
Teaching vs Telling

By A. Andrew Wood

After one semester of teaching English III, I quickly agreed with the objective shared by my fellow instructors. They all saw that the challenge for the course was to prevent students from copying the letter from the book onto their homework or worse, memorizing parts to use on the test. The essence of this issue is not that the work is being taken from the book rather that *our goal is to teach our students to think creatively and originally in English in a business context*. In this discussion paper, I plan to explain three methods I have used to guide my students through the writing experience.

For those of you who are not familiar with the English III course, the process is quite standard. First, we explain the context of a certain type of letter, then we elaborate and lecture on different parts or aspects of the letter and finally, we show the students a sample letter. As you can assume correctly, the content for my exercises are particular to English III, but this approach to writing is applicable to all the different levels as there are many different situations to write about. Furthermore, my comments (I hope) can benefit all the levels of the Department.

After we provide the basic instruction, the students are given a different topic from the sample letter, but instructed to follow the same format. For example, if the sample letter was requesting chairs for a nursery school, the homework or writing assignment might be a request for office supplies for a new office downtown. Nevertheless, the students, as we have found, have a tendency to copy the sample letter almost verbatim, replacing a few words from the example to the homework. At this point, the instructor reads 30 letters that are nearly identical to the sample.

At first it was easy for me to think that the students were just copying the letter for expediency, which was slightly discouraging. However, the more I work with these students, the more I begin to realize that many of them are not copying out of laziness or carelessness, rather that they are doing the best they could with the steps I give them. In other words, they do their work the only way I showed them how. Can we honestly expect them to behave any different?

Upon realizing this (or even just by assuming this attitude), I was able to differentiate between teaching and telling. When I was showing them parts of the letter and explaining the context of the letter, I was just *telling* them about the letter. When we turned to the example, I would read it aloud and highlight certain points, but I was still only telling them about the letter. In contrast, to *teach* means to actively guide them, step-by-step, from the beginning to the end of the entire process. Only then can we equip them with the ability to break out of the copying mindset.

A simple analogy: imagine someone “teaching” you how to cook food, but only giving you the ingredients of the dish, directions to make it and a taste of the final product. You might be able to create something similar on your own, but it would be far more advantageous to actually cut the vegetables together, stir the soup together and add the spices together with simple, informative comments being exchanged the entire time. Instructions are “things”; they are inert. Education is an activity; it has action and energy, which facilitates a learning experience.

There are three main activities that I have been trying to incorporate more into my lectures and they are quite simple, but provide enough of a guide for students to cross the gap from imitating to creating. This gives them confidence that they are writing an appropriate response without relying on a reproduction of the sample. Slowly, I began to feel that they were copying out of confusion and that they might be able to be taught to use their own originality while staying within the guidelines.

The first thing I changed comes immediately after the lecture. We go over the letter together as normal, explaining the reasons for the letter and all of the parts that must go into the letter. Then, I show them a sample of my own or from the book. Instead of making them copy a letter from the overhead or PowerPoint, I give them a new scenario and we go *back to the outline* of that style letter. From here, we *build the entire letter together*, where students volunteer suggestions as we go. I write it in pieces on the board and then they have to put it all together. I believe that once they experience, they will not need to rely on the example as much.

Here is a more specific example: The main point for a negative indirect reply (if you don’t know, don’t worry) are the reasons for the negative response. I’ll show them the example, give them a new scenario and then stand at the board and take down ideas for the many reasons they could use to answer negatively. Usually, the first responses are similar to the example, but eventually they are capable of providing imaginative and original reasons on their own. Also, I try to use a situation that they might be familiar with already. In one case I talk about reasons for denying a refund for a mobile phone rather than a copy machine.

The second example is similar to the first, but takes place later in the writing process. As we check and grade hundreds of papers, we often see patterns of our students’ limitations. I notice that instead of explaining something in detail, they might just make

longer lists of adjectives. Once again, I find that simply telling them to “explain” is ineffective without providing a concrete example and lesson on it. The ideal instruction would be *to show* them their limitations and *then guide* them beyond them.

To actually get the students to become aware of their weaker aspects, I give them a carefully selected sample of another student’s work (anonymous). I choose a letter that contains many of the common mistakes and edit the letter in front of the students. While doing this, the students are able to see where they are going astray and/or what I am looking for in particular. I take the comments on the page and display what I actually intend for them to do or change. Sometimes I write, “more content” and together using the letter, we would come up with the type of content I expect from them.

The final activity is the quickest and the easiest. Instead of always having my students write entire letters, I *isolate* certain aspects or areas and have them only write a single part of the letter, maybe even do it two different ways. The students are asked only to focus on one aspect of the letter and when we go over it, I have time to elaborate on the part that was isolated. Using this method, the students are not overwhelmed with an entire letter and can be more careful and creative in a specified area. By asking them to write similar things differently, they must create original ways to use their language. Thus, they no longer rely on the examples in the book.

Teaching is achieved when the learner actually *experiences* the subject. Telling is a great way to disseminate information, but it is not sufficient for learning. The shift from one to the other is simply done by creating an environment where students are experiencing the writing process and not being told it from a book or overhead. Language learning is unique because it requires the student to acquire a skill and not just a collection of ideas or terms. Language can only be learned when it is experienced directly. Our task as teachers is to bring the students to this experience.

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