UNIT 13 DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is aimed at raising teachers' awareness about

- What is writing?
- How does it differ from speech?
- How do we assist students to write well?
- The need for students to go through the process of writing.
- Writing as a holistic activity

13.1 INTRODUCTION – WHAT IS WRITING?

Learning to read and write is a process of experiencing language. Children learn to talk in a language by participating in communicative interactions. They receive feedback about what they have said. They discover whether their meaning has been understood. They learn to refine their language to be able to convey their meaning adequately to a particular audience. Once a child has begun to communicate orally in a language, writing can be introduced.

Writing is the physical expression of what you think. The close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing valuable. As young children struggle with what to put down next, or how to put it down on paper, they often discover a new way of expressing an idea. Sometimes they rethink the idea itself. It allows the writer time to look at, as well as reflect upon thoughts, ideas, feelings or experiences. This is important since there is a degree of permanence about writing. It is something you can go back to. The child also begins to realize the power of written words, as vehicles which communicate our thoughts to others. S/he discovers the real need to find the right word or construct a correct sentence. Often it is indicative of a search for meaning and reveals the amount the child knows. Thus writing is closely related to the inner processes within a child's mind, the internal manipulation of external experiences. In addition to this, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that we have been teaching our children.

Most writing by young children can be considered as encoded speech, i.e., residual images of experiences are stored within a child's mind and are transformed into inner speech. This in turn transliterated into a graphic form which is writing. Initially, children communicate their experiences and ideas in a variety of ways such as...
through talking, through actions or through drawings. Writing, which is a sophisticated, abstract and complex symbol system gradually gains importance as the child grows older.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Why is writing thought to be a creative activity?

2. Discuss with your partner and work out two definitions of ‘writing’.

13.2 HOW IS WRITING DIFFERENT FROM SPEECH?

Why is it that to a large number of students in India, writing in English seems to pose great problems? Possibly for the same reasons that large numbers of adult native speakers as well never achieve a high level of expressiveness in writing their first language. It is partly to do with the nature of writing itself. Harold Rosen (1981), writing about a school’s curriculum project on writing in Britain, explained it in this way:

“The writer is a lonely figure cut off from the stimulus and corrective pressure of listeners. He must be a predictor of reactions and act on his predictions. He writes with one hand tied behind his back, being robbed of gesture. He is robbed too of the tone of his voice and the aid of clues the environment provides. He is condemned to monologue; there is no one to help out, to fill the silences, put words in his mouth, or make encouraging noises.”

As Rosen points out,

- Writing is detached from the wide range of expressive possibilities in speech.
- A writer is unable to exploit all the devices available to a speaker: gesture, body movement, facial expression, pitch and tone of voice, stress, and hesitations.
- A speaker can backtrack, or clarify and revise ideas as listeners question or disagree. A writer has to compensate for all of those disadvantages.
- Compared with speech, effective writing requires a number of things:
  - a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information;
  - a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning;
the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis;
and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers.

It is these demands which present particular problems to foreign writers of English. Even those who are proficient writers in their first language have to acquire a wide language base from which to make these choices. They may also find that confusing differences exist between the conventions of writing in their first language and English. For example, the level of formality or patterns of presenting information in letters may differ, or the accepted method of setting out arguments in discursive writing may vary. We need to be sensitive to all these factors when our learners attempt their writing tasks.

**III3 CREATING A NATURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR WRITING**

If the writing process is to develop naturally, then it is important to allow some *mother tongue usage* until such time as when a child has enough mastery over the second language to not require the mother tongue. The policy of "speak in English only" is not found to be conducive to learning naturally. The *transition is gradual*, and if we do not allow children to use the mother tongue we might completely block the children from being able to express themselves. We need to facilitate the transition by providing suitable vocabulary or structures, as well as motivating children by creating a real need to communicate in the second language. This can be done by providing a *secure and stimulating natural environment* for language learning.

In order to create a non-threatening and conducive atmosphere in the classroom so that children feel free to express themselves, the following guidelines may be useful:

**Some suggestive guidelines:**

1. We need to build our writing programme and the classroom environment around the child's need to convey something to a recipient audience. The primary drive for wanting to write *comes from* the need to communicate or convey an idea. In the process of exchanging written interactions, the child learns to understand other people's writings.

2. We need to understand the importance of experimentation and risk-taking in the process of learning to write. In an environment where children are not anxious about making mistakes, they explore the language in various ways. Through invented spelling, imitation of adult writing and their own inner drives, children step into unfamiliar language areas. As they use the language, as they write and speak and read it, they become better equipped - they acquire new linguistic abilities. Their mistakes help a teacher to provide the formal instructions they need.

3. We need to understand that children progress in different ways and at different paces. Each child brings to his/her writing a rich background of experience. Whether a literate background at home supports this experience, or whether the child comes from an oral tradition will influence the child's writing.

4. We need to support children's experiments with the new language, watching for *conventions* as they creep into their writing. Children must feel comfortable exploring the written form of the second language. They must relate to it and feel a sense of *ownership* about their writing, without being...
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afraid to make mistakes. It is through this that each learner discovers the strategies that allow him/her to be an effective language user. Every time a teacher sets a topic, asks for a particular rhetorical form or expects accurate spelling and punctuation to take precedence over meaning, s/he is not giving children the opportunity for experiencing and experimenting with the language.

5. Children need to be gently led into the arena of writing in the second language. Since most children are reluctant to take risks and experiment with an unfamiliar language, the teacher should design or mould writing activities which begin within a structured framework. Gradually as the child acquires competence over the lexical and syntactic structure of the second language, more open-ended communicative activities should be taken up. Use of the mother tongue should also be allowed with gradual insistence on second language usage as the child becomes more confident.

6. We need to recognize the importance of having audience respond to what the child has written. Writing involves a constant sharing with others; talking and sharing about ideas and getting a feedback on whether those ideas have worked or not. Children need to write for many different purposes. They need to write for a real audience - for themselves, for the examiner, for both younger and older children, for adults they know and for some general unknown audience as well.

7. We need to provide demonstrations of what is involved in being a writer. In order to help children develop as writers, we need to share in the writing process by being writers ourselves. By providing demonstrations of writing in action, by being partners in their writing process, we do more to help children figure out how to be writers in this way than all our correcting of their mistakes can ever hope to do.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Which factors contribute to a conducive learning environment for writing?

2. What are the two most important features in learning to write? What can a teacher do to promote an interest in the children to write?
13.4 PROCESS OF WRITING

Much of the research and academic work in the field of writing has begun to recognize that writers follow a process when they work, just as scientists follow a systematic method. When we begin to understand this process we can help our students invent, use and adapt effective writing strategies (Murray 1982, Graves 1991). Yet in most of our language classrooms we tend to only look at the end products of writing. We look at the process in isolation. It has very little to do with the child. We expect the child to produce a perfect piece of writing in one sitting. We do not allow the process of revising, improving, rethinking about their writing. As adults we always write a draft, then rework it, maybe once or twice, we ask for a feedback from others. It's only after this whole process that we produce a final piece of writing. Removing the writing from the process of development does not help children to become actively involved with their writing.

Theorists have defined the writing process as different steps or stages that a writer goes through to produce a piece of writing. Broadly speaking these are the stages of prewriting, writing and rewriting, editing and then producing the final piece of writing. Murray refers to these as rehearsal, drafting, revision and editing. Each stage is important. There are different skills required at each stage, and children need to go through each stage under the guidance of the teacher. The stages however do not occur in the linear order given above, there maybe overlaps.

In brief, the process of writing contains a number of stages which can be represented in the following figure:

```
being motivated
+ to write + getting ideas together

making notes

planning and outlining

making a first draft

revising

replanning

editing and redrafting

generating ideas to write

outlining

for publication

getting ready
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However, the figure oversimplifies matters because, although writing in general involves these stages, the process of composition is not a linear one, moving from planning to composing to revising and to editing. It would be more accurate to characterize writing as a recursive activity in which the writer moves backwards and forwards between drafting and revising, with stages of replanning in between. As Shaughnessy (1977) describes it, it is a messy process that leads to clarity.

The process of writing is often described as consisting of three major activities or groups of activities:

**Pre-writing**

It involves two main areas of concern:

a. **What is the purpose of this piece of writing?**

   The writer must know the purpose of his/her writing i.e., is he/she writing a report for action? or is it a letter of invitation to some friend or a formal letter to the Principal or a letter applying for job. Identification of the purpose of writing would determine the choice of organization and the style of the written piece.

b. **Who am I writing for?**

   This question directly relates itself to the *audience*; the reader may be an acquaintance or an intimately known friend or a group of colleagues or an institutional head and so on. The information about the audience helps the
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writer to determine what to say and how to present the writing in the most appropriate style.

The good writer generally plans for writing at this stage, though the amount of planning varies as per the following scale:

- A letter of complaint to a manufacturer
- An academic paper for publication in a journal
- A postcard to a family member or close friend
- A memo to a colleague requesting action

Writing and rewriting

The second phase of activity is the writing itself and with good writers this consists of making a first draft. But writing the first draft is often interrupted as the writer stops to read over and review, to get an idea of how the text is developing, to revise plans, and bring in new ideas or rearrange those already expressed. There is a good deal of recycling in the process from planning to drafting, reviewing, replanning, revising, etc. Good writers tend to concentrate on getting the content right first and leave details like correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar until later.

In summary, the drafting process focuses primarily on what the writer wants to say, while redrafting progressively focuses on how to say it most effectively.

Editing

The post writing stage consists of reading through and trying to apply a reader's perspective in order to assess how clearly readers might follow the ideas. The editing process makes the final readjustments and checks accuracy so that the text is maximally accessible to the reader. Some lazy writers tend not to engage in editing but assume that their writing is clear to others because it is clear to them. Alternatively, some writers may concentrate throughout the whole writing process on accuracy in grammar, punctuation etc., without considering whether or not the overall structure is clear. They continually move from drafting to editing without any in-between stages of rethinking and reorganization. It is a less-than-effective process that might well be unwittingly encouraged by teachers whose strategy for marking is to correct only minor problems on the surface of the writing without commenting on any major problems in structure. This is an understandable strategy on the part of teachers, given the amount of marking most of us have to do.

How can the teacher help?

1. Teacher can help to raise awareness of the process of composition by talking explicitly about the stages of writing as well as by restructuring tasks to take account of this.
2. Teacher can play a support role during the early stages of the writing process by helping students to get their ideas together. This can be done by talking about things to generate ideas, by pooling information, ideas, or opinions in the class, by working from pictures, or by reading texts of various kinds.
3. Teacher can also provide good models for writing indirectly, by encouraging good reading habits, but also directly, when appropriate, by analyzing textual structure, particularly with some types of more formal academic writing.

4. Planned activities structured by the teacher can help students to develop a sense of direction in their writing, though they should always be encouraged to regard a plan as an enabling device or support rather than as a rigid structure.

5. Teachers can encourage the drafting process by creating a workshop atmosphere in their classrooms, to the extent of providing rough paper, scissors, paste, erasers, etc. And while monitoring writing in progress, they can suggest that these are used for chopping and changing the structure of the text. Teachers can support the drafting process in various ways. They can intervene quietly, questioning and advising, in order to help students get their ideas down on paper in English. Or they can encourage students to read each other's work and suggest restructurings and revisions. Giving help during writing proves far more effective than giving it afterwards.

6. The advent of the word processor in institutions that can afford the technology has great potential for encouraging students to develop revision strategies. Rewriting is more motivating when it can be done quickly, easily, and relatively painlessly by moving pieces of the text around. Alternatives can be evaluated and improvements immediately appreciated on the display screen.

In summary, the classroom needs to provide an environment in which students can experience being writers, thinking about the writing purpose and their audience, drafting a piece of writing, revising it, and sharing it with others.

Check Your Progress 3

1. How would you define the Writing process?

2. Make a cyclic diagram to represent the different stages of the process of writing.
WRITING AS A HOLISTIC ACTIVITY

What needs to be done to make writing meaningful is to tap the children's natural urge to write. When we begin to work with inexperienced writers like our students, writing in their second language, our first concern is to get them to produce written language. **Frequent opportunity for writing is the single most common recommendation for increasing the fluency of writers.** The more the children write, the more they get, and the less they worry about making spelling mistakes and errors.

To try and be able to do this in a class of forty to fifty children, with each one demanding attention, is a very challenging task. It is often a good idea to divide the students into smaller groups of four to six students. The teacher must give clear instructions and then move from group to group helping and supporting wherever required.

A calendar of experiences needs to be worked out and planned within the timetable. The writing tasks can be linked up with other subject areas and project work. In fact, to genuinely achieve improvement in the writing ability, a daily time slot of 45 minutes to one hour should be included in the timetable and this should reach across the curriculum.

An example of students working together in a writing class is reproduced below. Trial it in your class and work out your own observations on the extent of success it meets or should meet.

**Lesson outline - Collaborative Writing**

**Introduction:**

The purpose: This is not a model class to be emulated. It is only a trial of an idea and is open to critical observation, analysis and discussion.

**Lesson Outline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Stages</th>
<th>B Teacher instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I (2 minutes)</td>
<td>Have you ever been <strong>annoyed/irritated</strong> by certain things around you? Can there be solutions to these irritations? Can you suggest some?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. 3 minutes</td>
<td>Get into groups. Individually list the things (at least 3, but as many as you want to) that have always annoyed you deeply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. (3 minutes)</td>
<td>Share with the others in the group things that you have listed. Listen carefully to one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. (2 minutes)</td>
<td>Choose as a group: Two things that seem most serious, and for which you need solutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Remarks**

Examples: fairly empty buses not stopping at bus-stops while you wait; **inconsiderate neighbours; loud-speakers at all times of the day and night** (invite initial suggestions from the class).

Four or six (not more than six members to a group.)
Work in the group and write down two or three solutions for each of these two problems that you have chosen for your group. Share each one of your solutions and discuss their merits. Which one of them are the best solutions?

Together as a group write out your group’s choice of Things that annoy you as a short text under headings as given on the black board.

Exchange your draft with the group sitting next to you. Ask them to read your draft, discuss and write comments about it in the margin. In turn, comment on the draft you have received from the group next to you.

Take back your draft and give your neighbour’s draft back. Read the comments given on your draft. Discuss. Are they useful comments? Will they help you re-draft?

Write a second draft of your text incorporating what your group thinks are valid comments received from your peers. At the end discuss who you will send this text to: Letter to the newspaper? Any other concerned party? A small snippet for a newspaper?

**Developing Writing Skills**

**13.6 FEEDBACK THROUGH WRITING CONFERENCES**

As the children work on their writings, the teacher discusses with them either individually or in small groups (depending upon the class size) the writing in progress. Through these discussions or “conferences” the teacher discusses the organization of ideas, or he might help to extend the child’s thinking about the
The teacher asks questions and makes comments that encourage the child to keep on writing. The teacher might make comments such as:

Tell me more about what you are saying here.
When you told me about your experience (journey, etc.) there were lots of details, but you haven’t written very many of those details. Would you like to add anything?
Are you happy with this part?
What did you have in your mind when you wrote this sentence?

The questions the teacher asks, elicit an understanding in the child of his/her own process. These would be questions like:

- How did you decide on this particular topic?
- Is there some other information you’d like to put in?
- What else are you planning to put in? What questions do you think your readers might ask?
- Do your readers have enough details to be able to feel, think?
- Are there places where you feel the reader might be misled?
- Have you chosen the most important aspects of your topic? How could you stress these and put other things into the background?
- What are you going to do next?
- Do you think the topic you have chosen is working? Where did it not work so well? Where did you have problems?

The teacher helps the child-author by asking questions which leave the final decisions of what to do, how to change, where to rewrite, to the child. The teacher helps children to become “conscious creators” of their writings. It is useful for the teacher to sometimes have conferences with some children in front of the whole class. As children watch the teacher discuss children’s writings with them, they learn how to look at each other’s work and have peer-conferencing. While conducting a conference, the teacher has an opportunity to help the child consider what has been written and think of ways to expand or improve the piece if desired. This is done best by focusing on the meaning and clarity of the story rather than the mechanics of writing.

Another benefit of the writing conference is that the children begin to model the same behaviour and questions that the teacher has demonstrated. Once children have acquired a certain degree of functional competency say by class five, they can begin to have peer conference or small group conference. They read or listen to each other’s work for appreciation and to raise questions for clarification or to make suggestions for improvement. It is amazing how quickly some children learn to respond constructively and positively to one other’s writings. There are however, always some classes where the group dynamics and personality clashes take over, and children respond more on the basis of personal likes and dislikes, rather than the actual writing itself. These are all the ground realities that a teacher has to be ready for. Ultimately, it is really for the teacher to decide whether the particular group of children is ready to take up peer conferencing.

In the beginning a child is satisfied with what she has written and does not want to rewrite. As children go through whole class writing and rewriting, they begin to absorb the process. They want to apply it to their own writing. It is only when they have reached this stage that ‘conferencing’ has a purpose. Most teachers improve their conferencing techniques with experience. There is no “right way” since each child and each teacher is different. Some children are very sensitive about their writing and need to be treated carefully.
In this unit, we examined the various stages of the writing process. After children have been equipped with the basic knowledge and techniques of process writing, they will be ready to explore various forms of writing with alacrity and confidence. We have taken you through a sample of how the process approach can be transacted in the writing class. We have also looked at the teacher's role at each stage, and the kind of support the teacher needs to provide. We are aware of the challenges of process writing in a large class. It is ultimately the teacher's own convictions and beliefs that become the driving force of this programme.

13.8 KEY WORDS

Process: 'How' we write in terms of planning, organizing, writing the first draft, revising, editing and finally writing the final draft.
Planning: The first stage of writing, when we collect our thoughts and think of an audience and purpose for writing.
Reviewing: The last stage of writing where we edit, reformulate and refine what is written.

13.9 SUGGESTED READINGS


13.10 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Writing is thought to be a creative activity because:

   (i) Writers processes information according to their experience
2. One possible definition:

Writing is an extended piece of work through which an individual expresses, on paper, his/her thoughts or ideas in a logical sequence. A written piece usually has a specific format to follow; it is written with a purpose and with a reader in mind.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Fluent and effective written communication can take place in an environment where children can risk exposing their real lives. Where the act of telling what one is really thinking and feeling is treated with the utmost respect. Where children are not afraid and anxious about making mistakes and are being constantly guided to learn from their mistakes.

In such a writing environment there is -

* acceptance
* open-communication
* absence of stress
* loads of stimulation through displays, activities, and meaningful experience.

2. The two most important features are time and support.

Learning to write well requires time. It requires writing frequently, preferably every day. Writing must have a chance to grow — to change, to be revised. The ability to use standard grammatical forms and standard usage does not develop in a day or two, it takes months and months of constant usage. Good writing involves integrating thinking and language with the purpose of writing.

Writing also requires support. Teachers can offer support in the following ways —

1. Talking to children about the content of their writing; — before, during and after the actual writing has taken place. This helps children to clarify their thoughts.
2. Providing meaningful experience which stimulate ideas for writing.
3. Providing a real audience as well as real reasons for writing. This makes it worth while for students to improve their writing.
4. Helping children choose topics, by getting them to write about things they know and care about. This helps a child to discover his/her own voice as a writer.
5. Relating the study of punctuation, spelling, language conventions to language use. Standard usage and editing skills are best learnt when their study relates to a communicative purpose.
6. Sharing the excitement of writing. The teacher's eagerness sparks the children.
8. Encouraging creativity.
9. Providing a free and non-threatening environment in which children can write without stopping to correct. Very often children's ideas come faster than their thoughts. They go back subsequently and revise, correct and redraft the writing.
10. Finally caring about writing and using all possible resources, ideas, materials to create a rich and stimulating writing environment.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Perhaps the most important insight that recent research into writing has given us is that good writers go through certain processes which lead to successful pieces of writing. They start with an overall plan in their heads. They think about what they want to say and who they are saying it for. Then they draft out sections of the writing, and as they work on them, they are constantly reviewing, revising and editing their work. In other words these writers have a sense of purpose, a sense of audience and a sense of direction in their writing. Beginning writers are much more haphazard in their writing. They need to be encouraged and guided through a process of planning, drafting and organising, revising and editing.

There is a tendency among teachers to look at the finished product of writing, whether it is a paragraph, poem or letter. It is however, the process that went into the creation of the child's writing that gives real insights into how the child is thinking. Whether the child has a sense of purpose and audience? Is the child able to convey this appropriately in the written form? Is the child able to structure these ideas in a logical sequence? The children acquire new skills as the need arises. Through rewriting and checking the children become more precise and gain independence.

2. Identify the topic
   Collect Ideas
   Final Draft  
   Collect Ideas
   Edit
   Revision
   Organize Ideas
   Rough Draft

Developing Writing Skills