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UNITED KINGDOM

# Unleashing Writing Creativity in Students

*L* *athophobic aphasia* is a term coined by Earl Stevick, perhaps EFL's best writer of the past twenty five years, to describe his language paralysis when he first visited Germany and France. At that time Stevick had just graduated from a U.S. university, majoring in German and French. For the first month or so he spent in each country, he dared not open his mouth for fear of making mistakes. He reckoned he was suffering from *lathos* (mistake) *phobic* (fear of) *aphasia* (inability to speak). This behaviour had been ground into his being by a perfectionist set of teachers for whom the best was only just good enough. (Since those days, Stevick has gone on to learn about 14 other languages.)

Stevick is not the only perfectionist around. I feel that sometimes L2 writing is more prone to paralysis, brought on by absurd demands on oneself, than is oral production in the target language. Writing takes longer than talking, and some students use the added time to initiate corrosive inner monologues about the inadequacy of what they are doing. This self-strangulation occurs in L1 writing too, of course. I can think of a couple of excellent colleagues who flagellate themselves into deleting and trash-binning fully adequate text. If these folk had the same neurosis in their cooking, they would starve to death!

Let me offer you an L2 student example of this perfectionist *dis-ease*.

Last summer at Pilgrims, Kent, UK, one course participant wrote the lines that follow about herself as a writer:

I am a 29-year-old beginner writer who is going to stay a beginner writer for the rest of her life. I presume that the reason for this is that I never seem to be totally satisfied with my writing. Every time I read what I have written I feel like revising something. Sometimes it is just a comma and sometimes a whole paragraph. I guess I would like to do the same with these lines. I love writing but it's so "painful" reading your own texts over and over again.

## Free, creative writing practice

I would like to make a case for free, creative writing practice, during which the teacher circulates in the class, working as a mobile dictionary and grammar book rather than a punitive mistake spotter. The teacher's role is to help the students and enrich their texts, rather than to use "geo-stationary-positioning" (reading over student's shoulders) to eradicate all the mistakes the students will naturally and usefully be making.

Of course, yes, there is a case for 100 percent correction, but not all of the time. That is what Stevick experienced, and it tied his tongue when he went to his target-language countries.

### **Creative writing exercises**

I want to offer some well-trying classroom activities that may bring students to WANT to write in English. I feel that doing some writing work during class time is useful precisely because the teacher can give SUPPORTIVE help when and where it is needed. The very best time to teach a new word is when the student needs it to express herself.

#### *Activity 1: Writing across the classroom*

Tell the students you want them to spend 20 minutes writing short letters to each other. When Ahmet has written his short letter to Maria, he takes it over to her. She then writes him a reply.

Once the technique is understood by the students, everybody should be engaged in reading or writing for 90 percent of the twenty minutes. You go round helping, but not reading over their shoulders. This could be the first time the students have ever written anything in English to actually say something to another person. As happens in all good writing exercises, each person has an interlocutor, a reader. It is extremely hard to write convincingly to the sky or to the teacher's red pen.

If you use the technique with 14-year-olds, it is best to get the students to write their names on slips of paper—you collect the slips and shuffle them. Each student then picks a name and writes his or her first letter to that person. This avoids a handsome boy getting 12 letters from the girls in the class and makes sure that marginal students are included.

#### *Activity 2: Tree-leaf correspondence*

Bring some small bits of tree branches, roots, bark, etc. to class.

Teach "tree" words such as *needle, leaf, sap, taproot, twig*, etc.

Ask students to name and draw their favourite tree, each working on a sheet of paper in front of them.

Then ask the students to get up and mill round the room. They are to find a partner who is not sitting right next to them.

In each pair, they decide who will be the tree and who will be the leaf/needle.

Tell them to go back to their respective places and explain that the "Tree" is to write a one-page letter to the "Leaf/Needle" and that the "Leaf/Needle" is to write a letter to the "Tree."

When the writing is done, the trees and the leaves exchange letters. Then they answer the letter received.

End the class with the partners exchanging their second letters and discussing the process.

In both Spring and Autumn, some very touching, lyrical letters get written.

You can use this technique to get the students to practise the vocabulary of many different areas of life with pairs such as the following:

- Oxygen writing to Water
- A Waterfall writing to its River
- Brakes writing to their Car
- Lungs writing to their Smoker
- The town of Catania writing to its volcano Mount Etna

The potential list is endless.

#### *Activity 3: Tapering dialogues*

To demonstrate this technique, divide the board down the middle with a vertical line. Ask for a student volunteer. The volunteer takes the right side of the board and you the left.

Ask the volunteer to write the beginning of a dialogue with you on her side of the board and to use exactly seven words. Contractions count as one word. As she does this, you start a different dialogue with her on your side of the board.

Your two dialogues could begin like this:

**Teacher (7 words):** *The weather's rather cold today, isn't it?*

**Student (7 words):** Teacher, why aren't you wearing earrings today?

At this point you change places with the volunteer. She comes over to your side of the board and answers your first line with a 6-word response. You do the same on her side of the board:

**Student (6 words):** *Yes, and the school is cold.*

**Teacher (6 words):** Couldn't find the ones I wanted.

Again you change places with the volunteer. Each of you continues the dialogue, using just 5 words:

Teacher (5 words): *They are repairing the heating.*

Student (5 words): Which ones did you want?

*(See sample below.)*

You continue swapping sides and stop when you get down to one-word responses.

After this demonstration, ask all the students to work in pairs, with each student using a separate sheet of paper. They will start with seven-word utterances and end with one-word ones. At each stage they swap papers, just as happened in the demonstration with the different sides of the blackboard.

Of course, you can also do the exercise the other way round, starting with one word utterances and going up to seven, like this:

(1 word): *Wow!*                      *Ouch!*

(2 words): *Why "wow"?*    *What's wrong?*

Tapering dialogues are good, communicative fun and a superb language thinking tool. The number-of-words rule forces people to

search for different ways of saying what they want to say and thus to explore what they know of the structure of the language.

### Conclusion

Enjoy watching your students begin to actually WRITE in English to say something to another human being. Enjoy their surprise at your turning a blind eye to their plethoric errors. Enjoy the way this kind of writing can give them a thrill they may not yet have had, even in their Mother Tongue. Enjoy the way this sort of contagious process helps YOU to relax and enjoy your class.

Enjoyment is at the opposite end of the spectrum from obsessive-compulsive, grim-faced, teeth-gritted perfectionism.

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### SAMPLE TAPERING DIALOGUE

#### (7 words)

**Teacher:** *The weather's rather cold today, isn't it?*

Student: Teacher, why aren't you wearing earrings today?

#### (6 words)

Student: Yes, and the school is cold.

**Teacher:** *Couldn't find the ones I wanted.*

#### (5 words)

**Teacher:** *They are repairing the heating.*

Student: Which ones did you want?

Continue exchanging shorter and shorter comments until you have one-word responses.