

5. Writing using video

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The production of a piece of writing in English is required from most students at the French baccalauréat and in some cases it amounts to 40% of the overall mark. Writing is thus generally given more importance than any other skill tested at the French exam. And yet the reading of these “essays” is often a source of great disappointment. One is all the more puzzled as sometimes the grammar exercises one has just marked reveal some real knowledge of individual aspects of the language. For instance, a pupil will master the use of the preterit and the present perfect in unrelated statements but not in the narrative parts of his “essay”. This discrepancy spurred our research. We soon realised we did not teach writing as a skill. Therefore we have tried to find some ways of changing things.

When setting a writing task to their students teachers ought to be aware of the specificity of the type of text their students will have to produce. A narrative, the review of a film, an informative text or a list of instructions differ in many ways: patterns, set of tenses, lexical cohesion among others. The students will be made aware of these differences through reading and analysing texts, both activities being prerequisites to any writing task.

Writing is a way to express or exchange ideas through some very definite rules—specific language, lay-out, and so on. One writes to be read and, also, in most cases to have some sort of feedback. It is obvious that there won't be much to read if one has nothing interesting to write about or no means to react to what one has read. However, students cannot be expected to find ideas out of the blue and the teacher's first concern should be to provide them with “food for thought”. One of our problems is to find ways of stimulating their imaginations and of arousing their interest. When it comes to writing, the task is so complex that it is definitely impossible for students to think and write. So, they must be given time and support. It seems to us that the flexibility of use which video documents give the teachers and the pupils make them the ideal tool for this activity. Indeed, such documents are particularly adapted to arouse imagination, to spur brainstorming and pooling activities. All the research which has been done so far about the use of such documents in the classroom provides with a variety of techniques to create a need for information and therefore to give the pupils a chance to be personal. When you work on one aspect only of the video document (i.e. either sound or picture) the

interpretations are bound to be different, therefore the pupils' productions will be different and worth reading by their friends who will want to compare them to their own pieces of writing. Thus the task will be challenging and more likely fun.

When they are gathering ideas to produce a piece of writing, the pupils become aware of their need for lexical terms and grammatical structures to express them. Then, the language lesson prior to the writing activity will spring from the pupils' demand and may prove a lot more motivating than any traditional lesson where language is introduced by the teacher for purposes which may seem very mysterious to the pupils.

Of course, when a video document is used as a springboard for ideas and interpretations, the purpose at that stage is not to reach an absolutely correct understanding of the document. The only reasons why some interpretations might not be accepted will be incoherence. The pupils will be expected to imagine a situation in keeping with the environment—cultural environment, atmosphere and so on—the document creates. The pupils will have to organise their ideas so that the readers understand them and enjoy reading them. This is what the actual writing task is all about.

Any type of document can be used to that purpose, provided, as *Les Instructions Officielles* in France recommend, it is not likely to shock the pupils. Obviously, the writing activity will be set according to the specificity of the document we have chosen. A passage from the morning news may not generate the same type of writing as the credits of a thriller which you may choose to discover either through not looking at the pictures or not listening to the soundtrack. There again, the approach will depend on the document itself. More often than not the video document entails certain types of writings and may not be well suited for others. It will be important to choose the type of writing which best corresponds to the document. Otherwise the task we would set would be just as artificial as those which are set at some exams.

Writing to Communicate

We insist on the fact that the pupils should write in order to be read. Together with giving a purpose and a meaning to the task, it makes it more challenging and more fun. Whereas writing is generally associated to assessing some type of work, to tests or essays which will be marked, in writing activities the focus is not on the mark but on the production of something readable. Because three people generally have more ideas than one person, group work will be particularly worth while for this

type of activity. Pupils then will have to decide on which ideas to keep and which to give up, on how to organise them, on language to express them and that will suppose negotiation and compromise that is to say authentic communication. They will communicate to write as well as write to communicate.

Writing is a process, which entails producing a draft, reading it to check, having it read and commented upon, then, reconsidering ideas and coherence, perhaps going deeper into some of its aspects and re-writing. That's why the pupils then will act as reading committees who will review the pieces their friends produced, write down any comments or questions they think appropriate. Thus, the writing activity will give way to a reading one. It is reading with a purpose, reading to communicate. This is to be followed by a re-writing session.

At that stage, teachers are readers too and give their own opinion on the work as such, not as teachers. Of course, they will give some hints to help the students correct what seems difficult to understand and they may note down any serious mistake(s) they think must definitely be corrected and decide to deal with those aspects of the language later on. In writing activities, what is expected is an up-to-standard production — the consistency of the type of text which the students, or the teacher, had decided upon — which is understandable and pleasant to read.

To make this writing task even more challenging and fun, the written productions should be either printed by a word processor or written on large sheets of paper, illustrated and put up on the walls so that not only the pupils in the class can read them but also all the pupils who have lessons in that classroom. Communication then goes beyond the limits of the class.

This kind of activity is certainly time-consuming but we really think it can help the pupils grasp what writing is about, learning and practising grammar in context, searching for appropriate lexical terms, in other words, learning the language.

Activities

Here are some examples of writing activities which we have experienced and we would like to share. Prior to everyone one of them, the pupils will have analysed the specificity of the type of text they are going to write as they will have to respect its basic writing rules.

Writing a newspaper article

Level: Intermediate/Advanced *Timing:* 3 hours

Video document: a very short excerpt from the news (one or two minutes).

Group work and class work

Step 1: The students watch an excerpt from the news, sound off, so that they can imagine what the topic may be. It will prove interesting to choose a document where the pictures are ambiguous enough to lead to various interpretations. The pupils first discuss what they have just watched in groups, then at class level and acquire the language.

Step 2: At group level again they decide about their version of the document and write the articles. The draft would be submitted to either another group or the teacher who act as 'editor in chief' and who, as such, comment upon it. The articles are given back to the group who makes the appropriate alterations. After re-writing, they are properly laid-out and displayed on the walls.

Step 3: The class works on the soundtrack. At that stage, the motivation for understanding will have been triggered and the oral comprehension task will be much easier.

Step 4 (optional): The task could be followed by a study of a written version of that piece of news the teacher may have found in the papers.

Variations: The same type of activity could lead the class to write headlines or to write the news bulletins the newsroom get from the different press agencies. In this case, the productions could be compared to the actual news bulletins one can access through Minitel in France or The Internet.

Writing a narrative

Level: Elementary/Intermediate/Advanced **Timing:** 4 hours

Video document: Any two-minute document will do provided the soundtrack is rich. The credits of movies (i.e. their introduction) or trailers seem particularly adapted.

Group work and class work

Activity: Writing the first page or the blurb of the novel the movie has been shot from. We have used the credits (sound only) of *Cry Freedom* as well as those of a BBC - Scotland production of *Witness for the Prosecution* starring Diana Rigg.

Step 1: Gathering ideas.

a) The students listen to the soundtrack of the credits which must be

mysterious enough to lead to different interpretations.

- b) In small groups (three seems to be a good number) they agree on what they've heard and try to make sense out of it.
- c) They confront their findings to those of the class and, thus, expand their vocabulary.
- d) They listen again to check.

Step 2: Writing task. In small groups, they write the first two or three paragraphs or the blurb of the novel the movie has been shot from.

Step 3: The drafts are read and commented upon by editorial committees (i.e; the other groups of pupils and / or the teacher)

Step 4: Each group re-write their text.

Step 5: The pieces of writing are properly laid out and edited on the computers of the school. They will be displayed on the walls of the classroom to be read by others.

Step 6: As working on one aspect only of a video document creates frustration, the class will work on the document as a whole to 'know' all about it.

Variations: The study of the soundtrack only , or perhaps of the whole of the credits could lead the pupils to imagine the type of film, to guess what is going to happen, the kind of public who will be interested in it and to write the review they might read in their favourite newspaper.

Dubbing a document

Level: Intermediate/Advanced **Timing:** 5 hours

Video document: A documentary which is not in English. It may be in the students' language or in another foreign language they learn at school. It could, for example, be a document they have studied in the German class. The students who learn German would tell those who do not what it is all about and the teacher would not be the one who knows everything.

In those documents there are a few interviews but the essential part of the soundtrack is the reporter's commentary on the subject.

Group work and class work

Activity: The task consists in writing a commentary to dub the document to sell it to a British TV channel. In this case, the writing task will be followed by an oral one. First the students will produce the script to dub the document and then they will actually record it on the soundtrack.

Step 1: The students work on pictures and soundtrack to a certain extent at least, depending on how important the latter is to understand the document and how close we wish the production to be to the original one - this is totally personal. Work is done as usual, first in small groups, then at class level to acquire language and finally back to the group who opt out for one interpretation of the document

Step 2: This part of the activity consists in writing the commentary, having it read and commented upon by the other groups and correcting it.

Step 3: Now the students should record their commentary on the soundtrack itself or on an audio-cassette, perhaps with the help of the English-speaking assistant.

Writing an informative text about an animal

Level: elementary to intermediate **Timing:** 3 hours

Video document: a five-minute documentary about an animal

Group work

Step 1: Groups of three pupils write a questionnaire about any animal: weight, size, food, mating season, endangered species, and so on. It is important that pupils should not know what animal. Give each group a different task. For instance Group 1 will write questions about the animal's physical characteristics while Group 2 will deal with food and habitat and Group 3 with the offspring.

Step 2: Pupils watch the video document and complete their part of the questionnaire. Completing the questionnaire may require several viewings.

The information not available in the video document may be searched for in other sources if the teacher or the pupils wish to write something comprehensive about the topic.

Step 3: The answers to the questionnaire are reformulated by the group into an

informative paragraph. The various paragraphs are then read and compared so as to avoid any repetition of information.

Variation: Instead of answering one part of the questionnaire pupils may be required to answer the whole questionnaire and then to write the whole text. This is more time consuming.

The approach we have just described can be used to write about all sorts of topics: places of interest, holiday places, as well as famous characters.

Writing subtitles

Level: upper intermediate to advanced *Timing:* two hours

Video document: a two -minute TV news item

Group work

Subtitles, because they have to be short in length and compact in meaning, because they disappear every so often are not easy to write and therefore their characteristics must be carefully analysed beforehand. However they offer a real challenge to both pupils and teacher.

Choose a two- minute news item with a well defined structure, so that it will be easily divided into four or five parts as the pupils will work in groups, each group being in charge of one part only of the document.

Step 1: The first part of the work involves comprehension of the document through the pictures, the soundtrack and anything written appearing on the screen. Everyone watches the whole document first. Then each group focuses on the part of the document it has been assigned, each member of the group concentrating on one aspect of the document, either pictures or soundtrack or things to be read. Discussion follows to make up the meaning of the part the group is responsible for. When this is done the class tries to reach an agreement as to the overall meaning of the news item.

Step 2: When the meaning of the news item has been made clear the teacher may set the writing task. Each group writes subtitles for a specific part of the document taking into account the facts that a) each subtitle consists in 2 lines of 5 words maximum; b) it has to convey the meaning of the spoken commentary whether this commentary matches the pictures on the screen or not.

Step 3: Once the subtitles have been completed the groups must compare their work and make sure there is no repetition of information, no overlapping. They must also ensure that the cohesion and coherence of the text as a whole have been respected. For instance it is important to avoid repeating the same noun over and over again when pronouns can be used. On the other hand there should be no doubt as to what each pronoun refers to. When this and any correction have been done the subtitles are ready to be printed on the tape.

Writing a letter of complaint and replying

Level: lower intermediate and intermediate *Timing:* three hours

Video document: a TV commercial boasting the qualities of the goods advertised is the most readily available video extract to be used for this activity.

We first got the idea of writing a letter of complaint when using Andrew Wilson's stage adaptation of *The Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde filmed for the CNDP (*Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique*, Paris). In this rendition, Mr. Otis, an American Minister who has just bought Canterville Hall, a haunted manor in Great Britain, keeps taking great pain to get rid of a blood stain using a supposedly powerful stain remover. To no avail. Given Mr. Otis's repeated but unsuccessful efforts writing a letter of complaint to the stain remover manufacturer was the obvious thing to do.

Step 1: Study the video extract and insist on the benefits or the positive results one can expect when using the product.

Step 2: Divide the class into customers and manufacturers. Only half the class is working on this writing activity at a time, the other half being set another kind of task.

- a) Customers write letters complaining about the inefficiency of the product and asking for some sort of compensation.
- b) Manufacturers read the letters and write replies which are then read by customers.

We insist that letters and replies be either hand-written on the right type of paper respecting a correct letter lay-out or word-processed so as to make the task as authentic as possible.

Another video document we have used for this activity: a TV news item in which English wine growers complained about EC rules as regards quality tag, wished their wines would be upgraded and demanded the government's help. (*Central News n° 4*. Oxford English Video)

Conclusion

These are a few examples of writing activities that we have experienced in our classes over the last few years. We have tried to make them part and parcel of our work, and not something that comes only as a test at the end of a series of lessons. We insist that these activities should be given as much authenticity as possible, authenticity implying such things as being printed, passed around or exhibited, read, commented upon and replied to by others. To reach these aims, video documents have been of great help. There is such a great variety of them as far as genres and topics are concerned. Contrary to more traditional texts they always appeal to pupils and this is to be taken into account when some arduous task such as writing is set by the teacher. New video documents are available every day and they can initiate any type of writing. Flexible, rich and modern they provide teachers with imaginative and challenging teaching activities.

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