CONFERENCING: AN INTERACTIVE STRATEGY IN TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING

Wienny Ardriyati[1] and Sri Murtiningsih[2]

Abstract: Writing plays an essential role in our personal and professional lives. It becomes one of the important components in learning and teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This article shows that teaching writing by using a conference technique is an effective way for communicative interaction purposes. In this context, the teaching of writing for the students in their widely varying personal needs and goals can be in the form of conferencing, a short meeting between the students and the teacher. Teaching writing through conferencing gives some benefits, for instance, it enables the teacher to modify and adapt instructional methods and approaches according to the students' needs. Academic writing implies a successful transmission of ideas from the writer to a reader through a text, because there is an exchange of information, which becomes a powerful means to encourage the development this language skill.

Key words: one-on-one conferencing, discourse, interactive.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a very individual skill, with each person having his or her own particular feelings, ideas and even problems can express them in it. Each person will also have different means of expressing ideas and how to organize these ideas in the form of writing.

Writing teachers have acknowledged these problems and have provided individual feedback to their students. The common form of feedback in the past has been written comments on the students' final paper, pointing out problems and giving suggestions for improvement of future papers.

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[1] **Dra. Wienny Ardriyati, M.Pd.** is a lecturer at STIE Stikubank, Semarang. She received her M.Pd. from State University of Semarang.

[2] **Dra. Sri Murtiningsih** is a lecturer at STIE Stikubank, Semarang.

Since writing has become one of the essential components for academic purposes, writing teachers should know that its multifarious pedagogical purposes range from reinforcement, training and imitation to communication, fluency and learning style.

Writing teachers should favor a process approach to teaching writing skills through conferencing from the outset, since traditional classroom methods cannot provide students with all the instructional assistance that is needed to become professional writers. The social orientation becomes visible and highlights the writer-text-reader interaction. Therefore, purpose and audience are all important in the production of discourse while the functional dimension of communication is reinforced. Students need to be familiarized with specifying discursive conventions and constraints. The writing teachers also adhere to a genre approach to teaching writing (Swales 1990).

The social purposes of a communicative event exert a powerful influence on the textual choices a writer makes and, for this reason, the students should be made aware of the sets of schemata which determine both the content and the form of the texts they will be asked to produce, so preparation for the tasks will comprise exposure to authentic material plus a thorough discourse analysis of the different genres before they begin to develop their own texts. The implementation of a discourse-oriented writing approach will make the students acquire an effective command of the foreign language in a range of familiar situations. By generating and encouraging interactive writing, not just texts per se to be read and graded by the teacher, the students will obtain self-confidence, fluency, and they will be stimulated to express their own authentic voices in the process of text production.

DISCOURSE APPROACH TO WRITING

The discourse approach to writing follows a task-based framework which aims to encourage classroom interaction so as to maximize opportunities for students to put their language to genuine use and to create a more effective learning environment (Willis 1996:19). The focus of the tasks can vary, ranging from an emphasis on discursive skills (selection of topic, disposition of the information, complexities of utterances, lexical choices of the text according to the students' development stages) to a more functional focus (informing, persuading, convincing, entertaining, and so on).

The combination of skills is fostered, depending on the task and its complexities, so that along the drafting-writing-revision procedure, listening, speaking, reading, and writing will overlap, involving thinking, talking, consulting sources, doing research, peer editing, interacting in groups and the like. For certain cases, cultural aspects are important and students may need some help to get familiarized with specific conventions and constraints in the target culture. Different cultural background may cause some writers (in this case students) to feel uncomfortable with personal or shared writing. (Leki 1992, as quoted from http://web.ics.purdue.edu/-magits/ kairoselect/ hteoryoutline.htm). In all cases, the situation has to be made clear to students, so that they can determine roles, conditions, effects on the interlocutor and standards to be achieved. In other words, the teacher gives a task. The teacher outlines the activities in the real world that the students typically do in their first language lives and reflect some canonical genres in particular discourse formats.

ACADEMIC WRITING

Talking about academic writing, the writers/students must know about the audience and purposes. They must also learn about writing conventions. Writing conventions includes patterns expected by the academic reader in such areas as (a) overall organization, (b) functions of paragraphing, (c) the amount and kind of evidence (d) the appropriate use of word-signals to help direct the reader, and (e) the use of citations.

In general, academic writing assignments share similar writing conventions in their overall organization. The length of the parts of the paper depends on the actual assignment. "Many academic assignments usually contain an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion. An academic essay is a series of paragraphs about one topic; each paragraph has a specific function" (Reid 2000: 66).

The first is introduction. It is the first paragraph in the essay. It orients the audience by giving a little background information about the topic. It states the thesis of the essay.

The body of the essay has the functions to explain, define, clarify, and illustrate the main idea of the essay and to explain to the audience that the writer's ideas and opinions are worthwhile.

The last is conclusion. It completes the essay by summarizing the main ideas by providing solutions to the problems discussed in the essay.

Almost all academic essays require the writers to explain ideas and opinions, and often persuade the audience that the ideas are worthwhile. To get good results from academic writing essays the writing teacher should explain about what the writing conventions are. After that the teacher can use the interactive techniques to teach writing to gain good results from the students' writing. The interactive techniques used can be conferencing or group research. After using this technique, the students should know how to write good academic writing.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD WRITERS

Good writing in any language involves knowledge of the conventions of written discourse in that culture as well as the abilities to choose words that convey one's meanings, select a variety of syntactic structures those that transmit one's message most precisely, and adopt a style that will have most positive rhetorical effect. Obviously, such expertise will not develop merely from practice exercises in grammar and vocabulary at the sentence level. Exercises in paragraphing, including the writing of topic sentences and the use of supporting detail of various types, as well as activities promoting the development of discourse skills beyond paragraph level are also important elements to include in writing. Krashen (as cited in Omaggio, 1986: 221-226) reviewed research on the composing process in the native language that good writers differ from poor writers in at least three ways:

1. *Planning.* Good writers show some evidence of planning or organizing before they sit down to write the first draft. They tend to have flexible plans and do not feel compelled to stick to their original ideas if they see a reason for changing the course of their thinking while in the process of composing.

2. *Rescanning.* Good writers often stop to reread what they have already written before continuing to compose

3. *Revising.* Good writers make more changes in content and try to find the line of their argument in the finished draft in order to see if revisions are necessary.

One additional characteristic of good writers is their awareness of their audience and their concerns for the reader's point of view. They are reader-centered and use words with special meanings and organize an exposition of ideas that characterizes good work of writing.

INTERACTIVE WRITING

Writing is an interactive process by nature since it develops the symbolic interplay between writers, text and reader. By making situations more 'authentic' than the ones in the traditional classroom tasks, awareness of audience, purpose and intention is reinforced. While planning a written piece, the writer is constrained to consider the audience and to adopt a reader-oriented approach so as to achieve a persuasive, emotive or objective function. Interactivity can be promoted in the writing class by implanting some suggestions, such as the conferencing technique.

A. Conferencing Technique

Conferencing involves a short meeting of about 10 to 15 minutes between the student and the teacher. It is one-on-one teaching. Students are helped by verbal cues and the teacher gives them freedom to work on a task with a small amount of guidance, an experience which can be achieved through conferencing. Conferencing provides the leaner with an opportunity to learn how to avoid errors. It allows the student to ask questions and allows the teacher to ask the students their perceptions of what they are doing. Both student and teacher will face the most significant technique used in writing class.

The purpose of conferencing is to provide an opportunity for the students to learn about the process of writing; to focus attention on their own work from a fresh perspective; to generate and clarify their ideas and audiences; to model writing; to provide support with editing skills; to assess the students ongoing process; to identify areas of writing that need to be developed and to establish future goals in writing.

Let's take a look of an example developed by Marshall (1986). She developed in her classes around her conferencing sessions, in which she addressed meaning in the composition first, and then the forms. At the beginning of the conferencing, students discussed their ideas for papers. In the next conference, students brought their first drafts and discussed them with the leader. She planned class lessons based on the students' needs that were shown in the conferences. She found this method to be more effective for the teacher and more effective for the students.

Other forms of conferencing include collaborative conferencing, small group conferencing, third person conferencing, group research, journaling and so on.

B. A Small Group Conferencing

In this group conferencing, the teacher meets students in groups of three or ten. Often the teacher divides the group according to their needs or writing weaknesses. The writing process may focus on the introduction, modeling or reinforcement on a specific writing skill. Small group conferencing takes less time and offers students more feedback than regular classes. Group dynamics sometimes help students speak up and find out their writing problems.

C. Peer Conferencing

In peer conferencing students independently listen and give feedback to their fellow student-writers. Using what they have learned in the teacher-student individual conferences, the peer will comment on various pre-determined aspects of writing. In peer conferences, students need to know how to maintain a helpful and supportive relationship. Since collaboration among student writers does not occur spontaneously, teachers need to take time to model good responses and set some ground rules such as the following:

1. *Be positive.* Respond to what the writer is trying to say and what the writer does well.
2. *Be helpful.* Do your best to make comments that will be useful to the writer.
3. *Be specific.* Talk about specific words, phrases, or paragraphs.

The tone of the response should be positive. It should emphasize what is going well and how to make things even better. Peer conferencing needs to be in a quiet area away from others.

Conferencing takes place every time teachers and students meet to give requested and teacher-initiated feedback; to respond to revisions, and to provide support for final editing. While the students are writing independently, the teacher is able to conference with an individual student of a group about their writing (cited from http://www.Webpagesforteachers.com/thewritersource/conferencing.htm).

D. Tutoring

This is third-person conferencing. In tutoring, the teacher meets students in groups of three to ten. It looks like a small group conferencing. It takes place in writing class when students ask their tutor to check or edit

their papers. Sometimes, in writing class before editing their papers, the students can ask former teachers or peers they trust to check their papers. In the writing center setting, students bring their papers to tutors to discuss. Tutors are instructed first to deal with content before they deal with form, even though most students will ask questions, then to check their grammar. According to Harris (1986) tutorial instruction differs from traditional classroom learning. In tutoring, it introduces a middle person (tutor) between student and teacher.

E. Collaborative technique

In collaborative counseling, the teacher works individually with students in developing their papers. The students work together to write a previously agreed text. They read the text construction and compose on the board in front of the class. In class writing, the students can consult each other and co-construct texts while the teacher moves around listening to their comments, providing feedback, lexical items, the validity of an argument, the order of presentation of the information, organizational aspects in writing, and so on. The teacher keeps track of their progress and works out a record of most frequent questions, doubts and inaccuracies for a future error analysis session.

F. Text topic or group research

The writing teacher divides the students into groups. Each student has responsibility for different aspects of the information gathering stage on a certain topic. Then they pool their results and work together to plan a text that may be collective or individual. Students exchange their first draft of a text and point out changes which are needed to help the reader, for example, better organization, paragraphing, sentence variety, vocabulary, choices, etc. They can act as each other's editors spotting vocabulary repetition, grammatical infelicities, spelling mistakes and so on, for the purpose of specific analysis aspects. The teacher displays on an overhead projector one by one the whole class examination of texts produced by the students with names removed. (These could also be photocopied). The aspects checked can be the adequacy to content, development ideas, text structure, cohesion or grammar.

G. Journaling

In journaling, teachers and students carry on "written conversation" with one another and might continue for any length of time during the course (Ommagio 1986:254) Teachers talk with students by responding to their journal entries. Some writing teachers ask their students to focus their journal on development of essay topics and on writing problems.

Journaling allows the teacher and student to enter into dialogue. Moreover, students can have essential control over what they wish to discuss. For example, the teacher can ask the students to make a dialogue journals using email. It shows effective interactive between student and teacher. For teachers, this technique does not demand as much of their time as conferencing does. It has many of the drawbacks of written communication, including long lead times question and response.

Interactive writing becomes communicative and purposeful at the same time, since it enables the students to permanently challenge their current language practices and gain the most from the experience.

IMPLEMENTATION

Teaching writing using conferencing techniques can be formal or informal and can be conducted in a special writing task. The teacher of writing can use open-ended questions and allow plenty of time for students to think before they answer. The purpose is to get them to tell the teacher their thinking. It is important to ask questions that lead the students to discover what they have to say and want to communicate; and that encourage them to talk about their work.

The teacher needs to develop a list of questions for her/his first conference, which are open-ended and allow the student to do the questioning once the conference begins. While the teacher poses the first questions, she may ask students to add questions they may have about the subject she teaches or asks them to give specific answers about why they are feeling uncomfortable with the course. For example if you teach American literature, the first questions might be:

1. What is your main purpose or goal for being in the literature class? (Mention more than one if you like)
2. Why are you required to take literature class?
3. What do you expect to take away from this class?

4.   As a teacher, what can I do to help you realize your goals for this class?

5.   As a student, what can you do to achieve your goals?

6.   Are you willing to do what it takes to realize your goals?

At first, those questions may not seem like American literature questions, but they open the way for students to express their frustration with the subject matter, or their excitement of the subject matter. However, the teacher should remember that conferencing takes many directions and be time consuming, so as the instructor, the teacher must be prepared so that he can make use of the time efficiently.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF CONFERENCING TECHNIQUE

Conferencing techniques have merits for the students who learn English. It is one on one conferencing, whether it is student - teacher or third party conferencing. The students who have three or more conferences in a term not only improve their writing ability, but also significantly improve their listening and speaking skills (Brender 1993).

In face-to-face conferencing, teachers can often see whether students understand what they are saying by reading their faces, and can respond accordingly. Moreover, teachers can also learn to be more sensitive to their students by carefully paying attention not only to what they say but also how they say it. This face-to-face conferencing can be used as one of effective ways for both of teaching writing and listening.

Conferencing allows students to ask questions which they may not ask in front of the rest of the students. It also allows one-to-one learning that increases the student's belief in her/himself. Teachers can listen to what is said; students can listen to what is said; the teacher has a chance to respond to what isn't said, and students have a chance to give feedback to the teacher. Teaching any subject is a matter of learning to move ahead one- step at a time; conferencing helps students see one step at a time.

Fritts (1977) said the conferencing technique significantly showed better writing achievement for a group of students who had attended 15-minute conferences each week for thirteen weeks as compared to a control group.

Conferencing involves instructions directly so that the teachers can talk and respond to students at all stages of their writing about essential

elements of the process rather than the relatively superficial problems. The teacher or tutor should be aware of the special needs of the students. One problem that often happens in conferencing is that teachers and tutors talk down to their students. Other problems in which students are at a disadvantage in one-on one discussions include types of questions asked, the length of questions, turn-taking, and the proportion of time each speaks per turn, ways of negotiating meanings, and ways of wielding power. In this case teachers and tutors need to listen to students more attentively and become more adept at a certain kind of listening and give a non-judgmental setting where there is no punishment for trying out new ideas.

CONCLUSION

One way of teaching academic writing is through conferencing. It constitutes interaction strategy of teaching writing and can involve discourse approach following a task-based framework aiming to encourage classroom interaction. To gain a good result of students' academic writing, the students must know about the audience and purposes. Good writing can develop the symbolic interplay between writer, text and reader.

To promote interactivity of writing- teacher can implement conferencing techniques such as small group conferencing, peer conferencing, tutoring, collaborative techniques, text topic and journaling. Conferencing techniques may give advantages for students with some reasons, such as:

1. Conferencing gives direct feedback to a student. It is a method of reducing student frustration and allowing students to improve their work before a final assessment of their study.
2. Conferencing is one of the techniques for teaching writing that is not a monologue but a dialogue between the student and the teacher.
3. Conferencing improves class meetings: students become interactive with techniques used in class and see the teacher as an individual committed to her/his success.

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