

University of Birmingham  
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**Writing Improvement in a 4th year EFL classes:  
Limits and Possibilities**

**Module 1: Language Teaching Methodology**

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September 2000

# WRITING IMPROVEMENT

in a 4th year EFL class  
LIMITS and POSSIBILITIES

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## **Introduction**

This paper is about writing improvement in a 4th year EFL class, its limits and possibilities. I have collected 5 different types of four of my students' writing (20 altogether). After analysing them according to the difficulties my students appear to have I suggest strategies to help them overcome these.

**Section 1** sets the scene by defining the context this paper deals with. It tries to answer the following question: Which contextual elements need to be considered as a framework for all future decisions about language teaching and learning relevant to this paper?

**Section 2** continues with laying the theoretical foundations for the analysis of my students' writings by dealing with the notion of communication in writing, the nature of process and product, interlanguage in writing and different types of errors.

**Section 3** introduces the subjects of my investigation, describes the different types of writing and then continues with setting a focus for the following analysis of the difficulties my students' appear to have in writing.

**Section 4** finally deals with the role of both teacher and student in language improvement. What role does the teacher have to play if he/she wants to guide their students to effective learning? What is the students' responsibility in doing so? How can feedback have a beneficial effect on student motivation? Section 4 then concludes with a series of general and specific suggestions for language improvement. General suggestions refer to suggestions which I believe apply to all learning. Specific suggestions refer to suggestions that apply to language learning only.

## **Section One**

# Context

## 1.1 Introduction

Reviewing the literature about Language Teaching Methodology it becomes clear that the notion of context plays a fundamental role in making sound decisions about language teaching and learning. Nunan (1991) in the preface of his book points out that it is finally up to the "teachers to identify what works for them and their learners, in their own particular context". For the purpose of this paper I would like to adopt the approach of Brown (1994b) who talks about the complexity of our profession and views the notion of context as part of that complexity. Any particular context he argues can be understood by answering the following questions.

Who are your learners?  
Where are they learning?  
Why are they learning? ( H.D. Brown,1994b: 89)

The question "Who" will be answered under the heading of "Learners" and the questions "Where" and "Why" under "Setting".

I adopted these terms from McDonough and Shaw (1993).

## 1.2 Learners

Regarding "Learners" I want to concentrate on **age**, **proficiency level** and **mother tongue**.

### **Age**

My students are 13 and 14 years old. H.D. Brown (1994b: 95) writes about that age group:

"The "terrible teens" are in an age of transition, confusion, self-consciousness growing, and changing bodies and minds. What a challenge for the teacher!"

He then continues by making several suggestions by first noticing that there is not a lot of information about them available in the language teaching field (page 95).I have summarized his suggestions below. The following need to be considered:

- The development of the ability to think in abstract terms,
- the lengthening of their attention spans,
- the stimulation of all five senses,
- the students` sensitivity concerning appearance and self-esteem, and

- that occasional diversions from the "here and now" are possible.

(H.D. Brown, 1994b: 95-96)

### **Proficiency Level**

Defining proficiency levels is a quite adventurous task, nevertheless it is mandatory, because it provides a starting point for future decisions about language learning and teaching. I refer to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines listed in Brown and assess my students on a continuum from Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-Mid level.

"The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:

- create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode.
- initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks;
- ask and answer questions." (Brown, 1994b: 102)

The basic distinction between low and mid level is, I believe, the range of complexity.

### **Mother Tongue**

Ever since the introduction of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis in the middle part of the twentieth century there has been much controversy as to whether referring to ones L1 helps or interferes in learning the L2. The proponents of the CAH claimed it was possible to predict the difficulties a learner would encounter by analysing the differences between a L1 and the L2 in question. It was this attempt to predict difficulties in particular that attracted criticism (Brown; 1994a: 193). Nevertheless, I strongly believe that many of my students' errors stem from their L1 (German) and therefore agree with Michael Lewis (1996: 55) who notices that

"The student's L1 is as much a resource as any other aspect of the student's real world knowledge; attempting to marginalise it, or reduce its role is both impossible and undesirable."

### **1.3 Setting**

Concerning setting I consider **EFL versus ESL context** and the **role of English in the school/ country** as crucial

#### **EFL versus ESL context**

I believe the most important difference between the two is that students in an ESL context can practise their English after class in real life situations like shopping and socializing whereas EFL students cannot. Brown (1994b: 121) points out that "students may have difficulty in seeing the relevance of learning English." They are not required to speak English once the lesson has ended. They certainly do not speak it outside of class and probably do not write, unless they have a penfriend in another country for example. However the teacher can make a difference for instance by establishing a small English library and encouraging them to read.

### **Role of English in the School/Country**

The role of English for educational and professional purposes is regularly emphasised by Austrian politicians. So I have to ask myself why this is not reflected in the time spent for instruction. In the first two years of secondary school most students have four English lessons a week, in the remaining two years only three. This is the **time** available for teaching and learning English in school. Terence Odlin (1994: 11) in his introduction to *Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar* writes

"The time spent in language courses is only a fraction of what is needed to develop thoroughgoing proficiency in a second language."

Odlin calculated that the average student receives about 800 hours of formal language instruction at secondary school. I did the same calculation for my school and ended up with only 504 hours. This means I need to make crucial choices about what is feasible and important to teach and learn.

## **Section Two**

# The Nature of Writing

## **2.1 Introduction**

I start this introduction by quoting Michael Lewis who in his book "The Lexical Approach" says:

"Do you learn to write essays by writing bad ones, and improving, or by learning to write sentences and their paragraphs and then how to link paragraphs? The truth is we do not know, and again it is difficult to see how we could get evidence."

Lewis points out, that though a wide variety of methods has been developed over the last decades we still do not know how best to teach our students. I believe nowadays there is a tendency in the field to favour the notion of approach which serves the teaching profession well since experience has shown that no one method can provide a satisfactory answer to our students' different needs. Lewis (1996: 2) emphasises that any approach "needs to be based on explicitly stated theoretical principles". This section provides some necessary theoretical principles for this paper.

## **2.2 Communication in Writing**

Each piece of writing is in essence a piece of communication. Writing is certainly no one-way-street. Students need to be made aware of this. There is a writer who wants to communicate something to an audience. I want to stress the notions of "Purpose" and "Audience" here. McDonough and Shaw note that the classroom "is not simply a reflection of the outside world", but argue that situations can be created in class where students write with a concrete audience like other students or penfriends in mind and hence at least resemble the outside world (1993: 184). Teachers need to create motivating occasions, which intrinsically encourage students to write. Writing to other students is certainly one possibility however to take this idea a step further, it is certainly more challenging to write to someone whose mother tongue is either English or at least different to your students' mother tongue. This leads directly to the notions of writing as a process versus writing as a product.

## **2.3 From Process to Product**

In the Japanese martial arts like Judo and Aikido the suffix "do" means "the way" emphasising that it is the way, the process, which is important. However, you can only go along a certain way if you know where to go. You need to have a focus in mind, the product.

Brown

(1994b: 322) points out that

"The product is, after all, the ultimate goal; it is the reason that we go through the process of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing."

Michael Lewis argues that students usually write their essays, hand them in and then have them returned graded. Therefore they need to be explicitly introduced to the idea of process writing. (1996: 177). In school some occasions require process approaches (prewriting, drafting, revising and editing), like writing an article for a school newsletter. Others, however, do not usually demand an explicit focus on process like writing a diary or an email.

What finally matters, I believe, is that we encourage our students to write. Lynn Holaday (in Stephen Tchudi, 1997: 35) points out "that the way to become a better writer is to write". She later remarks (page 36) that "students who feel incompetent at writing avoid writing. They do not practise. They do not get better." In other words, if they do not practise, their interlanguage will not develop.

## **2.4 Interlanguage in Writing**

Interlanguage tells us a lot about where our students are in terms of grammatical and lexical development. Within the scope of this paper I would like to extend the notion of interlanguage to include other important aspects of writing like content and organization.

Two factors, among others, seem to be essential for developing one`s interlanguage: sufficient input/intake and plenty of practice. To provide sufficient input students need to be exposed to a variety of listening tasks and, more importantly, encouraged to do extensive out-of-school reading since what they read gives them a model for their writing.

## **2.5 Error Analysis in Writing**

Brown distinguishes between *mistakes* and *errors*. According to Brown *mistakes* refer to "a failure to utilize a known system correctly", whereas *errors* concern "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner" (1994a: 205). Two things need to be pointed out here: Firstly, mistakes do not require special treatment assuming they are recognized. Secondly, *error* here refers to structures only.

Reviewing J.D. Brown`s (in H.D. Brown, 1994b: 342) six general categories which serve as a basis for the evaluation of student writing it becomes eminently clear that grammar is only one element in a successfully written piece of communication. The others are: **content, organization, discourse, vocabulary and mechanics** (spelling, punctuation and appearance). Within the scope of this paper I would like to extend the notion of error and include the elements above mentioned.

### **Section Three**

# Analysis of Written Work

## **3.1 Introduction**

This section deals with the analysis of some of my students' writing difficulties. I chose four students (Table 3.1), collected five different types of writing from each of them and will analyse their writing according to the difficulties they appeared to have. The focus of this section is on recognizing main difficulties they all appear to have. This will enable me to give precise suggestions for writing and language improvement in section four.

TABLE 3.1 SUBJECTS

<b><i>Christine</i></b>	a very diligent student, who is not very confident about her language abilities.
<b><i>Manuela</i></b>	a shy, introvert girl, who hardly ever speaks up in class.
<b><i>Kathy</i></b>	an outgoing, talented student, who does not seem to be a very conscientious learner.
<b><i>Sascha</i></b>	one of the two boys in class, knows a lot of vocabulary, seems to have fun studying English.

### **Types of Writing**

Different types of writing share different characteristics. They serve different purposes and are written for different audiences. Table 3.2 provides an overview of the various types of writing I have collected and contains information about the purpose and audience my students probably had in mind when they were writing these texts.

TABLE 3.2 TYPES OF WRITING

<i>Type</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Audience</i>
<b>Homepage</b>	Homework	Teacher
<b>Letter</b>	Exchange news	Friend
<b>Diary</b>	Homework	Teacher
<b>Interview</b>	Homework	Teacher
<b>Summary</b>	Show Understanding	Teacher

Table 3.2 shows very clearly that the purpose and audience my students in the majority of their writing probably had in mind do not resemble real life purposes and audiences.

### 3.2 Focus of Analysis

My analysis is based on J.D. Brown`s categories (see 2.5). They are given in Table 3.3 below, together with a brief description of what I want to concentrate on during the analysis.

TABLE 3.3 CATEGORIES FOR ERROR ANALYSIS

<i>Category</i>	<i>Brief description</i>
<b>Content</b>	Meaning of a text, logical sequence of ideas
<b>Organization</b>	Is there some kind of introduction, main part and conclusion?
<b>Discourse</b>	Fluency, sentence starters and cohesion. Cohesion is the "grammatical linking of one part of a text to another". It makes the text more than a sequence of sentences (Lewis, 1996: 15).
<b>Grammar</b>	Sentence structure, correct use of tenses
<b>Lexis</b>	Lexical items are not only words, many consist of multi-word units (Lewis, 1996: 90)

I consciously omitted mechanics (spelling, punctuation, appearance) because it is of minor importance in language improvement as such.

### 3.3 Analysis

**Homepage** (see Appendix 2)

Christine and Kathy did not have any difficulties with content, organization and discourse. There is a homepage of an Australian girl in their textbooks and they probably took it as a model. Sascha tried to add one or two ideas which do not really fit in. Manuela`s homepage misses the ending. A homepage, by its very nature, usually does not require very complex structures. The reason being is that it mainly describes people and places. Therefore grammar did not pose any major problems. Only Manuela had some difficulties ("The other time are raining."). Lexical items, too, did not seem to cause real confusion. Christine, however, did have occasional troubles ("The weather in Dornbirn is very **complicated**").

**Letter** (see Appendix 3)

I assumed the letters would reveal much more about my students` interlanguage because firstly, they did not have a model and secondly, in a letter you normally talk about past and

future events which demands more complex grammar and lexis. I was right. They did not seem to have real difficulties with content, organization and discourse. All letters convey meaning, the ideas are neatly linked together and they all have some kind of introduction, major part and conclusion. Sascha's, Christine's and Manuela's letters did, however, exhibit a lot about their grammatical interlanguage. Sascha for example does not know the past form of *must*. What is quite interesting here is the use of *must + first verb form* in the first two sentences, and *must + second verb form* in the next two sentences. His interlanguage system does not yet contain the second form of *must* (= had to) but shows that there has to be one by using *must + second verb form* inconsistently. Christine talks mainly about future events in her letter. Strictly speaking there is no future tense in English, so future time is expressed by various structures like *will + first verb form* or *be going to + first verb form*. Christine's interlanguage system uncovers the following possibilities: *would going to go*, *will going*, *will going to go*.

Manuela mainly uses past form for future time (I hope we had snow at Christmas).

Katharina's letter shows that her interlanguage is well advanced compared to the others..

#### **Diary** (see Appendix 4)

The diaries again show that none of my students seem to have real difficulties with the notions of content, organization and discourse. Only Christine's 8<sup>th</sup> *December* is not very well organized and lacks proper discourse markers, thus appearing artificial and peculiar.

Katharina's diary displays more grammatical errors than her other writings. I assume that it is first draft which means that she did not do any editing. She does not use the past tense consistently and for the second time uses "hear a CD" instead of "listen to a CD", an obvious L1 interference. In German the verb for *listen* and *hear* is a single word. Christine makes some lexical (e.g. This day was really **confused**.) and many grammatical errors which, in my opinion only shows that she does not hesitate to take risks. Many students do and thus exhibit the phenomenon of avoidance; they do not use structures and lexical items they are not completely sure of. Diaries are usually about past events which is very convenient for Manuela who often seems to use past tense for future time. Sascha's diary displays again the inconsistent use of *must + first verb form* and *must + second verb form* among other structural difficulties.

#### **Interview** (see Appendix 5)

An interview demands the formation of questions. In that respect it is unique compared to the other types of writing. It resembles spoken language and thus has many of its features like sentence fragments and colloquial expressions. Nevertheless, it demands some kind of organization, discourse markers, content, grammar and lexis. Regarding organization all four interviews comprise a beginning, main part and ending. The different ideas are linked together well. Native speakers use all kinds of discourse markers and I think this is where interview could gain the most. There is a fair number of grammatical errors in all of them, which, I believe, is normal and only a manifestation of a developing interlanguage.

### **Summary** (see Appendix 6)

A summary is usually written to summarise the most important points of an article you have read. This is very useful for academic purposes. Writing summaries is an acquired skill and involves a lot of practice. At secondary school level students naturally copy many structures and sentences from the texts they have to summarise. Christine's summary is a good example for this. There are hardly any errors, it is well organised and apart from the first two sentences, which she obviously wrote by herself, it does not uncover any structural or lexical difficulties. Manuela, on the other hand, did not use very many structures from the original text. She seems to have major difficulties with discourse (e.g. overuse of *then*), grammar and lexis. In a process oriented approach Manuela's summary would be a draft and after some editing would almost certainly not reveal as many errors. I believe she would learn more for her overall development as a writer than Christine.

## **Section Four**

# A Way out

## **4.1 Introduction**

In this final section I first want to discuss the role of both teachers and students in language improvement. Bolitho and Tomlinson (1980: iv) in their book "Discover English" write

"In the classroom the only views of language that really matters are the ones that teachers and learners have built up in their own heads."

Section 4.2 deals with the role of both teacher and students in learning a foreign language. If teachers used more motivating ways of giving feedback within a process orientated approach students would probably loose their dislike for writing. Section 4.3 provides some suggestions for giving more motivating feedback.

Finally, under the heading of *General and Specific Suggestions* I have summarised some recommendations for writing improvement and will discuss possible side-effects on the students overall development as language learners. Within the limited scope of this paper this cannot claim to be comprehensive.

## **4.2 The Role of the Teacher and Student**

Within a certain context teachers and students can adopt many different roles which mainly depend on their views of language and learning. These roles can be placed on a continuum with the teacher on one and the student on the other end. In Austria, however, many teachers let their textbooks decide which role they and their students take. What follows is a short description of the teacher and student roles I support.

### **Teachers**

I believe a teacher should be flexible, most of all, and have a range of methods available which he/she applies according to the needs of his/her students. My students are from 10 to 14 years old. Different ages require different approaches. You cannot teach 10 year olds the way you teach 14 year olds. Ten year olds need much more teacher attention than 14 year olds. Concerning my 14 year old students I see the role of the teacher as facilitator, editor, consultant, adviser and manager. "There is no good teaching which does not result in effective learning." (M. Lewis, 1996: 188).

### **Students**

Students bring to class features which ultimately determine how well they learn the language. Among these features are certain beliefs like beliefs about learning, language and teacher roles. They also bring to class specific learning styles and strategies. Learning styles, according to Nunan "refer to any individual's preferred ways of going about learning" and learning strategies "are the mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language" (1991: 168). If teachers want to assume the role of facilitators they need to provide exercises that make students aware of their preferred learning styles and they also need to equip them with a battery of learning strategies.

### **4.3 Feedback in Writing**

I strongly agree with Lynn Holaday (in Tchudi, 1997: 36/37) who in her article "Writing Students Need Coaches, Not Judges", criticizes the traditional way of grading written work, pointing out that "negative feedback is demoralizing and demotivating: Low grades are negative feedback". It is also demotivating to cover our students' writing with red, pink or green ink. Feedback needs to be truthful and positive. Reviewing the literature shows that there are many different less intimidating and more encouraging ways to give feedback like **Minimal Marking, Conferencing and Peer Evaluation** (see Appendix 1). Applying alternative ways of giving feedback would probably result in students being more motivated and having a more positive attitude towards writing.

### **4.4 General and Specific Suggestions**

General suggestions refer to suggestions which I believe apply to all learning. Specific suggestions refer to suggestions that apply to language learning only. Suggestions will certainly only work if students try them out over a longer time period. Teachers need to constantly remind them of the importance and usefulness of such suggestions. I also do not think that it is useful to drown them in suggestions but rather to choose some very carefully and then consequently implement them.

#### **General Suggestions**

General suggestions could concern

a) the improvement of concentration

e.g. drink enough water during the day, relaxation exercises

b) how to arrange learning

e.g. choose a quiet, cosy place, make a learning plan, take breaks

c) advice on more effective learning

e.g. index cards for lexical items or grammar points and mind maps

Some possible side-effects of the above mentioned could be that students learn to take responsibility and thus discover that they can make a difference. Also if they see that some of those suggestions work they might be more motivated.

### **Specific Suggestions**

My students' writings have mainly revealed difficulties in the areas of grammar and lexical items. That is why I first want to give suggestions concerning improvement in those areas and afterwards suggestions for language improvement in general, which will naturally involve all four language skills.

### **Grammar**

Yip writes that

"Several studies suggest that comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient for acquisition of grammatical accuracy."

She then continues with pointing out that some grammatical elements call for instruction and favours grammatical consciousness-raising (in Odlin, 1994: 136). Such exercises need to be slowly introduced into a classroom where students are used to explicitly being taught grammar. Grammar instruction needs to be carefully planned and implemented and certainly not exaggerated. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that it does have a place in language teaching and learning. Apart from C-R exercises process approaches (see 2.3) could also help to improve grammatical accuracy. In addition to that students' own work could be used as the starting point for form-focussed activities. Manuela, for example, used mainly past tense for future time in her letter. A C-R exercise with focus on distinguishing between past, present and future time could be used to make her aware of this.

### **Lexical Items**

I favour the use of index cards. There are many ways to learn vocabulary with index cards and I believe if I use some of my precious classroom time practising one or two different ways, students get used to it and will do it at home, too. I also want to encourage them to do it in pairs, which is much more motivating and fun. Lewis emphasises the importance of extensive, rather than intensive reading. They should not stop at every unknown word and teacher should encourage them to use contextual guessing, top-down and bottom-up approaches instead (1996: 117). Students in my intermediate groups do already have the opportunity to choose a book once a week during the last ten minutes of a lesson, begin to read and then are free to take it home to finish reading. I offer a multitude of books for different levels and interest. They really seem to enjoy it.

### **Integrating The Four Skills**

Integrating the four skills is very important to show students, how in real life, they do not usually use them separately but in combination. This approach could be implemented in class by doing various projects. I have one particular in mind, which I want to begin next semester. It is about making a school paper which includes English articles. Students need to talk about what to choose, then maybe read related articles to see how they are organised. Afterwards they start the prewriting stage doing brainstorming activities. This is followed by a drafting and finally editing stage. Integrating peer evaluation means that some students have to read the various articles and also discuss possible improvements. The advantages of such a kind of project are obvious: students use all four skills for a purpose in a meaningful way. Doing that they are naturally more interested, motivated and willing to give their best.

### **Conclusion**

The most challenging task for teachers is, I believe, to choose what in the long run helps their students to become good learners. Considering the multitude of literature in the field it becomes evident that this is quite a task. Another is to define what comprises a good learner. The possible answers to this are probably as plentiful as the different attitudes towards language and learning. I think for much too long now there has been too much focus on the role of the teacher and the different methods in language learning. There is still a lot to be done to change the mindsets of teachers, students and parents for many teachers still spend most of their lessons in front of their class making speeches, many students think as long as they do not speak up in class they cannot make errors and many parents think the only good teacher is one that corrects every little error in their students' exercise book.

In this paper I have tried to point out that for language learning to be successful not only the teachers but also the students have to play their roles. Dawkins, in his book *Unweaving the Rainbow*, which is a love letter to science, writes that "there are times, when a pendulum has swung far enough and needs a strong push in the other direction to restore equilibrium".

(Dawkins, 1999: 23)

For language teaching this means that after centuries of teacher centredness the role of the learner cannot be too much overemphasized.

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## **Appendix 1: Alternative ways of giving feedback**

**1) Minimal Marking**, described in M. Lewis "Lexical Approach" is an evaluation technique developed by Hyland and concentrates on surface errors (syntax, mechanics) only. The teacher makes a cross in the margin next to the error. Then students work together and review their text again to correct these errors (1996: 177). At the age of 13/14 the students need the guidance of the teacher and some surface errors will probably not be discovered by them immediately.

**2) Conferencing** is one way to free writing from its isolation and integrate other language skills like speaking. During conferencing a student meets a teacher to discuss his/her draft, asking questions about all aspects of writing. Two points need to be stressed here. Firstly, for conferencing to be successful students need to have some knowledge and idea of what a successful text consists of. Secondly, teachers need to give positive, encouraging feedback and offer suggestions for improvement.

**3) Peer Evaluation**, finally is another possibility to emphasise the role of the student. To focus on the role of the students is an important issue and has to be carefully planned and incorporated. Students need to know what to evaluate and how to do it. McDonough and Shaw point out that peer evaluation "will only be effective with guidance and focus". It can help students to see more consciously and critically what they do (1993: 191).

## **Appendix 2: Homepage**



**Appendix 3: Letter**



**Appendix 4: Diary**



## **Appendix 5: Interview**



## **Appendix 6: Summary**

