Learning to Write/Writing to Learn[1]

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1 Introduction

In common with listening, speaking and reading, we can distinguish two main roles for writing in English Language Teaching (ELT). One is the by now well-established view of writing as a skill, that is writing as itself *a goal* of language teaching and learning. The other role, no less important but perhaps under-explored, is writing as *a mode of* language teaching and learning, where writing is a means of developing the learner's general foreign language abilities. In this paper, I want to examine the ways in which these two aspects of writing are currently handled in ELT practice. I will argue that writing should and could take a much more central role in our classroom work. The final part of the article will show how a relatively new task type - interactive writing - may be of value in this respect.

2 Writing as *a goal* of teaching and learning

A survey through most of the 'writing skills' books currently available would, I am sure, identify considerable uniformity in their methodology. Typically, learners are asked to work through a series of steps, beginning; first with a 'model text' - model in the sense that it is supposed to be a good example of the kind of text that the learners are learning to produce. This may be followed by comprehension exercises of some kind, but the next significant step is that the learners are then offered an analysis of the structure of the model, with a commentary on how the various parts of that structure together form a complete text. Essay writing, for example, might be analysed as *introduction -development - conclusion,* paragraph writing might be analysed as *topic sentence - exemplification - discussion,* letter writing as *greeting - reason; for writing - main message -- closing remark and salutation,* and so on.

Working from these analyses, learners are then asked to create 'parallel" texts in which they are given certain information - perhaps notes, perhaps incomplete sentences, perhaps simply a situation. - to mould into complete texts similar in nature to the original model. There is, of course, considerable variety in how these stages are handled, but in general it is possible to identify an underlying methodology of *model text - analysis - reproduction* in most writing skills books.

Now, the first point to note about this pattern of work is that it would seem curiously out of step with much of the recent developments in communication-based approaches to language teaching. It is true that the parallel text which the learners produce may reflect the *form* of a genuine text, but the text itself has no actual communicative purpose. The assumed reader of the text - whether it is a future employer,, an examiner or the editor of a newspaper - is hypothesized. The learners are to imagine that they are writing for a particular reader, although they know that, in reality, their text will probably only be read by the teacher who, in all likelihood, will be concerned with the overall form of the text, rather than the message it contains. This absence of a 'message reader' is significant because it indicates that our approach to teaching writing as a skill lacks many of the features which are now held central to a communicative approach to language teaching.

We have become familiar with a rationale for communicative language teaching which emphasises (quite rightly) the need to provide learners with an opportunity to use language in a wider context, where they are required to make judgements over the appropriacy of language and not simply its form and where they may have some direct interaction with their interlocutors such that they may check and clarify their meaning (to 'negotiate meaning", as it is currently termed). These features seem to be absent in contemporary approaches to teaching writing as a skill. The highly controlled, patterned writing which learners are required to do makes irrelevant the kind of experimentation and risk-taking which are now thought to be vital to good language learning. An *hypothesized* reader makes impossible any interaction between writer and reader, any feedback on how clear the intended meaning is. In fact an hypothesized reader actually makes writing more difficult since the absence of a

strong sense of audience prevents writers from reviewing their texts as *readers*, a vital part of the writing process.

These observations point to at least three new criteria for the design of writing tasks. There is a need, firstly, for tasks which allow learners to experiment and take risks with the new language, allowing them to develop their own personal hypotheses of how language works and of what things are linguistically possible. Secondly, there is a need for tasks which lead to the learners producing unpredictable texts. We tend, it seems, to stress safe, error-free, predictable guided and parallel writing in place of creative, imaginative, open-ended writing, emphasising what Ann Raimes (1983:262) has called 'editing' at the expense of 'composing'. Yet, it would seem obvious that the principal need of most learners, when they come to utilise their foreign language skills outside the classroom, will be composing.

A third feature for the design of writing tasks is that, to capitalise on the classroom as a resource, tasks need to allow some interaction between those learning to write and their readers, so that they may get feedback on how far the intended message has been understood arid how its form was received. A dialogue of this kind between writers and readers would provide learners with a unique opportunity to gain insights into how they express themselves and thereby to develop the ability to take the perspective of a reader of their text.

Although these three criteria relate primarily to tasks for developing writing skills, they contain within them some important considerations for language pedagogy as a whole. In suggesting that learners need to take the perspective of their interlocutors, that the development of personal hypotheses of language structure and use are important, and that we need to move away from heavily structured tasks towards tasks which allow more creativity, we are also implying a rethinking of way in which language teaching is in the main undertaken, a point to which I now turn.

3 Writing as *a mode* of teaching and learning

In the last ten to fifteen years, we have seen considerable expansion in the materials on offer to teachers and learners. Coursebooks regularly announce a fresh methodology, innovative classroom techniques and so on. Although there has undoubtedly been more account taken of the personal needs and interests of learners, much of these recent 'methodological advances' have boiled down to new ways to lay out course materials (including the use of colour and authentic-like documents) and to the addition of a single task type (such as projects or role-plays) to conventional ways of approaching language teaching. It is useful at this point, therefore, to reflect on the nature of 'conventional' language teaching, since it reveals some interesting facts about the place of writing in general language pedagogy.

The first significant fact to note, so obvious that it may almost escape us, is what I term 'the primacy of speech'. The assumption that underlies most contemporary approaches is that speech is not only important as *goal* of language teaching (that is, 'the skill of speaking', making conversation, pronunciation, etc) but that it is also the most effective *mode* of language teaching (that is, that people will learn language most effectively through listening and speaking, through oral drills, through answering and asking verbal questions and so on). Writing has a relatively small part in all of this, mainly as a follow-up to oral classroom work through grammar exercises, reconstruction exercises, gap-filling, dialogue writing and such like. The origins of this are comparatively recent - writing-based, grammar-translation methodologies were, after all, dominant until the turn of the century.

The next significant feature concerns the organisation of language teaching. Most contemporary approaches utilise, in one way or another, a 'presentation - practice - free practice' format, in which the learner is presented with a sample of the foreign language (for example, a dialogue), then perhaps questioned on its meaning (for example, comprehension questions), before moving on to guided practice (for example, a drill or patterned dialogue) and finally freer practice, where the teacher and coursebook provide less direct control over the students' language output. Even here, though, the freer practice will be related directly to a specified

teaching point, albeit in a slightly larger context (it is here, in fact, that the main impact of communicative language teaching has been felt).

There are three main points to note about this way of organising language teaching. Firstly, the kind of language with which the students work is frequently stereotyped. Certain grammatical juxtapositions are presented with surprising regularity and, even more surprisingly, illustrated in identical ways (how many times have you seen the sentence I *was having' a bath when the telephone rang ?).* Functions and notions are set out in terms of fixed phrases even though, as we now know, speech functions are more likely to be accomplished through interaction rather than isolated sentences (consider for a moment how many times you have seen *Making Suggestions* illustrated with *How about. ?, What about. ..? Why don't ,you. ..?.* Then think about how often you actually hear those phrases used).

Secondly, in teaching this language, the emphasis is most clearly on reproduction and imitation. Similar to the approaches in writing skills materials described earlier, the main requirement placed upon learners is to reproduce through devices such as oral repetition, prompts, slashed sentences, gap fills, parallel situations and so on. This emphasis on reproduction and imitation points to another interesting fact: the assumption of what I call an input-output model of teaching. Everyone involved in teaching knows that what is taught in the classroom is not often equal or identical to what gets learnt - end of course tests almost always confirm that - the difference lying between what Corder (1981) calls teacher input and learner uptake. Yet, despite this, our teaching and certainly most coursebooks are organised around the notion that it *is* possible to specify exactly what will be learnt. Unit headings which specify grammatical or functional items, drills which focus on narrow teaching points, lists of vocabulary items to learn, all betray an assumption of direct control over learning, as assumption that experience does not, unfortunately, sustain.

Now, apart from doubts about the effectiveness of a methodology which assumes that direct control over learning is indeed possible, we may also raise questions about the efficacy of a methodology which allows such little room for learners to say what they

actually want to say, which allows little creativity or imagination in the use of the foreign language and which focuses the learners cognitive work on trying to understand someone else's analysis and systematisation of the language rather than trying to develop their own. If, as I believe many teachers would agree, the ultimate goal of language teaching is the learners' autonomy in language use, then we need a methodology which moves away from pre-digesting the language for the learner, away from packaging items for the convenience of teaching, away from stereotyped sentence patterns and more towards freer, open, more creative task types through which learners may develop their own personal abilities to compose - and edit - in the foreign language. It is here, for me, that writing could have a much more important role. Why?

Composing takes time. Bound, as learners frequently are, to 'real time' oral activities (drills, question and answer, role play, discussion, etc), there is little time for all but the most proficient learner to engage in composing. Repetition and imitation is far quicker. lt may well be, therefore, that decrement in learning. Nor am I suggesting that classrooms should become silent as learners devote their time to writing. What. I am suggesting is that writing could usefully become a focal point for classroom work, such that speaking, listening and reading all surround the production of learners" own texts - that is, surround the learners" own composing. Now, for writing to act in this way, we clearly need a new breed of tasks which our existing stock does not provide. Heavily structured, linguistically oriented, guided and parallel writing tasks are unlikely to be of help here. There are undoubtedly a number of possibilities to explore in the design of freer, open tasks centring on writing, but one task type with which I have been experimenting in the last few years is interactive writing and in the final section of this paper 1 would like to give a few illustrations of such tasks and explain how I believe they offer new opportunities for learners to learn.

4 Interactive writing tasks

By *interactive I* refer to learners writing to, for and with other learners. I am, therefore, using the term to refer purely to the organisation of classroom work, not, as others have used it, to refer to the psycho-linguistic interaction between writer and

reader. The following examples should illustrate what I mean.

Example 1: Zany descriptions

Read this description of a motor car. What's wrong with it?

> Cars usually have four wheels, a motor and wings. They run on water and go very fast. They taste very nice with tomato sauce.

Now, in a group, think of a common object and write a description of it - but make your description wrong in some ways. Then, give it to another group - they have to correct your description.

In this task, learners work together in a small group to produce a ludicrous description. When they are ready, they pass it to another group who read it, and try to rectify it.

Three interesting things have emerged from my use of this task. Firstly, many learners find refreshing a move away from the earnest., authentic, perhaps over-utilitarian atmosphere which seems to dominate many language materials nowadays. Even so-called 'serious' learners seem to respond to the task since it, is clear what it is about and does not ask the learner to pretend. Secondly, by insisting on the absurd, the task forces a focus on meaning and with it a focus on accuracy. Learners put considerable energy into constructing deviant texts and then further effort into rectifying the texts, produced by others. Thirdly, the amount of Oral language work that surrounds completion of the task is considerable. In their groups, learners share ideas not only about what they will write but also how they will write it, suggesting spellings, sentence structures, wording and so on. This helps them to formulate and refine their own ideas about the structure and use of the foreign language.

Example 2: Do it yourself English.

Work in a small group. Make up a gap-filling exercise about the people in your class, using the present and past tenses. For example:

1 Pedro is __ next to Irma.

2 Last week, Jan _____ ill and he___ __ to the lesson,

3 Isabel___ in an office. She ____ her job because it is very boring,

(If you prefer, you can choose any other subject but make sure you use the past and present tenses.)
When you have finished, give it to another group to do. Check that they get the answers right!

In this task, learners similarly work together to produce a text for other learners to work upon, although in this case it is a language exercise (or test) which they are producing. This particular example uses the members of the class as its topic, but learners are free to think of any other topic they wish as long as they restrict themselves to a specific grammatical or vocabulary area.

An initial reaction to this task may be that it appears to focus on precisely the kind of work which 1 have argued against in the earlier part of this paper - narrow linguistic items devoid of a wider context,. The important point to note, however, is that. the learners real work lies not in doing the exercise but in designing it. Similar to example 1 above, in working together on the design of an exercise, learners become involved in sharing ideas about sentence structure, phrasing, spelling, vocabulary and so on - perhaps more so than in example 1, given the nature of the text they are to produce. Despite the seemingly dry nature of the task, in practice learners appear to become deeply involved in jointly constructing the perhaps primarily because offers an opportunity to refresh their understanding and memory of things they have done so far in a non-evaluative atmosphere.

Both of the above examples relate primarily to writing as a mode of teaching and learning, that is to general language development, rather than to 'the skill of writing' specifically. It is, however, not difficult to imagine the design of writing skills tasks which similarly utilise an interactive classroom methodology and which thereby allow learners to share ideas, take risks and to take the role of both writer and reader. Littlejohn (1988), for example, has attempted to do this by devising simulations for the development of business letter-writing skills.

4 Conclusion

One initial reaction to the arguments put forward in this paper may be that the kind of creative, imaginative, less structured tasks I have suggested may be inappropriate for beginning students, who may have little or no language on which to draw. In principle, however, I see no major problem here. Use of illustration can stimulate ideas which can be expressed in fairly simple language (see, for example, Littlejohn, forthcoming 1991). The case of beginning students does, however, underline the need to open up further resources for learners. Bilingual dictionaries, for example, banned from many classrooms, are invaluable in helping lower level learners to say what they want to say. (use of the mother tongue is also an important resource as, are good bilingual grammars and other reference works. More thorough indexing of coursebooks is also vital so that learners can gain easier access to examples and guidance. Too often, students' books are simply the other half of a teacher's book, thereby effectively making its use entirely dependent on the teacher.

This paper has touched on a number of points which concern not only the teaching of writing but general language pedagogy as well. Perhaps for too long we have seen the 'four skills' as objects of learning, failing to recognize their role as avenues of learning. It has been my intention in this paper to show how these two different roles relate to one of the skills, writing, and thereby suggest some new directions for methodological development.

1 An earlier version of this article won first prize in the English-Speaking Union's English Language Competition 1989.

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