

Creative Writing and preparing students for Exams

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People, including teachers of English, relate very individually and very variously to the business of writing, whether in their mother tongue or in English. On a recent trip to Malaga, South Spain, I asked a group of Spanish teachers of English to write me short letters explaining how they felt about themselves as writers. I wonder if you will find yourself echoing any of their thoughts or whether your self-characterisation as a writer would be very, very different.

Antonio: I see myself as a hopeless writer. Even sending an email take me ages, and after sending it, I am never sure I've actually conveyed the message I meant to. Just writing this letter is already a challenging test. I think it must sound as if it were written to an agony aunt asking for help. Ps. I have the same problems writing in my own language.

Macarena: I'm quite glad you're asking us to write about ourselves, for this early in the morning this seems a much easier task to do. I've always loved writing, I've loved it since I was a child. And I'm not just talking about the typical diary. When I write I seem to be able to free a part of me that does not come out easily otherwise. Writing allows me to admit things that are difficult to express in spoken words. The thing is, it's me I always write to, nobody usually reads me and I don't think I would really like it if they did, either. In fact, the old habit of writing letters to friends is dying out and the quick email is taking over. So much for progress!

Marta: My writing skills in both Mother Tongue and English are satisfactory but not outstanding. I can just about manage. I have students who are excellent at writing compositions in English, and, not surprisingly, they are also very good writers in Spanish – they just have the gift. I belong to the group of people who can manage to produce a good piece of writing after working for hours and hours, checking and checking, changing words and expressions again and again. However, the result is – how could I put it into words? – rigid or controlled. I am not the sort of person who keeps a diary or writes stories. I write letters, reports, project outlines... that is pieces of writing where you end up using the same structures and vocabulary. Nothing creative, after all. I don't want you to think that I am not interested in writing. I really envy those who have the gift and of course you can always learn!

For me, as a teacher of writing, information like the above is precious. I know who I am dealing with in this skill area and I know a bit about their emotional filters. This will, naturally, influence my choice of exercise. I guess Antonio, who says he dislikes writing, may well feel better in a dialogue writing exercise, where he is continually being stimulated by the other person.*

The above texts exemplify a fundamental exercise it is sensible to do with any group of students to whom you have to teach writing skills. It is vital for you, the teacher, to learn something about the students' self-image as writers in both Mother Tongue and the target language. To fail to do this is a bit like being an architect who does not much care whether she is laying a house's foundations on granite or sand.

Creative Writing As Opposed To Writing for Correction

Drawing on their past experience, many students think that the aim of writing in L2 is to produce super-correct text, to produce text that attracts the minimum of teacher red or green squiggling in the margins. They easily forget that the real aim of any decent writing is to produce a genuine effect in the heart and mind of another human being. As a teacher of writing, my first job is to persuade the students that they will have an interested addressee and that they should write with this person in mind.

I need to wean my students from a narrow and restrictive focus on form and hel-

... them to enjoy this

area of language as communication.

Let me share some techniques with you that have the above aim.

Letter to self later

Tell your students

- a) that you have not yet gone mad
- b) that you want them to think about themselves at some point in the future, (the end of the week of the month, of the term or of the year), and that you want them to write themselves a two-page letter about whatever they would like to say to themselves at this future point. They should head the letter with the time, the day and the date and they should write Dear + own name. Give each student an envelope and ask them to write their own name on the outside. Typically the students will ask you "What shall I write about?" to which the honest answer is "how can I tell you what you want to say to yourself?" It is worth adding that they should avoid writing two pages which will bore them rigid when the time comes to read the letter! Also assure them that their text will be seen by no-one but them. Join in the activity and write a letter to yourself. Your writing will give the group energy.

Collect in the sealed envelopes. When the time comes give them back to the students.

The Letter-to-self-later is the most intensely addressee focused form of writing I know. Since no teacher eye will course over their lines they can write with no fear of being hit over the head for mistakes they may make. They are free to use their full power of expression without diving into mistakes-avoidance-mode, as happens when they know a corrector is lurking round the corner. They are using English in an intra-personal way, and for some students this may feel bizarre and intrusive, yet taking this step will bring the target language nearer to them, beginning to transform it from a "target language" into a "right-in-here" language.

Weaving lies into a composition

In all decent writing exercises the authors of the work should have an interlocutor in mind. If, in September, you ask your students to write a composition about their summer holidays, then ask them to include four lies in what they write. Suggest that they make their falsehoods as plausible and hard to detect as possible.

Pair your students and ask them to swap essays. Student A reads B's piece to spot the lies, while B does the same with A's text.

You may want to collect in the writing for evaluation and correction, but the falsehood ploy, (which I learnt from Andrew Wright), has guaranteed each writer an attentive reader. (You, the teacher, are a communicationally false reader, as your main focus is form, not content, and every last student in your class knows this, consciously or otherwise.)

Letters Across The Class

Tell the students you are going to give them 20 minutes free writing practice. Ask each student to write their name on a slip of paper and collect the folded-over slips. Give back the slips so that no one takes their own name.

Tell the students to write a short letter to the person whose name they have picked. Once they have finished it, they give it to the person. Each letter a student receives, they reply to. They then write freely across the group to any person of their choice. Be available to help students who want it. No peeking over shoulders, as what is being written can be quite personal.

Once this activity gets going it is quite hard to bring it to an elegant close. Most students get very involved.

What have the above exercises got to do with preparing students for Exams?

They are central to “re-balancing” the writing class. In an exam class, the focus of the teacher and students is often over-focused on form, on correctness, on critical thinking. In these exercises the student uses the screen or the page to say something worth saying to a real, live addressee, to a classmate. These activities and many others like them (see Letters, Burbidge etc al, OUP 96) encourage the student to reach out and try to say things he is not yet sure he can say. Writing becomes a warm, human learning process, not just a critical, reductive focus on form.

Ps: If you get your students writing to you about how they see themselves as writers, in both German and English, I would be really happy to read what they have written. The magazine I edit, www.hltmag.co.uk has a section called STUDENT VOICES, in which such texts could be published. Writing for Web publication is a jolly good reason for writing.

- Here is a very interactive writing exercise: Pair the students. Person A and Person B simultaneously, and without communicating, start writing a dialogue to each other, like this:

Person A. Nice morning today, but it's bloody freezing! (7 words)

Person B “ You been to see Bowling for Columbine? (7 words)

Their first, simultaneous, parallel utterances must be exactly 7 words long.

Tell the students to swap papers.

Person A now writes a 6 word answer- Person B does likewise

They swap and continue with 5 words.

The dialogues are concluded when they reach one word utterances.

Apart from being highly interactive Tapering Dialogues are also linguistically quite stretching.