9. How to Take the Pain out of Marking and Exams

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Abstract
This article explores some possibilities of avoiding the authoritarian and often punitive teacher-pupil and examiner-candidate relationships of traditional educational methods. The suggestions in this paper will lead us to reward our students for what they can do, and will also have some important implications for the way we organize our classes and mark our students' work. In helping the learners to become more aware of their strengths as well as their weaknesses, a teacher's role changes from that of informant and judge into one of guide and supporter. The days of the red pen may be coming to an end!

Why do we need to take a fresh look at the marking of writing?

Our traditional experience of writing in English as a foreign language has been characterized as follows:

* The student is asked to write a composition or essay either set by the teacher or from an exam paper on a topic in which neither of them may have any interest. It usually involves the creation of content out of the student's head.
* The purpose of the essay is for the student to show how good his or her English is (or is not!)
* The only reader of the essay will be the teacher.
* The teacher will then mark the essay to see how many grammar mistakes the student has made and cover the student's effort with red pen and a mark out of 20.
* The student receives the essay back. The first thing he or she will do is to look at the mark and feel either pleased or disappointed. The next thing will be to try and find out if this mark was better or worse than those of the other people in the class.
* The student will then put the essay away and probably never look at it again or even if he or she does, he or she will not know how to make it better next time.
* The teacher will feel fed up because he or she spent all that time

correcting the work and the student is probably not going to benefit from all this effort.
- The teacher will continue to feel fed up, because in the next essay that the student gives in, he or she will not noticeably have improved or taken on board any of the suggestions that the teacher made on the last essay.

We need to take another look at writing for several reasons:
- English is now most definitely an international language of communication. It is used every day all over the world to give and receive information in real-life contexts. We therefore need to consider what real-life contexts our students are going to find themselves in, both now and in the future, and make sure that we are equipping them with the skills to function in the international community. This means asking them to work with authentic text types such as letters, postcards, memos, greeting cards, faxes, notices and reports. Compositions have no place in the everyday world of communication – although this is not to say that creative writing does not have another valid role to fulfil.

As soon as we begin to look at writing as communication, it changes significantly some fundamental assumptions about what it is for. First and foremost it will have a **reader, who is not a teacher,** but someone who needs to understand **the message** we are sending to them through the writing. The first and most important question then becomes, "will the reader receive and understand the message?" So we are talking about language skill for a given purpose, which forces us to look at the **text as a whole and not just at sentence level.**
- The roles of student as composition writer and teacher as marker have always implied a judgemental and authoritarian relationship. As we come to the millennium, the whole question of the teacher-student relationship is being called into question. Teachers are no longer the knowers of information which only they can impart to their students. Learners are surrounded by knowledge on every subject these days through the media of the Internet, CD Roms, TV and video, and increasingly the teacher's role is not to impart knowledge but to help and guide students along a pathway through it. This is nowhere more true than in their exposure to English.

How can we make sure that we are producing learners who are confident about coping in English in the future?

It seems to me that in thinking about the production of writing for communicative purposes we have a golden opportunity to do this.

As soon as we begin to look at a piece of text from the reader's point of view, it can drastically change the emphasis as to what we consider to be important. It becomes immediately obvious that grammatical accuracy is not the most important criterion in making a message successful. The recipient of a thank-you card is much more interested in how effusive the writer is in his or her thanks than in whether the spelling and grammar is correct.

This putting of grammatical accuracy into its place is reflected in the CCSE marking criteria. At all levels it is only one of four criteria against which a piece of writing is judged and has equal weighting with others. It will be seen that at the first three levels, the effect on the reader is paramount and is reflected in such phrases as 'what candidates write is unambiguous, the intention of the writer is clear, the candidate may have laboured to say what they want to say'. It should also be pointed out that a "pass" is translated into a description or "profile" of what a learner has achieved and is not simply a number.

The joyful news in all this, especially for the traditionally less able or lower level learner, is that these vital bringers of the message – things like layout, functional language, and organisation of information – are much easier to understand and reproduce than perfect spellings and tenses ever were. Within a few lessons, even low level students can produce enough conventions of formal letter writing to impress a real-life recipient. Grammatical accuracy can then be improved within this framework of success rather than feeling like an Everest that has to be climbed before success can be achieved.

The second piece of good news is that this knowledge, once the learners have it, is within their power. If we lead them to an awareness of what is required for each text type and give them templates and conventions for each one, and if we describe their work in terms of what they can do rather than what mistakes they have made, they are much more able to set their own targets and be critical of and improve their own work, without having to rely on the teacher for an assessment.

Within this framework, we will examine an adaptation
of a technique called process writing.

Students work in small groups and are given a specific text type to work on, for example an informal letter. The writers choose a life partner from a selection of pictures on the wall, then have to compose a letter saying that they are leaving them for someone much more desirable and extol the virtues of this new person. After a few moments the teacher shouts "change" and the letters are passed one group to the left.

Before they continue writing, they must read what the previous group wrote and make corrections to any mistakes they can see. After a few moments the teacher shouts "change" again and so on until the letters are completed. *(Thanks to my colleague Gillie Cunningham for showing me this idea).*

When the letters are complete, they are passed on one more time. This probably means that students now have a letter in front of them that they have never seen before.

Once more they look for grammar mistakes, but this time students are also asked to take different coloured pens and look for certain features appropriate to that text type. For example, in the informal letter you can ask them to draw boxes round where they think the paragraphs should start and end and see if they are the same as the writer's paragraphs. They could put circles around words which link the text together or around all the functional language which tells the writer what is coming next (e.g. "I am sorry to have to tell you this but...") The teacher and/or the class can decide on which and how many of these specific textual features they wish to concentrate on in that lesson. Group writing has many positive features – not least the fact that the writing does not belong to anyone in particular so there is no comparison to be made about who is better or worse. In the completion of the letter they have read and focussed on a lot of language from different sources and corrected mistakes. They have worked with the notion of textual features and made decisions about them. It has relieved the teacher of a lot of marking and most of all, it has been fun.

Another idea *(from Ron White)* deals with the writing of individual students. Instead of correcting the writing, the teacher simply indicates in the margin what type of mistake the learner has made and where it is. The writing is given back and

the learners try to correct the mistakes for themselves – this often accounts for about 50 per cent! They then give in the essay again. This has not only forced the learners to appraise their own work but also allows the teacher to see much more easily where the real problems lie. The learners make a count of how many mistakes they have made and over several pieces of writing are able to see where their main weaknesses lie and what they need to work on most.

While teachers continue to have to work within constraining examination systems and school demands for marks as a way of evaluating learner competence, it may feel like an uphill struggle to take this radical approach to the teaching of writing. I hope, however, that the empowerment of our learners will be looked upon as a way forward. It makes learning and teaching more purposeful and positive for everyone, not only the traditional "high-achievers" and their teachers.

Annex
What makes a successful piece of communication
for the readers of these different text types?

Postcard	an address that the postman can read
Notice on a noticeboard	eye-catching layout clear facts
Thank you card	who it's from the degree of gratitude
Informal letter	friendly phrases and register clear requests or information about future contact clear understanding of what has happened to the writer since the last contact
Report	you can see immediately what it is about you can find the information you need quickly it's clear what is fact and what is opinion

Letter of complaint	clear what the person is complaining about clear how angry they are know what they want to do about it
A note pushed through the door	who's it from and that the facts are clear
Formal letter	the first paragraph tells you why the person is writing there is some clear indication of what will happen next

What, other than grammar, raises learners' awareness and will help them with their writing?

the need for a usable address	
appropriate layout	including headings underlining capital letters bullet points columns the placing of information on the page
functional language which tells the reader what you are going to say	e.g. ' I am writing to tell you that…' 'Guess what!' 'I regret to inform you that…' 'I can't tell you how grateful I am for…' 'Do you think you could….?'

linking words	however, on the other hand, although, since
the organisation of information	Are there conventions about what information goes where?
appropriate style and register	'Send me an application form as soon as you can.' 'I look forward to receiving an application form at your earliest convenience'.

How can we help to raise this awareness?
* letting them choose the types of texts they want to work on
* giving exposure to lots of examples of each text type
* comparing good and bad examples of different text types and discussing why
* giving students templates of model layouts for different text types
* prediction exercises from functional language stems 'What comes next?'
* asking students to rearrange texts which have been cut into strips
* ranking exercises – what are the most important elements of different text types?
* mechanical exercises using linking words
* comparisons of different registers of language for the same purpose e.g. asking for help formally and informally
* giving lots of writing practice in class where we can be used as a resource
* encouraging self and peer correction

Lynne Rushton is a teacher trainer at the Bell Language School in Saffron Walden, Essex, where she is concerned with learners at the primary, secondary and adult level. She is also a writer and examiner for the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. She is involved with KET, BEC (the new business English certificate), the Young Learner's examination and the Certificate in Communicative Skills in English. She has a particular interest in humanistic styles of learning and teaching which take pressure off learners and help them recognize and achieve their potential.

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