
Writing with a Clear Aim in Mind

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1.- Introduction

Among life skills in language learning, a fundamental tool to grasp and develop is writing purposefully. It is an essential skill for the different scenarios a learner needs to interact and perform in a foreign language. As a teacher, I can share practical ideas to contribute to fulfilling this objective.

The following essay seeks reflection upon a series of ideas which result from my own teaching experience. These ideas have been translated into practical activities which can be easily implemented in the classroom. When writing occurs in the real world, be it in a business environment or in an academic context, the first difficulties a student faces are connected with the fact that they need to be effective, purposeful and as clear as possible.

It is our goal as teachers to provide students with useful tools, techniques and formulas learners can resort to when they are confronted with writing tasks throughout their daily lives.

2.- Setting the context: Students' Profiles and Academic Background

Writing poses a challenge for autonomous learning. It is inevitable to connect writing to the **skills** we are supposed to make use of on a daily basis in a number of scenarios, e.g. communication in everyday life, business and in the academic context to display our knowledge of a specific field.

In my case, I am a lawyer as well and have been teaching Law in English for 16 years now.

Also, as a counterpart of reading comprehension skills, students need to be able to write in a broad array of styles.

Generally speaking, as teachers and professionals we often find resistance against writing and we think the classroom is not the proper space for spending (or "wasting") time writing.

We usually set writing as homework and we do not take enough time to provide students with proper feedback.

On the other hand, students do not enjoy writing at all. The first question we need to answer is if we are used to **communicating by writing** in our mother tongue on a daily basis.

The reply to this question is no. Social media have made us write more but we write the way we speak or even in an abbreviated style, colloquially, a totally different "jargon" or "variety of the language", an ongoing and constantly evolving phenomenon that, on certain occasions, can impede the development of this skill.

Therefore, in the first place, we need to consider what the specific purpose of writing is, our

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target audience, how to write in the adequate register and have a solid grasp of the cultural background: not only of the audience but also of the language we are writing in.

The second question to consider is if writing is a life skill.

The answer to this question is yes, definitely.

Out of the definitions there are about life skills, Macmillan English defines **life skills** as the skills we need to deal **effectively** with the challenges in everyday life, whether at school, at work or in our personal lives. They add to our chances of **employability** in the competitive and constantly changeable world of work.

Another interesting term is “**transferable skills**” which are known as “**portable skills**”, defined as qualities that can be transferred from one job to another.

Among the listed skills, **written communication** is specifically included. Qualities mentioned in written communication for a job are:

- 1) being able to adapt your writing style frequently, produce reports, press releases, marketing materials, letters or emails, memos, to write for the web, for customers, shareholders and colleagues.
- 2) Being effective.
- 3) Going to the point

In addition, the skills that can be developed when teaching writing are **self-confidence**, communication, effectiveness, **clarity**, simplicity.

Teachers can also provide instances of real or authentic communication in writing by exchanging messages as well as ideas through social media or by means of including information and answering question on the virtual campus or by mail or WhatsApp to name a few.

This habit can encourage students to write in English more naturally so as to feel more confident and start training.

For those students that need a working knowledge of the language to be effective in business or in their professional lives, this aspect can make a difference between just being taught and being engaged in using this skill.

3.- Students' needs:

As for the needs students have, the main aspects they have to be convinced of is that they need to keep it simple and, at the same time to go to the point, in other words say it briefly but efficiently.

When it comes to the world of business or academic English, there is an undoubtful and unavoidable need to be sure that what they say is right, how **to develop understanding and independence** through the use of certain formulas which make further writing easier.

Students must know how to apply these formulas to what they know so as not to find themselves immersed in a breakdown in communication.

Moreover, Academic writing brings about a further need, which is **to become critical thinkers** and ensure that students can display their academic or technical knowledge in the same way as in their mother tongue. They have to be good at critically assessing, discussing, giving an opinion.

Also, they have to be aware of their target audience, to be personally involved in provoking the reaction they aim at, the effect they expect, to attract the audience to their domain.

4.- Some tips to start off:

As a starting point, these can be tips to take into account:

- a) Identify the register, whether it is formal or informal. Besides, it has to be considered if it is Academic or Business English.
- b) Make a plan: Start by writing a tree diagram, answering the questions themselves.
- c) Also, consider what possible alternatives there are, and be sure about how to say it.

d) The typical situation we find ourselves in is that students sometimes become entangled in a great deal of thoughts and a stream of technicalities they want to include in a very complex manner: students have to be ready to split up long sentences, simplify ideas and to use connectors and punctuation properly, among other aspects to take into account.

Especially in academic writing, students have to remember to go back to the initial question and check if they are actually answering the question, not just writing a checklist or all they know about the subject, as well as whether they respect the format, e.g. to be sure they do not come up with an interesting idea in the conclusion (e.g. in an essay question) but which has not been addressed at the right time.

Critical thinking and writing means that they have to speak their mind, give their own views on the topic at stake, but in a way that is connected, applied (theory and practice are “two sides of the same coin”) and that it flows visually speaking, as well as through paragraphs which are intertwined.

Language is the means and the place to resort to achieve their goal and it cannot be a barrier, an obstacle.

How to achieve the objective of writing with a clear aim in mind

Our next step is **HOW** and it is of the utmost importance to provide **balance** between **technical and transferable skills**. The key is to implement writing activities in which both teachers and students take part actively and commit themselves to achieving a goal.

As useful ideas or tasks to do, I have come across these throughout experience: Brainstorming, thinking of main ideas/ issues to sort out.

Another interesting idea is to attempt to make the plan or tree diagram, the frame or skeleton together, teacher and students.

As an example of how writing can be motivating, in a subject we were doing as part of an LLM Programme, we decided to write together a little article on what the subject, this area of law was about with bullet points as a way of a brief overview and round- up for other lawyers who came across this field. We then uploaded it to our institution’s website and social media. It helped as a revision, also as a way of becoming aware of how this legal issue was reflected in real life, as well as a motivating activity for other professionals to get to know about it. In this case we wrote it both in English and Spanish to reach a wider audience.

Also, we always think of better ways of saying something so, **re writing** means enriching as well as improving their work.

What has always been acknowledged by students is the fact that they get **proper feedback** when they are corrected.

What does that mean? Not just underline, highlight mistakes but also **create a dialogue**, an instance of **self –reflection**, of **creativity**. Why not including comments on the good points, make suggestions, proposals, offer alternatives? It takes time to correct in this way, but it has proved to be highly effective and motivating.

What is more, students and teachers have shared answers to questions - in the case of revision period before exams- and the feedback provided by teachers for each answer. Most of the times, they have come up with innovative ideas or interesting points to make.

I would like to let you know a suggested approach for **pre-writing** and **post-writing** in a variety of contexts: **Everyday** English, **Business** English or **Academic** English.

5.- Suggested activities

The following examples are included to illustrate how this approach can be developed, how theory and practice are intertwined, how effective these simple activities can turn out to be in the course of the teaching – learning process:

First Example: (Academic English)

Classroom activities to encourage writing:

Pre-writing

a) **Brainstorming – main ideas- framework**: students provide with ideas and the teacher contributes.

E.g.: 1.-What do you associate with the term **SOCIETY**?

2.- Compare and contrast the following definitions:

3.- How much of what is mentioned in these definitions have you taken into account? What aspects, if any, strike your attention?

4.- Write a definition in your own words.

Second example: (Everyday English)

b) **Collaborative writing**: Let's make up a story: Each student writes a sentence without knowing what the previous one wrote.

An incredible summer!!

- Last summer I (go/went) to...
- It was a ... place. There was a ... and there were a lot of ...
- I travelled by ... It took me ... (how long?) to arrive there.
- The weather was ...
- I did a lot of amazing things! I ... and ...
- I met ...
- What I didn't like was ...
- I enjoyed ... a lot!
- I would like to ...

Third example: (Business English)

d) You're going to read a memo asking for advice about a case. Write an answer to it and include the following issues:

- e) **Refer to the main issue**
- f) **Summarise relevant facts**
- g) **Identify and explain legal issue**
- h) **Refer to precedents and law which is applicable to the case.**
- i) **Indicate options**
- j) **Recommend the best course of action**
- k) **Finish with a proper closing remark**

Post writing:

Feedback and Follow up

Examples of feedback: Essay writing

An ("**the**", not "**an**"... Or maybe you can refer to a **habitat**) environment is the natural world that surrounds us. It is very important to keep it clean in order to live a healthy and peaceful life. However, the (no "**the**" **here**) environmental pollution has become one of the biggest threats for **the** Earth. It can affect our future one day. People suffer from their own mistakes. Pollution endangers our existence and destroys our living environment. The future will either be green or not at all.

Good starting point. I would include some connectors so as not to have different sentences which are disconnected... e.g. Therefore, it is very important... , Also, it can affect... Something must be done for the future... If not, the future...

Academic writing: Description of graphs

At a quick glance, we (in academic writing, you should avoid using the royal "**we**"... it is more arrogant than I Better use passive voice/ Impersonal construction... It can be seen...) can see the population of Yemen for the year 2000 is conformed in **it's** (no apostrophe here...its) half by children under the age of 14, a **percentage it** (which , not it here) is estimated to decrease by 13%

Business writing: Report.

The aim of this proposal is to suggest different ways of making our company more competitive. For this purpose, I will point out many changes that we can **do** (not here / make!) to improve our efficiency and I will comment on some disadvantages that **could come up** (come up with?) **more formal, appear** /(during) **along** this process.

Be careful with collocations and tenses! Also, phrasal verbs are more informal...

6.-Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential to make sure that, if teachers want students to learn **writing as a life skill**, there must be a personal commitment from the former to resort to their own experience and reflect upon the way we improve writing so that students can make the most of **tools** and diverse **strategies** to become independent, resourceful and critical thinkers, in case the main

purpose of the task is to give an opinion on a certain subject.

Apart from that, it is very important to make use of students' background and academic knowledge to boost confidence, explore tools which are available, strategies already developed, profit from similarities and differences of both languages, seek new resources and make adjustments when necessary.

Finally, it is good practice to create a kind of open dialogue with students in the post writing stage by spotting the mistakes or inadequate register, highlighting the good points or making comments and suggestions for further writing.

All these points can be considered a springboard for real life skills' improvements in the field of writing.

I expect this essay will be of use to other teachers and, in this way, make a little contribution to better results in the **teaching-learning process**.

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