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Let's Talk about It: Strategies for Integrating Writing and Speaking in the Classroom

Each of the four language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—plays an important role in language learning, and successful teaching can benefit from including a combination of these skills in the classroom. This article shares strategies for integrating speaking into a writing-focused course, with the goal of improving students' competency in both language skills. Instructors have the potential to include speaking through a variety of activities, creating a student-centered classroom that incorporates communicative language teaching and task-based cooperative learning.

WRITING AND SPEAKING IN THE CLASSROOM

Although instructors often teach writing as a separate skill, the integration of speaking and writing has sparked interest among English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and researchers at the same time that the practice of teaching writing has evolved in the classroom (Hubert 2011). Earlier, proponents of the process theory understood writing as an individual activity, as learners moved through the stages of the writing process. However, authors such as Atkinson and Weissberg emphasize the importance of social and cultural contexts in the teaching of writing. Atkinson (2002) describes language acquisition as a social experience that occurs in relation to the broader world, while Weissberg (2006) argues that second-language writing is best acquired through a dialogue classroom model that builds on social interaction.

Although speaking and writing differ, Harmer (2001) identifies key similarities between the two skills, including the need to structure language, follow rules and norms, employ different styles depending on the context, interact with an audience, and use strategies such as improvising and paraphrasing in order to manage difficulty. Together, these perspectives demonstrate the potential benefits of teaching both speaking and writing.

THE ROLE OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Many activities presented in this article involve cooperative learning, where students work in pairs or groups to reach learning goals. Research suggests that relevant, group-centered lessons result in more-powerful language acquisition than teacher-led instruction alone, and that task-based learning leads to increased student motivation (Moss and Ross-Feldman 2003). Activities that

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require students to collaborate in pairs or small teams create low-pressure and high-involvement environments that encourage students to practice conversation and step outside their comfort zones.

When incorporating cooperative learning in a lesson, teachers may find it helpful to begin by creating clear expectations about how students should form groups, the appropriate volume level to use while speaking, how to take turns, and how to handle disagreement. Use the board to introduce target language that might be necessary for group communication, and give students the opportunity to ask clarifying questions about the task. After groups begin their work, circulate around the classroom, assist with conversations, answer questions, and listen to discussions without creating pressure or paying undue attention to students' grammar mistakes.

To facilitate participation, you can try assigning each group member a specific role. For example, in a group of four, students may be assigned the role of English monitor (to make sure group members use English as much as possible), recorder (to record main points from the group's discussion), reporter (to share the group's findings with the class), and participation monitor (to make sure every student is included in the conversation).

Yusuf and Adeoye (2012, 323) identify the hallmarks of a thinking classroom as "tolerance, dialogue, negotiation, care, active participation, and respect for each other's opinion." With these qualities in mind, one idea is to reserve the end of class for reflection about the day's group work through individual written responses and whole-class discussion. For example, ask students to reflect on how well group members worked together, listened to one another, spoke persuasively, and reached an agreement.

Cooperative learning presents an opportunity to cultivate these traits and strengthen the quality of speaking in the classroom—all while creating a foundation for writing activities. The remainder of this article presents seven types of activities with these goals in mind (see the Appendix for a list of included activities).

1. WARM-UPS

A classroom warm-up is a low-pressure task intended to help students recall concepts from previous classes or activate prior knowledge ahead of the day's activities. Dedicating time at the beginning of class to a warm-up also presents an opportunity for student speaking.

Example activities
- Create a visual idea map about the day's topic. Write the topic in the center of the board, then ask students to discuss what they know about the topic and what more they would like to learn. For example, if the focus of the day is writing an analytical essay, have students spend two minutes at the start of class individually writing down everything that comes to mind when they think of essay writing. Then, ask students to turn to a partner to share what they wrote down, what they are most interested in, and why. Finally, give each pair an opportunity to write two of their points on the board.

- Direct students to fill-in a K-W-L chart, detailing what they know (K) and want to learn (W) about the day's topic, before sharing their charts with a neighbor. At the end of class, students should complete the third column—what they learned (L)—and share aloud in small groups or as a class.

- Ask each student a quick question of the day while taking attendance. These questions can be informal—such as, "What is your favorite

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hobby?"—or on-theme with the topic of the course. If the focus of the day is personal narrative writing using the past tense, questions such as, "What was one thing you were afraid of when you were younger?" and "What is a memory you are proud of?" will prime students for the language they will use later in class. If the focus of the day is developing an argument through writing, begin by asking students their opinion about a certain dish or restaurant. In asking these questions, you should give students freedom in the way they answer to make sure the students are not afraid to make mistakes in front of the class.

- The game "Name Ten," in which students compile a list of ten items that fit the day's category (such as countries whose names begin with vowels, types of transportation, and jobs that require using one's hands), offers another warm-up possibility. As one example, if students will be using similes and metaphors in their writing and the day's category is "Name ten things that are uncomfortable," encourage students to think of a simile that represents an item on their list. Ask them to share their ideas with one another. If an item on a student's list is "wet shoes," he or she could share with a neighbor the simile, "My shoes are as wet as an umbrella on a rainy day."

- Similar to the K-W-L chart, entrance and exit slips, on which students respond to a specific question when entering or exiting the classroom, present an opportunity to activate prior knowledge, formulate questions about the day's topic, synthesize what was learned, and practice speaking through sharing (Waters 2014). While many classrooms use entrance and exit

slips as an informal assessment related to the day's lesson, the slips can present a speaking opportunity if the teacher allows students to discuss their answers for two or three minutes with a partner before handing in the responses to the teacher.

2. WRITING TO SPEAK AND SPEAKING TO WRITE

One way to include speaking and writing in the same lesson is to incorporate activities that require writing in preparation for carrying out a speaking task, or speaking in preparation for carrying out a writing task. These activities can often mirror real-world scenarios that students may one day pursue in their careers.

Example activities

- Have students work in groups to draft an original role play or advertisement to share in front of the class, based on a given scenario. For example, explain that each group must make a pitch about a new, fictional invention or product of their own design that will be judged by the rest of the class. Drafting the script in advance of sharing enables students to prepare their thoughts ahead of time, allowing them to build confidence before speaking. By developing the idea in groups, students have an opportunity for conversation practice. At the end of the activity, return to writing by having students write reviews, explaining what they liked about each group's presentation.

- Another activity that draws on writing in preparation for speaking is to have students participate in a mock debate or press conference. First, have students write position papers, taking different stances on

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an issue facing their community, such as strategies for fighting pollution or traffic congestion. Divide the class into groups that include students representing each position. Then, direct students within each group to share their perspectives with the goal of reaching a compromise or finding common ground. Alternatively, to replicate a press conference, assign a group of students to represent members of the city council while others represent different stakeholder groups—journalists, business leaders, and leaders of organizations—responding to a problem facing the community. Students then use their position papers as a foundation to ask questions with the goal of uncovering the truth about the situation. Following both activities, give time for students to write responses describing the results. These could take the form of a newspaper article, a memorandum to a government official, or—more informally—a reflection on the experience of engaging in the activity itself.

- Have students interview one another and compose peer biographies. Sample guiding questions such as, "What are your partner's hobbies?" and "What does your partner want to pursue for a career?" can lay the groundwork for the students. After interviewing a partner, each student writes a short biography about her or his peer. Then, have students share brief highlights of their biographies aloud in small groups or with the entire class. For high school or university-aged students who may be applying for jobs in the near future, direct students to write their own cover letters describing their qualifications for a fictional position. Then, have students take turns as the interviewer and the job candidate in a formal interview.

3. SHARING PERSONAL OPINIONS

Activities that call for sharing personal opinions provide opportunities for speaking practice without stepping far away from a course's focus on writing. Learners should understand that the process of forming an opinion and supporting it with evidence does not change whether they are speaking or writing. The best opinion-sharing activities do not highlight a correct answer. Instead, they emphasize students' ability to defend an argument, listen to peers, and make compromises. Activities can be used first to prompt verbal discussion and then to spark ideas for writing after students complete the initial speaking tasks.

Example activities
- One favorite activity that calls for group problem solving is "To the Moon!" (see Burkhalter 2011). For this lesson, display or distribute a list of ten fictional volunteers for a mission to the moon, along with limited information about each volunteer. Ask students to individually choose the four volunteers they believe would be the best fit for the mission, then defend their choices in small groups, working with their peers to develop consensus and consider their initial assumptions. Burkhalter presents several ideas for writing assignments to be completed following this activity, including having students write newspaper articles outlining the group's decision, letters to a candidate who was chosen or to a candidate who was not chosen, or a memorandum to a government official.

- Another opinion-based critical-thinking activity is the "Lost at Sea" team-building game (see Knox n.d.). Ask students to imagine they are stranded in the middle of

the ocean on a small lifeboat and are given a list of ten to 15 objects (such as rope, fuel, candy bars, and mosquito nets). Have students individually rank the objects from most useful to least useful for the purpose of survival, and then ask students to work together in small groups to defend their views and agree on a final ranking. At the end of the exercise, students should write personal reflections about their group's experience—what it was like to reach a compromise, given the range of views expressed by members of their group.

- Through his town-meetings activity, Brookes (1993) presents a method for including speaking in writing courses. Twice a week, he asked two students to speak to the class for three minutes about an issue or subject they cared about, encouraging follow-up questions by members of the class as a way to spark discussion. This strategy can serve as a foundation for students to write and share their own "This I Believe" essays (see www.thisibelieve.org). Have students interview one another about their beliefs, asking questions such as, "Why is this belief important to you?" Forming and defending arguments aloud can be especially helpful when students are practicing writing argumentative essays or thesis statements.

- Short stories and thought-provoking proverbs can also become activity starters for defending opinions. Introduce a short story as part of class or have students read a short story, and then ask students to share their opinions in small groups about themes or characters. Afterward, task students with writing their own stories. Alternatively, introduce a pair of seemingly contradictory proverbs (for example, "The pen is mightier than the sword" and "Actions speak louder than words"). Ask students to describe in writing what each of these expressions means to them and which one they identify with more strongly. Have students share their thinking in small groups. Finally, ask students to write and share proverbs of their own.

4. ANALYZING AND CREATING WRITTEN WORK IN GROUPS

Analyzing examples of written work has the potential to help students understand new forms of writing before they begin writing on their own. When introducing a specific writing genre or structure, whether it is a paragraph, a letter, or an analytical essay, teachers can incorporate speaking into the lesson by asking students to work in pairs or small groups to analyze a pre-written example. This strategy connects to the research of Ranker (2009, 580), who finds that a combination of teacher instruction and "extended and collaborative experiences with reading and writing texts within the genre" is important when introducing a new writing genre.

Example activities
- After introducing the personal narrative genre, give students a short example of a personal narrative essay. Ask them to read the essay individually to ensure that everyone is prepared to contribute to a discussion. In groups, have the students analyze the essay to identify the characteristics of a personal narrative that had been introduced earlier in the lesson. Other tasks could include describing what the writer of the example essay did well and suggesting how the writer might improve the essay. As a guide, list questions for group discussion on the board; these can be broad, such as, "Based on our knowledge of the personal narrative form, what did this writer do well?" Or they can be more specific; for example, "Why do you think the writer chose to begin a new paragraph where she or he did?" Simpler questions could include, "What did you like best about the narrative?" This question allows everyone to respond but also leaves room for students to go into as much detail as they are able to. Sharing as a class at the end of the period offers another opportunity for students to articulate aloud what they discussed in groups.

- In addition to working together to analyze and discuss writing examples, students

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can work in pairs or groups to practice fundamental writing skills, using their English speaking skills along the way. Hosseinpour and Biria (2014) find that writing through task-based collaboration can improve the quality of English-language learners' writing in areas that include content, organization, grammar, and vocabulary. Collaborative writing tasks may range from exploratory activities that build critical-thinking skills to the composition of formal pieces of writing. For example, when teaching a class on supporting details in a paragraph, you might give a strip of paper with a different sentence to each student in a group and ask group members to work together to place the sentences in a logical order, according to a given topic sentence. This activity requires students to communicate verbally to carry out the task. A representative or representatives of the group should then justify their choices to the class or to another group that they join following their own group discussion. Alternatively, have students engage in dialogue in pairs or groups to develop topic sentences, closing sentences, thesis statements, or longer forms of writing, practicing speaking at the same time as they become more familiar with specific writing structures.

5. STUDENTS AS TEACHERS

One strategy for building a student-centered classroom is to give students the opportunity to teach one another. In schools where classrooms tend to be teacher-centered, the chance for students to act as a teacher among peers may help them feel empowered as learners.

Example activities
- Have students work in pairs or groups to review content from the previous class or the prior week. If the topic of a previous

class was how to brainstorm ideas before writing, ask each student to interview a partner about key takeaways from the lesson or how the lesson relates to a current writing assignment. For beginner speakers, try assigning a specific topic for each partner to explain. Students should aim to synthesize and explain their notes to their partner or group members rather than read them word for word. Simple guiding questions and prompts such as, "What was one specific lesson we learned in the last class?" and "Explain to your partner the structure of a paragraph as we talked about in the last class" can help initiate conversation. Pair these prompts with target language written on the board to help students formulate answers.

- Try using a similar framework as a strategy for reviewing material before assessments. For this activity, divide the class into groups and assign each group the responsibility of working as a team to become experts on a specific test or quiz topic. After a period of preparation, ask each group to share the main points of their discussion aloud with the rest of the class. Or use the jigsaw model to rearrange students into new groups and have them share the content of their initial discussions with their new group members (for more on the jigsaw technique, see www.jigsaw.org).

6. PEER-TO-PEER SHARING THROUGHOUT THE WRITING PROCESS

The steps of the writing process offer multiple opportunities for students to practice speaking. Beyond creating space for student talk time, peer review enables students to gain feedback about their writing, fosters an attitude that they can continually improve their work, and emphasizes reflection rather than a final outcome—a quality that

distinguishes both stronger writers and more-active learners (Anson 2000). While each writer approaches her or his writing individually and no two writing processes are alike, teachers often introduce a common series of steps to demonstrate writing as a process (Warne 2008).

Stages in the writing process

- *Brainstorming.* At this early stage, students should work together in pairs, in groups, or even as a class to generate thoughts about a writing assignment before they begin working on their own. For example, facilitate class-wide brainstorming by eliciting ideas from students and writing them on the board. Alternatively, ask students to carry out the same activity in pairs or small groups, encouraging students to ask questions in order to push their peer's thinking and generate additional ideas. If students first brainstorm individually, have them share their brainstorming ideas in pairs or groups.

- *Outlining.* Following initial brainstorming, while creating a more detailed and structured outline, students should use speaking in pairs or groups as an opportunity to explain their outlines and receive and offer feedback. By describing their work, students are required to articulate their ideas aloud and, in the process, hone their argument and supporting details. In exchange, by listening and responding, their peers can practice critical thinking and the skill of giving positive and constructive feedback. Finally, by helping to improve another student's work, students gain insight into potential areas of opportunity in their own writing.

- *Peer review of drafts.* Peer review of drafts is a further opportunity for students to practice their speaking while offering feedback to peers, a process shown to improve drafts in EFL classrooms (Hu and Lam 2010; Birjandi and Hadidi Tamjid 2012). In a peer-review lesson, students pair together, and partners exchange drafts and offer feedback to each other. Feedback

can relate to spelling and grammar, but it should also emphasize comments about style, ordering of ideas, and content. Have students refer to a worksheet or rubric to help them think through and record ideas as they read their partner's draft (for more information on peer review and creating rubrics, see this resource developed by McGill University: https://www.mcgill.ca/tls/files/tls/pa-resource-doc-final.pdf). Emphasize to students the importance of explaining comments to their partner when it is their turn to provide feedback. In return, encourage the writer of the essay to ask follow-up questions to the reviewer, with the goal of engaging in a conversation about the written work. The students should exchange their completed peer-review worksheets to guide future revisions.

- *Sharing final drafts.* At this stage in the writing process, incorporate speaking and create the sense of there being an audience by asking students to share their work aloud with a partner or members of a group. For longer writing assignments, encourage students to synthesize their writing rather than read it aloud. Have members of each group ask clarifying questions or share their initial reactions. Alternatively, ask students to form small groups, trade papers, and describe aloud one part of their peers' work that they found interesting.

7. PICTURES AND MEDIA AS LAUNCHPADS FOR BRAINSTORMING

Pictures and other media can further student engagement and spark ideas for writing. Media enable students to activate prior knowledge about a topic and strengthen the connection between the classroom and outside experiences. These activities can be fun and engaging, and they will facilitate creative thinking, listening, speaking, and writing practice.

Example activities

- Use a picture or photograph as the foundation for a chain story, where each student contributes a sentence aloud based

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on the picture, adding to the sentences of his or her peers while the teacher or a student records each sentence on the board. After one or two rounds, the students will have written their own class-wide chain story. (*Picture US*, published by the U.S. Department of State, is a source for photographs that can be used in this activity.) In larger classes, have students carry out the same activity in small groups by providing each group with a different picture and directing a member to record the group's story on a piece of paper.

- A picture or photograph, presented together with an example piece of writing, can serve as the foundation for a partner or group discussion about the writing's meaning—all while helping to inspire students' own written work. A lesson plan by the Academy of American Poets centered on Walt Whitman's poem *Mannahatta* uses a print and a photograph of Manhattan, a borough in New York City, to help students make observations and engage in discussion about imagery before they read the poem itself (see Holzer 2014). To guide the discussion, prompt students with questions such as, "What does this photograph show?"; "How does the photograph relate to the poem?"; and "What about this poem do you not understand?" After discussing the visuals and then the poem, students can write their own poems about a place that is important to them.

- Play a thought-provoking audio clip and ask students to share their reactions in small groups, and use these conversations as a departure point for writing. Before writing personal narratives, for example, have students listen to and read other narratives—and use those as a foundation

for brainstorming and sharing their own stories with peers (see www.storycorps.org and www.themoth.org for examples of personal stories). Direct students to work together to write a song after listening to or watching an example song or video (see *American Rhythms* songs and accompanying activities at AmericanEnglish.state.gov/resources/american-rhythms). Or play a news clip about current events and ask students to individually write down a brief proposal for how to solve a real-world problem. Students should then interview one another about their ideas or present the ideas in groups (see LearningEnglish.voanews.com for current-events materials for English language learners).

CONCLUSION

Emphasizing both speaking and writing in the classroom allows teachers to make lessons more dynamic while creating an opportunity for students to practice multiple forms of communication. According to Costa and Kallick (2008), asking students to apply what they learn to contexts beyond the original task creates opportunities for higher-level thinking to occur. By incorporating speaking and writing together, teachers are able to link the two language skills and build competency in ways that are relevant outside school.

For teachers and students who are not used to integrating speaking into a writing course, these activities may initially feel challenging. If so, try beginning with a smaller activity, such as a warm-up, or by applying the think-pair-share technique to activities in the students' course textbook (Green 2000). For example, if a textbook lesson calls for students to write a paragraph on a given topic, ask students to brainstorm individually and then share their brainstorming with a partner before writing.

Then, have students describe their completed writing aloud in small groups. These small changes will go a long way toward integrating multiple language skills, all while drawing on existing course materials.

Always look for opportunities to say, "Let's talk about it" to students. Incorporating speaking into the English classroom is an important way to make the curriculum relevant, reinforce key verbal skills, and ultimately prepare students for real-world success with the target language. A student-centered approach may require shifts in teaching practice and giving a certain amount of control to the learners, but it promises to be a rewarding experience for everyone involved.

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APPENDIX

List of Example Activities

1. Warm-ups
   - Idea map
   - K-W-L chart
   - Question-of-the-day during attendance
   - Name Ten
   - Entrance and exit slips

2. Writing to Speak and Speaking to Write
   - Role play or advertisement
   - Mock debate or press conference
   - Peer biographies and interviews

3. Sharing Personal Opinions
   - To the Moon!
   - Lost at Sea
   - Town meetings and "This I Believe" essays
   - Short stories and proverbs

4. Analyzing and Creating Written Work in Groups
   - Analysis of writing examples
   - Collaborative writing tasks

5. Students as Teachers
   - Review of content from the previous class
   - Becoming experts on topics for an upcoming test or quiz

6. Peer-to-Peer Sharing Throughout the Writing Process
   - Brainstorming
   - Outlining
   - Peer review of drafts
   - Sharing final drafts

7. Pictures and Media as Launchpads for Brainstorming
   - Chain story and other picture-based activities
   - Visuals alongside written work: for example, Walt Whitman's *Mannahatta*
   - Audio as an example for writing: StoryCorps, The Moth, *American Rhythms*, and VOA News