

Hands.on

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Published: (October 1997) in APAC of News, N°31. Barcelona

This article describes some of the Reading and Writing activities found effective in our classrooms. You will find them effective in any classroom context. We have used them with computers to heighten students' motivation.

Charlie

To combine Listening and Writing you can use the reader What's Next?(1) which is full of folk-tales told in short paragraphs. The first story, "Charlie", is amusing and easy to the ear because it uses the same basic routine to tell each paragraph. You introduce the story explaining that the English word "charlie" means numbskull. You can then easily elicit that this is the story of silly boy called Charlie.

The basic plot is that Charlie and his mother are poor, so Charlie works on a farm each day. The problem is that the farmer gives pays him in goods, not money, and Charlie always manages to destroy his day's wages on the way home from work. For instance when the farmer gives him eggs he gets into a fight and throws the eggs at some boys, when his mother gives him a basket the farmer pays him with milk and he pours it into the basket... and so on with butter which melts in his pocket and corn which falls through a string bag. The funny storyline is easily followed because it is predictable and uses similar structures to recount each episode. You can read it to your students, section by section, checking their comprehension. In the final chapter, left unread, Charlie's mother is so fed up that she decides to go to work on the farm. This is the section students write on their computers. They have had intensive aural input of structures and are usually able to finish the story creatively.

Once students have typed out their version on the word processor they use the speller, thesaurus and grammar check options to do their own correcting. They also make a note on paper of all their corrections, which they later write into a multiple-choice programme(2) for review.

Dictation

An all-round exercise is that of dictation which has a myriad of variations(3).

You will find the song "What a Wonderful World" is easy enough to understand to be useful at the ESO level. You can also use this opportunity to familiarise pupils with the format keys on the processor by dictating the format along with the lyrics. For example you dictate the title and the keys necessary for it to appear underlined. The refrain is repeated so you can also dictate the Copy & Paste keys to have students move lines of text without retyping it. Tab keys are also handy, so include them too. Students can use the processor's spellcheck facility to correct spelling before the whole result is checked on the board. Then you have your students translate the text with their electronic dictionaries(4).

The perfect completion for this class is listening to Louis Armstrong's version of the song.

Another effective dictation activity is The Race where teams of students have to copy from a text placed at a distance from their computer. One from each group runs up to the dictation, reads a part, then runs back to repeat it to the group who write it on the computer. The trick here is to use the correct form of typical student errors to construct the text because these will be assimilated more easily on account of the meaningful repetition involved in the race.

Teams spellcheck their dictation and switch off their screen to show they have finished. Teams then exchange computers and count up others' mistakes. 0 points are allotted for finishing first and points are added for each mistake, so the team with the least points wins.

Daydream

The real difficulty with creative writing is often getting pupils into the right frame of mind to create ideas. You may find that the following technique jumpstarts your students's creativity.

Write "daydream" on the board and elicit its meaning. Announce that for the first part of this class everyone is invited to daydream. To help you will put on some background music - play a piece of instrumental music (I suggest New Age.) Ask your students to sit back, relaxing and listening, letting their minds float away on the sound of the notes... Invite them to allow themselves to conjure up images to fit the harmonious melody...

As your pupils are settling into their dream there will probable be giggles and general murmuring in the class - ignore it, it is only a reaction to their own visualisations.

When the piece has ended and everyone has gradually returned from their "trip" ask students to describe their experience by writing down the images and the

sounds and sensations related to them. Advise them that to bring out the detail in their pictures they can describe the colours in the image, the background scene, the foreground, the different shapes, the intensity of light, the quality of the sounds, the rhythms, the volume, the temperature, and so on.

Explain that this is what writing is about: putting your images, sounds and feelings into words.

Pupils use their electronic dictionary to write, then they spellcheck, grammar check and write their findings to Basetest.

A 14 year-old girl wrote this example during a class:

"With this song that gives me a strange vision I can see a warm and green field with a river crossing it.

This song makes me think in beautiful things like: peace, love and harmony and a lot of things I can't describe with words.

This song makes me dream of fantastic things. I can sleep with it with a lot of calm in myself and without problems. The song's harmony is alright and there are no lyrics.

I can observe a field of wheat. It's yellow like the sun and a lot of sheep, black and white sheep.

I can appreciate a pair of frogs in the river. Both are greenish or brownish. I can't see them very well.

The sky has some little clouds. There isn't any danger of rain because there is no wind.

I'm under a tree, reading a book ... that's the end of the song."

Storylines

Mixed-up stories are an amusing reading exercise where you have two stories interlaced and students have to read intensively to disentangle them. Use of the Copy and Paste facilities on the processor make this good fun.

The diminishing sentence is an exercise in editing where your students are asked to delete unnecessary text while retaining the same meaning. This can work equally well on the board in a normal classroom with groups getting marks for deleting sequences of unnecessary text. In the computer class it only requires the delete button on the processor. Here's an example:

"The fat and ugly sisters who were jealous of beautiful young Cinderella's good looks and tried very hard to stop her from meeting or even seeing the rich and handsome Prince Charming who lived a wonderful life in the great golden palace in

the land of Fairytale were very unhappy when she lost her slipper then met the Prince in her kitchen where she accepted his marriage proposal and lived happily ever after."

Students do all of these activities in groups around the same machine. We believe this group work setup is another strong motivational factor worth taking into account. In fact in their answers to the final questionnaire most students express a preference for working in groups, which they said makes for more enjoyment and learning.

Blank Page

Ask students if they have ever experienced the blank page syndrome during an exam, when they just can't think of anything to say or write. Talk about the episode. Announce to your pupils that you have good news for them: after today's lesson they will know how to overcome this syndrome.

Present this strategy:

1. Students write for three minutes. They are to write without thinking or revising, whatever comes into their minds.
2. They exchange papers with their partner who comments on one aspect they like and one they dislike, then return the paper. They now add something and delete something.
3. They rearrange the structure, for example by exchanging the introduction and the end, or the middle and the end.
4. They spellcheck and do a grammarcheck of their writing.
5. They rewrite the whole piece.

You can round off the class by reading a few creations out loud. Remind students that they can use this strategy anytime they have to create something from nothing.

Here is an authentic example written by a 15year-old during a class:

"When I'm in the English class I hear the teacher, I practice the exercises and I sometimes speak with my neighbour.
Sometimes I think about the words of the teacher, they are clear words for me to understand the sentences. Sometimes I don't understand the sentences, then I think about it and I know that my vocabulary isn't enough. Then, when I arrive at home I take the dictionary and read some words that I don't know their meaning.

After my mother enters into my room and she talks with me some things, sometimes she makes me angry and I speak a lot, then I realise that I use many words in my language, then I understand that English is an easy language but I still need practice."

- (1) Abbott,G.(1976) What Next?, Longman
- (2) Casas,J.(1970) Basetest (software), Generalitat de Catalunya.
- (3) Davis,P & Rinovolucrí,M,(1988) Dictation, CUP.
- (4) We bought a inexpensive dictionary called "Rapid" which is available commercially.

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