Proposing Opinion Writing as a Practice of Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

While practicing freehand writing activities in an EFL class, some learners feel uncomfortable because they cannot simplify the subject matter or organize a good beginning. In elementary classes, if the learners are studying something that is related to the in-class task, their work becomes easier. Other than modeling the activity to the learners, if the instructor asks them to write their personal opinion after reading or listening to a piece of literature, then the aforementioned trouble that some of the learners are facing can be solved. I have experience using this method in my classes and have received a satisfactory result. This paper aims to share my experiences and the methodology used to conduct the activity.

INTRODUCTION

In EFL classrooms, freehand writing followed by critical thinking activities is a common practice. Learners are asked to write about different issues so that they may acquire not only the ability to respond accurately on different occasions, but also to nourish the argumentative, descriptive, narrative, comparative, contrastive, and analytical competence. In advanced level EFL classes, opinion writing can be offered and practiced in addition to various activities. In my class at Stamford University Bangladesh, this activity has turned out to be a very effective exercise.

ACADEMIC WRITING AND CRITICAL THINKING

For ELT experts, responding through writing activities are considered to be communicative and productive in skill building. Practicing any skill is not merely imitating or copying, rather it suggests interacting and reacting fairly and properly according to the demands of the situation. However, for any kind of organized writing, planning or prewriting is a prerequisite. Naturally, planning requires critical thinking. At least 44% (often even up to 60%-65%) of any academic course work depends on writing that covers class work, written tests, assignments, projects, and dissertations. Such an extensive activity occasionally demands identification and challenges assumptions. Students must explore alternative ways of thinking and acting. In order to integrate information, they have to be effectively engaged and reach a tentative solution or a justifying argument by the end of the course. According to Hughes (1989), “an analysis of examination questions in the university revealed that students were required to describe, explain, compare and contrast, and argue for and against a case” (p. 81).
Therefore, during learners’ academic years, they repeatedly need to deal with problems, questions, and issues. They need to be able to carry on writing as a process of doing and thinking. Though a learner may be helped by his text and class lecture notes, responding accurately, preparing a written assignment, arranging sources, as well as presenting their individualistic view or personal comments on a subject matter, all depend on his or her own skill. Academic writing and critical thinking are not so apart from each other; they are both collaborative processes. To be even more accurate, academic writing insists on the learners thinking critically. Unfortunately, for many EFL learners and instructors, writing exercises are nothing more than extensive grammar exercises. This is due to the fact that the learners are asked to write about selected issues they rarely face in their practical lives. While studying a written document in an EFL course, grammar problems are extensively considered, whereas, in other academic courses, grammatical mistakes can often be overlooked due to a sympathetic attitude. If learners repeatedly obtain poor grades in writing, both learning and practicing writing as a skill may gradually become for them one of the most frustrating and demotivating part of learning a language (Nunan, 2008). In order to help the learners cope with any writing assignment and to make writing an interesting task, the instructor’s role will be to:

- Design critical thinking tasks
- Treat writing as a process
- Provide a supportive, open classroom
- Follow the Expert Academic Model (i.e., understanding the problems, expressing the problem, and finding suitable solutions to the problem)
- Choose writing materials from text of academic and nonacademic issues.

**OPINION WRITING AND CRITICAL THINKING**

Writing opinions can mean critical writing because the learners have to undergo a process of thinking. For different topics, the learners have to act in different ways. Some topics demand the understanding of particular problems with their coinciding umbrella issues; for example, the illegal immigrants living in various countries versus the overall immigration problem in the country. Some problems ensure direct focus on cause and effect, while others share previous experiences in order to predict the probable happenings. In doing this job successfully, the learners must possess the vocabulary to respond accordingly in a given field. For example, the learners need to be able to understand business and banking terminology if they work with business reports. They should know journalism jargon if they work with news reporters. This will minimize confusion. Yet, the word mix-ups happen. Sometimes it happens because the same word may convey different meanings, given the occasion. The following are some real-life headlines which can easily be confused.

- “Ex lawmaker Held” (“Held” means “arrested”)
- “Conference on Sociolinguistics held” (“Held” means “happened or observed”)
  
  or
  
- “Contra banded medicine worth $30,000 discovered at ZIA International Airport (Dhaka, Bangladesh) (“Discovered” means “arrested and seized”)
- “Fossil discovered at Siberian pit” (“Discovered” means “found”)
Writing opinions require the creation of coherent statements on any topic. While writing them, one must also have the proper balance of ideas with advancement of thought and use effective transitional words or markers, correct grammar, and a conclusion.

**WHY OPINION WRITING**

In my experience with EFL learners at the University of Bangladesh, I have found that reflective tasks (written or spoken) often puzzle students especially when they do not have any model written documents. According to Leki (1992), “In typical writing classes, the teacher assigns a topic, suggests a range of topics, or at least establishes a deadline date for a more or less final draft of a piece of writing” (p. 19). Bangladeshi students have English Language as one of the compulsory subjects. However, only a few students practice free writing or creative writing before they come to universities. In general, most of their academic writing is based on memorization. At the initial period (even the tertiary level), EFL instructors need to facilitate content matter by using supporting materials. I turned to newspapers in quest of suitable topics for my students. From my observation, I found that if the learners get an opportunity to find or choose topics for their writing (even from a limited option like a single newspaper), their activity level is livelier. Abarbanel, Kol, and Schcolnik (2006) stated that “Since learning is an active process of knowledge construction, the learning environment should not impart knowledge but rather support the learners’ construction of knowledge. It follows that learners’ should be exposed to materials, experiences, and situations from which they can immediately build their own knowledge” (p. 13). To recreate this kind of activity, instructors need to bring newspapers in the class and let the students deal with their personal interests.

In writing classes, learners must equally be given the opportunity to help them develop expertise and confidence in dealing with subject matter beyond writing based on personal histories, experiences, and tastes. Such assignments would not necessarily exclude personal opinion. Both those who emphasize personal response topics in writing assignments and those who favor English for especial purposes approach hope to develop students’ ability to marshal information on a topic, analyze it, and synthesize it for the students’ own purposes” (Leki, 1992). For opinion writing, scope serves other purposes, too.

**Opinion Writing Provides Scope for Motivating Students**

Opinion writing materials are chosen and taken preferably from recent global and local issues so that students may participate in the discussion by sharing, comparing or challenging their acquired knowledge about the topic. If a student is not informed already about the text being covered in class, those who do know it may have the opportunity to update him or her with the new information. My experience over the years shows that a well chosen topic for opinion writing can work as a motivating warm up activity.

**Linking the Class to the World**

I believe that many minds work better than one. Actually, this idea influences me to introduce the activity of opinion writing in the EFL classroom. Besides, writing opinions helps the learners not to become stuck in one topic throughout a ninety minute class. For example, the first phase of the class may be focused on unrest in the Middle East when the class can easily be
redirected to concentrate on the upcoming World Cup Cricket Final Tournament. If the first phase of the class hour deals with a contemporary global issue, remaining tasks may be shifted to ‘other’ subject matters like entertainment or sports. Naturally, task variations and topics chosen need to adhere to learners’ interest for best results.

Making Confident Learners

The goal of classroom activities and presentations is not only achieving a good score on the examination, but also using personal knowledge and beliefs to face real-life situations. While writing their opinion, the learners are not only refreshed by a wide range of subjects, but also unknowingly improve their speaking and listening skills. In order to successfully implement this style of learning as a part of their daily routine, the learners must listen, digest, respond and comprehend. The whole process must have active participation of speakers and listeners.

Share Viewpoints on Different Social Classes

A classroom is a good social gathering. Therefore, good feedback regarding a particular topic can be obtained from the varied social classes of students.

People enjoy debates. Abarbanel et al. (2006) argue that “Since dialogue, discussion, and interchange affect learning, teachers should allow for activities requiring communication and exchange of ideas” (p. 13). Therefore, a good debate arises when the whole class concentrates their views toward a particular idea or thought. Especially topics about politics, new theories, or new laws, people of different social classes react differently on the basis of their views, ways of thinking, social alertness, sense of belongingness in an especial social class, etc. These activities involve the learners by having them speak out, take notes, write, and motivate.

Opinion Writing Challenges the Learners

For freshmen, writing may not be an easy task. Most of the learners do not understand where they should start writing and with what information. Some freshmen find it difficult to speak openly during an oral presentation before a small audience, even though they are fully prepared. On the other hand, there are some students who are very poor in listening. For all types of learners, opinion writing may be more challenging because it needs to be understandable for the audience. They must be able to understand what they are listening to or reading. In order to reach all types of learners, opinion writing should use at least two or three of the following sets of literacy skills:

- Listening and reading
- Listening, speaking, and discussion
- Writing
- Reading and listening

Through opinion writing, our every day practices and problems may emerge in the discussion. For example, while practicing writing opinions, a well-chosen topic may help learners become conscious of global concerns (e.g., using animals for chemical testing, preservatives in food items, HIV, and Bird flu), thereby alerting them to ever more complex social issues that silently affect both our private and social life. Thus, through opinion writing,
the learners get a chance to practice quick structured thinking through the process of writing. The process begins with brainstorming, then planning, drafting and, finally, revising. It helps learners express their views and present effective and suitable arguments or counter arguments in an organized way which lessens the chances of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It also helps learners to focus directly on the subject matter in speaking, as well as writing.

Materials

In writing opinion, initial practices may be based on contemporary or largely analyzed issues. For such an activity, classroom practice should be on recent and popular issues or incidents that the learners have heard before. Practice shows that opinion writing may work as a listening practice activity, as well as an ice breaking activity. Daily news headlines of any international news agency written in English can be used. For variation, any literature text may be chosen.

FORM AND LANGUAGE

An academic writing always has to follow certain rules but above all, it must have a form. Generally, a written opinion has sections like an appropriate headline, findings, a conclusion and a recommendation if any. A little variation of the 3-7-7-3 model works best here. The 3-7-7-3 model of arrangement is a four paragraph essay entailing three sentences in the introduction, seven in the first paragraph of the body, seven in the second, and the conclusion is made up of three sentences. However, I usually ask my students to follow 4-7-7-3 model (see also http://www.writefix.com/argument/fivesteps.htm).

Headlines must be precise and to the point. They use the first sentence of the introductory paragraph. A writer may include his or her points of view, explanation of arguments in the body. This part is rather comprehensive. Here, they are to be persuasive to the readers with strong supports and rebuttals. Naturally, the concluding part requires a closing idea with a convincing claim whereas the recommendation is for fair judgment and suitable suggestions. It is expected that the language of a written opinion will be formal. Contracted forms of any grammar words (verb ‘to be’ and ‘modal verbs’) and abbreviations are discouraged. As a class activity, I prefer to deal with exercises like opinion writing as a group activity and for the first task I usually spend at least three sessions.

CLASS PRACTICE

Important considerations in opinion writing are as follows:

- Focusing skill (sentence pattern, transitional words, uses of certain phrases, etc.)
- Providing additional-supplementary materials
- Simplifying question/task (communicative as much as possible)
- Method, style, and form of language presentation
- Evaluation (satisfactory output)
Session 1

The first task of opinion writing is to offer reading passages to skim through or observe a picture with caption. Next, work generally goes to a thought provoking or thought generating activity encompassing brainstorming with new vocabulary. I usually select few words from the text and let the learners find out their synonyms, antonyms, and other forms through matching, meaning guessing, and fill in the gaps or multiple choice activities. The learners are then asked to observe the headline or the title of the sample text. Each single word along with grammar words must be considered. For example, if the title of the text is like “New Laws Against Forced Marriages,” the key idea is “stopping forced marriage through law.” The word “new” gives the reader direction of thought. Sometimes the learners need help in ascertaining the headline’s hidden meaning. To scaffold their learning, learners are asked to scan the text and mark the points they want to talk about. They are also instructed to write side notes next to each point marked. Should this activity present difficulties to them, I ask anticipated questions to help them realize what the topic proposes while facilitating their thinking process and motivating them to become actively involved in class activities. Anticipated questions based on “wh” words serve here well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part A</th>
<th>Part B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● What happened here?</td>
<td>● What do you think about the matter/incident?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What is the subject matter of the picture/write up?</td>
<td>● What are the other things related with the fact/incident?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Who are involved in this situation? How? etc.</td>
<td>● Do you think what has happened is right why/why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Why and where do such things happen?</td>
<td>● Have you ever heard about similar kind of things/happening? Compare that experience with the present one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● When did it happen?</td>
<td>● How do people generally think about this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Where did it happen?</td>
<td>● Do you think this problem might be solved?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At first, the learners’ concentration is directed to the first set of questions. I invite answers from at least five students to find out how much they know about the topic. Next, the attention of the class goes to the second set of questions to reinforce the thought. Learners of each group using the questions given on the board arrange points what they find suitable to express their thought. Of course, the learners have the liberty to add more information when they share their views with their partners. I always encourage my students to find out two or three synonyms for each expression and to avoid repetitions. Their next piece of work is to produce a brief outline for an essay draft.
Session 2

Next session starts with drafting. Now, the learners already have their outline plan checked. I always motivate my students to think logically as well as to be different from others. They are also encouraged to look at the same topic from the different angles. One of news reports suitable for opinion writing activity is attached herewith.

Uncle Throws Acid on Woman Over Land Dispute

A woman suffered acid burn at Gopal Bagh at Jatrabari in the city yesterday when her uncle allegedly threw acid on her over land dispute.

The victim, 45 year old Monowara Begum, is undergoing treatment at the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) with injuries to her left neck, chest, abdomen and thigh.

Monowar’s husband Yakub Hossain told reporters at the DMCH that his wife’s uncle (husband of her mother’s sister) Morshed Ali threw acid on her in their bedroom after Magrib prayers.

He said Morshed fled the scene immediately after the incident.

Locals rushed to their house hearing screams and took Monowara to the hospital at around 8:00pm.

Police could not arrest Morshed as of 11:20 pm.

(The Daily Star Dhaka, 2008)

The learners can focus on the aspects of the article. For example:

- Acid throwing as a criminal activity
- Acid throwing as apart of eve teasing
- Survival of an acid victim
- Punish the acid criminals
- Medical/Clinical treatment for the acid victim and so on.

Since I prefer my students to prepare their draft upon 4-7-7-3 model, they are guided to structure their opinion with phrases like:

Introduction Paragraph

1. The news headed with + “headline” + v. to be + an adjective
2. For many/ many people think + a generalized statement
3. Still there are few who think + another generalized statement/an analogy or the opposite of the 2nd statement
4. However, for me/ in my opinion + personal opinion
Body Paragraphs

The middle section of any composition demands variation in arguments and keeping logical connections among arguments (Turley, 2000, pp. 13-36). Here the learners are asked to choose at least three ideas directly from the given article using expressions such as “As far as the news is concerned…”, “From the news we come to know…”, and “The news article states that…”. Thereafter, they are asked to write their personal feeling and opinion toward each part of news cited. A completed task encompasses the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions Used</th>
<th>Direct News Citation</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Linking Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The news article states that…</td>
<td>Uncle threw acid on a lady over land dispute.</td>
<td>a crime; Common as domestic violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the news we come to know…</td>
<td>She is undergoing treatment</td>
<td>expensive ;not satisfactory</td>
<td>though, but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As far as the news is concerned…</td>
<td>criminal fled and Police could not arrest him yet</td>
<td>criminal should be punished</td>
<td>unfortunately, but, however</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion Paragraph

This paragraph is to wrap up. The conclusion may start with expression like, “To conclude, it can be said…”, “In conclusion, I want to say that…”, “However, I want to conclude saying that…”, and “In conclusion, my expectation is that…”. This part may contain a suggestion as well.

Editing

Now it is time to edit the draft. Learners are engaged in peer checking to remove the most common grammar mistakes like fragments, run-ons, parallelism, pronoun agreement, and reference from their draft.

Presentation

Next comes a presentation session with the final product. During presentations, I usually note the most important or interesting ideas/opinions the groups generate. I also ask the learners to offer their classmates constructive criticisms where needed. Following the presentation, a lively debate usually arises from the whole class. I start the debate. This session becomes more lively, interactive, and interesting since the young learners are always argumentative; they enjoy debates and show a tendency to prove each individual as exceptional. This activity ends with a formal session with the instructor commenting on the learners’ presentation. For assessment, I focus on the organization of thought, proper transitions, correctness of both structure and subject matter, and variety of vocabulary.

Opinion writing can also be offered as an activity guided by listening comprehension. In such cases, the instructor will read out a fact or an incident to the class or may use a record player instead. The learners may be engaged in tasks like note taking and answering quiz-like questions such as multiple choice sheets, fill-in the gaps, or true/false sheets in order to secure learners’ understanding of the text followed by an opinion writing activity. Either the instructor
may select a title or a headline for the learners or the learners themselves may self-select a suitable one. After the main text has been read, students are free to express their views in a critical way before being asked to work in groups and produce in writing their personal opinions.

A similar kind of task can equally be accomplished as a home assignment. Again, learners should be encouraged to self-select a topic of interest to them from a wide range of subjects that will surely engage them to read more and think more which, in turn, will lead them gradually to learn more.

CONCLUSION

In a trimester of four months, each learner gets an opportunity for a class presentation with his or her own opinion or with the opinion that results from group work. Throughout, learners are expected to be actively engaged in group presentations enabling them to improve upon their language skills. The activity of opinion writing brings a spirit of hard work and competition among the learners. The results are really amazing. Their presentations show them to be much more confident than in previous times, both in speaking and writing. They discovered quick thinking and enjoyed talking about various issues.

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REFERENCES


