentative tasks, since they most closely reflect the kind of writing that is required in upper-level FL courses.

Challenging FL students to write expository and argumentative essays is certainly important, however, the task may become overwhelming given both the cognitive and the linguistic demands. By designing tasks that specify the linguistic structures required by the task, the linguistic demands can, to some degree, be alleviated. Scott (1990; 1992) proposes task-oriented writing guidelines that refer specifically to the language functions, vocabulary, and grammar necessary to complete the writing assignment. Figures 2, 3, and 4 show examples of task-oriented writing assignments that combine expository and argumentative modes of discourse, for students in first-, second-, and third-year FL courses.

#### □ RESEARCH ON WRITING TASK DIFFICULTY

Determining the difficulty of a writing task is important when designing assignments, however, it may not be easy. In fact, what may be an easy task for one student, may be a difficult task for another. Koda's (1993) research supports the notion that the difficulty of a writing task is related to learner differences. Her study indicates that FL writers employ different strategies to achieve discourse coherence in varying text types. That is, a narrative text invokes the use of different strategies and different linguistic skills than a descriptive text.

## Figure 2: Task-Oriented Writing Guide for First-Year Students

**Situation:** You have heard that American and French/German/Spanish students are different. In order to promote cultural understanding, you are writing an article about American students for a French/German/Spanish magazine.

1. Begin with a general remark about American students.  
FUNCTION: Generalizing  
GRAMMAR: Present tense
2. State three things about the way that female students often dress and three things about the way that male students often dress.  
FUNCTION: Describing people  
VOCABULARY: Clothing
3. Indicate three things that American students often like to do.  
FUNCTION: Expressing likes/preferences  
VOCABULARY: Sports, leisure activities
4. Conclude with a personal opinion about American students.  
FUNCTION: Expressing an opinion

(Taken from pedagogical materials used by the author.)

## Figure 3: Task-Oriented Writing Guide for Second-Year Students

**Situation:** You have heard that American and French/German/Spanish students are different. In order to promote cultural understanding, you are writing an article about American students for a French/German/Spanish magazine.

1. Begin with two general remarks about American students.  
FUNCTION: Generalizing; linking ideas  
GRAMMAR: Present tense
2. State five things about the way that female students often look and five things about the way that male students often look.  
FUNCTION: Describing people  
VOCABULARY: Clothing; hair; personal possessions
3. Indicate five things that American students often like to do and three things that they often do not like to do.  
FUNCTION: Expressing likes/preferences  
VOCABULARY: Sports, leisure activities; studies  
GRAMMAR: Negation(s)
4. Conclude with two personal opinions about the individuality or conformity of American students.  
FUNCTION: Expressing an opinion

(Taken from pedagogical materials used by the author.)

## Figure 4: Task-Oriented Writing Guide for Third-Year Students

**Situation:** You have heard that American and French/German/Spanish students are different. In order to promote cultural understanding, you are writing an article about American students for a French/German/Spanish magazine.

1. You will argue for or against the idea that all American students are alike. Begin with a thesis statement.  
FUNCTION: Writing an essay; generalizing; linking ideas  
GRAMMAR: Present tense
2. Describe American students.  
FUNCTION: Describing people  
VOCABULARY: Clothing; hair; studies; leisure; personal possessions  
GRAMMAR: Negation(s); relative pronouns; adjectives
3. Define the concept of stereotypes.  
FUNCTION: Explaining; comparing; contrasting  
GRAMMAR: Impersonal expressions  
(EX: It is evident/interesting/important)
4. Support or reject the validity of stereotypes.  
FUNCTION: Expressing an opinion  
GRAMMAR: Subjunctive
5. Conclude by showing how your argument supports your thesis statement.  
FUNCTION: Concluding

... the analyses consistently demonstrate that the two writing tasks [narrative and descriptive] pose varying levels of linguistic and rhetorical demands, and suggest that different linguistic competencies are required for successful performance. It is essential, therefore, that a simple task analysis be used to assess the information processing load before a task is assigned. While topics should be selected for the motivational value in stimulating FL learners to write, once chosen, the writing task should be adjusted to the learner's proficiency level. Describing a holiday on the basis of personal experience, for example, entails a set of processing procedures quite different from those used to describe the same holiday as an aspect of one's culture (Koda, 1993, 343).

Since each learner demonstrates different degrees of linguistic and rhetorical mastery, evaluating the difficulty of a task can be difficult.

A study by Hamp-Lyons and Mathias (1994) provides further confirmation of the fact that task difficulty is not easy to assess. In their study, they postulated that a difficult writing task would have a direct effect on the quality of student writing. That is, a difficult writing prompt would produce low scores, whereas a simple writing prompt would produce high scores. In determining the relationship between writing prompt difficulty and student scores, the researchers found

that there was no clear answer. In fact, prompts that were judged to be difficult often produced high scores. The researchers speculate that the reasons for this result might include the possibility that raters were more lenient in their scoring when the prompt was difficult or that students performed better when the writing prompt was particularly challenging. However, the researchers point out that because their findings are not clear, a great deal more research is needed to understand what makes a writing prompt difficult.

## TEACHING WRITING FROM THE START: THE CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

---

As stated previously, the kind of writing that students typically do in lower-level language courses does not prepare them for the kind of writing that is expected of them in upper-level literature and civilization courses:

Often serving mainly as an extended form of grammar practice, writing in lower-division language courses traditionally consists of fill-in-the-blank workbook exercises and occasional descriptive essays about personal topics such as friends, family, and vacation. In these writing tasks, the focus is usually on surface feature accuracy rather than on the development, organization, and effective expression of the students' own thoughts or ideas. As a consequence, students often find themselves ill-prepared to write essays in upper-division courses in which they are held responsible not only for grammatical precision but also for their ideas, their style, and their ability to develop a lucid argument. Indeed, although conventional wisdom has it that the well-formed sentence is at the root of good writing, the ability to produce a good sentence does not automatically result in good paragraph writing . . . (Kern and Schultz, 1992, 1–2).

In order to bridge the gap between lower- and upper-level FL courses, teachers must design strategies for teaching writing from the beginning stages of language study. The following suggestions can help students write from the start:

### 1. *Distinguish between writing for communication and writing as an academic exercise.*

The kind of writing that teaches students real-life communication is a vital part of any FL course. Students gain a great deal from learning how to take notes and write messages and letters. However, teachers need to explain that writing can also be an academic exercise. That is, students can write to learn at the same time that they learn to write. Shrum and Glisan (1994, p. 182) suggest that “. . . language is a tool for building and shaping our thoughts rather than simply a means for conveying them. The writing process can help push students to the next developmental level.” When students must organize and express their thoughts in the target language, they are developing critical-thinking skills such

as analyzing, synthesizing, and decision-making. Figure 5 gives an example of a writing assignment designed for elementary-level students that has no real communicative purpose. The objective of the exercise is to practice analyzing an idea and then express it in the target language.

### 2. *Combine reading and writing.*

Because written discourse is culturally determined, reading should be linked to writing. Extensive reading, or reading texts for the gist, can help students internalize patterns of discourse, levels of register, and links between language and culture. Intensive reading, or close textual analysis, can provide students with models to follow.

When our students read, they engage actively with the new language and culture . . . The more our students read, the more they become familiar with the vocabulary, idiom, sentence patterns, organizational flow, and cultural assumptions of native speakers of the language (Raimes, 1983, 50).

### Figure 5: Academic Writing Task for Elementary-Level Students

Writing assignment: write a paragraph explaining the word American.

#### 1) Prewriting exercise:

- Write the name of a person who symbolizes your notion of “American.”
- Write a list of words that describe this person.
- Write a list of activities that this person does.
- Write several possible titles for your essay.

#### 2) First draft:

- Write a title for your essay.
- Write two sentences describing this person physically.
- Write one sentence describing this person's personality.
- Write two sentences stating what this person does.
- Write a concluding sentence explaining why, in your opinion, this person is “American.”

(The teacher reads the first draft, commenting only on content; teacher can signal areas where errors interfere with comprehension.)

#### 3) Final draft:

- Analyze the suggestions made by your teacher and rewrite your paragraph. (This short essay might be filed in a writing portfolio and could be corrected or rewritten any time during the course. Each revised version should be appended to the preceding versions and turned in at the end of the course for final evaluation and a grade.)

As students read, they need guidance in identifying the aspects of written discourse that will help them in their own written expression. For example, students can identify and examine the use of tense and mode, the choice of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, the syntax (simple, complex), the use of conjunctions, the punctuation, or the point of view (first person narration, third person/omniscient narration).<sup>5</sup>

Another important feature of written language that students can examine is *redundancy*. According to Horning (1987) “redundancy is information overlap in language” (p. 18). To show redundancy in grammatical forms, she gives the example “the teachers were grading their papers” where the subject, verb, and direct object all point to the plurality of the sentence. Redundancy also occurs in semantic form, with the same idea presented more than once in different words, and in discourse, with restatements of the main point of the essay. She points out that redundancy ensures comprehension even if one element is missed.

In a similar vein, Shakir (1991) contends that students need to be taught explicitly how to write coherent, communicatively acceptable texts through *exploration* prior to the stage of actual writing and *building relations via developing a core sentence* (407–409). By exploration, Shakir means using exploratory questions to identify the relationships among clauses and sentences written by experienced writers so that “student writers discover for themselves how the content of a text is structured and how general statements generate supportive ones” (p. 408). With regard to building relations via developing a core sentence, Shakir makes the following suggestion:

The teacher can set the pace by putting forward a lead (core) sentence. Key words/phrases in this sentence should be identified by the students in order to anticipate concepts that key words/phrases can trigger. In other words, students should realize that key words/phrases in the lead sentence signal commitments on the part of the writers; such commitments must be fulfilled in sentences that follow.

Having identified key words/phrases in the lead sentence, the students can write one more sentence in fulfillment of the anticipations triggered off by the key words. Another key word/phrase is identified in the second sentence and anticipations aroused by it are then marked, and a third sentence is generated accordingly. The process goes on until a paragraph organized around a developed idea is formed (Shakir, 1991, 408–409).

Shakir maintains that students must practice this kind of exercise, involving the notions of commitment and fulfillment, in order to develop an understanding of coherence in writing.

In addition to analyzing reading texts in order to improve students’ understanding of written discourse, reading can serve as a good writing prompt. Summarizing and reacting to texts are traditional kinds of exercises, but they can be done at any stage of language learning.

### 3. *Work on sentence-combining exercises.*

There is some doubt about the effectiveness of sentence combining in teaching FL writing, given the fact that sentence combining and real writing are said to require different cognitive and linguistic processes. However, in a study of advanced-level ESL students Johnson (1992) found that the cognitive demands of sentence combining suggests that this kind of exercise may be beneficial in teaching second-language writing. Using both controlled sentence-combining tasks (paired sentences with cued responses) and open sentence-combining tasks (ten sentences without cued responses), the researchers found that students generally used similar cognitive strategies regardless of the type of sentence-combining task:

The results revealed that these second language writers most frequently engaged in restating content, constructing meaning, and planning as they completed both controlled and open sentence-combining tasks. This suggests that sentence-combining tasks required these second language writers to think through content, formulate ideas in their own words, and plan their sentence constructions according to local and global discourse constraints (Johnson, 1992, 70).

The researchers identified ten types of cognitive strategies used by the students, including questions about the task and about ideas, local and global planning, restating the content both by reading the text and by writing their own text, constructing meaning, constructing cohesion, and evaluating.

### 4) *Work on reformulation exercises.*

*Syntactic complexity* in writing is often considered to be an indicator of the quality of writing. Moreover, according to Schultz (1994), “syntactic complexity serves not only as a tool for clear communication, but also as a tool for generating thought itself” (p. 171). In describing how to teach students about syntactic complexity, Schultz (1994) cites Cohen’s *reformulation* technique, which involves having a native speaker or teacher rewrite a student’s text so that the student can compare the original version with the reformulated version. The theory behind this approach is that students benefit from being able to analyze how a native speaker would have written it. Schultz contends that reformulation, even at the sentence level, can be an excellent exercise in teaching students about cohesive devices, overall coherence, and lexical as well as structural choices. She describes a practical classroom application of this technique that includes several steps. First, students are given a poorly written text, which may consist of only three or four sentences. Next, students working either individually or in groups rewrite the short text. Then, a native speaker rewrites what the students wrote. Finally, students compare their reformulated version with the one written by the native speaker:

All of this elaboration represents a significant amount of intellectual work on the part of the students, who must make interpretative choices about the content of the text in order to reformulate the passages. That is, learning how to use the foreign language more effectively by putting into practice the multiple aspects of that language (grammar, vocabulary, syntax) would seem to contribute to the development of students' critical thinking skills, particularly as they pertain to interpretative reading and analytical writing (Schultz, 1994, 176).

#### 5. *Work on vocabulary exercises.*

Koda's (1993) research suggests that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and text quality. In fact, her findings show that "vocabulary knowledge contributes substantially to FL composition, [while] sentence complexity has relatively little independent influence on native speakers' judgments regarding FL composition quality" (p. 337). Given this strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and quality rating, she believes that teaching writing should include vocabulary exercises to provide a "linguistic scaffolding" for a given task.

#### 6. *Design prewriting exercises.*

When students are first learning to write, it is important to provide adequate support in the prewriting phase. Students should have the opportunity to work with words and structures before they actually begin writing; this activity will help them generate more ideas on the topic as well as organize their ideas. Moreover, the composition will take shape early in the writing process. Figure 6 shows an example of a prewriting exercise for a narrative composition. Figure 7 shows an example of a prewriting exercise for a textual analysis, or an expository composition. These kinds of exercises can be given to students at any stage of language learning.

#### 7. *Develop task-oriented writing assignments.*

A task-oriented approach to teaching writing is founded on the idea that students need explicit guidelines in order to execute a writing assignment (Scott, 1995). Scott and Terry (1992) propose that a writing assignment consist of a general situation followed by a series of tasks that specify language functions, vocabulary, and grammar structures necessary to complete the assignment. In designing these assignments, teachers should bear in mind that the tasks should not be restrictive, but rather serve as guidelines for generating ideas and engaging in autonomous expression. Figures 2, 3, and 4 give examples of task-oriented writing assignments.

### Figure 6: Prewriting Exercise for Narrative Composition

(to be done in the target language)

- I. **Subject of story.** Write one sentence telling what you plan to write about.
- II. **Point of view.** Indicate whether your story will be in the first person (I, we), or in the third person (he, she, they).
- III. **Place.** Write where your story takes place (in a plane, at home during a big family dinner, etc.).
  - 1) Write three sentences describing the place.
- IV. **Characters.** Write who is in your story. (Limit it to three people.)
  - 1) Write two sentences describing the main character.
  - 2) Write a sentence describing each of the other characters.
- V. **Tone.** Write the tone you want to have (humorous, sad, serious, etc.)
  - 1) Write how you want your reader to feel after reading the story.
- VI. **Tense.** What tenses will you use in your story?
- VII. **Verbs.** Make a list of six to eight verbs that create a sense of the action in your story. (Do not list verbs like to have or to be.)

(Taken from pedagogical materials used by the author.)

In *Teacher's Handbook: Contextualized Language Instruction* (1994), Shrum and Glisan include writing activities that are very similar to task-oriented writing assignments. In describing middle school FL instruction, they include an example of Nerenz's fixed-form writing assignment:

#### Monument Poem

- Line 1: Name of the monument
  - Line 2: Four adjectives describing the monument
  - Line 3: Constructed in (date, century)
  - Line 4: Constructed by
  - Line 5: Which is (on the right bank, left bank, in Paris, . . .)
  - Line 6: Which is near (another monument or landmark)
  - Line 7: Don't miss (the monument name) because \_\_\_\_
- (Shrum and Glisan, 1994, 183).

#### 8. *Work on all four modes of discourse.*

Students should be taught to write in all four modes of discourse (description, narration, exposition, and argumentation) from the first stages of language study. This approach helps students prepare for the kinds of writing assignments in upper-level courses as well as engage in different types of cognitive functioning. The developmental writing program in Figure 8 shows task-oriented writing

### Figure 7: Prewriting Exercise for Literary Essay

(to be done in the target language)

After reading the text (short story, article, etc.), prepare your essay by doing the following exercise.

I. Introduction. For the introduction of your essay, write down the following information:

- 1) The name of the author and the date of the text
- 2) Two sentences summarizing the content

II. Personal reaction to the content. For this section of the essay, you will analyze and explain how you feel about this text.

- 1) List the things you like about the content of this text (characters, place, etc.).
- 2) List the things you do not like about the content of this text.
- 3) From the two lists above, choose the one aspect of the content that you find most compelling and explain why.

III. Analysis of the style.

- 1) Write the point of view used in the story (first, third, etc.).
- 2) List five verbs, five nouns, and five adjectives that are crucial to creating the ambiance in the text.
- 3) Write how you felt after reading the text (sad, happy, pensive, etc.).

IV. Conclusion. For the conclusion of your essay, you will evaluate the overall merit of this text.

- 1) Write who should read/should not read this text and explain why.

(Taken from pedagogical materials used by the author.)

guidelines for each mode of discourse designed for students in first-, second-, and third-year FL courses.<sup>6</sup>

#### 9. Be aware of learner differences.

The fact that every student has a different learning style is widely accepted among FL teachers. However, it is important to consider learner differences in the context of the writing class. Some students will benefit most from linguistic exercises, such as sentence combining or reformulation; others will benefit from pre-writing exercises or task-oriented guidelines; and some will feel more comfortable writing with computers than with pencil and paper. Teachers need to be open about individual student differences.

Another factor that may influence learners is their ethnic backgrounds. McKay (1993) points out that ESL students from non-Western cultures may have very different concepts about writing. For example, she notes that in some cultures reaching a conclusion about a matter of controversy is not valued. She suggests that L2 composition professionals need to examine the writing process “as it is affected by a culturally influenced set of values and beliefs” (p. 74).

### Figure 8: Developmental Writing Program

#### DESCRIPTION

Situation: You have been asked to write a description of yourself for the new student files.

#### First Year Tasks

1. Give name, age, nationality.
2. Describe yourself physically.
3. Tell three things you like and three things you don't like to do.

#### Second Year Tasks

1. Give name, age, nationality.
2. Describe your appearance and personality.
3. Tell at least five things you like and five things you do not like about your academic and leisure activities.

#### Third Year Tasks

1. Give name, age, nationality.
2. Describe yourself in detail.
3. Indicate your likes and dislikes.
4. Tell what you will do after finishing school.

#### NARRATION

Situation: Imagine that you went on a trip to \_\_\_\_\_ last year. You are writing to a pen pal telling about the event.

#### First Year Tasks

1. Tell where you went.
2. Tell three things you did.
3. Tell three things you did not do.

#### Second Year Tasks

1. Tell where you went and how you felt.
2. Tell what happened and how you felt.
3. Tell what you will do on your next visit.

#### Third Year Tasks

1. Tell where you went and why.
2. Tell what happened, whom you were with and how you felt.
3. Tell what you would have done if you had had more money.