

TEACHING PRODUCTIVE SKILLS

Language is a thing which is learnt by practice.

Michael West

1 Students often find writing boring and difficult. It's the teacher's job to try and make it more interesting and less frightening.

2 Flexibility, positivity and collaboration can help build students' confidence in both speaking and writing.

3 Before they can do meaningful production, students may require support in developing basic L2 orthographic skills and understanding the structure of the language.

4 Stories (particular folk tales) are an effective way of engaging students and encouraging them to speak and write in L2.

5 Task repetition, and focusing on quantity rather than quality, can help students become more confident L2 users.

Introduction

1 How do your students (from your twaching practice) feel about speaking and writing?

Do they enjoy it? Why / why not?

2 What are the main barriers to your students being able to develop speaking and writing skills?

Teaching speaking and writing

Students may have good grammar, a wide vocabulary, and strong receptive skills in the L2. The main goal of language learning, however, is to be able to say and write what they want to.

**Sowton, C. (2021). Teaching in Challenging Circumstances.
Cambridge University Press.**

**‘1. While learners’ receptive competence continues to develop, their productive competence remains relatively static.
2. Language items that learners recognize and understand in the input they hear do not pass into their productive competence.’**

Jack C.Richards

Feeling bored about writing

Challenge: When students are asked to write about topics they have no interest in, or little knowledge about, it's not surprising they find it boring. Furthermore, some of the classroom techniques traditionally used to teach writing, e.g. copying and dictation, are demotivating. As students are frequently asked to do writing as homework, it becomes a very solitary activity where they get little support or formative feedback.

Solution: Where possible, get students to write about things which they are interested in. Or, if it's a piece of writing from the textbook, ensure that they have enough background information / knowledge to complete the task.

One way to do this is to create a mind map with the whole class on the board before they start the writing.

Writing to somebody also makes the process more interesting and motivating, as there is an audience. Students writing to each other (e.g. short questions and answers) is one way of doing this.

ACTIVITY: Running dictation

is a fantastic, energetic activity which focuses on writing, but uses all four skills. The activity works well either outdoors or indoors.

ACTIVITY: Dictogloss

1 Give students a topic to discuss in groups. The purpose of doing this is to brainstorm relevant ideas and words.

2 The teacher then reads out a short (below 100 words in length) pre-prepared text on this topic (from a book, newspaper, the internet, or written by themselves). Reading should be done at a natural pace, without pauses.

3 In groups, the students try to reconstruct the text together as accurately as they can.

4 If several groups are finding reconstructing the text too difficult, read the text again (possibly at a faster speed).

Suggestions

- **creating a positive, friendly atmosphere:** Many students may be worried about losing face when producing L2, or may feel overwhelmed, nervous, shy or scared when asked to speak. Given this, it's crucial that you create an atmosphere in which mistakes are tolerated, and accepted as a normal part of the language learning process. When students speak, think carefully about error correction. With inexperienced or nervous learners, focus on communication rather than accuracy.

- **making productive tasks flexible:** When setting the level of a task, try to make it slightly beyond their current level. For the reasons described above, students may be risk-averse, and prefer to stay in their comfort zone. This will not help them develop L2 competence. In this way they will be stretching themselves, but only within limits. Be prepared to change the task if needed, for example if it becomes clear that it's too difficult – e.g. you could allow them to do it first in L1, or in a mixture of L1 and L2. And if students are finding it too easy, give them an additional task to do which practises the same language but in a more complex way (e.g. make up a story using the target language, or create a role play).

- **not being afraid of silence or 'thinking time':** Busy teachers needing to 'get through the textbook' often feel pressure to move on quickly, and hurry students. But when speaking, students need time to think of what they want to say. Speaking with others can be a very difficult thing. Silence is actually the sound of thinking. Similarly with writing, asking students to write in a foreign language about a difficult topic can be very scary. It is linguistically and conceptually difficult. Allow students time to think about what they want to write. If you force them to jump straight in, the quality is likely to be poor.

- **emphasizing that students should not worry about their pronunciation or accent:** One reason why students are reluctant to speak is that they think their pronunciation / accent is 'bad', and they are embarrassed by it. In your classroom, try to create an atmosphere where the emphasis is on comprehensibility – i.e. that students can understand each other, rather than that they sound British or American.

Suggestions

- **Supply key language.**
- **Plan activities in advance.**
- **Choose interesting topics.**
- **Create interest in the topic.**
- **Activate schemata.**
- **Vary topics and genre.**
- **Provide necessary information.**

Resources:

Welcome - Professor Jack C. Richards <https://www.professorjackrichards.com/>

Sowton, C. (2021). *Teaching in Challenging Circumstances*. Cambridge University Press.

Harmer J. (2021) *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Pearson.