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STRATEGIES FOR HELPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS THROUGHOUT THE WRITING PROCESS

Most ESL students step into the classroom for the first time brimming with enthusiasm and ready to improve their English communication skills. And by “communication” they’re thinking of speaking skills. Which is great! But what happens when they’re faced with the challenge of communicating in writing? In today’s world where a lot of our communication and interaction is digital or online or electronic, ESL students need to learn to communicate well in writing, as well as orally.

Writing does not exist in a vacuum. It is a natural extension of listening and speaking, true in any language, but no less true for speakers of other languages and those in the process of learning English.

Because of that spoken-written word connection, engaging these skills in your ESL students when they write will help them move smoothly through the writing process. By helping your students engage the oral and aural skills they have acquired in their studies of English, they will find that writing is not as impossible as it might otherwise seem.

Here are a few stages that help facilitate the process.

First of all, it is prewriting. It is the stage of the writing process when the writer generates ideas for his writing. For ESL learners, this is also an opportunity to generate vocabulary and grammatical structures that will be necessary for writing on a particular topic. At times, your students will be more successful in groups. Other times they may need your assistance as they generate their ideas. You may find at times your direction is enough to set them going in the right direction, and then they will be able to work independently. For example, you can

ask questions to help elicit vocabulary or grammatical structures from your students; or work together as a class to create a word bank that relates to the topic on which they will write. You can also give your students a blank template to organize their writing ideas which may be just enough to get them going. Also doing research on the web, in books or with interviewees may be what your students need to find useful vocabulary or to determine the correct format for answering a question. Give your class time to prepare before they sit down to write.

When your students have done all that, they will take the ideas they have generated and start putting them into their logical positions in what will become their composition. Again, giving your students a chance to speak and prepare for writing is the key. Try any of these strategies in the organization phase: topic sentences, graphic organizers, open ended questions.

When your students enter the writing process, make sure they understand that a draft is not the final composition. Instead, remind your class that writing is a process, and they will have an opportunity to find and correct their errors later in the process. Right now, their goal is to get something written out on the page.

Using a fill in the blank template for topic sentences, thesis statements and transitions may help your students as they write the first draft of their essays. When you give them the grammar and the organization, they can put all of their energy into the content as they write.

Similarly, students working off the graphic organizers and templates they used in the organization stage will have a more thorough grasp of the vocabulary and content that they will need to write at this stage.

In the editing process, writers look for major communicative gaps in their essays. When your students edit their compositions, encourage them to pay attention to writing elements such as thesis statements, content development, introductions and conclusions.

Peer editing is one of the best resources for ESL students at this point in the writing process. Assigning a partner to each student and asking that person to look for specific issues in the essay can be a priceless experience for your students. Encourage each person to look for any breakdown in meaning, confusion in organization, or topics that are not fully addressed in the composition.

Finally, rewriting is just as important as the rest of the steps in writing a complete piece. Here your students will look for errors in grammar, sentence structure, word choice, spelling and punctuation.

Dictionaries are a tremendous resource for ESL students. Whether they use a bilingual dictionary or an English only version, checking for spelling and misuse of words or word forms can be done here.

This is also a good time to look at the sentence structure your students are using most often. Likely, they will be relying too heavily on simple sentences, so a

quick grammar review on combining sentences with coordinating conjunctions and using relative clauses is perfect to introduce here.

When you encourage speaking, language use, vocabulary development, and grammar examinations, your students will find that the process of writing may not be as intimidating as they once thought it was!