

MR/LP/46

Ms Therese [REDACTED]
Editor
MET
[REDACTED]
GHSWTC
London [REDACTED]

Dear Therese,

Here is the article we discussed in Edinburgh. I hope it is right for the slot you intended it for.

Yours sincerely,

Mario Rinvoluceri

PROXY WRITING

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims

Have you ever walked into class, given your students 6 or 7 half sheets of paper each and asked them to write letters to each other in the target language? The first reaction on their part is sometimes one of amazement – some people ask questions like “What shall I write about?” The answer to this one is “Write to whoever you want and about whatever you want.” Tell them to deliver their letters as soon as they have written them and to answer letters they receive, if it seems appropriate.

This simple exercise has a number of clear advantages:

- the writer is writing to someone real and is likely to get a response. She is not just writing to be corrected by a person for whom the content of the writing is a secondary consideration.
- the readers of the letters are looking at text intended for them, personal text in the target language.
- the exercise draws some of its strength from the fact that we all passed notes to one another behind the teacher’s back in secondary school.
- people in class are communicating using a different channel – the way you talk to a classmate on paper is different from the way you talk to her across the group, when working in pairs or in the coffee break.

The main idea I want to share with you in this article developed from the simple letter-writing across the class outlined above.

“I am your secretary – you are mine”

The classroom procedure:

- ask students to leave their seats and move around the room. Once they are up and moving ask them to choose someone they will be happy to work with for three quarters of an hour. They go and sit down with their partner – both will need pen and paper.
- explain to the students that each person is going to author letters to others in the group but the actual writing of the letters will be done by the student’s partner, her secretary. Show how this works by picking a particular pair of students:

“Tomoko, you choose a person in the group you want to send a letter to. Tell your partner, Maria, what you want to put in the letter and the sort of register and tone the letter should be written in. In other words, Tomoko, you programme Maria to write a letter on your behalf.

Maria, you also choose a person you want to write to and you tell Tomoko what you want her to write on your behalf to this person.”

- Stress that the students should programme each other before any writing is done. Once writing starts each partner should be writing her colleague's letter. Make clear that this is not a dictation exercise. It can become one if Maria starts telling Tomoko exactly what to write, word for word.
- Explain that when the secretaries have finished writing they submit the texts to their 'bosses' for modification, correction and signature. The letters are then delivered. Make clear that a 'boss' is at liberty to ask the secretary to change bits of the letter if she does not like the way something has been expressed.
- Once a pair have sent off their first letters they choose new people to write to and repeat the process. In the second round some students will be responding, via their secretaries, to letters they have received.

The exercise is one that it is quite hard to draw to a neat close as some students get quite strongly involved in the writing, editing, reading and reacting process.

Advantages

- the originators of the letters are forced to plan what they want to say before pen touches paper. (This is good preparation for exam writing where planning can be very useful.)
- the secretaries really listen to the outlines of the letters their 'bosses' give them as they know they will have to work from these ideas. They tend to pay real attention.
- the secretaries are writing at a remove. They are trying adequately to express the thoughts of another, to find a right voice for this other.
- the editing process, that is necessary in nearly all writing, happens naturally. The 'boss' wants to check out what has been written on her behalf. The secretary is interested to know what is acceptable to the 'boss' and what is not.
- The reader is faced with an intriguingly mixed text - the ideas are those of person A but the expression is largely that of person B and they come in the hand-writing of person B.

The origin of the idea

The idea for this exercise came from thinking of places like East Turkey where people who can't write need to send letters to loved ones abroad. They have recourse to a public letter writer who composes letters on their behalf.

Extension of the idea

If you see ways of spawning further exercises from this seed, why not let Therese Tobin, editor of MET, know about them for publication in the magazine. Too many excellent ideas invented by teachers never get shared around the profession because people are too modest.