

Planning a Good Writing Lesson: The SAFE Lesson Plan

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Abstract

Children can write. Children prepare to write as they begin to learn to speak. As infants, children listen to language spoken around them, and they absorb the sounds of speech. Soon they try to make sounds themselves. They learn to associate sounds with certain meanings. Gradually, the child begins to speak. By the time children enter kindergarten, they are speaking fluently. Listening and practicing oral language prepares children to write. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework for teaching writing, known as the SAFE Lesson Plan. The SAFE Lesson Plan was developed by the South Bay Writing Project, located at San Jose State University in San Jose, California, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. The SAFE Lesson Plan consists of four components: stimulus, activity, follow-up, and evaluation. An example pre-writing lesson is presented, using a choral response poem.

Most children are self-motivated to learn to speak (Harris, 1991). As children begin learning to speak, they are also preparing to write (Clay, 2010). As infants, children listen to language spoken around them, and they absorb the sounds of speech. Not long after, they try to make sounds themselves. Soon they learn to associate sounds with certain meanings—for example, “mama and “dada.” By two-years old, children create brief, meaningful sentences: “Thank you. Give it to me. I don’t want it.” By four-years old, children construct more complex sentences. By the time they enter kindergarten, they are speaking fluently, using a wide variety of sentence structures (Brooks & Kempe, 2012; Hoff & Shatz, 2009).

Listening and practicing oral language prepares children to write (Tiedt & Johnson, 1988a). Children draw on their knowledge of words spoken to them before entering school or from books read to them aloud at home (Anbar, 2004). From these experiences, children learn the rudiments of reading. Learning to read and learning to write are inseparable (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2008; Lunenburg, 1999). Reading exposes the child to models for writing, and writing involves a theory of how to create something readable. Thinking about one enhances understanding of the other, and both are learned simultaneously. A theory of speech and a theory of reading/writing are inseparable but different. Speech is considered a precognitive process, much like learning to perceive visual depth (Liberman, 1995).

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to introduce a framework for teaching writing, the SAFE Lesson Plan, developed by the South Bay Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. The South Bay Writing Project is located at San Jose State University in San Jose, California and is dedicated to improving the teaching of writing at all grade levels (K-16) and in all disciplines.

South Bay Writing Project

The South Bay Writing Project was created in 1976 as part of the National Writing Project. The National Writing Project consists of a national network of sites through which teachers in every region of the United States gain access to effective practices and research findings about the teaching of writing. To provide these services the National Writing Project contracts with institutions of higher education, such as San Jose State University, and other nonprofit education providers to operate small (\$100,000 or less) teacher training programs. Federal funds support 50 percent of the costs of these programs and recipients must contribute an equal amount. A National Advisory Board regularly provides advice and support and reviews the Project's programs and activities. The National Writing Project serves more than 100,000 teachers at approximately 208 university-based sites, and has served over 2 million teachers and administrators since its inception in 1974 (Lovell, 2013).

The principles of the South Bay Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project, include the following (Lovell, 2013):

- *Writing is thinking.* Thinking and expressing thoughts develop together from the time of a child's birth.
- *Oral language provides the foundation for language.* Children develop oral language before they work with written language.
- *Children learn to write by reading.* Through listening to stories and reading what others write, children develop a sense of story or a sense of how others make a statement.
- *Children learn to write by writing.* In order to learn to write with ease, children need to write frequently.
- *We can teach young writers to improve their writing abilities.* The ability to write well comes from practice, persistence, and the discovery that writing is enjoyable. (p. 1)

The SAFE Lesson Plan

A good writing lesson begins with objectives. Generally, the objectives of a lesson indicate what you expect students to do during the lesson or what you expect students to be able to do as a result of the lesson. Objectives also may describe the skills students have had the opportunity to practice during a lesson. Some examples follow: Write an expository paragraph; use transitions between paragraphs to provide connections between ideas; proofread other students' paragraphs; suggest ways to improve an essay.

Each SAFE Lesson Plan has four components: stimulus, activity, follow-up, and evaluation (Tiedt & Johnson, 1988b, p. 3). The key words of this plan form the acronym “SAFE.” Let’s examine each component of the SAFE Lesson Plan.

Stimulus

Stimulus is any prewriting activity of the lesson that is intended to stimulate writing. Stimulus activities include listening to a story read aloud, watching a film, and attending a field trip. It is a good idea for the writing teacher to engage the students in a group discussion in preparation for the main activity.

Activity

The main activity of the lesson is the performance by the students. This performance typically will be some form of writing. Students may write sentences, paragraphs, stories, reports, letters, poems, essays, and so forth. On occasion, the activity may be oral, designed to parallel the writing process. In this case, they may perform skits or role-play situations they imagine.

Follow-up

The follow-up activity of the lesson occurs after the main activity. The follow-up typically will be a postwriting activity. Postwriting activities include editing, rewriting, or completing a written piece that was started. Postwriting activities are important to the success of a lesson, because such activities are motivating and encourage further writing.

Evaluation

Teachers should use a variety of techniques to evaluate students’ writing. It is a good idea to have students evaluate each others’ work. Student evaluations provide students the opportunity to develop critical judgment and a greater appreciation for the writing process. This can be accomplished by exchanging papers or by having students work in small groups. The teacher may read students’ papers aloud or have students read their papers. Or teachers may collect papers, write comments on the papers, and assign grades. Whatever system is used, teachers need to emphasize the worth of each writing attempt. This will stimulate students to continue writing. Figure 1 provides a format for the SAFE Lesson Plan.

<i>Objectives</i>	<u>Title of Lesson</u>	<i>Materials</i>
Students will:		
1. _____		
2. _____		
3. _____		
Stimulus		Follow-up
Activity		Evaluation

Figure 1. SAFE Lesson Plan format.

Oral Language to Support Writing

Before students begin writing, they need to learn to focus their ideas and clearly communicate their thoughts orally. Oral communication helps stimulate and direct students' writing. Teachers can extend lessons to include writing; however, it is a good idea to begin writing lessons exclusively as oral exercises. When working with the entire class, teachers should encourage all students to participate in sharing their reactions to the stimulus provided. Tiedt (2002) provides the SAFE Lesson Plan-A Choral Poem: Response Poetry (Figure 2) as an example of how a writing teacher might begin a writing program using oral language to support writing (Tiedt & Johnson, 1988b, p. 16).

A Choral Poem: Response Poetry

Objectives

Students will:

1. Discuss the meaning of the poem.
2. Write a poem in response to the poem they read.

Stimulus

1. Display the poem on a screen using an Elmo. Read the poem aloud, or have students take turns reading it.
2. Discuss what the poem means. Ask students to think of as many different interpretations as possible.

Activity

1. Explain to students that they will write a response to the poem. Each time the teacher reads a line of the poem, students volunteer an interpretation.
2. Read the first line of the poem (Little bee come here and say).” Call on a student to respond. The response may be a rewording, clarification, or interpretation of the line. Write his or her response in one column on the poster board using a blue marker. Request another response. Write this response in another column on the poster board using a red marker. Continue doing the same with the rest of the poem.
3. Indicate that each set of lines contributed by them makes a poem.
4. Divide the class into three groups. One group recites the “blue” poem, one group recites the “red” poem, and another group recites the original poem.

Materials

A hardcopy of the poem
Elmo
Poster board
Red and blue markers
Tape recorder

Follow-up

1. Tape the students reading each poem. Play back the tape.
2. Note whether the students’ response coincides with the meaning of the original poem. Comparing the meaning of the three poems will provide an interesting discussion.

Evaluation

Praise students’ efforts. When necessary, guide students to rephrase their responses for more meaningful interpretations.

Poem

Little Bee

Little bee come here and say
What you have been doing all the day
Every day and all day long
Amongst the flowers you hear my song
I creep in every flower I see
And all the honey is for me.
By Fred C. Lunenburg (n.d.)

Figure 2. SAFE Lesson Plan-A choral poem: Response poetry.

Conclusion

Children can write. Children prepare to write as they begin to learn to speak. As infants, children listen to language spoken around them, and they absorb the sounds of speech. Soon they try to make sounds themselves. They learn to associate sounds with certain meanings. Gradually, the child begins to speak. By the time children enter kindergarten, they are speaking fluently.

Listening and practicing oral language prepares children to write. The purpose of this article was to introduce a framework for teaching writing, known as the SAFE Lesson Plan. The SAFE Lesson Plan was developed by the South Bay Writing Project, located at San Jose State University in San Jose, California, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. The SAFE Lesson Plan consists of four components: stimulus, activity, follow-up, and evaluation. An example pre-writing lesson is presented, using a choral poem, to demonstrate that oral language provides the foundation for writing.

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