Bridging Academia and the Real World: A Letter-Writing Journey for English Language Learners

by **KAMRAN AKHTAR SIDDIQUI**

Being a passionate writer, I often try to write something and get my work published. One of the ways I get my voice to the world is through contributing to the letters-to-the-editor section of various English language newspapers. The e-paper or the web version of the newspaper enables me to share my work with a wider audience using social-media platforms.

By the time I taught an English Composition and Comprehension course in Fall 2022, I had published over a dozen letters in mainstream English newspapers, both print and online. During the course, one of my pieces was published in *Dawn*, the top-tier English news daily in Pakistan. I was working with my students on their paragraph-writing skills in those days, and the publication of my letter sparked an idea. The idea was to engage students in writing short pieces on socio-economic issues or current topics that mattered to them, then guide them to get their work published in print/online newspapers or on news websites.

Hence, I came up with this writing project. It aligned with one of the student-learning outcomes of the course, which was that students should be able to write in an organized and a coherent manner. I decided

to embark on this journey, which I never expected to be so wonderful.

THE PROJECT

Aim of the project: To have students write short opinion pieces and publish their work in the letters-to-the-editor section of English newspapers

Procedure: The project comprised five steps: Step 1 and Step 2 were done in the classroom, while the other steps were to be done outside the class, according to the students' ease and comfort.

Step 1: Read and discuss samples
Aim: To give students ideas about possible topics for their opinion pieces

Time: 40–45 minutes (depending on the number of students)

This step is teacher-led. I conducted a session to help students see how one's ideas related to current events could be organized and shared with a mass audience through letters to the editor. For this purpose, I used some of my own letters published in *Dawn* and other newspapers as examples. The letters, being short pieces, were projected onto a

screen for the students to read and discuss in pairs.

Since we were working on paragraph-writing skills, the general guideline for the students was to discuss the topic of the letter (i.e., what the letter was about), the main idea (i.e., the writer's opinion), and whatever supporting evidence the writer had used to support the opinion. This peer discussion was essential to help students see how ideas can be organized and connected in a short piece. Because all the samples are freely available online, I shared links to the letters with the students after the session.

This step took around 40 to 45 minutes because there were around 20 pairs (40 students) in the class. While I used my own published letters, teachers can select other letters as samples. It is, however, suggested that teachers bring to the classroom letters that students can relate to. Familiarity with context helps students learn how their thoughts about the world around them can find a place in print and digital media platforms. For this step, short pieces are useful to work with, as many news outlets have length limits for their letters-to-the-editor section. Using short pieces may also ease students' writing anxiety.

Step 2: Select a problem

Aim: To help students select a tentative topic for their opinion pieces

Time: 15–20 minutes (depending on the number of students)

After reading and discussing the published work, the students need to select a problem that matters to them. To make the topic selection easier for my students, I asked them to select a level—society (i.e., their immediate surroundings), national, or international—and pick one issue corresponding to that level. The emphasis was on selecting a problem that the students were genuinely concerned about. This approach helped them because they eventually wrote about a variety of issues, ranging from societal

(e.g., forced conversions) to national (e.g., expensive elections) to international (e.g., the prospect of World War III) affairs.

This step was done in class for two reasons. First, students' reading and discussion were fresh in their minds and could guide them in their topic selection. Second, their peers could assist them if they needed help with the topic selection. When the students had a tentative idea of what they would write about, I invited them to share their topics with the class. In case of any ambiguity, I guided the student to refine the topic. Since topic selection is not easy or straightforward, guidance was provided by asking questions on the tentative topic, the reason why it mattered to the particular student, and what exactly the student would like to share with the readers. However, given the limited time and the large number of students in the class, they were given the opportunity to reflect and refine their topics or change them after the session. Because the context and students' language proficiency levels vary, teachers are advised to consider these factors while asking students to choose topics and allowing them reflection time.

Near the end of the session, I shared with my students the email addresses of some of the potential avenues where they could get their work published (see the Appendix). Since writing was the key part of the project and I wanted my students to focus on that, I myself collected the email addresses from the contribution guidelines (or submission guidelines) of newspapers/news websites. This was done to save students' precious time. Besides, choosing the platforms was important to help them to reach a wider audience by publishing their letters in leading newspapers or on news websites. It is, therefore, suggested that teachers themselves look into which local newspapers and websites publish letters to the editor and how students can submit their work. This can be done by going through the contribution guidelines of the selected publications (see the Appendix). Sometimes the information in this section can be daunting for learners; therefore, teachers should select only the most relevant information (e.g.,

email address and formatting instructions) and share it with the students.

As mentioned earlier, Step 1 and Step 2 were done in class. For the next steps, students were guided in class, but they completed the work outside the class.

Step 3: Write your thoughts
Aim: To have students write first drafts of their opinion pieces

Time: One week

Students write their first drafts on the topics they have finalized in the class or on the ones they choose later. To ensure accountability, I assigned my students to bring their first drafts to the class in a week's time. I recommend making the first draft time-bound so that students do not fall into overthinking about it. Moreover, this compels students to break the perceived writer's block that many students face when they receive writing assignments.

Step 4: Get peer feedback on ideas
Aim: To facilitate collaboration among students through peer feedback on their first drafts

Time: 25–30 minutes (depending on the length of the write-ups)

To ensure collaboration, I asked students to share their drafts with their peers. The focus of the peer feedback was threefold, as peers had to comment on the main idea, organization of ideas, and clarity of thought. Making students work as readers of each other's texts kept the process focused and constructive. Since the students had already done a similar task in Step 1, they were familiar with the process. The only difference was that this time, they were discussing their own write-ups with their peers. Teachers adapting this activity in other contexts should encourage a peer-feedback session with these or some other guidelines because this gives students an opportunity to communicate and share ideas with their peers. Moreover, it is essential to emphasize

their role as readers to foster constructive and purposeful collaboration.

Step 5: Get feedback on language by using ICT tools
Aim: To encourage the use of ICT tools for language feedback and learner autonomy

Time: 25–30 minutes

This is an optional step, but I asked students to use Grammarly.com for feedback on language. I included this step so that students could integrate information and communication technology (ICT) tools as a part of their writing process, especially at the revision and editing stage. At this stage, students were encouraged to use their language skills and judgment to accept or reject the changes suggested by the online editing tool. This was done deliberately to develop learner autonomy and to grow their confidence in their language abilities and specifically their writing skills. In this regard, peer feedback in Step 4 proved useful, as students felt confident to have their work read and reviewed. English language teachers in other contexts might suggest to students different tools depending on the availability of resources and learners' ICT skills. Moreover, teachers may adapt this step or even skip it as per the context and the learners' ages and proficiency levels.

DEVELOPMENT OF AN E-BOOK

Since the students were doing such a thing for the first time, no marks were assigned to the project. I wanted to encourage students to work for amplification of their voices rather than for grades only. Thus, we agreed upon the development of an e-book. This, I believe, was the biggest motivating factor for students, as 30 of them published opinion pieces in English newspapers. The e-book was developed post-activity. It comprises students' work that was published in prominent national and regional newspapers (e.g., *Dawn*, *The News International*, *The Nation*, *Pakistan Observer*, and *Sindh Courier*—a regional website on current affairs). The topics covered themes such as social, political, economic, environmental,

and personal reflections, and they ranged from local and national to international issues. The students' choice of topics reflected that their minds were illuminated with some amazing ideas waiting for the right chance to come out. Therefore, I named this e-book *Light Within: Reflections on the Issues That Matter*.

Depending on the context, teachers may decide to exhibit the efforts of their students differently. For instance, teachers may come up with a poster presentation or gallery walk, where teachers and students from other classes or institutions may come, read students' work, and appreciate their efforts. However, it is strongly advised that teachers decide upon a way to do it with the consent of and suggestions from students. This will not only boost their confidence in their language skills but will also encourage students to keep writing and publishing.

CONCLUSION

The project was assigned to students with the aim of getting them to write about the world around them. Students not only gained writing skills through independent work, but they also improved on collaboration through peer feedback. The goal of publication was set to make each student aware of their agency as a citizen and the importance of their voice, raised through their written word. Although they can share their thoughts on social-media platforms, publication in print and digital media after an editorial review boosted their confidence. Additionally, it made students' ideas accessible to a wider audience. Personally, publication not only makes me happy as an aspiring writer but also gives me a sense to have raised my voice for or against something. Therefore, I planned and executed this project with my students, and they seem to have enjoyed it.

Subsequent development of the e-book *Light Within: Reflections on the Issues That Matter* exemplifies empowering students through writing. This e-book showcases that students' engagement with critical and complex issues can be developed, and their voices can be nurtured through academic projects. Such projects create space for diverse perspectives and dialogue through writing. Moreover, the e-book highlights the educational impact of experiential learning by integrating the publication process into a course project.

Although the project was done in the Pakistani context, it can be easily adapted for classrooms worldwide, encouraging students to write about issues relevant to their own communities and societies. I hope readers will enjoy every opinion piece in this e-book. Happy reading!

Note: The e-book is shared with the consent of the writers.

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APPENDIX

Contribution Guidelines Examples

Submit Letter to the Editor – The Nugget Newspaper: https://www.nuggetnews.com/page/submit-letter-to-editor/35826.html

Submit a Letter to the Editor – The New York Times: https://help.nytimes.com/115014925288-Submit-a-Letter-to-The-Editor

Contribution Guidelines – DAWN.COM: https://www.dawn.com/contribution-guidelines/

List of Email Addresses

letters@nytimes.com

editor@nuggetnews.com

letters@globeandmail.com

letters@dawn.com

letters@washpost.com

letters@tribune.com.pk

letters@thetimes.co.uk

letters@sunday-times.co.uk

Note: These are only a few examples of potential avenues for publication. Teachers planning to adapt this activity are advised to explore publishers as per their context.