
New Publications ... Nuwe Publikasies

Reviews

Tricia Hedge

Writing. Oxford University Press, 1988 (repr. 1989) (Paperback 169 pp.).

Writing, in the "Resource Books for Teachers" series, has clearly been well-received. Like all the other writers in the series, Tricia Hedge was chosen because of a demonstrated success in a particular field.

Writing is perhaps one of the most difficult language skills for which to produce "winning recipes". Widdowson and other exponents of Discourse Analysis have demonstrated the limitations of a text-based approach which placed texts into different modes and attempted to teach the patterns which underlie them.

Writing presents other difficulties. Rosen has highlighted the "loneliness" of the writer cut off from the "stimulus or corrective" of a listener, and with none of the aids provided by body language or speech devices. Ms Hedge succinctly defines the particular problems of the person tackling a writing task.

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.

Not even the native speaker would necessarily have the wide language base from which to make the relevant choices. When the writer involved is someone whose home language is not English the problems are intensified. The author attempts in her book to offer suggestions to teachers "for helping such students to overcome the difficulties they experience in developing clear effective writing in English" (p. 6).

In order to do so she has firmly opted for a process approach to writing, which is based on what good writers do when they write. She begins by emphasising the importance of aiming at complete contextualized texts - so essential for a sense of purpose, a sense of audience and a sense of direction.

The organization of the book reflects a sensitive understanding of the needs of likely users.

There is a clearly set out contents page on which the various activities in the book are categorized into level and topic. The author begins the book by providing a “framework” for writing tasks and in doing so skilfully and succinctly summarizes current insights into the writing process. She goes on to explain the way in which the book explores the various stages of the writing process. There are five comprehensive sections: composing, communicating, crafting, improving and evaluating.

In the first section (composing) Ms Hedge allows teachers to see writing in the classroom from a completely different perspective. “We” are invited to explore our own approach to the process of composition. This is a very effective means of preparing the reader for the author’s next point - a knowledge of the strategies used by the pupils can give the teacher valuable insights into the problems faced by unsuccessful writers, as well as a fuller understanding of the nature of the writing process in general. At this point she briefly describes the three major activities (or groups of activities): pre-writing, writing and editing. Six implications for the classroom practice are firmly spelt out, which broadly summarized mean that “the classroom needs to provide an environment in which students can experience being writers, thinking about purpose and audience, drafting a piece of writing, revising it, and sharing it with others” (p. 25). The rest of the section on composing is concerned with providing eighteen ideas and techniques for the prewriting stages. Full information is provided in recipe format (level, topic, preparation, and in class) with very clear illustrative material so that the most inexperienced teacher is catered for.

Section 2 (communicating) focuses on audience. A variety of practical tasks is provided to help learners develop their skills in selecting what to say and in selecting the appropriate style. It seems that the ego-centric writing which is so characteristic of the writing of less skilled writers arises from a focus on the topic rather than the intended reader.

Section 3 (Crafting) looks at the more mechanical aspects of writing such as the skill of organizing sentences into paragraphs, using cohesive devices, effective punctuation, and choosing appropriate vocabulary. Section 4 (improving) is concerned to ensure that learners revise their work and thus develop their writing skills: teacher feedback becomes part of the important processes of redrafting and editing.

Section 5 (evaluating) is concerned not with the students’ work but in fitting teachers to be able to assess whether a writing task set by them has internal and external validity. The latter is particularly valuable in ensuring that the needs of the actual learners concerned have been taken into account.

This book will certainly be welcomed by the many teachers who are looking for an approach to writing which could form part of an integrated communicative curriculum. Her ideas on the process of marking are particularly valuable in this regard. She has gathered an amazing number of ideas and techniques which could readily be adapted to meet the needs of South African learners (or any others).

While I believe that the book will be a valuable teaching asset even for teachers who have kept abreast of current developments, I do have some reservations. The identification of audience is not as explicit as it might be in the section of communicating. In addition, there seems to be confusion between audience in the sense of someone who reads what you have written for the purpose of helping you redraft and edit it and a genuine audience for whom the piece is designed. For instance, the project (2. 5) in which the students build up a folder of material on the new shopping centre seems to go no further than being read by members of the class group. It seems that an opportunity of identifying people who would find the information useful and valuable and creating material for them has been lost.

I was disappointed too in the treatment of grammar. Although grammatical accuracy is considered important (30% of the marks accorded are for grammatical accuracy), the challenge of finding ways of developing grammatical competence has not been met. There is not even much advice or directed comment on the ways in which learners might achieve such accuracy. I would also have liked to have seen a clear acknowledgement of the close tie between reading and writing. Although reading activities are often used, they are placed as introductory activities. It is, of course, a moot point whether a competent user of language can engage in either reading or writing without the other. Finally, Ms Hedge's introductory comments to the third section reflects an uncertainty of approach. Although she seems to be concerned to produce "discourse", she finds no contradiction in returning to text types. In fairness to her it does seem that this uncertainty is widely shared among writing specialists: There does not appear to be a coherent and theoretically consistent approach to writing at present. In this respect the specialists too are involved in a process.

E. Ridge

Olefa Garcia & Ricardo Otheguy, Eds.

English across cultures, cultures across English: A reader in cross-cultural communication. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989. (492 pp.)

This is a book whose time has come. With English becoming a lingua franca for a significant part of the world, its use by people of differing cultural backgrounds has inevitably led to the development of not only various types of English, but of differing norms in the use of English. Hearing a different language leads one to expect culturally-based differences, but when one hears more or less the same language, expectation of differences may not be aroused. Problems in communication can ensue, and of the worst sort: unexpected and non-obvious problems, hidden beneath a common surface. The various papers in this book "focus on the culture-specific character of all communication, and on the overriding importance of differing cultural norms for conversations carried out in a common language" (p.1).