

WRITING IN CLASS

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Should we ask students to write in class? With a few exceptions, such as activities closely linked to some form of oral work (e.g. making notes during a listening exercise), most teachers will probably feel that class time should be almost entirely devoted to developing oral skills, for which their guidance or mediation is essential. Besides, time is short -- and students can never get enough oral practice. Writing, on the other hand, can be conveniently given to the students as an out-of-class activity, to be done in their own time and at their own pace as homework, thus serving to increase the amount of language contact time.

On the whole, this point of view is sensible and it is not the purpose of this article to question the basic premise: that oral skills should get preference in the classroom. However, if in the long term we want our students to learn to write acceptably, we need to consider whether there are some advantages in getting them to do a certain amount of writing in class and, if so, what kind of activities are appropriate.

First, let us look at some of the disadvantages of treating writing mainly as an out-of-class activity:

- (a) Students tend to see it as an institutional task imposed on them by the teacher. If they are at school, it is 'just another homework'; if they are mature students, it has all the overtones of 'school'. It has to be done whether they like it or not, and whether or not they have enough time to do it. In these circumstances, students rarely see writing as something which can be enjoyable.

- (b) There are problems in identifying suitable tasks for homework. We can of course ask students to write 'exercises' (although not all modern coursebooks provide suitable ones for this purpose). We can attempt to devise something more ambitious - a piece of guided writing of some kind. But then we are often up against the problem of length: a homework has to be more or less substantial to make it worth setting, but it is not always easy to devise something relevant and interesting, especially in the early stages.
- (c) It is difficult to devise activities which bring out the communicative value of writing. Even when students are asked to write something in the form of a letter, which has all the trappings of communication -- it is addressed to someone, in the eyes of the students it is still something for the teacher to look at and correct.
- (d) There is no immediate 'feedback': the students carry out the task and hand it over to the teacher. By the time they get it back, even one lesson later, they have probably lost interest in it, together with any suggestions the teacher may have made for improving their writing.

I do not think it is possible to solve all these problems. Students do need homework, as an extension of the lesson, and some form of writing practice is one of the ways of meeting that need. Probably exercises of some kind, which reinforce what has been learnt orally and which do not pretend to be communicative, are best suited to that purpose in the early stages. At least, since they are exercises, it is appropriate for the teacher to correct them.

However, it is important for students to begin to appreciate early on in a language course that writing is a form of communication and to learn how this is done through the written medium. And this has to be done in the classroom because this is the only place we can provide them with someone to communicate with: that is, with one another.

In this respect, teaching writing is very similar to teaching oral skills. For oral work, we try to develop as much learner interaction as we can, not just a one-way flow between teacher and student. We get students to talk to one another: across the class, in pairs or in small groups. Although we may monitor these activities to a greater or lesser degree, since this is one of the roles of the teacher, gradually the students come to appreciate in this way that they can use the language to communicate for various purposes. The same can be true for writing: the students can be shown how it is used to obtain or exchange information, for example, or to get something done, if they use this medium to communicate with one another in the classroom.

Let us look at a very simple activity of this kind before analysing the advantages further. Let us imagine that the students have just been learning how to talk about their likes and dislikes with reference to a range of activities such as swimming, playing football, dancing, watching TV (etc). They have practised this orally across the class and in pairs. It is at this point that a quick writing activity can be introduced: the students are asked to write notes to find out more about one another's likes and dislikes. Their notes can be based on a model like the one below:

April 1 1980

Dear

Do you like

Yours,

.....

The students can write half a dozen notes of this kind to one another in 3-4 minutes. By way of reply, they simply write Yes or No on the note and send it back. But they can also be asked to answer notes as well, thus setting up a flow of correspondence.

For example:

April 1 1980

Dear ,

What do you like doing in your spare time?

Yours,

.

The student who gets this note then answers:

April 1 1980

Dear ,

Thank you for your note. I like
and I don't like , ! What about
you?

Yours,

.

The advantages of organising a writing activity in this way should be apparent. The learners feel that they are communicating because they are in contact with someone through the written medium and because, in this case, they have used writing to find something out. And unlike many written tasks, they enjoy doing it!

Pedagogically, even through a simple activity of this kind, they are practising many of the essential features of a letter (which students often fail to learn even at more advanced stages of a language programme). It is possible too for them to ask you for advice or for you to check there and then what they have

written. One of the best ways of checking is in fact to join in the activity yourself!

In terms of lesson organisation, this short written phase can then be followed up with related oral practice. All the students have certain information about other students in the class which they can exchange -- across the class, in pairs or in groups. The writing activity has also provided a welcome break from intensive oral work. It is perhaps sometimes forgotten how much a strain it is for students to listen and talk all the time: a short break relieves the tension, and they can return to their oral activities refreshed and, one hopes, able to learn more effectively. A variety of language items, structures or functions, can be practised through the exchange of short notes as illustrated above: ranging from simple enquiries such as: Have you got a (pet/car)? (What is it like?)/Which month is your birthday in?/When exactly is your birthday?/What is your favourite (sport/TV programme/subject)?/Who is your favourite (actor/singer)?/What did you do (last night/over the weekend)?/I like your (sweater). Where did you buy it? to requests and invitations: Would you mind lending me (plus name of record/book) if you've got it?/Would you like to (play tennis) with me (on Saturday)?/Why don't we (go to the cinema together)(tonight)? If you're free, please meet me (plus name of place).

The students can also be asked to write short letters to one another. You can give the students an outline, like the one below:

April 1 1980

Dear

Would you like to(plus ACTIVITY) on(plus DAY)? If you can come, please meet me(plus PLACE & TIME). You can't miss it, by the way:(plus EXACT LOCATION).

Looking forward to seeing you!

Yours,

.....

PS Don't be late!

Or you can give the students instructions such as: Invite someone to do something with you (such as going for a walk). Say exactly when and where you will meet.

The person who receives the letter must write back accepting or refusing the invitation -- or perhaps making a counter-proposal.

So far I have described activities which involve students writing to one another: they do not involve the exercise of any great writing skill, but they are valuable because they demonstrate that writing is a way of communicating and not just another tedious task. Children, by the way, enjoy this form of writing activity just as much as adults.

However, I should also like to give some examples of activities which involve more extensive writing and for which the students have to collaborate (at least at a certain stage of the activity). Once again, there is a close parallel with oral work (the use of pairs and groups) and again oral work and written work are interlinked, this time through a discussion stage. These activities are suitable for use at a post-elementary level (1).

- (a) Select from magazines a variety of ads for well known products and paste them on to cards. Ask each student in the class to choose one of these ads and to write a short letter of complaint either about the product or the ad.

Divide the class into groups, each representing a big firm responsible for advertising a number of these products.

Then distribute the letters to the appropriate 'firms' and ask them to discuss and write their replies. These should then be given to the person who wrote the letter of complaint.

Note that the first stage of the activity can be done as homework. However, the letters are not written for the teacher

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- (1) These examples are taken from Donn Byrne: Teaching Writing Skills (Longman 1979). See Chapter 5 for other similar activities and Chapter 8 for writing activities which form part of a simulation.

(and are not corrected by him); they are used for a class activity. At the second stage, after the 'firms' have discussed their replies, the students may work in pairs on the actual letter. You must, by the way, organise the work in class so that students do not deal with their own letters of complaint!

- (b) Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to draw up a notice on a given topic: for example, starting a pop group or a club; starting a protest against; raising money for(etc). At least two groups should work on the same task, so that they can compare their notices. They might then be asked to write a final notice, combining the best ideas from each.
- (c) Divide the class into groups. Give each group the job of describing one feature of their town. For example:

- places of interest
- good places to eat at
- entertainment facilities
- sports facilities
- local industries (etc)

Each group should then write their description in such a way that the feature described sounds attractive to someone visiting the town. Each student should also make his own copy of the description.

Then form new groups, making sure that they contain at least one representative from each of the original groups, and ask them to write a full report on their town based on these descriptions. The report may be accompanied by a map showing the location of the various places of interest (etc).

- (d) Divide the class into groups and ask each group to decide on some action they would take to improve their town: for example, by pulling down a certain building, by providing a facility of some kind (such as a new swimming pool), by widening a street (etc).

Each group should then announce, in the form of a press report, what they propose to do.

Each student in the class is then invited to respond to one or more of these proposals: for example, by writing a letter to the press; by writing, in collaboration with one or more other students, a public protest or a notice calling for a meeting to protest against the proposal; or by writing an anonymous letter to one of the people concerned with a certain proposal. Writing anonymous letters is an activity which students really enjoy!

Note that for the second stage of this activity, the students can select the kind of activity which most appeals to them. They can also do it as a homework, although not one to be 'corrected' by the teacher but to be read by their fellow students.

Should we ask students to write in class? I think the answer to this question should be a qualified 'yes'. There is room in most lessons for short writing activities of the kind I described in the first part of this article, which not only provide a welcome alternative to intensive oral work (at the same time offering opportunities for using what has been learnt in this way) but also show the learners that they can communicate through the medium of writing. And there is room, although not so often of course, because these activities take up time, for writing which forms a natural part of a roleplay activity or small scale simulation. An important feature of both these types of activity is that they involve learner interaction. For it would certainly be a waste of valuable class time if we asked students to do on their own in the classroom the kind of written work which they can do on their own out of class.