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Teaching and Learning English

2nd edition

CAPPELEN DAMM AKADEMISK

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ISBN 978-82-02-67108-2
2. utgave, 1. opplag 2020

Omslagsdesign: Marianne Zaitzow, Affair AS
Sats: Bøk Oslo AS
Trykk og innbinding: AiT Bjerch AS, 2020; Norge

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CHAPTER 7

Writing in English

Ragnhild Elisabeth Lund and Maria Casado Villanueva

Writing is regarded as a basic skill in all school subjects. The *English subject curriculum* (LK20) requires that students should develop the ability to express themselves in writing. At the same time, students are expected to use writing as a means to learning English effectively. In this chapter, Ragnhild Elisabeth Lund and Maria Casado Villanueva ask the following questions: How can teachers achieve these aims? What can teachers do to motivate students to write? How may teachers help them to use writing strategically in their learning process and to become competent writers? What kinds of tasks and activities can teachers give their students, and how can teachers make their work with writing meaningful and productive? The chapter addresses these questions in addition to the most fundamental one: *Why* should learners of English write?

Why write in English?

The answer to this question may seem obvious. We live in a text-based society and we constantly process and share written information. We write at school and at work, but also in our free time; from shopping lists, text and Facebook messages to emails, formal letters and professional reports. The school curriculum takes this reality into account and highlights the relevance of learning to write different types of text for different purposes in all school subjects.

Writing has always occupied a central position in second and foreign language learning, and writing tasks are central in textbooks and other teaching material. Traditionally, learners have documented their progress through writing, and assessment has often relied on written products. Many of us have experienced how writing can be useful to develop our language competence: We use it to memorize vocabulary, to get the knack of grammar rules, and to try out different ways of expressing ourselves in longer texts. In other words, writing is not just a skill that needs to be developed; it is also a tool in the development of new language skills.

However, while teachers of English see the importance of writing in the language learning process, learners may not have the same understanding. Many students will need help to see the relevance of writing skills and of writing as a strategy for learning, and it is the teacher's responsibility to provide this help. One useful strategy is to discuss the purpose of the writing activities with students. This may increase their motivation for the task and, in turn, contribute to better performance (see Smidt, 2011).

What does the English subject curriculum say?

The Education Act ("Opplæringslova") states that students should develop the abilities and competences necessary to master their own lives and to be able to take an active part in society (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019). Democratic understanding and participation are presented as central aims. Since active participation in today's society requires the ability to communicate in a global world, writing in English emerges as a central skill.

Global communication is a central idea in the *English subject curriculum* (LK20) as well. Here, it is stated that learners need competence in English to be able "to communicate with others, locally as well as globally, regardless of cultural and linguistic background". Moreover, the role of English as a door opener to the world and a tool for the development of intercultural understanding is emphasized. When it comes to writing, after Year 10, learners are expected to be able to produce "different types of formal and informal texts, including multimodal ones, with structure and coherence, which describe, narrate and reflect, suited to the purpose, the recipient and the situation". After vg1, learners should also be able to write texts that "discuss and explain" ("begrunner"). In order to do this, they need to be able to "follow the rules for orthography, word inflection and sentence structure". They must be able to use different writing strategies and draw on their "knowledge of grammar and text structure". After vg1, they are also expected to be able to use academic language in their own written as well as oral texts. (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019, authors' translation).

There are relatively few explicit references to writing in the curriculum. The term *text production* ("tekstskaping") is used instead, indicating that many of the same issues are involved in the learners' work with oral and written texts, and also that oral and written skills should be developed in unison. The learners are, for example, expected to use "varied strategies" and "digital and other resources" in their text production and be able to "improve their own texts on the basis of feedback and their knowledge about language" (Year 10).

Writing is also implicit in competence aims related to literary and cultural topics. When learners are expected to "describe central traits in the development of English as a world language" or "explore and reflect on diversity and social conditions in the English-speaking world" (vg1), for example, it would be natural to do some of this work in writing.

While the 2006 curriculum underlined the role that writing has as a tool for learning in all subjects, explicit formulations related to this are kept only in the curricula for Norwegian and maths in LK20. This may seem strange, given the central role that writing has always had – and will most probably continue to have - in the teaching and learning of English as well as other foreign languages. However, implicit references to this function of writing can be seen when learners are reminded to use "simple" (Year 7), "suitable" (Year 10) and "varied strategies for language learning" (vg1). Internationally, the idea of writing for learning has received increased attention in recent years.

Different types of writing

Some specialists in second and foreign language learning talk about three different perspectives on writing: *learning to write*, *writing to learn* and *writing to learn a language* (Manchon, 2011). *Learning to write* refers to learning to communicate and express oneself in writing. One wants the text to accomplish something, for example to inform, instruct, or persuade. Such texts are intended for an audience, and the writer therefore needs to have the reader and the context in mind. He or she should consider issues related to accuracy (correct orthography, grammar and the choice of words) and appropriacy, which means that the texts should fit the context and the situation. Knowledge about levels of formality and genre conventions will help the writer here (see chapter 6). Finally, texts should be as clear and precise as possible, so that the reader can understand the message the way it was intended.

Writing to learn refers to the use of writing as a tool in a learning process (Langer & Applebee, 1987). It can involve jotting down key words, note taking from a text or a lecture, mind mapping, summarizing and reformulating information. Such writing can help learners to memorize new concepts, organize information and structure their own thoughts. There is no need to consider an audience, since this kind of writing is for the writers' own personal uses. As such, it needs to be understood only by the writers themselves.

Research indicates that the visual and the tactile aspects of writing support the learners' mental processes (see Williams, 2012). Looking at the print text can help them remember what has been written. The physical movement when writing by hand has been found to generate more brain activity than writing on a keyboard does (Mangen & Velay, 2010). It is important to help learners develop the ability to write as a strategy for learning and to make them reflect on the technology (pen/paper or screen/keyboard) that works for them (for a more detailed discussion, see Lund, 2016).

Writing to learn a language refers to the specific process of developing one's language skills. For beginners and intermediate learners, activities are often designed to drill vocabulary and grammar forms and to provide necessary repetition of central features of the language. Drill-like activities can be motivating for the learners, as they give a sense of immediate accomplishment, and they are easy for the teacher to administer as well. However, teachers should use such activities with care, as their transfer value is questionable (see Truscott, 2007). Learners may get the idea that they master a certain language feature, only to discover that they are unable to use it correctly in their own free writing.

It is therefore crucial that learners are given tasks which encourage their own use of the language. When they have to form their own sentences and produce their own texts, they are likely to become aware of what they are able – and not yet able – to express. They may notice the gap between their present competence level and the level they need or want to achieve (Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Manchón, 2011). In this way, open activities can function as self-assessment of the learners' own proficiency, which is a prerequisite for further development.

The distinction between learning to write, writing to learn and writing to learn language may seem unnecessary, as all writing in English will probably help learners develop their language skills. Still, it may be useful to keep in mind the three perspectives when justifying the choice of activities and making the purpose of each activity clear for learners.

How to motivate for writing?

How can teachers help students to use writing as part of their learning process, to be good writers and to enjoy writing in English? Four key words can guide planning and choice of activities:

1. **Variety**
   As discussed above, writing has many purposes and the texts we encounter daily take many forms. Teachers should keep this in mind and present students with varied activities so that they can practise a diversity of texts and experience the richness of our textual universe.

2. **Meaningfulness**
   Teachers need to make sure that the tasks are meaningful and relevant for students, taking their level of language development and their interests into account. The students should understand the purpose of the task in the context of their learning. If the task is meant for language practise, they should know exactly what it is that they are training. If the product is going to be assessed, they need to know the criteria that will be used for assessing it.

3. **Scaffolding**
   When teachers *scaffold* their students' learning, they offer them the support they need in the learning process. In order to be able to prepare them appropriately, teachers have to consider the knowledge and the language that students need to carry out a task, as well as the specific needs of each individual student. Research shows that help and support before the students consider themselves finished with the text is most effective (see Hyland, 2011).

4. **Making the most of texts**
   It is both useful and motivating when the learners' own texts are given a central position in the classroom. The students' written products can, for example, be used to practise other skills. They can be discussed and used as prompts for oral work (including drama, role-play and presentations), and they can serve as a starting point for work on language (such as grammar, spelling and vocabulary). When they are shared, written texts can help the students and the teacher to get to know each other better. The students can use texts to keep track of their own progress, and they can use them to foster self-assessment as well as peer assessment. The students can gather their favourite work in a portfolio, they can publish them as a class gazette or blog, and they can be exhibited and decorate the classroom.

How to help learners get started?

Unfortunately, not all students are eager and happy writers. It can be discomforting to see how little text some students produce before they consider themselves finished with a task and exclaim: *I don't have anything else to say*! This attitude can, of course, be seen as the result of laziness. But it can also have something to do with insecurity, anxiety and a lack of language and text competence. Whatever the explanation may be, teachers must make sure that they provide the students with the tools they need in order to get started and to get on with their texts. Whether they are going to *learn to write* or *write to learn*, the main obligation for a teacher is to help the students to actually write, and to enjoy writing. For reluctant writers, support before and during the writing process is particularly important (see for example Borgen & Lund, 2013).

With a product approach to writing, students are expected to produce a clearly defined product, such as a book report or an argumentative text. For this it is useful to start with a model text. The students should be helped to recognize the typical traits of the text, and be encouraged to mimic these in their own writing. With a process approach, students have more freedom in the writing process and in the development of a possible end product. With both approaches, however, teachers need to make sure that the students have the resources they need to do the task. Before the writing session, students can work with relevant vocabulary, language structures and text type conventions in addition to knowledge about the topic they are going to write about. Many teachers start with brainstorming in order to generate ideas and help students think of a topic they would like to write about. The next step can be mind mapping, which can help the students organize their thinking, for example when it comes to arguing for and against an issue or putting their points in a logical order. But even from here, it can be difficult to actually start writing. Woody Allen is said to have formulated a very valid point like this: "The hardest part of writing is going from nothing to something". A useful strategy here is to let the learners *quick write* (also referred to as *rush write*). This means that the learners get a few minutes to write everything they know about a topic or everything related to the topic that comes into their heads, just to get something down on paper.

Graphic organizers can also be a useful tool in the pre-writing process. A graphic organizer is a visual display that can guide the students' thinking as they start to build up their text. If they are asked to compare a book and the film of the book, for example, a simple Venn diagram can help them sort the similarities and the differences between the two:

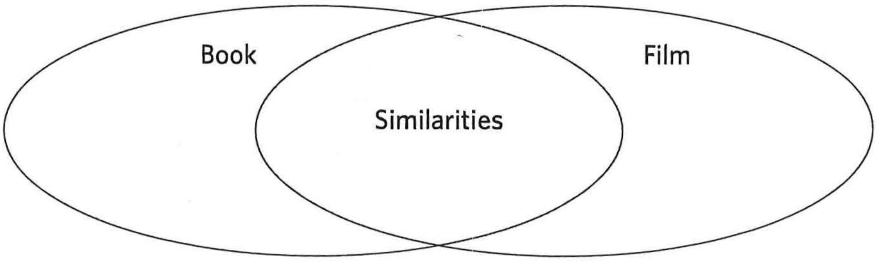
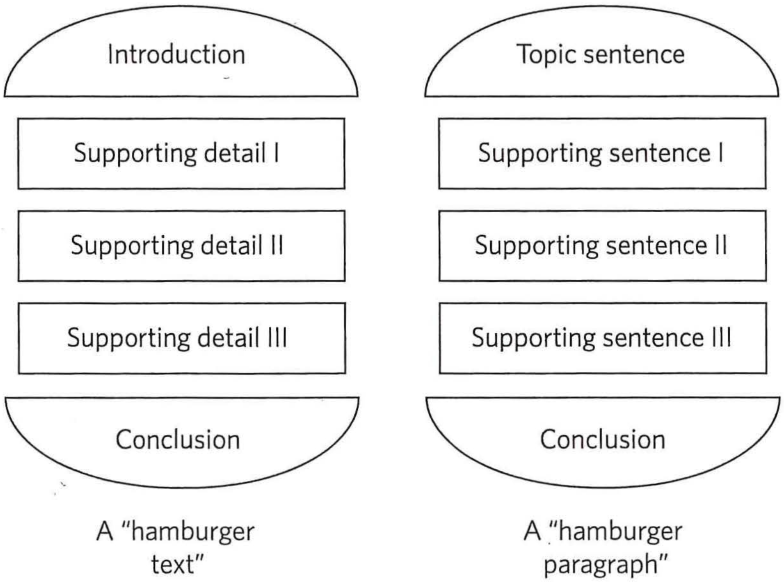


Figure 7.1 An example of a simple Venn diagram.

Scaffolding learners' writing

Similarly, graphic organizers can help students classify arguments and organize ideas in order of importance. They can also reflect visually the overall structure of a text or a paragraph. A hamburger is often used as a metaphor here. The idea is that a hamburger bun is not a hamburger unless it is filled with meat, lettuce, tomato, onion and perhaps a pickle. In the same way, texts need to have an introduction and a conclusion that bind them together. In between, there needs to be supporting and interesting detail such as examples, explanations or arguments. The hamburger is also sometimes used to illustrate how a paragraph can be built up.


Introduction
Supporting detail I
Supporting detail II
Supporting detail III
Conclusion
Topic sentence
Supporting sentence I
Supporting sentence II
Supporting sentence III
Conclusion

A "hamburger text"

A "hamburger paragraph"

Figure 7.2 The hamburger metaphor.

Writing frames can also provide valuable support in the writing process (see Langseth, 2008). Here is an example from eighth grade, where the students were asked to write a report about a book they had read:

The title of the book is …
It is written by …
The book is about …
In addition, we also learn …
I like this book for several reasons, firstly …

Secondly, …
Thirdly, …
However, I did not like …
The book is suitable for … because …
To sum up, I think …

(From Lund, 2015)

In indicating the kind of information that each paragraph can contain, this writing frame helps students structure their texts. It also provides support when it comes to binding the text together, at the paragraph as well as at the text level. Expressions like *in addition, firstly, secondly* and *however* can help the writers create coherence in the text, and they are also good tools to make the text move forward.

Some students find it hard to write more than a single sentence when they are asked to describe or explain something. In the task above, for example, some might just settle for the sentence *I liked the book because …* if the writing frame had not encouraged them to provide several reasons. For those who struggle to produce text, it can be useful to learn to always build out the first sentence in a paragraph with three examples, specifications or elaborative comments.

A writing frame can help the students fulfil a given task, but it can also provide them with knowledge about the ways in which different texts can be built up. They can, for example, learn how an argumentative text can consist of five paragraphs, where the first paragraph presents the issue, the three following paragraphs present and support different points of view, while the last paragraph is a conclusion or a summary. The writing frame can look like this:

I think that … because …
The reasons for my thinking this are …
Firstly …
So …
Another reason is … Moreover … Because …
These facts/arguments/ideas show that …

(Adapted from Lewis & Wray, 2002, p. 35)

If the students have a visual image from the very beginning of what the final text will look like, this can be good support for them in the writing process. A main idea behind writing frames is that the students use them as scaffolding as well as a point of reference in their reflections on how texts can be structured. As time goes by, they will develop the ability to do without them (Lewis & Wray, 2002).

Reading certainly helps us become better writers. However, while the students may be used to focusing on what a text is about, they may need some help to be able to recognize how a text is written. A model text can illustrate text conventions, and also how structure can help the reader understand the content of the text. Therefore, the teacher should draw their attention to the typical features of the text, for example to the paragraphing and the language used in a formal letter. In a story, the teacher can point out the techniques that are used to make the story interesting, and the students can work on identifying where and how the writer has used these techniques. When students are exposed to and work with different model texts, this may raise their awareness of the conventions of different text types and genres in English.

Ideas to practise different text types and strategies

There are endless resources when it comes to tasks and activities that can help students develop their abilities to write different text types. Here are some ideas to practise writing in different forms as well as to raise awareness of the conventions of different genres.

1. Raising awareness about the features of a text: cohesion and coherence

The fold-over story game (or the exquisite corpse) is an example of a collaborative writing task in which students take turns to write a story on the same sheet of paper. The first student begins the narrative with a sentence or short paragraph and folds over the paper, so that only the last words are shown. The next student must try to guess what comes before, write another sentence and pass the paper to the next student. The result is often humorous and incoherent and, apart from providing writing practise, it can be used to reflect on the general features of texts. Good texts are not random collections of sentences; they need to show unity in terms of both form and meaning. Afterwards, the students – individually or in groups – could choose one of the sentences of the fold-over story and write a coherent narrative around it. They can then reflect on the elements of the new story which make it more coherent.

Another approach is to use model texts (see above) as a starting point and divide the text into fragments, which the students need to put in the appropriate order. Afterwards, they can reflect on those words or set phrases which helped them to solve the task. They may notice how articles, pronouns, connectors and opening and closing sentences structure the text and give it unity, and also help the reader to predict and understand the information it contains (see Harmer 2015, p. 371).

2. Creative texts

Creative writing activities can be very motivating and therefore useful when it comes to making even reluctant writers produce text. Several strategies can be used to provide a starting point for a creative narrative text. The teacher can suggest an intriguing or humorous title, picture or situation. There are a lot of websites where visual and textual writing prompts can be found, including pictures, story starters and headlines. Below are some examples:

http://www.somethingtowriteabout.com/
http://www.eslprintables.com/writing_worksheets/creative_writing/
http://bogglesworldesl.com/creativewriting.htm

Story-telling cards (or story-telling dice) can also be used as prompts, and they are especially suitable for collective writing. In groups, students sitting in a circle take turns drawing cards from a pack in the middle. The cards contain fairy tale or mythological characters, places, objects or animals, and the images inspire the students to add events to their story. They could start formulating their sentences orally and take notes to help them write their text afterwards.

Another possibility is to use a roll-a-dice story to provide cues for creative writing. The teacher, or the teacher together with the students, needs to create a grid with six options for a number of categories, such as main character, setting, conflict, time and secondary character. The students roll a dice to determine which option in each category will be included in their story.

A competitive element can also be added to the writing process: the starting point can be one of the students' own texts. The other students are given the title of the story or some words which appear in it, and they need to ask *yes-no* questions, which the author will answer. With the information obtained, the students – individually or in groups – write their own version of it. The one which is closest to the original story wins.

Poetry is a popular genre, as it allows students to write an effective text with only a limited number of words. It also allows them to write about something personal, or something they feel strongly about. They can be asked to follow a specific format, such as the diamante form:

Noun
Adjective Adjective
Verb Verb Verb
Noun Noun Noun Noun
Verb Verb Verb
Adjective Adjective
Noun

A five-line poem is another option. Here, students can be asked to include certain elements, as shown below, or they can simply be asked to write five lines about a specific topic.

- noun
- four adjectives
- an action
- how you feel about the noun

Many websites provide other, fun ideas, such as this one: https://www.poetry4kids.com/.

3. Communicative writing and "authentic situations"

A task-based approach to writing can help to keep the focus on the communicative dimension of this skill. Descriptive texts can be given a communicative purpose if students are asked to draw a picture (such as furnish an empty house or room, put clothes on a human silhouette, draw traits on an empty face or create an imaginary animal) and write a description of it so that a classmate can replicate it. Students can also hide objects in the school and write the directions needed to find them, or build a figure with Lego® bricks or building blocks and write an instructional text with every step necessary for a classmate to build a replica. Activities of this type are "self-correcting": regardless of grammar or spelling mistakes, the text will communicate information effectively if the partner manages to solve the task.

Ideally, a teacher should aim at creating writing situations which are as authentic as possible, where students write in English to communicate with other people. The platform e-twinning (https://www.etwinning.net) facilitates contact between European schools. Students could regularly email other students of their age, thus giving the traditional accounts of their own experiences and opinions (such as daily life, holidays and hobbies) a communicative purpose. Students could also write blog entries reviewing their favourite book or film, or expressing their opinions about issues of their interest. The writing products could actually be shared online with other students, teachers and parents in safe online platforms such as Kidblog (https://kidblog.org/home/), which can be administered by teachers. Students can also be encouraged to comment on their classmates' entries and use writing interactively.

4. Hypothetical writing

One could argue that every writing situation is communicative if a text is written to be read, even if this happens within the context of the classroom. Therefore, it is only natural for the teacher to create fictional contexts where the students can develop their writing skills and get the chance to use their imagination. Tasks which take the form of hypothetical writing, starting with the words *Imagine that* … or *Think that you are a* … may be used to produce texts of a variety of genres (see Otnes, 2013). The premises can be realistic situations such as "imagine you want information about a summer course and you write an email to a language school" or imaginative ones: "write an email to yourself, to be delivered sometime in the future" (see Harmer, 2015, p. 374).

English textbooks often contain historical or factual information about English-speaking countries and characters. Students could learn about a historical event while learning the conventions of a news article or other text types found in a newspaper if they are asked to imagine that they are reporters travelling to the past. Their task is to inform the readers of that time about something that has just happened (such as the Great Fire of London or the Gunpowder Plot). They can also imagine that they interview a historical character or that they are an agony aunt advising them (Henry VIII about his marital problems, for example). Their work can be printed out and published using newspaper templates like these:

http://www.readwritethink.org/
http://www.makemynewspaper.com/free-newspaper-templates

When working with literature, this form of hypothetical writing can be especially productive. It can help students to reflect on narrative technique, or the motivations of a character. For example, R. J. Palacio's novel *Wonder* narrates the school experiences of a boy with a severe facial malformation. The author uses the device of presenting the same story from the point of view of different characters. Students could be asked to add a chapter narrated from the perspective of one character who is not given a voice in the novel. Or, working with Jeff Kenney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, students can also be asked to write the diary entry of a particular day from the point of view of a different character.

This approach does not need to be aimed solely at the production of narrative texts: *Help me Mr. Mutt!* by Janet Stevens, subtitled *Expert Answers for Dogs with People Problems*, is a humorous book which collects the letters of desperate dogs to a "canine advisor". It can be used to model written correspondence, and students in pairs could be asked to exchange letters imagining they are Mr. Mutt and a pet in trouble. A storyline-like approach can also be used to encourage writing in different forms. For example, the classroom could be prepared as the scene of a crime (chairs can be turned about and objects scattered) before the students enter it. They can take on the roles of detectives, journalists or witnesses. They may need to take and share notes and write reports, statements and news articles about what they know, or their guesses about what happened.

Tasks like these can be both useful and motivating. They invite the students to use their abilities and imagination while becoming familiar with the conventions of different text types. Moreover, the process of placing themselves in someone else's situation and writing from that perspective may also work as an exercise in empathy (see Brooks, 2008).

5. Multimodal texts

Multimodal texts convey information by using two or more communication modes (for example written language, image, spoken language and music). In the English class, thinking of the product of a task as multimodal allows us to integrate writing and oral skills. It also takes students with different abilities into account and gives them the chance to display their talents in other areas. These activities are especially suited to promote teamwork and develop digital skills. For example, students can gather information about a topic in different forms, such as newspaper clips, pictures and self-written texts, and compose a collage or a poster. Glogster (www.glogster.com) is a learning platform for the creation of GLOGS –online multimedia posters – which can include text, words, music, voice recordings and file attachments. Students can use a variety of templates and features for their glog, and glogs can also be printed out and used as decoration. The platform allows teachers to administer and control their students' work at all times. The students can also create texts in the form of picture books or comics.

This approach helps them to reflect on the relationship between image and text, promoting the development of both textual and visual literacy. It also helps struggling students to express themselves through different means. Those students with a knack for drawing can make use of their talent, but there are also a variety of online sources which provide the artwork they could need for their products:

http://www.culturestreet.org.uk/activities/picturebookmaker/
http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/

Another option is a digital story, which consists of a series of still or moving images combined in a variety of ways with a narrated (or sung) soundtrack and/or music, to tell a story or present some facts. It can cover a wide range of topics and take different forms, and it can be created using different software applications (such as Photo Story), some of which are free and very easy to use. Digital storytelling can be a very attractive way of integrating writing and oral skills (see for example Ohler, 2013; Røkenes, 2016). The students need to write a script to an accompanying storyboard as part of the process of story creation, and it is also possible to include captions on the screen (see chapter 12).

Responding to texts

Handing back "corrected" work has a long tradition in the Norwegian school system and English is no exception. With time, however, the focus has shifted from correction to assessment for learning, feedback and "feed forward". Jeremy Harmer distinguishes between correcting and responding to a text. When teachers correct a text, they focus on mistakes and how to improve them. If the aim is to help students to write as accurately as possible, a certain degree of "correction" is necessary. Teachers may refer to problems of spelling, grammar, or expression. When teachers "respond" to a text, they are not only concerned with accuracy, but also with issues of content and design. They can respond by telling the students what they enjoyed about the text, pointing out specifically what the writer has succeeded in doing. Teachers can make suggestions or ask questions which invite the student to clarify some of the ideas expressed in the paper or to organize them in a more appropriate way. These responses promote "a kind of affective dialogue with the students" (Harmer, 2004, p. 108).

Many teachers have spent precious hours correcting and responding to written work, only to experience that the students hardly look at the comments, and that the feedback has no effect whatsoever on future assignments. One way of addressing this challenge is for the teacher to point to the language mistakes, without correcting them, and then let the students discuss the teacher's comments in pairs or groups. This will make the students active. In speaking and reflecting on what is correct, and on their particular problems, they can also develop valuable metalanguage, which means language about language (see also chapter 18).

Teachers can scaffold the students' collaboration by asking them to look at specific aspects of the text, or to exchange questions such as: *Can you provide more examples of ….?, What is your conclusion, then? and Have you checked agreement between subject and verb*? In this way, the students' written texts can be used as a point of reference for language learning in a communicative and social context, in line with a sociocultural learning approach (see Swain, 2006). As follow-up work, the students can be asked to write a brief statement about one or two things they could do better in their next written task (see Harmer, 2004).

The bottom line is that teachers need to make their feedback and the students' peer feedback as meaningful and effective as possible. With product-oriented writing, a rule of thumb is to inform the students properly about what they are expected to do, so that they can work towards a clear goal. Assessment must always refer back to the criteria which were given at the beginning of the writing process (see chapter 17 and online chapter 21).

Concluding remarks

Writing is a basic language skill, and it is an essential tool in the general process of learning. In the English language classroom, there is a long tradition of letting learners engage in writing activities which aim to support the development of their language skills. Such activities are often referred to as writing to learn language. But learners are also expected to learn to write, which means that they should develop the ability to express themselves accurately and appropriately in a diversity of text types. However, it can be challenging to get students to produce texts in a language they do not feel confident using. In order to help them to make use of writing as a tool for learning and to improve as writers in a foreign language, teachers must choose and design activities which are both useful and motivating. Teachers must offer learners the support they need during the process of writing, and give them significant feedback on their texts.

Reflection questions

1. How did you learn to write in English?
2. What experience do you have with the different types of writing discussed in this chapter?
3. How can you help *all* students to enjoy writing?
4. Look at the writing tasks in some textbooks or other learning resources for English. What would you say is the purpose of the different activities? Is there a good balance, do you think, in the types of writing tasks and activities that the resources offer?
5. How would you work with assessment of learning, and assessment for learning in relation to the tasks that you found in the textbooks or learning resources (see the previous question)?

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