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Building Vocabulary and Improving Writing while Developing a Tourist Brochure

Teachers need effective and efficient ways to help students improve their writing and build their vocabulary. My teaching experience, augmented by research, suggests that the best way to help students do these things is not through manipulative or controlled writing exercises, but rather by paying attention to the processes that contribute to a finished piece of writing. Too often, however, teachers fail to allow students sufficient time for these processes, particularly during the important pre-writing stage when students interact with their teacher and peers to generate ideas and determine their topic, purpose, audience, and organizational scheme. This stage of the writing process also provides opportunities for building vocabulary.

Building vocabulary by writing a tourist brochure

Writing, and the vocabulary building that goes with it, is a more complex process than merely putting words on a page. In the process of acquiring vocabulary, for example, students need to understand not just what individual words mean but also which combinations of these words in sentences or paragraphs convey a meaningful message to the reader and how the audience and the writer's purpose determine appropriate word choices. Students learn this throughout the three stages of writing: pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing (Hedge 1993). Littlewood (1994) points out that vocabulary learning is best concentrated during the pre-writing stage, during which students explore ideas, determine their topic, purpose, and audience, and organize their ideas.

This article describes how students asked to produce a tourist brochure on resorts in their country can build vocabulary and improve their writing. Obviously, the students could do other writing activities to strengthen their vocabulary and their writing skills, but giving them the opportunity to create a tourist brochure exposes them to a style of writing that relate

to their lives and provides them with an opportunity to be creative. This article discusses how to introduce writing lessons associated with tourist brochures and how to help students plan, write, evaluate, and display their brochures.

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Introduction: Viewing videos

Stempleski and Tomalin (2001) point out that videos can form the basis for an enormous range of dynamic and motivating classroom activities. So, as the lead-in to the brochure-writing project, the teacher could show a video-taped travel program focusing on descriptions of places and tourist areas. This kind of program is useful for introducing and practicing a wide range of vocabulary words and expressions, and it increases students' exposure to vocabulary in different contexts. Viewing a video makes the lesson lively, attractive, and enjoyable; it provides students with an exciting change to the daily classroom routine, increases their interest in the brochure-writing project, and motivates them to participate actively in it.

At this stage, the teacher also can introduce vocabulary notebooks in which students take note of new vocabulary items, locate their meaning, discuss the appropriateness of the words used in a specific context, and observe how different kinds of expressions can be used in descriptive writing. Keeping such a notebook can also support students' dictionary work, thereby providing a useful resource they can use to develop new strategies in vocabulary acquisition, strengthen existing ones, increase the number of words they understand, and make the students less dependent on the teacher to supply the appro-

priate words (Hedge 2000; Harmer 1994; Wallace 1982).

Planning the brochure: Generating ideas

The planning stage of the brochure can best be done through group work. This includes group discussion of various resort-area brochures distributed to the students. Group work helps the students eliminate any writing block they may have, develop and shape their ideas, and work out the vocabulary they may need for their brochures. Byrne (1993) and White and Arndt (1991) have suggested that the use of authentic material with groups provides an opportunity for learners to apply their thinking skills to writing, to discover ideas for their writing, and to focus on vocabulary they might need for their project. I have found that visuals, such as films and brochures, also arouse the students' interest, help them focus on a task, and encourage considerable discussion and genuine communication. More important, such material exposes students to real-world language. Gairns and Redman (1986) reinforce my observations, finding that visual material is particularly useful for teaching vocabulary and lends itself easily to various types of student interactions.

Writing the brochure

After discussing the plan for their tourist brochures in groups and deciding on the overall format and presentation, the necessary text (descriptions of tourist attractions), artistic composition, and appropriate vocabulary to be included, the students begin to write. As they work on their drafts, the students are encouraged to use thesauruses and to recall and recycle new words from their vocabulary notebooks. The "expanding rehearsal," which is suggested by Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) as an efficient recycling method, proposes that learners should review new material soon after the initial meeting and then at gradually increasing intervals. Wallace (1982) and Gairns and Redman (1986) also find "recycling" activities, along with rote learning, to be useful in helping students store and memorize vocabulary. They note that many learners derive a strong sense of progress and achievement from this type of activity.

The group writing stage provides students the freedom to create their own expressions

for their brochure and is a good context for generating ideas and vocabulary and for identifying sources of information. In a group, one person's idea stimulates ideas from other students. This stage also results in considerable communicative activity in the form of making suggestions, agreeing and disagreeing on viewpoints, and negotiation. Harmer (1994) and Raimes (1983) point out that group work increases student talking time, opportunities to use the target language to communicate with one other, and cooperation among students. Hedge (1993) emphasizes that collaborative writing in the classroom generates discussions and activities that encourage an effective process of writing. I have observed that collaborative writing enables weaker students to experience successful writing and to feel they have contributed some effort to the group's work. Besides these benefits, collaborative writing provides an immediate audience, makes writing for the students an achievable task, and provides students with immediate feedback on what they write.

Getting feedback and rewriting

After groups have produced their drafts, the next step is to have groups read each other's brochures and respond to and evaluate them. At this stage, the writers and readers are encouraged to discuss their drafts and to give each other feedback on organization, development of ideas, and the language used. The writers answer questions or ask for clarification of the readers' comments. This interactive activity is versatile with regard to focus and implementation along the process writing continuum, which is really a cycle of decisions on what to write, how to write it, and how to improve what has been written. Although we are used to thinking of the composing process as linear, moving from the pre-writing to drafting to revising, we now know that the process is recursive and interactive.

Throughout this process, the teacher is not the only responder or evaluator; the students are also involved in responding to the written work of their classmates. This is where the *Readers' Response Questions* come in (see the Appendix); these questions help guide the students' responses to the efforts of their classmates.

These activities of responding and evaluating the students' products not only promote critical awareness; they also make the writing activity essentially learner-centered and interactive. The peer-evaluation and teacher-student conferencing activities that take place as each group presents its brochure to the class encourage and reinforce the successful features of each brochure and provide advice and help so that the drafts can be improved.

Students who are given the time for the process to work, along with appropriate feedback from the readers—the teacher and other students—discover new ideas, new ways to write, and new words as they plan, write a first draft, and revise what they have written for a second draft. This interactive process is considered an important technique in developing the language skills because, as Raimes (1983) has pointed out, responding to students' writing is very much a part of teaching writing because it improves the students' writing and gives encouragement, which is an important part of teaching (Edge 1993; Norrish 1983), especially for the weaker students. Davies and Pearse (2000) point out that in situations where opportunities to use language and receive feedback outside the classroom are limited, the kind of classroom review and remedial work provided by this interactive process becomes vital. With the interactive process, each group not only writes but also reads the writing of others, and in doing so, the students develop critical skill—a skill that each of them needs to apply to their own work to become effective writers.

In the post-writing stage, further interaction between the teacher and the students helps students discover the strengths and weaknesses of their final drafts, or end products, and helps students learn to correct grammatical errors themselves rather than blindly reproducing what the teacher has corrected for them. In other words, the teacher's response to students' writing becomes a genuine communication between teacher and student, not one in which the teacher does little more than identify and correct errors.

Displaying the brochures

When they are finished, the students' tourist brochures can be displayed on school bul-

letin boards or other areas. Local tourist information offices could also be asked to display the students' work. Possibly, the brochures could be reproduced in school publications.

If the students know at the beginning of the project that their work might be displayed or published in certain venues, they will have a clear purpose for the writing and will develop a sense of audience, and they will be energized and motivated to work hard to improve their writing.

Conclusion

Having students write a tourist brochure as a project offers important benefits. First, it provides the students with an opportunity to validate knowledge they acquire outside the school, such as knowledge of the tourist sights and activities in their own community or country. Second, this activity makes the students aware of the need to acquire the English vocabulary and writing skill required for career purposes (perhaps a career in the tourism industry); that is, students become more conscious of English as a tool they might need for their future jobs or studies. Third, creating a brochure provides a context that allows students to be creative in their writing at the same time that they build vocabulary and use words and expressions they normally employ for a different purpose and audience. As Hedge (1993) points out, where writing is concerned, without a context it is difficult to know what to put in, what to omit, and just how formal the writing and vocabulary should be. Providing the students with the task of preparing a tourist brochure gives them a context, a real-world purpose for writing, and strong motivation to find the words and develop the writing skills that will serve their needs.

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1. What is the writer's purpose?

2. Is the writer's message conveyed effectively? Why or why not?

3. Is the overall tone appropriate for the topic and the audience?

4. Did the writer include all the information needed to convey the intended message?

5. Are the ideas well developed?

6. Is the layout/format appropriate for the purpose and audience?

7. Are the paragraphs well-structured (into main and subordinate themes)?

8. Are the ideas presented in a logical sequence?

9. Is the grammar accurate?

10. Is there variety in the vocabulary used?

11. Are conventions of spelling and punctuation followed?

(adapted from Rizzardi 1989)