

Focused Writing Exercises: Word Associations, Stream of Consciousness Writing, and Friday Specials

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The current focus in second language education on the development of communicative competence calls for instructional activities stressing creative, spontaneous, and meaningful use of the target language. Unfortunately, students are often unprepared to participate in these types of linguistic experiences. Many teachers find that their beginning and intermediate students do well in structured oral activities (drill, fact-recall questions, etc.), but seem to have little to say during free conversations. Even advanced students may have had little experience with communicative language use. The following sets of exercises—word associations, stream of consciousness writing, and Friday Specials—have been designed to make students more flexible in both oral and written responses by giving them practice using language in inventive, unstructured, and practical ways; thus, these exercises help to bridge the gap between the limited patterned responses of beginning students and truly communicative language use.

Word Associations

Word association exercises are based on the premise that language students need practice putting unusual combinations of words together before they can move from pat responses to creative ones.

1. Give students a word in English and ask them to write down the first English word which comes into their minds. Ask several students for the word they wrote down. Reinforce every response with phrases like: "That's good.", "How interesting!", "You had the same word as

_____.", "Anyone else have that one?" This exercise gives even the poorest student a chance to answer a question correctly. After all, every response is correct for the student who gave it.

2. Once again, give the students a word, but this time ask them to write down the first five words which come into their minds. Ask several students to report one of their answers, perhaps the one they like best or the one they feel is the most interesting. Sometimes it is fun to use a picture or even a nondescript blot on the wall as the word association stimulus. Since there are truly no "correct" words to be associated with a blot, this practice underlines the necessity of freely associating words rather than searching for a specific correct answer. Again, all answers should be reinforced by the teacher.

3. This time give students thirty seconds to write down as many associations to the stimulus as they can think of. Ask some students for their favorite word, ask others how many they were able to write. Take a show of hands to see who was able to list the most words.

The word association exercises should be done several times before moving to the next set of exercises. Students should be able to do the thirty-second association with ease before they move on to stream of consciousness writing.

Stream of Consciousness Writing

Stream of consciousness writing helps students bypass their—perhaps natural—tendency to carefully consider and

meticulously construct an utterance before articulating it (thus creating a response which is more studied than fluent). Students should be given a set amount of time (starting out with one minute and working up to five minutes) to write in English. They should be given the following directions:

"Take out a pencil (or a pen) and a piece of paper. I'm going to give you ___ minutes and I want you to write in English the entire time. If you can't keep writing about one idea, change to something else. If you can't write sentences, write phrases; and if you can't write phrases, just list words. You must keep writing in English the entire time. I'm not going to collect this so don't be afraid to write something private."

As the students write, the teacher should circulate to keep them on task. It is important that this type of writing be done without reflection. If a student appears to falter, whisper quietly, "Keep writing, don't stop to think." Remind him/her that it is okay just to list words. When the time is up, ask students if they thought the task was hard, if they were able to write sentences the entire time, if they enjoyed the exercise, etc. *Do not* ask them to read what they wrote to the class or share it with others. The purpose of stream of consciousness writing is to avoid the monitoring process; thus, they may write thoughts—or linguistic forms—they would not want anyone else to see.

Extended Writing:

Friday Specials and Personal Journals.

1. Many teachers use short, journal-like writing assignments, but Leemann and Waverly (1977) were the first to use the term "Friday Special." Friday Specials are short, unstructured written assignments designed to focus students on the communication of meaning. The assignment is as follows: "Every Friday you are to turn in to me

approximately three, four, or five sentences in English." (Of course, the teacher should vary the timing of the assignment to meet his/her schedule. A Friday Special could become a Monday Special and/or be due every other week.) Friday Specials are appropriate for students at all levels, even beginners.

The important part of the Friday Special is the teacher's response. These assignments should never be graded; the student simply gets credit for doing them. (I have usually made them worth ten percent of the student's final grade. The student gets an "A" for that ten percent if s/he has turned in all Friday Specials with the grade prorated accordingly.) The teacher should read the Friday Special, correct obvious errors, and then write an appropriate response in English. The teacher's written comment should respond personally to what the student wrote. If the student says she saw a good movie, give your opinion of the same movie, or say that you have not seen it and ask if she thinks you would like it. At the beginning students may have difficulty thinking of something to say and may resort to handing in sentences copied from their textbook. The teacher should respond to these sentences as if they were meant to be communicative, "Oh, why did Robert put the red pen on the table and not the green one?" and then add that you hope that he writes something about himself in the next Friday Special. Besides being excellent language practice, Friday Specials open up a two-way channel of communication between teacher and student, give students individualized reading passages, and generally help teachers get to know their students. I have learned a great deal about student interests, experiences, and difficulties through their Friday Specials, and I feel that these writings make a large contribution toward establishing trust and rapport between teacher and student.

2. Journal writing is a natural extension of Friday Specials for more advanced

students. Students are asked to write at least one paragraph in a personal journal or diary on a regular basis. (To keep the writing from becoming burdensome, I have generally required students to write in the journal only five days a week rather than daily. In that way, they can feel that they occasionally have a night off.) Teachers should respond to journal writing in much the same way as they do to Friday Specials. The teacher can first point out important grammar errors, and then a personal reaction to the content should be written. It is not necessary to respond to every journal entry, just those which interest the teacher or specifically ask for a teacher response. Some general content reaction should also be included at the end of the journal, and sometimes, the teacher might want to add a grammatical explanation for a form the student consistently misused.

One drawback to journal assignments is the time it takes to read and react to them. For that reason, I limit my use of a journal assignment to one class at a time and collect the journals individually instead of the whole class at the same time. In that way, I feel less burdened by reading journals, and my comments are fresher and more spontaneous.

Conclusion

The reader might be surprised that an article purporting to improve students' oral fluency concerns only written exercises. Certainly, the second language literature contains many excellent suggestions for oral activities stressing spontaneous and meaningful language use, and this article does not argue that these activities should be abandoned. Rather, the premise here is that writing provides an additional tool for developing oral skills, one perhaps ideally suited to students who feel self-conscious or uncomfortable expressing themselves in class. Although many of the suggested activities can also be done orally, writing provides a safe and familiar haven for students to experiment with new linguistic forms, important personal messages, or the

communication of complex ideas; students do not have to expose their abortive attempts to other class members or even to the teacher. Thus, written activities can seem less evaluative and threatening. Additionally, written activities can dramatically increase a student's communication opportunities during a single class session. During an oral activity, most students listen while a few students answer personal questions or act out a role-play situation. Even in small group activities, more student time is spent listening than speaking.

Focused writing exercises give students experience using language in novel and meaningful ways within a comfortable context. They can help students move from pattern manipulators to true communicators.

Reference

- Leemann, Elizabeth, and Lynn Waverly. 1977. Communication-based beginning college French: an experiment, pp. 119-129 in Renate Schulz, ed., *Personalizing Foreign Language Instruction: Learning Styles and Teaching Options*. Skokie, IL: National Textbook.

About the Author

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