

# Writing in the Lower Secondary School

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Writing has degenerated into a joyless task for most pupils and correcting compositions is often the most depressing part of a language teacher's job. It is no wonder, then, that both teachers and pupils regard the weekly or fortnightly ordeal with anything but enthusiasm. And yet writing can be a stimulating and challenging joint venture in the classroom.

Teachers who have been brought up in the familiar and known techniques adopt the same with their charges and are indignantly surprised when these don't seem to produce the desired results. They are shocked by the inarticulateness of their Form I, II or III kids on a nebulous topic like "A Rainy Day", or the embarrassing confessional "Why I like my parents". A poor choice of topics can only result in boring writing untrammelled by sense or syntax. Even a normally articulate pupil will be reduced to mediocrity in such cases. It is only too easy to blame their poor performance on laziness or carelessness while the real cause escapes notice. The good pupils may not be put off by an occasional low grade, but the weaker ones who consistently collect depressing grades can develop protective shells to shield themselves from unhappiness. When this happens writing ceases to be of any use in the learning process. What must the teacher do to prevent this? How can he make writing a meaningful and joyful experience in class?

This leads us to a definition of aims. Unless we have certain objectives clearly in mind, we would not know what to prescribe to reach those goals. Composition at all levels is intended to train the child to write creatively, to think imaginatively and, for this purpose, to use language correctly. For our lower secondary kids who are still floundering in the rudiments of the language these aims may sound at once trite and ambitious. Let me explain how they can direct our efforts in the classroom.

To achieve these goals two types of written work are needed: guided composition and free writing. The former seeks to establish acceptable language habits and sentence patterns, the latter provides scope for the imagination and the creative spirit. What kind of balance to maintain between these two forms of activities each teacher has to work out for his class according to their interest, response and level.

## Guided composition

In this form of writing the burden on the pupils is lessened so that he can concentrate on one area of writing, namely, on the correct use of grammar. The content, organization and presentation work is done for him. All he is invited to do is to supply certain grammatical items. This can also be controlled. In one exercise the class may be given a short but self-contained passage with the basic verb forms given in brackets and they have to use the correct tense of these verbs. In another exercise they have to supply suitable prepositions or articles. The general weakness of the class will be a good index of the kind of exercise needed. Of course various combinations of the above can be used in one exercise, e.g. one paragraph on tenses and another on prepositions or articles. (for further details see THE ENGLISH TEACHER, Vol.i No.4 Nov.1971, p.11) Books, magazines, newspapers, etc. should provide ample materials, but it will require time to sift through these sources. But the satisfaction of seeing the class enjoying their work and progressively improving should be more than compensatory.

Guided composition may also be in the form of a careful series of questions to which the pupils give short answers in complete sentences. The type of sentence patterns can be controlled by these lead questions. Yet another form is where outlines on a given topic are given in a number of phrases. The pupils complete or expand them as they wish. These are more advanced than the first kind discussed above. When to use which form of guided writing and how often are questions the individual teacher has to answer for himself bearing in mind various classroom factors. But they are most effective if the writing exercise is related to the grammar lessons. That is to say, if the teacher is teaching the present tense, then in the guided composition exercise he will also specify that only the present tense is to be used. Thus the grammar lessons and the composition become complementary and mutually enforcing.

## Free writing

Perhaps the title is a misnomer. Free writing, paradoxically, requires intelligent control on the part of the teacher. It doesn't mean that pupils can write on anything they like. It doesn't mean throwing out a few

general titles for them to display their literary talents or knowledge. Rather it means selecting materials within their knowledge, interest and experience. A pupil who lacks ideas may merely lack the sort of experience that provides them, which has nothing to do with a failure to write creatively. It also means defining the scope and limits within which their imagination can run wild. For too much choice is really no choice at all, especially for young immature minds. They are more bewildered than thrilled by the complete freedom of choice. What forms, then, should free writing take?

It could take the form of writing a different conclusion to a short story or a cinema picture. The teacher reads or tells a story. Then after a short discussion to make sure they all have the main facts of the story, they are asked to say how they would end the story. Examples of this are stories like 'Romeo and Juliet' or the short story 'The Lady and the Tiger'. Or, if there is a popular picture in town, e.g. Love Story, the teacher could discuss this with the class and then ask them to write the kind of ending they would have used if they were the author of the story or the producer of the film. TV programmes could be used as well. Some preparation in the form of a classroom discussion is a prerequisite. Indirectly this helps to develop discrimination and judgment.

If film-strips or featurettes are available (British Council, USIS, town library, etc.) they could be used as the starting point of a discussion and writing exercise. Newsreels and documentaries are particularly helpful in this connection.

A third kind of free writing is based on impersonation and play-acting. Children at this level will find it fun if suitable subjects are chosen. To delimit the scope the teacher could use lead sentences like "I am a scooter and let me tell you how it feels to belong to a teenager....." (phrased it could trigger off a series of fascinating episodes. A class was given the cue "It's hell being a snake...." and one 'snake' wrote:

The worst part is when those dumb humans came round looking for snakeskins for their shoes and pocketbooks and things. I'll bet you never heard of human skin coats. But, boy, would I like to go into the business.

In all these exercises the important thing is the personal viewpoint. This is only possible when pupils can write about things that interest them or arouse their enthusiasm. The intention of free writing is to produce personal, imaginative work.

Finally, it might not be inappropriate to conclude these reflections on writing by exploding two popular myths that many (inside and outside the classroom) cling on to, very often because they exempt us from thinking and sometimes because they have the imprimatur of general acceptance.

*Myth No. 1* More essay assignments will improve the pupils' English. Practice makes perfect, but the wrong kind of practice entrenches rather than eradicates bad habits. It is unrealistic to strive for progress by sheer quantitative means. Qualitative measures are more effective. If pupils are given the proper motivation, if they can be made to feel the need to communicate, then they will make the effort to equip themselves with the necessary skills. If writing has become a drudgery for them, then an increased amount of drudgery will exercise any remnant of interest left in them; it will not make them perfect by any means.

*Myth No. 2* Basic language skills must be given priority. The importance of acquiring fundamental skills is not disputed (the object of guided writing is in fact to acquire these skills). What is deplored here is when this is used as an excuse to submit pupils to overdoses of remedial work. Grammar becomes a sort of sadistic punishment meted out to those weak in writing. In no other field as in language is it so true that the weak we will always have with us.