

UNIT SIX: COMMENTARY

DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS

1. There is a similarity of approach in this unit to that presented in Unit 5: Reading Skills. (See also the note on Listening Skills, Unit 5a.) The focus here is on examining writing as a real-world activity and following the implications of this for teachers of English interested in developing useful, communicative skills. This unit should be presented after doing the Reading unit. If, however, this is not possible, you will have to expand the first part of the unit's activities by adapting to the field of Writing the points made in the Commentary for Unit 5 relating to the activities after the demonstration lesson.
2. Make sure the course participants understand that this includes anything they wrote from comments on a student's exercise to the next chapter of the novel they may be writing.
3. Remind the course participants of how you talked about things you read (in Unit 5). Then put the first question – WHAT did you write? - on the board and ask the course participants to think of further questions we need to ask in order to build up a communicative profile of a piece of writing just as we did for something they read.
4. The "WHO did you expect/intend to read it?" question is very important. It adds a vital dimension to the communicative profile and interrelates closely to the question of HOW you write something.
5. Make sure you bring out the interrelatedness of the answers to the five questions.
6. Try to get a realistic discussion of this question. The fact is that most people write very little in real life outside the classroom other than brief notes and filling in forms. It may be the case that the younger generation is actually writing more than they used to thanks to the popularity of email and social networking internet sites. This sort of writing may well appear at the top of your course participants' rank order of writing text types. It does not really matter what order your course participants come up with. The important thing is that they should think about the text types that people actually write and how often they write them in order to contrast this information with what usually goes on in the language classroom. You will use the results of this discussion particularly in the session after the break.
7. Make sure the course participants understand you want them to talk about what actually happens now in their classrooms, not about what they think ought to happen. The principal aim here, of course, is to contrast what people do outside the classroom in "real life" with what we traditionally ask people to

do in the classroom. You will need to observe the difference between writing as part of the general language learning process - written grammar exercises, for example, and attempts to develop the writing skill itself. Possible answers that you will want to explore and discuss include:

- a. *When:*
 - i. taking notes – have they ever received any help in how to do this?;
 - ii. language/grammar exercises – emphasis on getting “the right answer” and practising the mechanics of writing;
 - iii. “follow-up” writing – e.g. summarising a class discussion, typically evaluated entirely according to the grammatical accuracy of the writing;
 - iv. dedicated “writing” lessons – essay writing, typically narrative and descriptive in style.

- b. *Why:*
 - i. because the teacher or the textbook tells them to – no other reason is considered necessary;
 - ii. in order to be able to present homework to the teacher;
 - iii. to demonstrate learning – suggests that if you can write it, you know it. How true do you think this is? The value of this writing depends entirely on the validity of the activity that gives rise to the writing;
 - iv. to pass examinations – there are obviously good practical reasons why most examinations have to rely on written answers. This does not mean, however, that we cannot question the validity of most forms of written examinations if they do not reflect real-life writing behaviour.

- c. *What:*
 - i. Notes – see above;
 - ii. Language/grammar exercises – see above;
 - iii. Summaries – either as follow-up to classroom activities (see above), which could, if appropriately organised, be much more realistic than they usually are, e.g. writing up the minutes of a committee meeting held in class, or as a traditional Summary Writing exercise based on a text that is read in class (**see below).
 - iv. Essays – usually narrative or descriptive and uncontextualised. The students are given no reason to write. They do it because the teacher tells them to and because it is considered to be “a good thing”.

** A note about Summaries. Extracting the gist or the principal points from a text can be a useful exercise as long as it is put into a context and students have a reason for doing it. Separate members (or pairs) from a small group might be given the task of presenting the main points contained in different documents at a “committee” meeting at which certain decisions have to be taken. This form of summarising means being able to read, extract relevant information, write notes and then present this information at a meeting. The writing is there to back up the reading. It is not an end in itself.

Comparison with what we said about writing in the “real world” should cover at least the following points:

“Real World” writing:

- has a much wider range of text types;
- is always written for a reason and the writer always has a result in mind;
- is written with a knowledge or expectation of who will read what is written;
- has a range of different formats and lay-outs (not always “well-made paragraphs”);
- has various forms of result: for example, the writer may receive a written reply, a telephone call or a parcel in the post. The least likely result is to get the writing back with the language corrected.

8. Discussion of the implications will include at least:

a. *Why we ask students to write:*

We will always try to place writing within a context in which it might realistically be expected to take place. The students will know why they are writing, what their writing is intended to achieve and who, within the context, is going to read what they write. So, for example, you would not simply ask students to write a description of their classroom, but you might set up a situation in which the school has enough money to redecorate three classrooms and the students’ task is to get their room chosen as one of the three. They must, therefore, write a letter to the Head Teacher saying why their room should be chosen and describing how it should be redecorated.

b. *What we ask students to write:*

We need to practise writing more than just letters and essays. Earlier in the day the course participants built up a list of text types and then ranked them in the order in which they thought these text types were most used. The results of this exercise should indicate the types of writing that need to be practised. There should be a variety of text types with a variety of formats, so as well as descriptive essays, students should practise notes and short messages, emails, a range of different types of letters and form-filling.

c. *How much we ask students to write:*

This perhaps depends on the classroom context. In an exam-oriented class there will have to be a lot of practice of the type of writing needed for the examination. Similarly, in a class preparing students for life at an English-speaking university there will have to be a lot of practice in note-taking and essay-writing. In a general language class setting, however, it is worth remembering the low priority of writing in most people’s real lives and so we might want to give more of the limited time available to speaking.

On the question of how long each piece of writing should be, the criterion is set by the task to be achieved and the text-type. You do not set a target of 500 words if the task can be achieved in 300.

d. *How we make it possible for students to write:*

We first of all make it possible for students to write by setting a realistic, comprehensible task. So students know why they are doing the writing, who they are writing to and what they want to achieve. Secondly, we make it possible for students to write by how we structure the activity in the classroom. We are going to present a possible approach to this in the next stage of this unit. All we need say now is that there needs to be an introductory phase which sets the context, a preparatory phase, a writing phase, an editing and completion phase and a response and result phase.

e. *How we handle what students write:*

There are two aspects to this. One is how we handle the phase following the completion of the initial writing phase within the context of the classroom activity. What should happen next? Should the students receive some form of reply (to which they might have to reply)? What sort of acknowledgement should they receive in the context of the activity? This is important because it demonstrates that writing is not something that is finished and sent off into the void. There should be some sort of result or response. If there is no response in the real world the writer is left feeling dissatisfied. We can avoid this in the classroom.

The second aspect is concerned with how we evaluate the writing produced by our students. The first thing we should evaluate is whether or not the writing achieves its objective. If it is a letter of complaint, does it set out the reason for the complaint clearly and is it likely to result in something being done about it? The extent to which our evaluation focuses on specific elements of the language used depends on the degree to which grammatical errors, faulty spelling and questionable choice of vocabulary impede the achievement of the writer's objective. Just as when our students are engaged in an active group discussion we do not want constantly to interrupt to correct what we perceive as errors of language, similarly when students are concerned with achieving an objective with their writing, we do not want to cover their pieces of paper with red marks so that the question of whether or not the objective has been achieved is obscured.

If there is time at this point you could spend some time exploring different approaches to providing feedback on students' writing. You could point out that there are several occasions during the classroom activity when the teacher is able to provide assistance with language problems: during the preparation stage if students are making notes, while they are writing their first drafts, during the editing stage and after completion. Other areas to discuss might include:

- i. Is the use of the traditional red pen helpful?
- ii. Do you correct or just indicate where there is an error?
- iii. Do you use a code in the margin to identify different sorts of errors?
- iv. Do you use self-correction or do students correct each others' work?

Be careful not to spend too much time on this. It is a relatively unimportant matter, but one that teachers can get hung up on!

9. This activity is concerned with planning writing activities for the classroom. Do not present the handout as THE WAY TO DO IT. It is an approach that fits with the overall approach to interactive, communicative teaching and which attempts to incorporate a real-world understanding of writing.

You can expand the six stages on the handout like this:

- i. Setting the context:*
You can do this with a combination of explanation and background information by means of texts (letter, newspaper article, advertisement etc), recordings and discussion.
- ii. Giving a reason for writing:*
This is an essential element of setting the context. It may mean, among other things, that the writer:
 - a. Wants to say something in writing, e.g. give an opinion, some advice or a warning; make a comment.
 - b. Wants to do something by writing, e.g. persuade someone, make a purchase, make an application, ask for advice.
 - c. Needs to write something. e.g. leave a note or a message, reply to something received.
- iii. Thinking, Discussing, Preparing:*
Using the introductory documents or others, this may be done individually, in pairs or in groups.
- iv. Writing:*
This will be "first draft" writing and can be done individually, but probably better in pairs or small groups
- v. Editing:*
There may be more or less teacher intervention here. First drafts can be exchanged with other groups or individuals for suggestions and corrections.
- vi. Completion:*
Back in original grouping to complete the text. An alternative is for each student to complete the piece of writing individually at home.
- vii. Response/Result:*
 - a. Contextualised response: what might reasonably be expected to happen in the context set up at the start of the activity; could be the next step in a series of linked events
 - b. Feedback and correction, see section 8.e above.