

# ENGLISH MAGAZINES = MOTIVATION + IMPROVED EFL WRITING SKILL

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EACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) WRITING IS A HEADACHE FOR many teachers; they spend considerable time correcting their students' compositions only to find their corrections and comments ignored. Despite teachers' hard work, many students' written English remains non-idiomatic, poorly organized, insufficiently developed, grammatically awkward, devoid of sentence structure variety, and weak in vocabulary usage. One important reason for all this is that learners have not been helped to become motivated, involved in their own learning, or self-sufficient. The fact is, students will not devote their efforts to learning a foreign language if they do not have a need or desire to learn it. However, when students are duly motivated, they will become involved in learning a foreign language and will learn it autonomously.

One way to motivate learners, according to Ellis (1994, 516), is to design challenging tasks that present students with opportunities for communication and self-direction. To create such conditions, I designed a magazine-editing project at Shanghai Maritime University, where I taught English writing to EFL students. This paper describes that writing project.

### Objective of the project

The objective of the project was to encourage students to write more freely, naturally, and fluently while creating and editing an English language magazine. The project was designed to supplement the compulsory English writing course I taught.

### Class description

The project was carried out four times in four different semesters. Four separate classes comprised of 95 English-major sophomores participated in the project. They met for two hours each week for 19 weeks. The students' English levels ranged from intermediate to high intermediate. All had a basic knowledge of keyboarding and Internet search techniques. Five had advanced computer skills, but none had ever edited an English magazine.

### Requirements and guidelines

At the beginning of each semester, editing an English magazine was assigned to the students as a term task to be completed outside the classroom. They were given maximum freedom to read, write, and edit articles, and to print them. Only two classroom hours, one at the beginning of the task and the other about halfway through it, were set aside for the instructor and learners to brainstorm and share ideas, discuss difficulties, and solve problems.

The requirements and guidelines went through some changes, but in general they are as described below:

1. Magazine size: 30 pages
2. Students' own writing: no less than two-thirds of the magazine content
3. Illustrations: no more than five percent of the magazine content
4. Content and form: freedom of decision permitted
5. Format: paper size A4, handwritten, typed, or computer printed in 12-point font
6. Restrictions: no mother tongue, no photocopies, no direct web page downloads
7. Classroom discussion: week 8
8. Completion deadline: week 16
9. Exhibition and assessment: weeks 17-18
10. Students' assessment for the writing course: 70% magazine editing (50% stu-

dents' own writings + 20% edited materials) + 30% exam

To encourage the students to read and get information for their writing, about one third of the magazine's content was permitted to be simulations, adaptations, translations, reviews, etc. of any kind, in any style, and from any source. The rest of the content, however, was required to be the students' own writing. They could write in various forms (e.g., essays, short stories), and the content could be about anything (e.g., their own emotions, experiences, world affairs). The purpose was to encourage the students to express their own ideas, experiences, emotions, and values using the words and expressions they were learning. Because of the nature and purpose of the project and to maximize fairness among all learners, the students were not permitted to use photocopies or web page downloads. They were told that it made no difference whether they edited their magazines by hand or with the help of a typewriter or computer (which obviously was preferable, however). To develop in them a sense that they were writing to communicate to a real audience, students were told that their completed magazines would be exhibited in the classroom for their peers to review. The students were also encouraged to exchange views and share difficulties and joys during the editing process.

The portfolio assessment of the students' writing was designed to avoid inhibiting them and to encourage them to write freely as well as responsibly. The final magazine was evaluated as "very good," "good," "fairly good," and so forth. In general, grading was cumulative. All of the students' work was included in calculating the final grade.

### Collecting and editing materials

Students searched through all kinds of materials for what they thought best fitted their magazines. The topics eventually included in the magazines covered almost everything that interested them (e.g., arts, culture, business, sports). They spent considerable time adapting, rewriting, editing and organizing their selected materials. About 70 percent of the students used computers to help create their work and the others either used typewriters or wrote and drew everything by hand.

### **Students' own contributions**

Most of the students included classroom assignments as part of their magazines. All students made use of their selected materials as input to their own writing. Almost all students told me that their own contributions consumed much more time and energy than other parts of their magazine.

### **Classroom discussion**

The students were encouraged to raise questions and help each other improve the content and organization of the magazines. Peer review was encouraged as a collaborative strategy to help them learn from each other. During the discussions, they became aware that their classmates had similar difficulties in editing and writing. Major difficulties they encountered included decisions about the use of illustrations and anxiety resulting from unfamiliarity with computer operations. They also worried about their poor handwriting and the pressure of time. They were assured, though, that matters such as whether they used illustrations or computers, or whether their handwriting was poor, were not considerations in their final grade assessment.

### **Feedback by the instructor**

To lessen the students' anxieties and avoid discouraging them, the feedback the instructor gave to the students was generally positive. It focused on strengths rather than weaknesses.

### **Classroom exhibition**

Towards the end of each term, the magazines were exhibited in the classroom. Every student was required to skim through them and read carefully at least three pages contributed by the editor of each magazine. Students were also required to note their impressions of each magazine on a separate piece of paper, which was later delivered to the editor. Thus, students knew what their peers thought about their work and, as a result, they learned from each other.

### **Evaluation of students' work**

The magazines were read and assessed by the instructor. In addition to the criteria specified in the task requirements, the criteria for evaluation included the quality of the editors' own writing in English (communicative effective-

ness, coherence and fluency, linguistic accuracy, euphony, etc.), and the originality demonstrated in the design and content of their magazines.

### **Questionnaire survey**

When the project was brought to a close, all students were asked to answer an open questionnaire anonymously. The questions elicited such information as their growth during the process of carrying out the project, their motivation and interest in English writing, the project's contribution toward improving their written English, and any general benefit they felt they gained from editing their magazine. The majority (59%) of the students reported that they had been motivated greatly to be self-sufficient and creative, and their interest in EFL writing, in particular, had increased enormously. More than half of the participants (54%) said they thought the project had contributed greatly to their improvement in written English. The great majority of the learners (97%) said they believed they had gained a great deal or at least something from taking part in the project.

### **Test results**

Students who edited their own magazines performed well in the Test for English Majors (level 4), a high-stakes national examination of English proficiency in China. They did particularly well in the writing sub-test, which consists of essay writing and note writing. On the whole, these students turned out to be more successful than students who took the test in the years before and after them who did not participate in magazine editing. The writing test mainly reflects the learner's success in writing one kind of essay, argumentation. However, it was clear that the magazine project had had the remarkable effect of enabling students to write other types of essays and even creative stories as well. Although the writing the students did on the magazine project had some grammatical and lexical problems, it was creative and communicative.

### **Main achievements in students' writing**

In my past teaching experience, I frequently encountered compositions with interesting content and ideas but inaccurate expressions, or with correct form but boring content. The magazine-editing project provided students

with a good opportunity to balance form and content in their writings. In contrast to controlled writing on arbitrary topics, editing a magazine in the target language engaged students to such an extent that they wrote more and better.

Students were given an opportunity to immerse themselves in personal topics so that they had something interesting or something they considered important to communicate to their readers. Reading and selecting materials gave them valuable input to their own writing, indeed, so much so that they didn't have to worry about sufficient content for their magazine. The average length of a typical piece of their own writing for the magazine was one page (about 400 words), making it much longer than a normal classroom assignment (about 200 words).

The student editors had to write drafts and make repeated revisions of them, trying their best to polish their writing to their own satisfaction before having it published in their magazines. "After finishing every passage," one student editor wrote, "I would always modify and revise it very carefully." Another wrote, "I had spared no efforts to write every article the best I could." It is clear that students had learned to take full responsibility for their own work. They had come to understand that writing is a process involving constant revision, not only in terms of English grammar and usage, but also in terms of the logical organization of ideas. In general, their own writing read more fluently and coherently and with fewer mistakes than the compositions I had corrected laboriously before the students launched their magazines.

### **Why such achievements?**

After years of teaching EFL writing, I have reached the following conclusions: If students have the need or desire to write for real communication and a real audience, they will be glad to write. If they are engaged in challenging and interesting tasks, they will write well. Finally, if they learn to be responsible for their own writing, they will write even better.

Clearly, giving students the freedom to include what they wanted and write what they wanted in their magazines required them to consider for whom and for what purpose they were writing. These considerations in turn

spurred them to write what they thought would be interesting or important to a real audience, in this case, their peers. Moreover, they felt compelled to consider how they could accomplish their task. All this motivated their writing and made it seem close to real-world writing outside the classroom (White 1987, 261).

Another important factor contributing to the success of the project was that it was neither too easy nor too difficult for the students. Some students felt anxious at the beginning of the project, but all of the students persisted and finished the task on time, in spite of difficulties. In the course of editing their magazines, they gained confidence in their own abilities and enjoyed the work. There was no doubt, therefore, that requiring learners to present "a tangible end-product" made the project "meaningful and purposeful" (Skehan 1998, 273-4).

The project was learner-centered because strong emphasis was placed upon individualized reading and writing. It was up to the students to decide which topics to choose and how to approach those topics. Autonomy was thus initiated and learners were empowered to be masters of their own work. The task catered to students' differences, needs, and interests, which in turn stimulated their enthusiasm for the task. When the project came to an end, many students were unwilling to stop, and one wrote: "You should have asked us to launch another magazine full of our own writings so that we may have the chance to write more and to write even better."

### **Conclusion**

During the project we had fun. The students were active participants, learners, writers, and editors, while the teacher acted as director, organizer, and counselor. Students were engaged. They bragged to others, and they looked forward to the appreciative comments of their readers. Each magazine was unique, and they were a delight to read.

Next time I organize the project, I will make some improvements. First, I will increase the proportion of students' own contributions or require that the magazines consist solely of their own writing, as one student suggested. Second, I will assign more classroom time to discuss problems and difficulties, since

creating a magazine in a foreign language is such a demanding job. Third, I will ask students to publish their magazines on the Internet so that a wider audience will be able to appreciate them. With these changes, the project will be even more effective in strengthening students' writing skills.

#### References

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## APPENDIX | EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT MAGAZINE

English Magazines = Motivation + Improved EFL Writing Skill • Yuewu Wang

# Introduction

This is the first time that I have compiled a magazine. It is an absolutely good experience in my learning of English language. In the compiling process, I selected some good articles, condensed some, and wrote some articles of my own. Though there are a lot of mistakes in the magazine, I am still satisfied with it, for I spent a lot of time and energy on the magazine.

In this magazine, the contents include life, nature, editorial, experience, proverbs and so on. Some articles are so incisive that they are worth reading. I hope you will like this magazine and make some comments on it.

After such an experience of compiling a magazine, I have learned a lot and have benefited a lot. First of all, I began to like English writing. I found it is not very difficult to write a simple composition, although there is more room for improvement. Second, I have become active in reading English articles and found it is useful for my reading and writing skill. Finally, I want to point out that everyone has the ability to do something well, if you stick to it. Never give up, even if you confront with some difficulties. You must be self-confident and optimistic.

### *She*

She is one of my best friends and she exerts such influence on me that we have much in common. Everytime I stay with her, I feel we have a lot to communicate with her. In a sense, she is more than a friend to me.

We became friends when we were at the third grade in senior middle school, although we had been classmates for almost 3 years. At that time, my seat was placed behind hers. Perhaps due to the high pressure from the college entrance examination, we communicated a lot and became familiar with each other and I came to know her. In her words, she likes independence and forms the habit of thinking independently. In fact, she does be. Everytime we were on holidays, her father would pick her up home, but once she told me that she chose to go home by bus. I asked why, and she said that due to her father she became more dependent. After her return to school, I asked about her experience. Although she encountered unexpected difficulties, she said, she felt proud of herself—she succeeded in going home independently. As it was a little incident to those who had developed the habit of acting by himself, I cast different eyes on her since then. In my eyes, the majority of those, whose parents are senior officials, are arrogant, dependent, and demanding. But she belongs to the minority. She is also kind and easy to approach.

Middle school life is relatively monotonous, especially the third grade in senior middle school. At that time, examination became the center of the whole life. Every minute was spent on the preparation, everyone worrying being defeated in the fierce competition. So at that time, the atmosphere in the classroom was stagnate, unvibrant. However she added color to my routine life. At that time, she often turned her head to played jokes with us, which released us from the boring life. One joke is profoundly branded into my mind and whenever I think of it, I couldn't help laughing. One time she borrowed "chi zi" from me, which she referred to the ruler. But I misunderstood her and handed my spoon to her, which made her to tears. "You are so humourous." I was first at a loss and then understood her. In our dialect, ruler and spoon are both called "chi zi" in Chinese. When we met last time, at the sight of a spoon, we couldn't help laughing together, which made another friend puzzled.

Last winter vocation, I paid a visit to her. Although we had been separated for one and a half years, we still had a lot to communicate. She was still very charming, though not very beautiful. In my mind, her charm doesn't consist in her beauty, but in her thought, her opinion, and her penetrating quality. On every topic, she has her opinions, regardless of others'. In our educational system, students' characteristics are suppressed in the name of the group's interests. She is firmly opposed to the opinions, arguing that without characteristic, education will be a thorough defeat and since individual interests are the ingredients to a group's interests, why should one serves the public at the loss of his own interests. From these opinions, it is inevitable for her to major laws.

It is one of my fortunate experiences to meet her, know her and make friends with her.