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A Rationale and Set of Activities For a Language in Education Approach To Persuasive Writing

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The purpose of teaching persuasive writing is to help students learn to elaborate meaning and construct their own written arguments, not simply to evaluate whether they have mastered certain recognizable or conventional rhetorical forms. The framework presented here shares Mohan and Early's (1987) point of view: "It is not a method. Rather, it is a perspective on learning and communication."

There are six key steps in developing activities for a language in education approach to persuasive writing. These include (a) talking to activate past experience and prior knowledge, (b) connecting experience to purpose through focused writing, (c) constructing an argument, (d) supporting an argument, (e) extending an argument, and (f) examining and evaluating alternatives.

Talking to Activate Past Experience and Prior Knowledge

A theoretical basis supporting the role of prior knowledge and past experience in text processing has been developed in schema theory (Rummelhart, 1980; Rummelhart & Ortony, 1977; Schank & Abelson, 1977). Adams and Collins (1979) put the issue directly: "Schema theory provides a way of integrating our understanding of text with our understanding of the world in general" (p. 21).

Carrell (1983a, 1983b) has applied schema theory's concept of prior knowledge to text processing in ESL. Second language research has also pointed out the importance of the interactive features of talk in ESL classes (Long, 1981; Porter, 1983; Long & Porter, 1985; Rulon & McCreary, 1986). Duff (1986) advocates the development and use of tasks that "require learners to make use of world knowledge and previous experience, both linguistic and non-linguistic" (p. 171). Such research provides a rationale for the first element in the lan-

guage in education framework. Possible classroom activities which can help ESL writers activate past experience and prior knowledge are listed below.

1. Tell your partner about a conversation you had with a friend, classmate, or family member in which you disagreed with what that person was saying about some idea, issue, topic, or plan.
2. Tell your partner about a discussion in one of your classes in which different ideas or opinions were expressed on some issue or topic.
3. Tell your partner about a conversation you heard outside of school in which different ideas or opinions were expressed on some issue or topic.
4. Tell your partner about something you read in a newspaper or magazine in which a person expressed his or her point of view on a subject.
5. Tell your partner about something you read in a book or textbook in which clearly different ideas were expressed on an issue.
6. Tell your partner about something you saw on TV or heard on radio in which people expressed different points of view on a topic or issue.
7. Tell your partner about some issue you care a great deal about. Explain why other people should agree with your position on this issue.

Connecting Experience to Purpose Through Focused Writing in Order to Generate a Position on a Topic

The second step in the language in education framework builds upon the first. Students explore, connect, and extend the ideas generated during the exercises listed above in focused writing practice. Widdowson (1983) provides a rationale for focused writing activities by pointing out writing's capacity to generate the thinking process:

> Writing can change the character of the information the writer wishes to convey. For although he may start with a fairly clear idea of what he wishes to say, the very interactive process he enacts continually provides him with a different point of view which may yield insights and cognitive connections which he would not have otherwise perceived. The interaction not only facilitates the conveyance of information but also generates the thinking process. So it is that in writing one so frequently arrives at a destination not originally envisaged, by a process not planned for in the original itinerary. (p. 41)

The following sequence of activities is one possible way for implementing focused writing:

1. Choose a topic, issue, policy, or event you know something about and that is important to you.

2. Write for 10 minutes about your ideas, opinions, feelings, previous experience, or personal knowledge of that topic.
3. Without reading what you have written, explain to your partner what you were trying to say. Also, tell your partner what you would have said if you had had more time to write. Then, ask your partner if there are any relevant or important aspects of the topic that you did not mention.
4. After discussing your focused writing with your partner, re-read what you have written and continue writing for 10 more minutes.
5. Write a short letter to the editor expressing your opinion on this issue. Read the letter to your partner. Ask your partner to respond. Then, ask your partner to point out any important points you forgot to mention in your letter.
6. Write a dialogue or conversation between you and a friend or relative who disagrees with you on this issue. Read the dialogue with your partner and continue the discussion.
7. Write a short letter to the editor which responds to yours and criticizes the points you made in your letter. Ask your partner to respond once more to what you have written. Again, ask your partner to point out anything you neglected to mention in your criticism of your own position.
8. Summarize your position on this topic in a sentence or two.
9. Summarize the opposite point of view in a sentence or two.

Constructing an Argument

Two essential parts of constructing an argument in the present framework help connect persuasion to students' own language: (a) interpretation and (b) reflection. These two components can be related in argumentation by developing cases, that is, particular examples or stories which illustrate important aspects or issues in students' persuasive papers.

A case can be true, disguised, or fictitious. Cases provide students with a way to describe, account for, and interpret an actual situation or condition. Cases are a recognized structure in journalism, business, medicine, psychology, sociology, and many other academic fields. Developing cases gives student writers practice in analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, this process of analysis and reasoning remains entirely under the students' management and control. Ferreira (1987) states that critical thinking and reflection about the meaning of cases can be done by individuals or groups of students to define, clarify, and analyze problems.

Classroom activities designed to help students construct an argument using cases follow.

1. Think about a personal experience that is relevant to your topic. Describe one specific event from your experience that led to a later reflection. Describe that later reflection and discuss its meaning. Dis-

cuss how this reflection led to subsequent action.

2. Find a particular case or example which would help a reader understand the general issue you are discussing. Present that case in terms of description, sequence, choice, and meaning.

3. Find an example of a particular person's story that illustrates the issues involved in your topic. Tell this story in terms of details, feelings, summary, meaning.

4. Find some analogy which shows that what happens in one case may occur in another situation, too. Compare these two situations, or compare a present case to some historical example.

5. Show how a present case is different from a previous example or case. Give reasons stating why you think a prior or historical example related to your topic is unlikely to occur again.

6. Show cause and effect about some aspect or feature of your argument. Put this cause and effect into "if —› then" statements.

7. Discuss how some things seem to go together, even if you cannot say for certain that one causes the other. (One example of this might be the way crime is associated with poverty.)

After students have completed these activities, they should have a clear position on their topic; and they should be growing cognizant of the fact that an equally logical but opposing point of view exists.

Supporting an Argument

Supporting an argument is more than retrieving and transmitting information. Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986) discuss the role of information in writing: "We don't have students shuttling information from texts to teachers and back again, but...between their understanding of what they have read and their understanding of what they must say to us about what they have read" (p. 4).

In the present framework, information serves an intermediary role. It is a way for students to connect what they know to what they want to say about a topic. Students address the essential question of what they want to say as writers by compiling questions various kinds of readers might ask about their topic. These groups include (a) people who are neutral or unconvinced about the students' positions on the topics, (b) people who disagree with the students' positions, (c) people who know a great deal about or have had a lot of experience with issues in the students' topics, and (4) people who do not know very much about these issues. The lists of questions students compile dictate the information they need to find to support an argument. The following activities help students compile the questions and find support for their arguments.

1. List questions a neutral or unconvinced person might ask about your argument. Try to answer them. Ask your partner or group members to think of any such questions.

2. List questions a person who disagrees with your position might ask. Try to answer these questions. Ask your partner or group members to think of any such questions.

3. Interview two classmates and two native speakers to find out what they would expect to read about in a paper on the topic you have chosen.

4. Find and read two articles related to your topic that provide you with background information on the topic.

5. Find out the position of an expert or recognized authority on your topic. Try to find another expert who disagrees with him or her.

6. Gather statistical information and references about the topic you feel are impressive.

7. Gather evidence to support your position from two sources of information that do not come from the library. (These might include observation, surveys, interviews, lectures, pamphlets, or meetings.)

Extending an Argument

Ethnographic writing provides techniques of analysis that help ESL writers extend their arguments. Both the ethnographer and the student writer must learn to deal with the most specific, concrete human events as well as the most general. Spradley (1980) lists six levels of ethnographic writing.

1. *Specific incident statements.* These are attempts to describe behaviors and events. In one example from his ethnographic writing, Spradley describes a waitress working in a particular section of a specific bar on a Friday night.

2. *Specific statements about a cultural domain.* These are taxonomies or classifications of terms from particular cultural scenes. Spradley lists the ways customers ask for the waitress (teasing, hustling, hassling, or some other speech act). These descriptive taxonomies capture a great deal of information that is known to people in that domain.

3. *General statements about a specific cultural scene.* At this level, important themes are identified and developed. Spradley discusses the particular bar in his study as both a place of business and a ceremonial center. While these statements appear to be general, they do represent a level of abstraction.

4. *General statements about a society or cultural group.* These place particular cultural scenes within the context of a larger society. Spradley makes comments about the role of women in American society based upon his observations at the bar. He comments that the role of women at the bar is an extension of their role at home—serving men.

5. *Cross-cultural statements.* This level may frequently be highly appropriate for ESL writing. Different societies or aspects of different societies can be compared based on student themes or analyses at previous levels.

6. *Universal statements.* These are attempts to make generalizations which are relevant to all humans or their cultures. Here Spradley states that all societies have created identities or roles for males and females.

Possible classroom activities which help students to extend their written arguments include the following.

1. Describe specific events or behaviors which are relevant to your topic. Set these descriptions at specific times and in real places.
2. Make a classification of terms about important aspects of your topic.
3. Based upon your descriptions and classifications, identify and state themes you will write about in your paper.
4. Discuss what you think these themes say about society as a whole.
5. Make comparisons between societies based on your analyses.
6. State the theme in a way which makes it relevant to all human beings. Or describe some event, activity, or behavior mentioned in your paper as a cyclical or recurring phenomenon, that is, as something which is repeated every day in all parts of the world.

Examining and Evaluating Alternatives

Mohan (1986) makes evaluation a cornerstone of his language and content framework and discusses evaluation as a thinking process. In fact, students write persuasively in order to make written evaluations. The importance of evaluation in persuasive writing should be particularly stressed when teaching ESL students from educational backgrounds that do not emphasize the role of original analysis and critical thinking in education.

In academic writing in American educational contexts, students need to recommend and develop alternatives, draw conclusions, form positions, weigh evidence, apply knowledge, and make refutations. In ESL writing classes, students need many opportunities to use these thinking processes as well as support for making these processes an integral part of their persuasive writing. The following activities provide such opportunities.

1. List the specific policies, programs, alternatives, plans, or proposals you are advocating.
2. Show how and why the proposed recommendations, policies, or solution of a person who disagrees with your position will not work. State this in terms of problem, alternatives, reasons, and conclusion.
3. Cite legitimate limitations to your own proposals or recommendations.

The preceding sets of activities are intended to be guidelines. ESL teachers should revise and adapt the activities to meet the particular needs of their second language learners. The sequences of activities outlined in this paper are only starting points; they are practical ideas to help teachers develop their own materials. They are not definitive solutions applicable to all teaching situations. However, the language in education framework provides a viable way for teachers to help ESL writers connect persuasion to their own lives and language. And the approach enables L2 students to extend that language into the discourse of academic communities. ■

Ed. Note. For more on ethnographic writing and the use of cases in writing, see Ethnographic Writing: A Model for Second Language Composition Instruction, *p. 43.*

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