
Introducing Authentic Audiences Into the Writing Classroom

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In ESL writing classes, we attempt to help our students come to understand more about their own composing processes; we aid them in their struggle to write informatively by guiding them through the writing process: from invention to final written product. We instruct our students in how to use various inventions heuristics to develop ideas on the topics they have chosen to write on. We demonstrate the uses of numerous rhetorical strategies. We discuss revision techniques to clarify written messages. Finally, we show our students how editing will enhance communicative effectiveness.

Yet, with all this guidance, still one of the most difficult aspects of the composing process for ESL students to acquire is the whole complex idea of audience. Many students write clean, but "antiseptic," prose containing no message that a realistic audience could be informed, persuaded, or entertained by. Too often students view their writing instructor as the only audience that will actually read their messages, and, since this instructor grades these written attempts, he/she is more of an evaluator than a realistic reader. What is missing in many of these students' communication attempts is this authentic audience; a reader, or community of readers, who can realistically benefit in some way from the message the writer has tried to communicate.

To instill more audience-awareness in my students, I have designed four writing

assignments that place these students in communicative situations where they must write to authentic audiences.

Pen Pal Letters

The most obvious teaching approach to use in instilling a more concrete sense of audience in ESL students is to allow them to write to a peer reader. In the past I have worked with other ESL instructors to develop pen pal lists.

Each student selects one name from the list of available ESL pen pals; the student is required to pick someone he/she has never met before, and, preferably, someone from a different culture. The writer writes two one-page letters a week to this pen pal.

In the first letter, the writers are asked to discuss what they learned in a class (other than the writing course) that week. In this letter the students practice explaining complex academic terms to an uninformed audience. The writers learn that they must explain key concepts clearly before the audience will understand the subject matter contained in the letter. In the other letter, the writers are asked to write a more personal message. This letter allows the writers to communicate to the same audiences but for a different purpose; this time to entertain or inform.

In both types of letters, the reader plays an active role. Not only must this

audience verify that the writer is communicating the purpose set up in the rhetorical situation, but the reader must also respond with questions about those sections of the first written attempt that are insufficiently detailed to be considered informative. These questions must be written in letter form back to the initial writer. In this way, the reader and writer begin to understand that the effective communication act requires two active participants.

Letters to the Editor

Another assignment to help ESL students understand the importance of audience constraints is to have them write letters to an editor in response to an article they have recently read.

To begin this assignment, I ask my students to keep a response journal; a notebook with one-page responses to articles they have read in English language periodicals (usually current events magazines and newspapers). I ask the students to give the full bibliographic information, to briefly outline the author's views, and, in more detail, to discuss their responses to the author's views.

After two weeks, I collect these journals and search for the entry that demonstrates the most negative reaction to another writer's opinion. I then ask the ESL students to write a letter to the editor of the publication which printed the offending article. In these letters the students must explain why they found the original article offensive, incorrect, or one-sided in its discussion of the event.

I then pass these letters to "intermediate editors" in a native writing class (usually

Advanced Composition). Since I teach writing classes for both native and non-native speakers of English, I usually assign my own advanced native writing classes to take part in this exchange of writing. (When I do not have both types of classes, one of my colleagues who teaches writing to native speakers is always glad to "lend" me students.) These native students then respond to the letter after reading the offending article. These "editors" comment on places where the ESL student has misread or misunderstood the language used in the initial article, and defend the original author's piece by pointing to unclear, illogical, or badly organized writing on the part of the offended reader (the ESL writer). The native students' written comments are then returned with the letters to the ESL students for revision. Only when a thorough revision of this letter to the editor is completed and approved by the "intermediate editor" is it allowed to be sent to the actual editor.

Written Evaluations

Yet another way of getting these students to understand that there are real audiences out there that want to hear ESL students' opinions on matters that both can benefit from, is to have the students write evaluations of their tutorial staff and the materials used to teach them English.

First, I ask the ESL students to write a mid-term evaluation of their academic tutors. These support staff, located in the Writing Center, the Reading Center, the Study Skills Center, or the Language Lab, help my students individually with their various linguistic problems. I ask the students to discuss how they feel about

what they have been doing during their visits to the instructional center, state what they like about their tutoring sessions, and, more importantly, what they do not like in these one-on-one tutoring sessions.

These evaluations are then sent to the directors of the tutoring centers involved. After the directors have read through the evaluations (this type of feedback is usually well-received), the tutors then read the evaluations and respond in writing to the ESL students. Often these mid-term evaluations are helpful in further explaining the reasons why a certain tutoring strategy is used, in reminding the tutors that they are dealing with students from other cultures, and in reinforcing motivation for both tutor and tutee. The ESL evaluator is sent a letter explaining, in greater detail, the rationale for the strategies used to tutor him/her. The process is repeated towards the end of the academic term.

Students are asked to write one other type of evaluation letter—to the author of their composition text. Here the students write about what they like and dislike about the textbook they are using in their writing course. In particular, the students are encouraged to ask questions about the importance or relevance of any section of the book. Then these letters are turned over to my advanced TESOL Methodology course, and the students in this course (future ESOL teachers role-playing the part of the textbook author) are asked to write a letter back to the ESL students, answering all their questions and asking new questions concerning the student's composing processes. The ESL students then gain a clearer picture of the goals of their textbook, and are forced to think how

to communicate information about how they write to an interested audience.

Cross-Cultural Written Discussions

In this assignment, I ask my ESL students to write an essay about one aspect of American culture that they dislike, and explain how it differs from their own culture. This is a topic my ESL students have little trouble writing on, but most of the finished papers are overly emotional and poorly thought out. These papers are then given to a class of American freshmen. In turn, these students write a response paper to my ESL students, explaining why this aspect of American culture is the way it is. Most American freshmen become defensive when their culture is "attacked" and this defensiveness will appear in their written responses to the ESL writers. The American writers will point out weaknesses in the non-native writing style, as well as point out inconsistencies and generalizations in the argument.

I return the original papers with the American responses to the ESL students and ask for a revision. In this revised paper, the ESL student must compare and contrast both customs; this time the audience is another ESL student, who knows neither custom. In this assignment the ESL student gains valuable experience communicating information to two different audiences.

Conclusion

These four assignments are designed to convince my intermediate to advanced level students that there are authentic audiences that want to read their opinions

on issues. Of course, the assignments can be modified for other ESL levels.

I have found all four assignments successful. After completing these tasks, my students now begin many of their later assignments by deciding who can best benefit from the knowledge they wish to communicate on a particular issue, and many of these students realize that this audience-choice will have a

considerable effect on the content of their message.

About the Author

Ray Wallace received his D.A. degree from Illinois State University. He has taught native/non-native writing courses in Illinois, Hawaii, and Tennessee. He is currently an assistant professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.