



Emma Page,
an English teacher, writer,
Bournemouth, UK

Incorporating writing

“My students want to communicate in class”

“Writing in class is a waste of time”

and...

“If it's not grammar and vocabulary, they think they're not learning”

“If they know grammar, they know how to write”

comes the cry from staffrooms around the world.

“And I don't want a stack of marking”

comes the quieter, perhaps more honest comment from the corner behind the mountain of progress records, tests and other administrative paperwork the average teacher has to contend with.

I must admit that I experienced these reactions to writing myself early in my teaching career, and I understand them. But I think they fail to see the whole picture: writing is communicative; it is a valid classroom activity; grammar and vocabulary are not the sum of a language as having a breadth or depth of grammatical or lexical knowledge does not confer awareness of syntax or register, for example; and, thankfully, writing does not have to result in extra marking.

To truly know a language and to be able to communicate effectively in it, we must recognize the various ways in which that communication takes place. Perhaps twenty or even ten years ago, those ways were more limited than they are today, but one result of the exponential growth of the Internet is the necessity for many of us to have skills in constructing new types of written communication such as tweets, emails, blogs and posts. Frequently, business communication is conducted via this modern written medium. I, myself, have never actually met my editor at “Titul” as we are based in countries many miles apart, but we have a good, professional relationship as a result of the correspondence we exchange over email. It is likely your students will similarly have to communicate in English in various situations in their lifetime and so, yes, it is your job to equip them with the tools and skills to do that effectively and naturally.

It is perfectly valid to choose writing as the main aim of a lesson but only if the students are developing an aspect of their writing skills. For example, writing can be the main aim of a lesson if the teacher feels confident that by the end of the lesson the students will have developed their awareness and practical knowledge of an aspect of writing, such as register, or of a style of writing such as a review. Perhaps, with lower level classes, the aim could simply be to focus on a set of lexical items necessary to construct a well-written essay paragraph. However, and, for example... are good places to begin. And it is also valid to take this right back to sentence level. After all, what is a tweet but a well-constructed sentence with each character chosen carefully to convey maximum meaning.

However, while I try to incorporate one writing focus lesson per week or fortnight into my classes, I am currently moving towards finding ways to include it in my other lessons. I feel strongly that there is immense value in increasing the amount of writing students do in the average grammatical or lexical lesson. Written English tends to allow the student more time

to construct their idea than spoken English. It can be drafted, edited and improved creating a positive-feedback loop as the student sees their production of English visibly get better. It can shine a light on repeated errors that are easily missed in speech, such as the absence of third person 's' or missing prepositions and articles, and it can enable a large group of learners to peer teach without knowing it.

Mini-white boards

Starting with my final point, I would advise any teacher serious about incorporating writing into lessons to invest in a set of mini-white boards. If these are beyond your budget then simply laminate some A3 paper as boards and bring extra marker pens and some tissue paper to class. Laminated paper can substitute for a whiteboard for at least a few weeks if cleaned quickly after use with water and tissues.

The basics of letter formation and spelling can be added to any grammar exercise. Simply share out the mini-white boards, one per pair, and ask them to put their answers on the boards instead of in their notebooks. When all the pairs / groups are ready they hold up their boards for each other to see. They can see how many other people put the same answer as them; they can check their spelling; and they will learn. The teacher can step in and highlight correct answers or alternative answers as needed.

Alternatively, have a board race. Ask any vocabulary or grammar question and teams race to write the answer and hold it up first. Only correctly spelt answers win, of course.

How about dictating a sentence then asking students to substitute as many words as possible to make new sentences? Give them a theme or a genre and see how creative, funny, clever or able your students are. Don't forget to give points wherever you can. This is a very motivating exercise for a 5-minute warmer.

Instead of substitution, try addition. For example, give a simple two word sentence, such as 'Susan shouted' and ask the students to add as many words as possible, while keeping it as one sentence. It's incredible what this can reveal about their grammatical range and knowledge of things like adjective order, direct / indirect speech and subordinate clauses.

With both of these ideas, the resultant sentences can provide excellent positive feedback loops, opportunities for spot and peer correction, and chances for demanding high. One way I demand high with this exercise is to take a couple of the best sentences and find ways to make them even better. For example, take a verb they've used correctly and swap it for a phrasal verb with the same meaning. Or take the whole idea and rewrite it in a different style. Maybe it was a neutral sentence such as "The man wanted a new job" and you help the class create "The unemployed man decided he would do everything he could to find new employment".

Writing from reading

One great way to incorporate writing skills into other lessons is to connect tasks to a reading text. Here are some pre-reading writing tasks.

Running dictation

Running dictation is a young-learner friendly, or kinesthetic activity that raises awareness of features of written text as a pre-reading warmer. There are various ways to do this, which can respond to difference learning styles, and it enables the teacher to add differentiation to her lessons. They are also a great way to teach punctuation with a real need – if they don't know the name of the punctuation, they can't win!

i – straight running dictation

- a) Copy the introduction and stick it to a wall outside the classroom.
- b) Arrange the tables in a semi-circle.
- c) Put the class into small teams of no more than 3 people.
- d) Identify one person in each team who will be the writer (either self-selected or dictated by you depending on the needs of the individual learners in your group); they stay seated on the outside of the tables.

- e) The others will be the runners, they come to the centre of the semi-circle.
- f) Ensure there is clear access to the introduction paragraph with no trip hazards!!
- g) Set a time limit — 5–7 minutes is usually a good length of time.
- h) Tell the students there will be two winning teams: one, the quickest to finish (or who gets the furthest before the time runs out) and two, the most accurate.
- i) The rules are that the runners must remember as much as they can then dictate the text to the writer.
- j) Additionally, the runners must not touch the pens or paper / mini-whiteboards.
- k) Ensure they know that punctuation and spelling are important.
- l) Another rule is that only one runner for each team can be outside the classroom at any one time.
- m) Off they go! It's chaotic but energizing and produces a healthy sense of competition.
- n) The teams swap writing and check the work by finally opening their course books and looking at the original text. They count the number of errors. The team with the fewest errors wins the most accurate title. By monitoring this stage you are able to see which pronunciation errors cause spelling errors, which words were new, or which words were often missed out so you can tailor your class feedback to the whole group.
- o) Ask the students to read the now-corrected introduction and predict something about the rest of the text. Here are some ideas of questions you could ask:
 - What kind of story will it be? (identifying genre)
 - What kind of text is it? An essay, a story or an article? How do you know? (identifying text features)
 - What happens next? (prediction)

The entirety of this pre-reading task should take no more than 20 minutes, but it provides very valuable personalized learning opportunities. The writers develop their listening, speedwriting, and spelling skills. As they get the text piece by piece, they have to work at making meaning from what they are writing. Good 'writers' may well question the 'runners' grammar or spelling as they try to understand the text that is appearing. On the other hand, the 'runners' have to practice their short-term memory, which is a valuable skill across education and beyond, as well as their pronunciation, and they must learn to identify features of writing such as punctuation, and describe that to someone else. As each student has personal strengths and weaknesses regarding these skills, there will be different challenges for each of them in the completion of the group task.

ii – running dictation type two

In this version of the activity, the teacher removes a small part of the text, for example, the last half of the last sentence of the introduction, before the running dictation, and replaces it with an underlined empty space.

Then, instead of opening the books for the checking stage, the teacher slowly dictates the text while the students check for errors. The teacher may provide or elicit meanings and the spelling of difficult words, and models / drills pronunciation as needed. As this happens, one student writes the model answer on to the board as a visual aide for the students checking their work. A gap is left for the missing text.

Next, the teacher asks the teams to provide their own idea of the missing part of the text. They write their ideas on to mini white boards. They must utilize their sense of textual cohesion, awareness of genre and grammar to complete this stage.

When they are ready, the groups hold up their white boards and read the other groups' ideas. The teacher talks through the different ideas highlighting features of discourse and other textual aspects e.g. if the text was broken after the word 'to', the teacher might highlight that the missing text must start with an infinitive verb. It is a great opportunity to publicly praise good use of grammar, higher level vocabulary, and creativity. The students learn a lot from each other in this type of activity!

Finally, the course book is opened and the real introduction read. By this stage, the students have a real desire to know what the missing text is. They then feed back on which idea came closest to the right answer, and whether or not one of their ideas is better than the course book's!

Story introductions

If you find the reading text for the lesson is a story, you have a great opportunity to develop the students writing skills and awareness of genre. This activity is best done in pairs or threes to ensure students are all engaged with the task and no-one is able to take a backseat.

Via a running dictation or dictagloss, establish the introduction paragraph. It is important that you do not open the books or allow the students to see the original text. After the writing stage, ask the students to identify what type of story they think it is. How do they know? Then, ask them to rewrite the introduction in a different genre. A text I used recently was predicted to be a romance. The students then rewrote it as a horror, thriller / spy, fantasy and science fiction using the class set of mini-whiteboards. After each rewrite, they compared what they had written. As a teacher, I was able to highlight great vocabulary, good use of adjectives, and features of genre. Students were encouraged to copy sentences and phrases from each stage of the rewrites that they wanted to learn.

Finally, I reminded the students they had predicted a romance, they read the text quickly and realized it was in fact a thriller. We included one of the post-reading tasks from the book to finish the lesson.

This activity took 60 minutes including the running dictation. All the students had at least a page of new vocabulary and sentences in their notebooks, which they knew were correct and good quality English. As they had all contributed to their creation, there was definite sense of ownership and skill development by the end of the lesson.

Read and remember

When you want to introduce a new piece of grammar, one way you can introduce it following a text is read and remember. Choose a sentence containing the language point you want to focus on from the text. Highlight it for the students and allow them a short period of time to store it in their memories. Then they cover the text and try to write it. Let them check for themselves and each other. At this stage it is up to you whether you want to focus on complete accuracy including spelling and punctuation or just the grammar point. Once they have copied it perfectly you can highlight the form, pronunciation and start to elicit the meaning and use. Alternatively, this can be a great way to remind learners about the form of an old grammar point during the revision stages of a course by taking any sentence from a previous grammar practice exercise! Always remember to ask the learners to finally write a personalized version of the sentence to reinforce meaning and use.

Another way to approach read and remember enables you to give the students some ownership of their learning. This is done by giving them a set of sentences and allowing them to choose which one they want to read and remember. Incorporating choice allows for differentiation, reflecting the range of abilities and knowledge in the room. They can either stretch themselves with a long, difficult sentence or go for something more basic.

Text frames

This is a lovely way to give students creative input in a semi-controlled way, and works very well for audio scripts in course books, especially dialogues or descriptions.

Take a short description or two-person dialogue and blow it up to A4 on the photocopier. Tippex out some parts of the text, then make a copy for each student. The choice of what you remove depends on your lesson aims, but I like to use this for verb patterns. Next, ask the students to complete their text with their own ideas. For this stage, you could supply key words from the original missing pieces of text on the board, or simply let them use their own ideas. To avoid micro-management and encourage peer feedback, get the students to swap work and underline words or sections they think have a problem e.g. poor spelling or missing words. Then the original student tries to correct it. They can either work in pairs on correction or individually depending on the group you have. Next they then practice reading the text aloud, and present their versions to the class in small groups. The best / most original one is voted for in each group. Finally, the original is read aloud for the students to compare to their own. The second winner is the team who were most similar to the original text. A selection of the completed texts makes a good wall display.

Using technology

There are numerous ways to utilise technology in the classroom, but a lot depends on the facilities at your school or institution. I am going to include a couple here that might just help you spring-board into using your IWB or set of class computers more in class as a tool for skills development, rather than just a big TV screen to play videos on, or simply individual research search engines.

Online debate

If your school has the resources, then why not set up a group of Twitter accounts for the class with passwords you control? Create a hashtag, for example, if your class is 3A and your topic is the environment you could set up No 3Agreen. Get each student to brainstorm ideas and do some research for homework, then have a debate about how to make your school more environmentally friendly. Print out the debate for a follow-up lesson where you analyse some of the language.

Online real-time writing

There are a number of websites that can allow students to write onto an IWB from their computer or smartphone in class. Try www.padlet.com

Here is an example of a padlet page I made with an IELTS class.

<http://padlet.com/mrselfpage/ieltsbla>

I used the background map I had chosen for the page to allow the students to write brief descriptions of places they know using location language e.g. *on the coast of*. This was an alternative way into getting them to give the kind of brief introduction that can be useful in the speaking part of the exam.

Padlet can also be used to post points of view or, if you use the timeline layout where each post is listed down the screen as it is written, you can write a conversation between students. Give each pair a padlet page and have them role play a real online situation, such as being customer support for a phone company, or have them write an argument between a waiter and a customer! They could then perform it for the class. As a follow up you could print out the conversations and cut them up. Give them to different pairs who have to try to put the conversation back in order. This focuses on text cohesion and organization.

TED talks — making notes while listening

Many of my students are taking English in order to study at an English university. One real-life skill that they often need to practice is writing while listening. I like to shortlist 5 or 6 mini TED talks — the ones that are no more than 3 minutes long — and let the students choose one each to listen to. My main job is to ensure there is an even balance of people choosing at least two of the talks so there are not too many who have chosen the same talk for stage two. They then have around 10 minutes to listen and make notes. The nice thing with online listening is that they are able to fast-forward and rewind as necessary. This is not quite the same as making notes in a lecture theatre but it's still a good way to listen to a native speaker at the pace of each individual, adding differentiation to your lesson. After they have listened and made enough notes, they then tell a partner about their talk and you create some kind of suitable follow-up task depending on the content of the talks you chose.

This is only one way of many ways to use TED talks. You could also take a talk for which a transcript exists and turn it into a listening lesson, but that's not the focus of this article. I'm sure you will be inspired once you visit and see the range of topics available for you to exploit in your classroom.

.....

So there you have it. A few ideas that I hope will encourage you to see writing as a great way to exploit your course book material as well as something that doesn't always require in-depth preparation or lengthy marking in order to successfully develop this important skill in your learners.