

SINGING AWAY THE WRITING BLUES?

Introduction

In terms of skills, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing to do in a language, even in the first language. Added to the inherent difficulty of the skill itself is the added 'bonus' of age. Most adolescents find it boring or believe they just can't write anything decent. So, what can we do to sing away this writing blues?

Making writing interactive

Writing is an interactive process by nature as it evolves out of the symbolic interplay between writer, text and reader. By making conditions more 'authentic' than the ones in traditional classroom tasks, awareness of audience, purpose and intentionality is reinforced. Interactivity can be promoted in class by implementing some of the following suggestions (adapted from L. Hamp-Lyons and B. Heasley 1992):

- Group-brainstorming on a given topic.
- Whole class discussion of how a particular text might need adjustment according to the audience it is addressed to.
- Collaborative writing: students work together to write a previously agreed text.
- Whole class text construction and composing on the blackboard.
- Writing workshop or in-class writing: students consult each other and co-construct texts while the teacher moves around listening to their comments, providing feedback or answering questions. The teacher keeps track of their progress and works out a record of most frequent questions, doubts and inaccuracies for a future 'error analysis session'.
- Group research on a text topic: students divide out the responsibility for different aspects of the information-gathering stage on a certain topic. They then pool their results and work together to plan a text, which may be collective or individual.
- Peer-editing.
- Specification of an audience and purpose of a text by making the situation 'real': e.g. exchanging e-mail messages with other English-speaking students, producing a class blog.

Making writing interactive requires imagination on our part as teachers, but is rewarded by the creativity and enthusiasm that most students display in response. In order to attain this goal we need to help them build up from the foundations.

Building vocabulary

Many times students complain that they lack the necessary vocabulary to write. They feel relatively safe while they follow the step-by-step guidance provided by the teacher or the coursebook, but what happens when they have to do a writing task by themselves, particularly of the narrative or descriptive kind?

Students seem to operate on a very limited vocabulary repertoire. While their passive vocabulary may be quite extensive, their active vocabulary is often very limited and they end up using the same words again and again: people always walk or run, girls are pretty or not pretty, sometimes they can even be beautiful! Something they like is nice, if they don't like it, it is not nice, and you do things slowly or quickly. And that's it!

How can we help? What follows is a sample of activities that can be used to help them build up their active vocabulary.

1. Descriptions of people

Character

Brainstorm on the board adjectives beginning with each letter of the alphabet. If you feel students are going for the most common, give definitions and ask them to say the adjective: *'Someone who always says 'Please' and 'Thank you' and lets old ladies go first on the bus is?'*

If any letters are missing, ask students to use dictionaries and look up more adjectives and provide a simple definition. Have them keep a written record in their notebooks.

Then play a game. The first student begins by saying, e.g.: *'I like my friend Albert because he is amiable'*, the second follows: *'I like my friend Betty because she is brilliant'*, and so on.

Manners of walking

Ask students how many words they know that describe different manners of walking. They will probably come up with *run, walk, jump* and very little else.

Write a few verbs on the board and ask the students to mimic them if they know the meaning. If they don't, mimic and encourage them to produce a simple definition in English they can remember easily.

For revision, give students blank cards and ask them to work in groups. One group should work with verbs of movement, another with adjectives that describe character. Have them write a set of definitions and the set of words on separate cards. Have the groups exchange the cards and ask them to match the pairs.

This activity can be done with other lexical sets, for example sounds made with the nose and the mouth, ways of speaking, etc.

Sample consolidation task

Ask students to look for pictures or photographs of people in magazines, newspapers, the web, etc. and write a vivid description of this person, invent a personality from how they react to the photo, describe how the person moves, feels, their character, etc. This can be done as a writing workshop in class.

In groups, they read each other's description comparing them to the actual picture and help each other improve the texts. Then they exchange descriptions and pictures with another group, read the texts and try to match them to the corresponding pictures.

You may wish to choose a description from a novel, short story or newspaper, and make copies for the students to read. Encourage them to discuss the good and bad points of the text, the vocabulary used and ask them what they would imitate from it.

Describing places

To excite students' imaginations when writing a narrative that requires description, you can try modelling the narrative as if you were telling the story and eliciting enriching elements from them.

Suppose they have to write a story about what happened to them one evening when their car broke down in the middle of nowhere. You may begin like this:

'One day, you were driving along a deserted country road. The sun was beginning to set and the sky was

What colour was it? Red, yes red but was it just red? Bright red ... and yellow that's it. There was no traffic and the nearest village was

Where was the village? Near? Far away? How far was it?

Suddenly the car began to slow down and eventually it stopped. You tried to switch on the engine again but nothing happened. How did you feel?...'

You can build the story together by encouraging them to add interesting details and helping them with new vocabulary. It is a good idea to write the contributions on the board classifying words into categories, e.g. verbs, adjectives and nouns. Afterwards, you can ask the students to write their version of the story in groups.

You can also make copies of a short narrative or description omitting all verbs and adjectives and numbering the blank spaces. In pairs or groups, students fill in the missing details. If you would like to make it easier, you can provide two or

three options from which they can choose. Depending on the kind of text and the level of the students, you can supply options with different connotations.

When they have finished, you can give them the original text to compare and discuss the differences and / or similarities between the two.

Beautiful sounds

You can do this as a game to explain what the rhythm of a text is and how the choice of words can affect this rhythm.

Provide a list of words and ask the students to say them aloud and choose three or four they like the sound of most. For example: *murmur hush dribble home lullaby mist nevermore lilac bobolink fawn marigold fair memory mouse harbour cobblestone rainbow trembling*

Then, ask them to write six words, not from the list above, that they think sound beautiful. Allow them to use dictionaries. As a class ask them to share their words with their classmates. As a follow up, they can write a short story or a poem using their words.

Text structure and style

In my experience, students find these aspects of writing quite difficult to master; therefore, I think it's quite important to give them plenty of opportunities to see and discuss text samples that they can then use as reference and suggest ways in which they can improve the way they work.

Linking words

Using linking words correctly is usually very difficult for students in their mother tongue, even more so in another language. In English, they tend to stick to *and* and *but*.

Here are a few suggestions.

Provide samples of texts and ask students to circle linking words and cohesive devices. As a class, build a table for reference and display it in the classroom.

1. Ask them questions that help analyse how the writer has built the text and give them tips for each kind of text they have to write.
2. Encourage them to discuss the model texts and draw conclusions.
3. Ask them what they do in their mother tongue when given a writing task. Compare with what they do in the English class and encourage them to transfer strategies from one language to the other.
4. Encourage them to voice their weaknesses or perceived problems when faced with a writing task and elicit possible solutions from the class.
5. Encourage writing in class, in groups or pairs.
6. Encourage peer reading and feedback.

Register

There are many books with activities to make students aware of differences in register but the one I have found most useful is simply providing them with copies of different types of text that they can afterwards stick in their folders and keep as a reminder: letters to friends, to bosses, to newspaper editors, newspaper articles, narratives, etc. and asking them to work out the differences. Then they build a Formal / Informal table on the board and write in the elements they find in each text.

Style

There are some features which are typical of EFL students' writing: artificial emphasis, quite frequent in students whose language is either Spanish or Portuguese, sloppy wording and confused writing. A useful general rule is that good style does not require **artificial emphasis** of the following kind:

I have NEVER seen such an ugly picture in my life!!!!!!!

Emphases should be made by being explicit. If we are describing someone or something, we should show what we mean.

Sample task

Give students a sentence where there is an overuse of emphasis and ask them to work together in groups to improve it by being explicit.

I have NEVER seen such an awful dog!!!! It MUST belong to Bernard ...

Possible answer:

I had never in my life seen such an awful dog: fat, dirty, bad tempered, with its eyes half shut. I had no doubt, it had to belong to Bernard. It was the sort of dog he would have: ferocious and unlovable.

Sometimes students have a lot to say but they seem to be unable to group the points and deal with them in good order, they keep coming back to different aspects of the same points again and again. This disorder is natural in speaking because you go back to something you have already said, or remember something you didn't a few minutes ago and you need to say it now. But writing should be organised.

Confused writing is not acceptable even in an informal letter to a friend. So we may give our students some advice to deal with this problem:

1. Do not start writing right away. Take time to get ideas, examples and illustrations and make notes.

2. It's impossible to plan a composition completely beforehand, Ideas will come up while you are writing. Don't write them down as a next sentence. Write them on another piece of paper and go back to them when you have finished to see where you can include them.
3. After writing, check to see if you have grouped your points correctly and decide if it is worth including those new ideas and where. Edit the text.
4. Write your final draft, re-edit and give it to a classmate to read.

It's quite difficult to persuade students to plan their writing, mostly because they think that they have to plan everything in detail beforehand and they can't change anything later. Show them it isn't so, organise writing workshops in class and encourage peer editing and feedback. Collect samples of confused writing and give copies to the students and have them improve the texts. It will help them become aware of their own mistakes.

Putting it into practice

I would like to suggest a few writing activities that can fun to do in class as writing workshops.

a. Media stories from the news

Look up some headline stories on the Internet. There are several sites you can visit, for example The Guardian or the BBC. There are also many newspapers especially written for young learners of English that you can find with Google.

Print the headlines and the stories or articles separately. If you have a computer lab that you can use in the school, you may have the students read the stories directly from the Internet site so you don't need to print them.

Ask students to choose one that attracts their attention. In groups, they brainstorm ideas suggested by their headline and try to build up a story around it. Encourage them to plan and edit their writing. Ask groups to exchange their texts and react to the writing making comments at the bottom of the page. This feedback should help the group do the final editing of their story.

When they have finished, you either give them the original texts or they look them up on the Web and compare them with the stories they have written. Encourage them to discuss aspects such as choice of words, style, organisation, etc.

b. Interviews

Ask students to work in pairs or small groups and choose a fictional character they would like to interview. As a class, have them say who they are going to interview and why and ask them to outline the plot of the film or book or computer game where this character can be found.

With their partner, they write the questions they would like to ask. Encourage them to be imaginative, funny, deep, for example, asking a character about his or her motivation for doing something. Then, they should provide the answers.

When they have finished, ask them to write a semi-formal newspaper report of the interview. Again, if you have access to the Internet, they may look for information or interviews to compare with what they have written.

These reports could then be 'published' as a display in the school notice board or in the school newspaper.

c. Historical events

Present a small number of historical events for students to choose from. Form groups with those students who have chosen the same event. You should be able to make some groups of three or pairs. Ask them to look up information about the event they have chosen either in the school library or on the Web and report back to the class.

Ask the groups or pairs to imagine what the protagonist of the event was really thinking about when this event happened and write a short monologue, e.g. *What was Columbus thinking when he discovered America in 1492?* Ask the groups or pairs to edit their writing, exchange it with other groups or pairs and provide feedback on their classmates' texts.

After they have done this, tell them that at the same time, the most unusual things were happening on Earth. Have them write about one of them. This can be a crazy everyday situation. Again, ask them to share their writing with the rest of the class. Have them make a final version using the feedback provided by their classmates.

Depending on the preferences of the groups, you may encourage your students to decorate their texts with drawings, cut outs or collages to illustrate what they have written.

In all cases, I strongly recommend to spend time on these writing workshops. They are indeed time-consuming but they can be scheduled in advance and we can devote, for example, one class a month to this kind of work and set similar tasks for homework for extra practice.

In addition, it is a very good idea to display the students' texts either in the classroom or in common school areas. This gives the writers a sense of audience and of 'being published'. Their work is no longer just a piece of homework that has to be done to please the teacher. There is a sense of purpose to it. And, who knows? You may discover a potential professional writer in your class.

References

L. Hamp-Lyons and B. Heasley 1992. *Study Writing*. Cambridge, CUP

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