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Teaching Writing

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BEFECTETÉS A JÖVŐBE

1. Introduction

In the course of learning the language, your students will need to engage in (a probably considerable amount of) writing that serves the purpose of noting down words, grammar rules, as well as taking notes in class, writing out their answers to comprehension or language work tasks, completing homework assignments and writing tests. The goal of all these activities is not writing itself – writing is just a *means* of achieving some other aim (Ur 2012:157). The present material does not deal with writing at this level – but with activities where improving the learners’ writing skills themselves is the main goal. Harmer refers to the same distinction as *writing-for-learning* versus *writing-for-writing* (2007:330).

2. Writing needs and the use of writing

From among the four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), most learners of English will probably use writing the least in their everyday lives. In a world where English as a universally shared means of communication is rapidly spreading, coupled with an amazing speed of digitalization, more and more people are likely to have to read and listen to texts in English at some stages in their lives, and even have to speak it to some extent - but much fewer will also have to write it. Consequently, *when planning the writing component of your course with a particular student or group, it is advisable, perhaps more emphatically than in the case of all the other components, to get to know the needs and expectations of your learners.*

Now open and do Task 1 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

You might feel that (apart from preparing learners for the school leaving examination of course) it is not really worth wasting classroom time on teaching writing, as most of your prospective learners are unlikely to end up in study or work situations where they will need to produce written pieces of texts, like the ones highlighted above.

However, teachers and learners of languages alike can confirm from own experience that *getting plenty of practice in language production both in the spoken and written form has tremendous language benefits:*



When producing written language, similarly to producing speech, the aim is to practice and consolidate the material that has been previously learnt. In order for learning to take place, the brain needs practice, thus ingraining the received input through reading and listening. In addition, when learners are challenged to express a thought for which they might not have the language form, they engage in experimenting with the language and producing

utterances that they have not used before. Again, similarly to speaking, a communication need is created, which compels the writers to search for the missing vocabulary or structure, which will, then, be more likely to be stored in their memory.

3. Free versus guided writing

Free writing here is understood as writing by simply following the thread of your thoughts, without having the constraints of a specific genre to write in. The idea basically is that you should write, write, write what comes to your mind. Spelling and accuracy of language use are usually only minded to the extent that the reader (the conversation partner) can understand the message unambiguously and with ease.

Guided writing, on the other hand, is producing a piece of written text according to a set of instructions which determine its content and often also the text type or genre. In these writing tasks the text types that the learners have to produce have their own genre-specific characteristics and requirements that impose restrictions on a free flow of written communication.

In real life we are engaged in both types of writing. Obviously, as is the case in most binary distinctions, there is not always a sharp boundary between the two types – some pieces of writing are partly free and partly guided.

Now open and do Task 2 in the attached folder before moving on to the next section. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

4. Writing in the language lesson

So far we have reviewed what writing needs our learners may have and which of these can actually be practiced in the foreign language classroom. We have also defined what free writing and guided writing are. Let's now turn our attention to the ways the teaching of writing may manifest in the language lessons.

4.1 Free writing in the language lesson

A number of opportunities might arise in the course of a language lesson, which you might grab to give your learners some spontaneous, free writing experience. Can you think of a few?

Here are some examples:

1)

At some point in the *lesson tell your learners to take a sheet of paper* (or, in the case of online education, as a digital alternative, open a new document) *and write for a few minutes*. Give no topic or guidance as to what to write about, just give the time limit (5 or 10 minutes is the most practicable). Tell your students not to worry about the organisation of the text, just write whatever comes to their minds. However, at the sentence level they should form what they write as well as they can: the resulting text should be easily understandable and enjoyable for the reader. The goal is to allow them to express themselves freely in writing, without having to worry too much about language mistakes, and with nothing to limit the content of what they are writing.

It is also a good means of bringing the learners to focus at the beginning of the lesson, calming them down when they become unruly during the class, or ‘phasing them out’ at the end.

2)

When giving their answers to listening or reading comprehension questions, tell the students *to justify their answers in one or two sentences of their own* (not copying from the text).

3)

Before starting a discussion activity, tell the students to write down a few ideas in preparation. This will also help the discussion tremendously. (More about this when we are dealing with speaking teaching.)

4)

At the end of the *lesson ask the learners to write a few sentences of feedback about the lesson* they have just had with you: What did they learn? How did they feel? Was there anything that they would like to do more/less of next time round?

4.2 Guided writing in the language lesson

When helping our learners to be able to write certain text types like formal letters or essays, we need to specify the task in more detail: we at least have to give the text type that they are expected to produce and the topic that they should produce it about.

4.2.1 The ‘DIY approach’

Imagine the following English lesson: the students read and discuss a text with the title ‘The History of the Cinema’ in the lesson, then do a few language exercises around it. At the end of the lesson the teacher gives the homework assignment: ‘*Write a composition of 200-250 words about your favourite film*’.



Thinking task 1

Think back on your own English lessons: Were your experiences with classroom writing tasks similar to this? In what way were they different?

This scenario was typical of language lessons a few decades ago. *Practising writing longer texts was left for homework* – as writing is basically an individual activity and is time-consuming, it was considered a waste of classroom time to include it in the lesson. In the example above, the teacher gives this task mainly with the aim of improving the students’ general language skills (grammar and vocabulary), which they now have to demonstrate producing a connected written discourse.

The term ‘**DIY approach**’ was invented by a fellow teacher trainer, a great friend and colleague to describe the phenomenon where – apart from some relevant vocabulary that might have cropped up in the class reading text – *the learners are completely left alone with the writing task*: they have to select the film to write about, give it some sort of form and structure, search for the relevant vocabulary and structures to use and then actually write it out.

Advantages and limitations



Simply naming a topic to write about is the *easiest and quickest way for the teacher*. In addition, the writing activity does not take up any valuable lesson time. *The learners are under no time pressure*, they can relax at home and take their time to write the composition. They can also use any kind of resource material to help them with their work.

The learners are left completely alone in the writing process: with nothing more than a title or a topic to write about, without any definite idea about what the end product should look like and how to go about producing one, the writing is likely to become a daunting task. This does not go without serious implications. The immediate consequence might be that the learners feel they cannot think of anything to write: they might lack sufficient topic knowledge or/and might be at a loss for ideas to include. In addition, without adequate preparation, they might not possess the relevant vocabulary and structures that they would need to express their ideas about the topic. Above all, apart from fearing the consequences of not doing homework, *they have no real reason to write the text!* In the long term all this might lead to a loss of motivation to write in English, but also to the development of inhibitions and anxiety.

Limitations

4.2.2 The product approach

One alternative way of going about the same writing task (writing about the film, see above in 4.2.1) is called the product approach. An illustration could be page 97 of the following sample unit from a coursebook, see Task 3 below.

In this approach, which is also called the ***text-based or genre-based approach***, the goal is to teach the learners what certain text types typically look like and assist them in producing these.

Now open and do Task 3 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.



Thinking task 2

Think back to your English lessons – were the writing tasks that your teacher(s) gave you similar to this one? What were the differences? Did you feel confident and well-supported to cope with writing assignments in class and in exams? What did you miss that could have helped you to become more successful?

Advantages and limitations



The learner has a more specific task: the text type or genre is defined (here: a film review). As a central part of the method, a model text is provided, along with an analysis of some typical features of such texts. The model text provides the learners with a clear view of the end-product they are trying to produce, the awareness raising exercises assist them in how to organise the text and what kind of language to use to write it.

This approach is a definite improvement to the one where the learner gets no more than a title to write about. Good writers do not actually need any other support and can write the text with relative ease. However, not every learner is talented in writing, and learners also differ greatly in terms of how much they worked on their L1 writing skills back at school.

Teachers usually find that even with a model text and awareness raising exercises at their disposal, *a considerable portion of their learners are still at a loss as regards how to write the piece, i.e. the process.*

Limitations

4.2.3 The process approach

Rather than focusing on the end-product of the writing activity, the process approach, as its name suggests, aims at raising the learners' awareness as to how, through what steps successful writers produce a text – and provides practice for these in the language course.



Thinking task 3

Think back to your own experiences. Reflect on the essays and projects that you have had to write, either in English or in your mother tongue, so far in your life – at school, as part of language exams or in the course of your university studies. Can you identify some steps in the writing process that you went through?

List them here in any order that they come to your mind.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- ...



Key

You probably completed most of the following steps:

1. collecting ideas to include,
2. grouping your ideas: which ones belong together and will go into the same section of the text (e.g. paragraphs),
3. putting the paragraphs in the order they should appear in the text,
4. writing a draft of the whole text,
5. reviewing your draft,
 - if the ideas are enough, balanced and appropriate, if nothing is repeated or missing
 - language use (grammar, vocabulary, conjunctions, spelling and punctuation)
6. producing a final draft through the corrections resulting from the review in 5.



Please note

The order in which the steps are listed in the Key seems to be the logical one to follow, doesn't it? If, however, you reflect again on your own writing experience (or you might already be aware of this at this stage), *the steps do not necessarily follow each other in this neat, logical order*. Instead, we might start out by jotting down a nearly complete paragraph, then get stuck and brainstorm ideas, then again expand in more detail on one of those ideas, then stop and try to order what we have written so far, meanwhile noticing a few language errors and quickly correcting those, then we may decide to check the accuracy of everything that we have written so far, in the middle of which some new ideas occur to us and we jot them down and write out a few sentences in full, and so on and so forth.

Now open and do Task 4 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.

Advantages and limitations



The learners are assisted throughout the complete cycle of the writing process – which benefits them both with this task and in the long run as well: they will learn how to write a longer piece of discourse. This gives them a feeling of security and a sense of achievement.

At several stages of the process the learners have discussions with each other and the teacher (see above), which does not only give them support in the writing process but it also serves as a valuable spontaneous and goal-oriented speaking practice.

Limitations

Teaching writing with the process approach is immensely *time-consuming*: brainstorming and collecting ideas, arranging them, writing a draft, reviewing it (possibly several cycles of all this), then writing the final version – all this adds up to a huge amount of (classroom) time. Many teachers (and learners) argue that they would prefer to spend that time on ‘more useful’ language activities. This is one of the reasons why a clear knowledge of the learners’ aims is essential to decide how much time is worth spending focusing on the process of writing a text.

Implementing the process approach is also very time-consuming for the teacher. In the next section we will discuss how teachers can give feedback on learners’ writing, and then it will be clear, why.

If learners are working towards a language exam, where there is usually very limited time to write an essay, the process approach can only have overall benefits in the long term: one hopes that by working through the whole cycle of creating a text a few times, the students’ ability to plan and write an essay in a limited timeframe will improve. However, in this case, they also need practice in planning, writing and reviewing texts under time pressure.

5. Feedback to the students’ writing

Depending on what type of writing activity we set, we need to formulate our feedback accordingly. Depending on the aim of the writing task, we need to make decisions regarding what we ‘respond’ to, e.g. to the content, text organisation, genre requirements, style, language forms, etc.

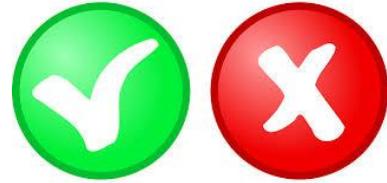
5.1 Feedback to free writing



If you ask your students to produce free writing, you are actually encouraging them to formulate their thoughts in writing, just like when you set a fluency task in speaking. It does not necessarily have to be the teacher who gives response, the idea of peers reading each other’s work has plenty of advantages. When giving feedback to a free writing activity, *respond to content*, and thus natural communication will evolve. This is highly time-consuming, therefore it requires careful planning how much you make your learners write and how much you yourself undertake to respond to.

5.2 Feedback to the product

When providing feedback for the ‘products’ written in the spirit of the product approach, it is always necessary to *respond to the content, the genre requirements and to the language*. As regards responding to the language, we can have several levels of assessment: we can simply indicate that there is a mistake there, we can introduce some coding system to indicate what type of mistake it is or, we can go as far as to supply the correct form. We need to bear in mind, however, that learners will not automatically review and learn from the corrections, but they need to be trained to do so. This is important, because correcting assignments this way is very time-consuming, and unless it is done for the learners to benefit from, there is not much point in it.



5.3 Feedback to the process



When applying the process approach, the teacher, or at times the peers, *give some kind of feedback (content or language feedback) at all the stages of the writing process*: the general idea is that content feedback can be provided both by the teacher and the peers, but as regards language feedback, the teacher is (or should be) the ultimate resource. For example:

1. collecting ideas to include – content feedback provided by peers, the teacher or both,
2. grouping/organising your ideas – content feedback provided by peers, the teacher or both,
3. putting the paragraphs in order – content feedback provided by peers, the teacher or both,
4. a draft of the whole text – content feedback: provided by peers, the teacher or both, language feedback: maybe preliminarily by peers, but ultimately by the teacher,
5. final version – content feedback: provided by peers, the teacher or both, language feedback: maybe preliminarily by peers, but ultimately by the teacher.



Summary

The aim of the present unit is to discuss the teaching of writing as a skill in the foreign language classroom. After exploring what writing needs our learners may have, the notions of free and guided writing were introduced and examples were provided for their use in the classroom. You have also learnt that feedback is always important and you were presented with a variety of ways in which you can provide your learners with feedback and/or corrections.

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