

Using Letters to Tell Stories in the EFL Classroom

Writing letters, or any writing process, may be metaphorically compared to weaving (Broukal 2002). When we weave stories, one thread may be our personal life, another thread may be our imagination, and other threads may come from our social experiences and how they affect us in some way or another. In addition, writing as weaving may be realised when we develop a story within another story or piece of writing. In this sense, our students can weave stories through letters, for example. In this article I share two ways in which letters can be used to tell stories with different groups of learners, beginners and advanced, and in so doing develop their English language learning.

Based on some theoretical concepts that connect English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning with authenticity and communicative competence, I will describe two activities I have explored with secondary school learners. The first activity is part of a lesson that involves writing letters to introduce oneself to a group of beginning

learners. The second activity, targeted at advanced teenage learners, demonstrates how an *epistolary story*—a story told by a series of diary entries, letters, or other types of writing—can encourage creative writing and language improvement. This activity may be carried out during a long period of time, and its end product is the collection of epistolary stories.

Letters as authentic language use

Why letters? Letters are powerful vehicles that support authentic and purposeful writing development in our lessons and courses (Woodward 2001). Letters with authors and addressees who are real people in the real world help teachers and learners understand the full meaning of what communication for interactional purposes (Adamson 2004) and communicative competence entail (Nunan 2004; Savignon 2007).

Let me unpack some of the concepts introduced above. By communicative competence, I mean the ability to use a language socially in a given context for

meaningful purposes, regardless of whether it is our first, second, or foreign language. We use the language to communicate something, such as our ideas, our feelings, our identities. Because this competence assumes that we use the language for socialisation, this means that we use the language to interact with others. We engage in conversation. We create oral or written texts to position ourselves. Through spoken or written language, we construct our voice and identity (Silva and Brice 2004).

When we use the language for interactional purposes—that is, to talk with others—the use of language becomes not only meaningful but also authentic. The dialogues or written texts we produce when we interact with others are examples of language authenticity in the sense that the products of our communications have not been specifically developed to teach, for example, EFL (Gilmore 2007). The use of authentic texts does not mean that they have native speakers involved; their nature is not pedagogical in principle. The use of authentic sources in teaching provides our learners with meaningful examples of language use. Real authentic materials are those texts that generate an authentic response from learners motivated to engage in interaction with others (Cunningsworth 1995; Peacock 1997). Judged by these concepts, letters represent an authentic and meaningful use of the language, and therefore our learners benefit from their incorporation into our classroom practices.

Based on these concepts, I will now explore two activities in connection with letters.

Introducing myself through a letter

Most EFL teachers are well acquainted with the reading/writing activity in which beginning students read a letter from a character their age who introduces himself or herself, and then the students answer some comprehension questions and reply to that letter following an “introducing myself” outline included in their textbook. Even though this activity is helpful as a warm-up, it lacks authenticity and meaning, as learners write a letter to a fictitious character. They see little value, if any, in writing a letter when they know in advance that nobody will read such a letter, except for the teacher for assessment purposes. Because I was interested in adding an authentic meaningful dimension to

this activity, I decided to write a letter to my learners myself as an introduction. Based on my initial letter, I started a letter exchange in a class of beginning learners aged 11–12 in a state secondary school. Such an activity may prove significant in those classrooms where learners meet their EFL teacher for the first time. Because it may be time consuming, I suggest exploring this activity with one class per term. This letter-writing activity may be carried out as part of a lesson as follows.

Activity: A Letter from Me

Class: Beginning EFL learners

Materials: Copies of a letter found in an EFL textbook, a small box, paper, and envelopes

Time required: One to two weeks, depending on class size

A. Before the lesson:

1. Write a letter to each learner of your chosen class. Use simple language in which you introduce yourself. Try to use neat handwriting. Address each letter personally by using “Dear (learner’s name).” If you think this will take too much time, you can photocopy this letter and then add your learners’ names. There is no need to worry about authenticity loss due to photocopying. You wrote the letter yourself to get to know your students, and it will produce an authentic response anyway.
2. In the letter, tell them who you are, where you come from, where you studied, some information about your family, and your likes and dislikes as regards music, films, food, sports, and hobbies. You may attach a picture of yourself.
3. Put each letter in an envelope. Write your name in the upper left-hand corner and the addressee’s name in the centre of the envelope. Take the letters to the class in a small box, which you may decorate by making it look as if it is from the post office.

B. During the lesson:

1. In pairs, ask students to think about the use of letters in the modern world. What are letters for? Who writes letters? Why do some people prefer letters over emails or vice versa?
2. Hand out copies of the letter taken

from a textbook. Read the letter aloud. Then, ask learners to read it silently. Nominate some learners to read it aloud to practise pronunciation.

3. Ask some comprehension questions. You can invite learners to come to the board to write your questions and their answers.
4. Lead students to notice the structure of the letter. Where is the date? Who writes the letter? Who is it for? How many paragraphs are there? What is each paragraph about?
5. Now, help students become aware of language use. What verbs does the writer use? What pronouns? What linkers does the writer use? Are there any words or phrases the students do not understand?
6. Announce that you have received letters addressed to your learners. You can either ask them to come to the box and find theirs, or “deliver” each letter yourself.
7. For homework, ask students to reply to your letter. When they are happy with their reply, they can drop it in the box you leave in the classroom.

C. After the lesson:

Depending on your learners’ permission and confidence, once you collect their letters, you can read them aloud in class. You can turn this follow-up activity into a game by reading a letter and asking the class to guess who the author is.

Possible variations

- If you do not have access to a letter from a textbook, you can write a short letter where an imaginary student addresses a student in another country. You can hand out this letter instead of one from a textbook.
- If your learners are true beginners, you may provide them with a template so that they complete sentences or follow a more guided letter-writing task.
- If the learners do not know one another, you can ask them to write their names on a slip of paper. Then each student can pick a name and write a letter to that peer.
- You may want to discourage the use of emails. It is difficult to monitor and it

may be sensitive from a personal or private viewpoint. We are their teachers, not their friends.

By engaging learners in this activity, teachers will help them activate their foreign language repertoire and, above all, the learners will value the act of writing a letter. First, teachers become a model by writing personalised letters and fully involving themselves in the activity. Second, learners will be able to use the textbook letter and the teacher’s letter as models for their own letter. Third, language revision and learning appear in context, making it easier to engage learners in language awareness strategies. Instead of telling them how language works, teachers can lead them in such a way that learners discover grammar rules, vocabulary meaning, and letter discourse features by themselves (Mohamed 2004). Fourth, learners can weave stories in their letters. In this case, letters become an open door to tell their own story, their autobiography. However, it is their right to decide how much they want to disclose to others. Still, the way learners write their letters will help teachers to see how they construct their identities as learners.

Teachers may be surprised at how their learners’ English improves, not because of drilling or focused grammar practice, but mainly because of their enhanced motivation: the letters they write are going to be read by someone real, someone who is their teacher or peer. In addition, giving learners the chance to edit their own letters and use them to notice how language works involves them in the process and supports autonomous learning. I have even noticed that some learners transfer what they learn about letters in the EFL classroom to their first language.

While writing letters to introduce oneself may actually be explored with all levels of learners, using letters to tell a story—that is, letters as ways to express our creative writing potential—may work better with advanced learners.

In the next section, I will explain how letters can be used to create epistolary stories written through letter exchanges. This activity is also grounded in language authenticity and communicative competence, and the stories are written by learners themselves with the purpose of sharing their creative writing and imagination with their peers and teacher. Language learning is peripheral in a way,

since learners will primarily engage in writing stories through exchanging letters. This is the focus of the following activity—to use the language meaningfully.

Epistolary creative writing

I first explored this activity with a group of advanced seventeen-year-old learners in a secondary school mainstream EFL class. My challenge as a teacher was to exploit their knowledge of English by providing them with more opportunities for language improvement. Therefore, I decided to enrich their learning experience by adding a Literature section focusing on the epistolary technique at the end of each unit in the syllabus.

Before students begin this activity, it is important to illustrate how authors use the epistolary technique to write letters that make up a short story or novel. The plot of a novel, for example, is developed as the reader goes through the letters that shape the novel. Epistolary novels do not usually have chapters. Instead, they are divided into sections that contain letters arranged chronologically. While some epistolary novels show the letters of only one character writing, others are a collection of letters exchanged between two or more characters. Some famous epistolary novels are *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982); *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (1999); *The Boy Next Door* by Meg Cabot (2002); and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* by Lionel Shriver (2004). In addition, I have also come across *Who's Cribbing?*, a short epistolary science fiction tale by Jack Lewis (1992).

In my teaching, I have used *The Color Purple* to generate fruitful discussions around thorny issues. I have adapted some of the letters to suit my learners' language level by simplifying vocabulary and sentence structure without changing the message the author sought to convey. Because this novel may raise controversial issues, teachers may use other novels instead. Together with reading excerpts from an epistolary novel, learners may also be encouraged to develop their creative writing skills by resorting to weaving their own stories together. One of the topics added to my Literature section was "Letters," which demonstrated the use of writing of a short story through letters. I will explain now how this activity may be carried out.

Activity: Epistolary Stories

Class: Advanced learners

Materials: Paper

Time required: About one month

A. During the lesson:

1. Each learner writes a letter to "Dear you." Included in the letter is the beginning of a true, fictionalised, or imaginary story. The learners begin by setting their story in time and place and presenting what the problem or situation is, but they do not offer much information; this way, they can be asked for more details in the next letter. Each learner signs the letter with his or her real name.
2. Collect the letters and distribute them, making sure nobody receives his or her own letter.
3. Ask learners to reply to the letter. In their response they need to ask, "And then what happened?" so that the thread of the story develops, thus maintaining interest in the letter exchange. When the original authors continue the story in subsequent letters, they will do it from the point of view of their own character, and what started as facts may become fiction.
4. Now that each learner has a letter relationship with another peer, ask the class to continue for a month or for a certain number of exchanges. In my case, learners were able to write three letters each. Each learner will always exchange back and forth with the same peer until the stories are wrapped up. Learners may find it more useful if they write the letters at home and ask you for support now and then.

B. After the lesson:

1. While learners develop their stories through the letter exchanges, organise some feedback sessions to provide language support.
2. Once they reach the second exchange, organise a brainstorming session in small groups in which learners discuss ways of keeping the reader's interest and ways of motivating the writer to continue developing his or her story. You can give suggestions, such as "Make use of foreshadowing" or "Use

cliff-hangers at the end of your letter,” to activate their thinking.

3. As a class, discuss their suggestions. You can even take this opportunity to ask them as a class how the stories may be finished.
4. When they finish their epistolary stories, collect them to provide language feedback and return them for editing work. Editing can be done in class in small groups.
5. Once they edit their letters, suggest ways of binding the letters so as to produce a collection of epistolary stories. Prior to this step, you need to make sure that every learner gives you permission to put all the stories together for others to read.

Possible variations

- If learners find it hard to work independently, devote some lessons for creative writing in class. You can ask them to write one letter a week in class.
- If you believe the exchange is out of control or difficult to monitor, distribute the “Dear you” letters—that is, the first letter learners wrote—in such a way that each exchange only involves two learners. Pair work may be even better to maintain interest, provide feedback, and edit the letters.
- If you and your learners have computer skills or website expertise, you can ask them to upload their final versions to a class blog with different entries or threads for each pair or group.
- If you do not obtain consent from your learners, you can ask them to use pseudonyms. Otherwise, ensure that the collection of epistolary stories is read only by peers in the class.
- Alternatively, learners can exchange the stories among themselves without binding them into a collection.

We need to remember that this activity requires creativity and upper-level language proficiency. Depending on the level and age of learners, teachers may need to adjust how much scaffolding they can provide. If learners struggle with creative stories, brainstorming possible ideas, plots, or characters might give them clues. Furthermore, teachers may trigger

learners’ imagination by presenting newspaper articles that invite speculation or possible ways of expanding stories.

Research shows that extensive reading increases reading ability (Yamashita 2008). From both literary and language-learning perspectives, teenage learners whose level of English is advanced are motivated by extensive reading, whether it is an epistolary novel or any other form of creative writing. Furthermore, the use of literature motivates learners to improve their language development—reading and writing in particular—and offers them authentic and creative uses of the language (Carter 2007; Lazar 1993; Paran 2008). Not only does learners’ vocabulary increase and their active lexicon expand, but discourse knowledge is also enhanced as learners begin to pay more attention to sentence patterns, paragraphs, and larger textual chunks. They realise that cohesion and coherence are vital and that they need to become more aware of cohesive devices and how to use them for creative purposes.

In addition, learners also internalise different types of letters and registers as they develop their epistolary stories. Surprisingly, some of the samples from my learners began as formal letters between two of them until a relationship developed and their letters became informal and personal. In other cases, learners resorted to letters of complaint and letters of application to introduce variety in their stories. In their attempts to use English through literature, learners often become more responsible for their work because they know that there is a real readership. Thus, their self- and peer-editing strategies become more active (Diab 2010) as they want to convey their message as accurately as possible.

Conclusion

From my experience, I personally believe that these activities help enrich the experiential learning cycle (Scrivener 2005) that language teaching entails. When using letters, learners experience firsthand the value of learning English to communicate their feelings, emotions, and identities to other peers. Although the activities may initially be related to developing writing skills for interactional purposes, learners also contemplate the relevance of developing writing as a creative skill that utilizes imagination (Hyland 2002; Silva

and Brice 2004). Learning a foreign language requires studying the language, including its system, but also requires that learners imagine and play around with it. Language is possible through cognitive processes that allow us to transfer our thoughts into words (Ellis 1994).

Both activities in this article can be turned into larger projects or units of work that also bring in speaking development if teachers ask students to deliver small presentations about what they have written, describing the process and end product. All in all, the strength that I perceive in using letters is that pedagogic tasks and input sources can be authenticated when there is a real goal underpinning them, a goal that students appropriate and regard as their own (Ellis 2003).

On a more personal note, I have discovered that empathy and pedagogic authenticity are engrained in our teaching practices, thus allowing us to assume new roles. As regards roles, I believe that teachers may become “enablers” and “empowerers” (Scrivener 2005), as our main aim is to socially construct new worlds with our students and fellow teachers. Through these activities, teachers may help their learners create and write about imaginary worlds that can be shared and developed in class.

Finally, we are always learners as every letter, every sentence, every word our learners write may teach us something new about them, their hopes, dreams, fears, and inquisitiveness. Their letters and stories will provide us with rich information about what they are interested in and what they expect from their teachers and education as a whole. It will then be our task to incorporate their needs and interests in our teaching (Davies and Pearce 2000; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011).

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