

Writing and Identity in Adult
Non-Credit Beginning Level Classes

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Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2005

Most beginning level textbooks do not require students to write much beyond the sentence level, and some even reduce the teaching of writing to filling out forms or applications or writing phone messages. We feel that such reductionism does not prepare students to write in higher level classes or to perform writing tasks necessary in many jobs in a world where written communication skills for writing letters and e-mails are becoming increasingly important. We think that early in beginning level, teachers should begin to have students practice writing paragraphs.

One reason ESL teachers shun away from teaching writing to beginning level adult non-credit students is that many students seem to be afraid of writing. We believe that part of the reason for this fear is that in writing much more than in speaking a person has to express his or her identity. Ivanic (1998) discusses the writer's portrayal of his or her identity as one of the reasons people find writing difficult. In Ivanic's 'social' view of writing "the text is thought to consist not only of 'subject matter' but also of the writer's portrayal of himself or herself, the reader, their relationship, the writer's commitment to the ideational content, and their assessment of the reader's knowledge and beliefs" (Ivanic, 1998, pp. 94-95). Ivanic's description of the roles of writers and readers echoes the description of Goffman (1969) and his use of the extended metaphor for human interaction as a kind of theatrical performance involving a "performer" and "character".

Portraying Their Identities in Beginning level Writing

While Ivanic focuses on a conflict of identity for students in higher education courses, we feel that her discussion of identity has significance for our beginning level ESL students. Our students are adults, who have well-formed identities. But as Ivanic discusses, people have multiple identities because they are "identifying simultaneously with a variety of social groups" (p. 11). Some of our students may have already written a lot in their first language, but even if they have, writing in English involves their having to portray themselves differently. We feel that students need to get used to portraying themselves and their identities in English and in a context which is probably quite foreign to them and may be even threatening. By giving them model paragraphs in which the teacher portrays his or her own identity and gives his or her own personal information, the students can become more comfortable in portraying their

identities and sharing their own personal information. In the following samples from our students' writing, our students are beginning to explore how to portray themselves in English. The variety of objects they choose to describe in their short compositions which they wrote after reading the model, "My Bedroom," gives evidence that they are struggling not only with the grammar and vocabulary of English but also with portraying their identities in English. Being able to explore ways to portray their identities in English freely, they can gradually overcome their fear of writing.

The Model Paragraph Technique for Teaching Writing in Beginning level

With this technique students are given models which contain the grammatical structures and vocabulary they have been studying. The models contain some paragraph structure forms and devices which students need to learn. The topics are chosen to encourage students to explore how they may portray their identities in their writing.

We will show one such model paragraph and also some paragraphs students wrote. This model paragraph assignment was given to students as homework just after they had studied chapter 4, "Moving Day," in *English in Action* by B. Foley and E. Neblett. In this chapter the students are taught to identify the names of rooms and furniture and also how to identify these using present tense BE and appropriate adjectives and prepositions. Prior to this assignment the students had already been given three simpler model writing assignments, but this assignment was the first in which they had some choice in what they could write about. Here is the model we gave our students:

My Bedroom

My bedroom is small and comfortable. My bed is next to the door. A bookcase is next to my bed. Many books are on the bookcase. A clock is on the bookcase. A radio and CD player are on the bookcase. My desk is next to the window. A computer is on the desk. A printer is next to the computer. Many papers are on the desk. My room is messy. But I like my room.

Discussion of Students' Paragraphs

Next, we will provide examples of our students' writing and discuss what the students seemed to be thinking about as they wrote. All of the students' paragraphs have been typed exactly as what they

hand-wrote on their papers. No corrections, even of punctuation or spelling mistakes, have been made.

Two students mentioned “toys” in their paragraphs:

My bedroom is small My bed is big is next to my bed. Many books are on the
bookcase. Is next to the door My dresser is next to the window Many toys in my bedroom
My son his playing and my room (Carmen)

My bedroom is small and comfortable. My bed is next to the door. I have two
pillows on the bed. A clock is on the bookcase. Many toys are on the bookcase. A radio and CD
player are on the bookcase. My room is very messy. But I like and happy ..very. (Pablo)

Carmen’s identity as a mother seems very important to her. She not only writes about her son’s
toys but ends her paragraph writing and thinking about her son. Her paragraph ends without a concluding
sentence, which most other students had. Instead, Carmen’s paragraph just ends with this image of her
son playing. It is as if she abandons her writing because she is concerned about her son.

Pablo also mentions “toys”. Since the previous week’s lesson had been “My Family”, we
found out that Pablo is not a father. But Pablo brought in a picture of his 3-year-old nephew and proudly
showed it to the class. So it seems Pablo’s identity as an uncle has some importance to him because of
his mention of “many toys”.

For one of the students this assignment was a chance to complain about her unsatisfactory
living conditions in San Francisco.

My bedroom is small, My bed is next to the window. A bookcase is in front to my
bed. Many Pictures are on the bookcase. A clock is on the wall. My room is very small and
I don’t like my room.

I don’t like it. (Leticia)

Leticia emphasizes that she does not like her room because it is very small. She is only one of the two
students who ends her paragraph with a negative concluding sentence. Also, her reiteration of her dislike
of her room and the placement of this sentence with “it” substituted for “my room” directly below the
original concluding sentence is interesting and quite striking. We don’t know whether she added this

sentence for emphasis or whether she was just practicing substitution of the pronoun. But Leticia seems to be concerned with improving her current living situation and in her paragraph she wants to portray herself as a person who is not satisfied. Also, Leticia is the only person who mentioned “pictures”. Perhaps her identity as a person interested in art is important. But it is strange because her pictures are not on walls but on the bookcase. Perhaps she doesn’t have enough wall space to hang them up.

Areydi, the other student who ends her paragraph with a negative concluding sentence, does not give any details about why she feels this way. Also, her conclusion is rather surprising since she begins by mentioning that her bedroom is “comfortable.”

My bedroom is small and comfortable My bed is next to the door My clock is next to the window. A computer is on the desk. I don’t like my room. (Areydi)

All of the other 21 students who gave us paragraphs about their bedrooms either write concluding positive sentences (usually “I like my room.”) or no concluding sentence at all. But Elizabeth’s paragraph is the most positive. Not only does Elizabeth begin with the two adjectives “big and pretty” but her conclusion has two sentences. Her writing is as bright as her personality in class. She uses adjectives to portray her identity as a person who is bright and cheerful or at least tries to appear so.

My bedroom is big and pretty. My bed is next to the window. My sofa is next to my dresser. My lamp is small. My TV is on the table. A computer is on the desk. My room is very good. I like my room. (Elizabeth)

Other students also have positive concluding sentences. Two students (Mai and Xiu Zhen) try to emphasize how much they like their rooms. Xiu Zhen begins with “My bedroom is big and very comfortable” and she concludes with “I very like my room”; using “very” to modify “like” is a common mistake for many Chinese, Vietnamese, and Russian speaking students. Mai also uses the same concluding sentence as Xiu Zhen, even though her room is “small and comfortable”. Other students also use some negative adjectives, but they end their paragraphs positively. For example, Pablo likes his room although it is messy. The paragraph Juan Carlos wrote is the most puzzling in this respect. He uses two negative adjectives “not comfortable” and “messy” but ends with a positive conclusion.

My bedroom is small. is not comfortable. My bed is next to the door. My TV is on the refrigerator A clock is next to the TV. My room sometimes is messy. But I like my room. (Juan Carlos)

He is the only student to say that his room is “not comfortable” but still likes it. If we didn’t know Juan Carlos, we might think that he doesn’t understand what he is writing. But Juan Carlos is one of the best students in this class. He always understands and is able to make sentences which contain structures and grammar taught in level 3 or 4. So we have to assume that he knows what he is writing. However, this is our assessment of Juan Carlos now. Six weeks ago we didn’t know his ability because all the students were quite new to us then. He made some basic mistakes in this paragraph, which he doesn’t make now, so maybe he is just a very fast learner. His conclusion seems to indicate that he would like to portray himself as a positive person who is studying and struggling hard to learn English, but who tries to stay optimistic. This is his attitude in class.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of our students’ writing employing the tools and methods suggested by Ivanić (1998) shows that our students’ portrayal of their identities in their writing in English is very important to them. Based on our success in using this model paragraph technique for teaching writing to adult non-credit beginning level ESL students and our realization that students’ coming to grips with how to portray their identities in English is very important to them, we make two recommendations: (1) Writing short paragraphs after reading model paragraphs from the very beginning of the semester can help beginning level students learn written discourse beyond the sentence level. (2) The model paragraph technique helps students to explore ways to portray their identities in English and in doing so it also decreases their anxiety about writing and makes them more comfortable to portray their identities in writing English.

References

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