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Dear Arlene,

Good lunch meeting with Renata. Your OUP proposal is firm and clear. My main reaction, expressed to Renata, was that it is important you don't produce a blueprint for one style of telling, as different teachers may be best in a variety of different styles.

I hope Alan Haley is happy with the book.

Arlene, I enclose a possible contribution on letter-writing for your 4th issue.

This is another form of obvious, natural, person-central communication.

Yours.

Mario.

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## Letter-writing in class

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, Canterbury, UK.

"OK class, here are eight blank pieces of paper each. We are going to spend the next few minutes writing letters to each other across the room. Choose someone to write to, write them a short letter, sign it and deliver it to them. If someone writes you a letter you may want to reply to it."

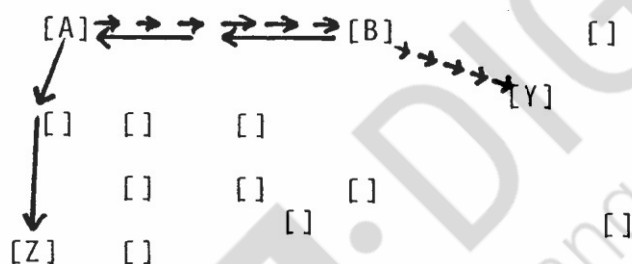
This is how I sometimes start an intensive half hours' writing practice with an intermediate class. The content of what they write to each other is entirely up to them. Each piece of writing has a real reader and is written with that person in mind. The technique works like wild-fire across the age ranges from early teenagers to adults.

## Problems with the technique

- What about the student no-one writes to? If you are worried about the more marginal students in your group then ask everybody to write a first letter to "Dear X", and to sign it. All these letters are collected and then given out again at random. This way everybody has a letter to answer and fringe students have communication engineered for them.
- What about correction? When the technique was used in a French Technical University the students told the teacher the letters should be corrected. He asked if he could collect them in and read them. "No", they said "too personal". This left my friend, Mike Gradwell, in a quandary which he resolved in the next class. After the free writing stage he asked the students which letters they felt they could publicise for correction purposes. For each letter they also had to get the consent of the other person concerned. In this group about half the letters were allowed to go public in the correction phase.
- What is the teachers' role in the exercise? You can stay out of the activity and be available as a language resource. There are a lot of things students want to know that they can't really get from a dictionary. I personally don't look over people's shoulders and correct mistakes - too intrusive - I simply float as a language resource and respond when asked something by a student. Alternatively you can join in the writing process and express things you might not otherwise say to students of your choice. By joining the writers you become available to students who want to write to you, which can be very revealing. It is extraordinary how the change from speaking to writing can change what is communicated.
- There is no neat way of stopping the exercise. Even if you announce 30 minutes as the writing period there will usually be plenty of students in the middle of a correspondence they want to finish off when the half-hour is up. You need to allow a 5-10 minute "disengagement" buffer zone beyond the end of the half hour.

## You write my letter

A powerful variation of the technique just outlined has the students working in pairs. A decides to write to Y but cannot do so directly. So A asks her partner B to write to Y and tells her roughly what to say and the sort of register to use. B then tells A the sort of letter she wants A to write on her behalf to Z. A and B then **simultaneously** start writing on each other's behalf to Y and Z. A diagram may help:



When A has written the letter B wants to send to Z, she gives it to B for checking and correction. B has to be happy with the ideas, feeling and language before she signs her letter and delivers it to Z. If Z decides he wants to reply to B's letter he does so through his secretary.

## Features of the exercise

- the room buzzes with motivated talk, mutual help and peer correction. Students want their secretaries to say what they intended and in as close to the way they intended as possible.
- each letter is read by 3 or 4 people and so the students often learn a lot of interesting new things about each other, even in a well-formed group.
- How would you pair students for the exercise:
  - randomly\*
  - friend pairs
  - one strong student one weak student
  - an expressive person with an introvert
  - one male, one female
  - people born in the same month
  - some other way?

I am still exploring the potential of this "writer and secretary exercise" and would be very interested to know how it works for you in your classes. Maybe you will vary it and invent new exercises from it, in which case why not share your discoveries via the pages of the *ELT Review*?

\*(A good way of random pairing is to hold up a handful of pieces of string and to ask each student to come and take the end of a piece of string. You need one length of string for every two students in the group. When all the students have crowded round you and take an end, let go of the strings and the students will be randomly paired).

One variation I have tried is getting the students to work in threes: A is B's secretary, B is C's and C is A's. Pairs and triads are very different, group dynamically.

### **Writing to another and to self**

At the start of a course give each student a sheet of paper and an envelope. Ask the student to write a letter to someone else in the group about her hopes, fears and feelings about the course. Tell the class that they are to keep the letters they receive until a given date halfway through the course. On this day they will be asked to give the letters back to their authors. Re-reading those initial writings is a powerful way of helping students to evaluate the course and their sense of their learning from it.

### **Writing to self**

The real evaluation at the end of a course does not come in questionnaires or in things said to the teacher or the administration. The real evaluation is done privately in the head of each participant. A useful way to ease this process into action is to ask each student to write her last day evaluation thoughts in the form of a letter she will open and read in 10 days time. Give the students a reasonable amount of time for the writing. Ask them to put the letters in envelopes they address to themselves and mark on the envelope the date on which the letters are to be opened and read. They keep the sealed envelopes.

As you scan these lines you may think "What simplistic rubbish!" All I can say is that writing a letter to myself on the last day of a course, and re-reading it two weeks later has often given me real pause for thought. "Was that what I was really thinking then?!"

### **You can't write without an addressee**

All over Europe students are writing pointless pieces addressed to no one, unless you call the teacher's red pencil a person. They are writing to be corrected, they are not writing to say anything to anyone. Sad and unnecessary.

It seems to me that all writing in class should have an addressee, a reader. If not what's the point? This article has presented you with 3 or 4 ways in which this can be achieved and high energy levels generated in the group.

Try them and write to the ELT Review.