

**SEARCHING FOR AUTHENTIC CONTENT IN WRITING BEFORE  
SEARCHING FOR FORM**

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**Abstract:**

This paper will focus on the importance and priority that searching for ideas, concepts, meanings or images has over searching for the appropriate form to translate them. This order of priorities is especially important for ESL adults. The reason for this will be discussed and emphasis is going to be given to the pre-writing stage. A stage where content, authentic content which really communicates the voice of the writer, is to be searched. Finally some activities for guiding the search for content will be suggested.

Two years ago one of my advanced ESL classes was having a final composition exam, and blank paper for writing it was provided by the Center\*. When I was distributing the white sheets one of my students told me that she would rather have ruled, lined paper, and I, anticipating the reason for her request, suggested: "So that you can write straight?" to which she answered: "No, it is because at least there is something there."

This anecdote reveals two common issues related to writing: first, that there is indeed something intimidating about the fact of having to face a white paper. Second, that the act of composing is for some ESL students a matter of solely filling a page with something, in this case with letters and words. This last idea denies the very essence of the writing activity because its main aims and functions are: to discover and explore ideas, and to communicate them to someone.

This paper will focus on the importance of the ideas, concepts, meanings, or images which need to be translated into written English and which, in other words, need to be conveyed through the medium of writing. Three main issues associated with this idea will be explored. First that the content has primacy over form, and this order of priorities is important for ESL students, specifically adults. Second, that searching for content is a complex process which starts in the prewriting stage. Third, there is a need for content, but not any kind of content, but relevant and authentic one. Finally, some activities for guiding the search for content will be suggested.

There are inherent characteristics and difficulties in the writing process which are shared by L1 and L2 learners but in different degrees. One of the main problems is

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finding what to say or what else to say to develop an idea. This problem has been identified by various scholars: Young (1981) and Rouse (1979) are among them. Young (1981:65) considers that finding what to say is a problem that students have to discover and to create. He writes,

The discovery of a significant problem and the discovery of a reasonable solution are or can be exciting and intrinsically rewarding activities, and they provide strong incentives for communication. Once students have been adequately instructed, they have little trouble with the traditional problem of composition courses - finding something to say. Adequate instruction includes not only instruction in the nature and articulation of problems but sharpening the student's awareness of his own cognitive life and encouraging him to believe that events in it are worthy and appropriate subjects for investigation.

Rouse (1979:2) also makes an observation when analyzing an example of student writing offered by Shaughnessy (1977:7-8:)

Start 1

Seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infant.

Start 2

I agree that seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to a infants. A infants heres a strange sound such as work mother, he then acc

Start 8

I agree and disagree that seeing and hearing have a different wuality for infants than for grownups, because to see and hear for infants its all so new and mor appreciate, bu also feel that a child parent appreciate the sharing.

Start 10

I disagree I fell that seeig and hearing has the same quality to both infants and parents. I learing and seeing is such a grat quality to infants and parents and they both appreciate; just because there aren't that

many painters or musicians around doesn't mean that infants are more sensitive to beautiful than their parents.

Rouse (cited before) deduces that the failure at attempting to start a paragraph "do not illustrate the students' fear of making error but rather his desperate effort to find something to say about the assigned topic." The student even took one position and then another in order to find whether agreeing or disagreeing would provide or generate the most words.

The problem that this basic writer had echoes the problem that ESL students very often have. They take any position, or reproduce any ideas, clichés, or stereotyped conceptions in order to fill the page. Sometimes, they also use the strategy of avoidance, simply avoiding a juicy topic for fear of not being able to find the correct structures and of making errors.

What results from this attitude is a pile of compositions which do not reflect the author's real voice. Students may have been forced, by threat of criticism, to say what they do not believe or feel. They might have chosen to write anything, regardless of what their true feelings on the topic are, in order to fulfill a requirement, to hand in an assignment. Truth and authenticity, however, are important concepts in composition:

Teachers must not make the mistake of thinking that true and false are meaningless terms for composition... To pretend to care, to pretend to believe, to pretend to know, are the most common violations of truth in student writing. Any kind of writing fiction or non-fiction. ...one must care-care for the truth, care for the audience, care for one's own integrity.  
(Commiaion on English, 1965:85)

It is, therefore, important to search for content, not any content, but the one that reflects the student's own feelings towards a topic. Students have to decide first of all

whether or not they are willing to write about a given topic. They have to discover if it is important for them. A given topic, however, can become important for them as a result of giving it some thought and looking for their own real point of view about it. This point of view may be found while looking for content or while writing. Students should also be given the possibility or opportunity of choosing either any topic or one from a given list. The act of choosing is very important and it is the essence of freedom. Once students have freely chosen a topic, a feeling of commitment will appear together with a personal desire to get engaged in the complex process of writing.

Becoming engaged in the writing process should start with another process: searching for content. Doing or skipping this preliminary process will make the whole difference between a successful energetic piece of writing or an unsuccessful, unconvincing one.

The issue of searching for content has also been identified as a central one by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1971:15) who comment: "By their own reports, children's problems in generating text are mainly problems of finding content, not of finding language to express it." Some say that Bereiter and Scardamalia are dealing with first language children which is a different situation from working with ESL adults. Some may say that adults have already mastered the content and the real problem is that they do not have the language to express it.

I would argue with this, saying that in my experience because of the tremendous concern students have with structure and mechanics, their goals tend to be very low. They block their vision for seeing a whole picture of their composition, and for searching for content that they in fact do have. This does not imply that form is not important because it is. But the search for forms or the search for better structures to say what one has to say has to come after the search for content.

Teachers and students have to allocate time for this process to take place. It will take place in a stage called,



simply, by many authors, a prewriting stage. Murray (1978: 375) considers that "Writing teachers should give careful attention to what happens between the moment the writer receives an idea or an assignment and the moment the first completed draft is begun."

A complicated process takes place during this stage in which Long-Term Memory plays a very important role because "The richness and accuracy of materials in LTM affect both ease of writing and quality of the product." (Nold 1981:69) A main problem with LTM is getting access to the knowledge writers have; they have to be aware that they do have relevant knowledge stored in their Long-Term Memory. Flower and Hayes (1981:371) define Long Term Memory as:

The writer's long-term memory, which can exist in the mind as well as in outside resources such as books, is a storehouse of knowledge about the topic and audience, as well as knowledge of writing plans and problem representations. Sometimes a single cue in an assignment... can let a writer tap a stored representation of a problem and bring a whole raft of writing plans into play.

Flower and Hayes include the outside resources in the writer's long-term memory. Let us consider now two types of knowledge: the knowledge which exists inside the writer's mind, and the knowledge which can be gathered from external sources. These types of knowledge could be called: monitored knowledge and unmonitored knowledge. The monitored knowledge may be retrieved by using for example relevant questions such as: What do I know about this topic? Who will be my audience? How do I want my audience to react? How could I expand my main idea? Which example could illustrate my idea best? Do I need more information to make my point clear and explicit?

The unmonitored knowledge has to be searched for in books, in other people's conversation, and in discussions. What could also be unknown or new are the relationships that one idea may have to another. This constitutes a very im-

portant part of the prewriting stage as well as the writing stage itself. The fact that writers discover relationships and meaning is the creative characteristic of writing and this discovery can happen consciously, but also unconsciously. The only circumstance in which the discovery of meaning happens unconsciously is when one has time, adequate time for incubation. it is known that many expert writers delay the act of writing: "...they walk, drive, make unnecessary calls, nap, daydream, and try not to 'consciously' think about what they are going to write so they can think subconsciously about it." (Murray 1978:376)

Teachers should give students time to think, and probably let them go home with a task, not of handing in a perfect composition, but of having the topic in mind and being receptive to any information relevant to the subject which they happen to encounter. This will happen in a natural way, students will find significance in what they observe, overhear, read, think or remember. Murray (1978:376) has observed that "The writer becomes a magnet for specific details, insights, anecdotes, statistics, connecting thoughts and references." As a consequence of this active but sometimes unconscious search for content, the writer will feel more involved, more concerned, and the information gathered and listed in whatever manner he wishes, will need to be written, will need to be communicated. The information, the new connection cannot remain unexpressed. It is important for the writer because he/she has discovered them and somebody else has to share this discovery and react to what has to be said.

At this point the ESL student will feel the drive to communicate, and may be willing to struggle and work hard with the language in order to convey the message. Their search for content, and their writing is personal, and in spite of the fact that others have written about the same topic and have thought about the problem, it is not until they engage in the process that they discover meaning for themselves. After gathering the information and selecting the most relevant, students have to take the role of a writer. The role of a writer entails interpreting the surrounding reality, and giving order to the chaos, giving a

certain focus to the confusion. In other words bringing meaning to the world and illuminating a point with their own light. Because the ordering and organization of the reality, images or ideas is done in the writer's own way, all writing is personal. Writing, therefore, is personal not only when describing a personal experience but also when writing to learn, when responding to a reading in a journal, when writing a description or an argument.

The quest for content and the generation of ideas is, in the majority of cases, a personal, solitary and individual task, and should be practised as such by students. Nevertheless, our class situation provides us with other ways of approaching the prewriting stage. There are some activities which take advantage of the infinite possibilities of working in a group and as a group. Example:

A) Class discussion and debate.- If the mode in which we want students to write is argumentation, then class discussion or debate helps to bring out the pros and cons of a subject. Students can take note of them and then take their own position making a selection from ideas brought out in the discussion.

Rhetorical invention seems to be specially helpful when dealing with argumentation but can serve other purposes as well:

Invention may refer not only to classical invention (which provides formal procedures for determining the status of an argument, discovering possible ways of developing it, and adapting it to specific audiences), but also to other formal methods designed to aid in retrieving information, forming concepts, analysing complex events, and solving certain kinds of problems. (Young 1978:32)

There is a need to reevaluate rhetorical invention, and make use of it as a tool and guide during the crucial stage of prewriting.



B) Brainstorming.- This activity can also have the form of a discussion or may be only a matter of contributing ideas. It can be handled in small teams or the whole group can explore an idea. Instructors should elicit as many workable schemes as possible. Brainstorming can also be carried out, as Bereiter and Scardamalia (1971:20) point out, by listing topical ideas or by writing single words that might be used in the composition. ESL students may even write this vocabulary in their first language, what is important is not to lose it. This listing of ideas does not necessarily have to be an outline.

Teaching students to outline their essays before they actually write them is a common practice which presumes that writing is a uni-directional process of recording pre-stored, pre-digested ideas. While it is certainly true that much of an essay can be planned in advance, one must also recognize that the very act of writing can itself serve to facilitate thought and shape ideas. (Taylor 1981:5)

The listing, therefore, should not constitute an outline as conventionally regarded; it may take the form of note taking. The ideas should not be written in complete or polished sentences, because there is a danger of taking the first sentence as the theme or being carried out by form concerns. It is important to write only words or phrases and to write any ideas without worrying about introduction, body and conclusion. There are students who want to use some natural strategies such as brainstorming, but which may differ from the ones taught at school. They are in conflict with themselves, they may try to remember a set of rules of paper production while writing. To illustrate this point some observations by Flower and Haynes (1981:55) can be considered:

In one student's protocol, her plans for producing a paper take precedence over any plans for exploring the topic, thus dictating a plan for generating ideas that is in conflict with the basic nature of the generating process as we see it. After a number of false starts, stops, and panics, she finally entered into a very productive session of brainstorming,

generating a series of ideas and examples that proved her point. Then suddenly in the middle, she broke off brainstorming with the comment, 'I'm just listing things. This is a rip.' Judging from the rest of the protocol, Pat simply threw that entire body of ideas away. It didn't look like a paper. Later, when asked to evaluate the generating she had done in the hour, her vigorous criticisms of herself showed an image of idea-generation based on the rules of paper production: coherence, focus, no listing, no repetition, no wandering from point to point. Yet these are some of the activities which are essential to thoughtful and creative generation. Here the writer's plan for constructing a paper was narrowing her intellectual options and stifling the very process she needed to undertake before she began to produce a text.

Teachers should help students to feel self-confident when they are generating thoughts in a disorganized way; only writing words full of content. These ideas should not be thrown away, on the contrary, they should be recorded because as writers record thoughts they create new ideas. Once a paper it is easy to discard the useless ideas, but it is almost impossible to recapture the lost ones.

C).- Meaning can be discovered cooperatively with peers.- Much can be discovered when somebody listens to us and we talk about a subject. The opinion of a listener may or may not be expected or needed, but attention is essential. Teachers should teach students how to listen to each other attentively. By talking to a good listener, students may discover how swiftly ideas will come to their minds and how soon they will start to organize them.

As all of us have experienced many times, simple verbalization in friendly discourse often leads to insight. Therefore much of the benefit of a peer writing group involved in writing invention derives not only from specific peer response but simply from peer presence, from an audience interested in what one has to say.

These three activities will provide a good starting

point for teaching composition to ESL students. It has been reported by Zamel (1981:199) that: "All the students interviewed talked about the importance of classroom discussion specifically related to a particular topic and how these discussions helped them delineate their ideas." The prewriting stage is especially important for ESL writers because they will not only retrieve content from long-term memory, but also information about convention and schemas. Some time during the composition class should be given to describing and exploring conventions, schemas, and the process of writing itself. All this information will determine the kind of content needed. It was observed by Hayes and Flower (1983: 208) that "... what counts in writing is not what the writer may be said to know but what he or she is able, or chooses, to draw from memory during the act of composing."

To conclude I would like to point out that it is of major importance that teachers really believe in the priority of content, true authentic content, over form. This should be reflected in their way of organizing the course, and also in their responses to written compositions which should always include a response to content and to the effectiveness of conveying meaning, before a response to mechanics.

Appropriate time should be given to the essential stage of prewriting because searching for information, like all complex activities, requires time and attention.

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