


### Writing 1: A product approach and features of written language: Unit 3 g)

Do you sometimes worry that your writing lessons are nothing more than practice? Are there features of written language that you feel that you are not focusing on? This lesson looks at some of those features and outlines a typical procedure for writing lessons.

#### Task 1 – Cassie’s exam class

**Cassie:** “I am teaching a Cambridge First Certificate class at the moment. I’ve never taught an exam class like this before. I’ve been giving my students lots of writing practice using old exam papers. However, they have told me that they want more on writing. We’re doing two practice writing tasks each week. I’m not sure what they mean.”



**Can you help Cassie? What do you think her students mean? Jot down your ideas and suggestions on a note pad, then look at the answer key below.** 

#### Task 1 Feedback

The students may be voicing their frustration at only practising writing and might want some kind of analysis of the genres they have to focus on in the FCE exam. While providing practice opportunities is important, this alone will not necessarily develop students’ skills in these areas, in the same way as merely practising grammar without providing any kind of clarification will not necessarily develop students’ grammar accuracy.

#### Key Skill

Written language has its own specific features and conventions. These will often differ from one language to another. It is useful for learners if you focus on these features in an explicit way when doing writing lessons.

#### Task 2 – Differences between written and spoken language



**Numbers 1 to 6 below are typical features of spoken language. Letters a to f are their counterparts in written language. Match the spoken and written features.**

Spoken features	Written features
1. When we speak, we use stress, intonation and pausing to highlight specific pieces of information and to help listeners understand what we are saying.	
2. Spoken language is spontaneous and is usually not recorded in any way.	
3. When people speak there is usually someone who is listening and can give feedback to the speaker.	
4. When people speak, their sentences are sometimes incomplete and they change their mind about how they will say something in the middle of a sentence.	
5. Speakers often use facial expression, gesture and body language to add meaning to what they are saying.	
6. When people speak, they plan and organise their language as they go and not a long time in advance.	

#### Features of Written Language

- a. In written language there is a greater expectation of accuracy in language features such as grammar, vocabulary and spelling.
- b. Writers tend to think about what they are going to write and how they are going to write it before they begin writing.
- c. Written language is usually fixed on the page so that people can return to the text as often as they like.
- d. When we write, we use punctuation to help signpost the message of written texts.
- e. Writers often never find out what readers think of their text. However, e-mail and texting are kinds of writing where writers will receive some response to their message.
- f. Paragraphing and layout are used in written language to make the message clearer.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

#### Key Skill

While it is true that writing requires more accurate use of language than speaking, grammatical accuracy is not the only feature of written language to focus on in the classroom. Nor is it a good idea to see written language as a collection of correct sentences. It is a good idea to see a piece of writing as a whole text with its own conventions.

Task 3 – Steps in a typical writing lesson



Letters a to i below show steps in a typical writing lesson. Put these steps into what you think is an appropriate order.

Steps in a Writing Lesson	Order
a. Students brainstorm ideas for their own text.	
b. The teacher checks understanding of the model text using some kind of comprehension task.	
c. Students write their final draft of the text.	
d. Students do an activity that aims to practise the highlighted written feature.	
e. The teacher provides a lead in to the topic of the model text.	
f. Students get feedback on the first draft from their peers or from the teacher.	
g. The teacher hands out the model text.	
h. Students write the first draft of their text.	
i. The teacher highlights one or two features of the model text (e.g. paragraphing, linking devices) by means of a discovery task.	

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

**Key Skill**

The suggested procedure above follows what is generally understood to be a ‘product approach’ to writing, in that the teacher aims to get the students to *produce* a piece of written text. This is not the only approach (see the related lesson on process writing), but it can be useful when teaching exam classes where students need to be able to deploy specific genres.

### Task 4 – Specific activities



Numbers 1 to 8 below describe some specific activities that teachers can use in the classroom to focus on features of written language. Sort these activities into the two categories in the box below, thinking about whether they focus on language accuracy, or on the text as a whole.

Focus on language accuracy	Focus on the text as a whole

#### Activities

1. Ask students to make a more complex sentence from two simple sentences using a linking device.
2. Get students to organise cut up parts of a model text so that it follows the correct format and layout.
3. Get students to think very clearly about who will read the text.
4. Ask students to organise a continuous stream of text into paragraphs.
5. Give students a text with spelling mistakes and ask them to identify and correct these. Set a time limit and allow limited dictionary support.
6. Ask students to think about why they are writing a particular text – what is its purpose?
7. Give students a text with no punctuation and ask them to add full stops, capital letters, commas etc.
8. Ask students to find out what different pronouns refer back or forward to in a text.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

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#### **Thinking about your teaching ...**

It is easy to think of the kind of texts that students need to be able to write when they are studying in exam classes. However, what about when they are studying general English at a lower level? Over a period of time, conduct an on-going needs analysis with students who are not in exam classes. Get them to tell you what kind of texts they feel they would like to write.

Note your conclusions in your *Teaching Log*.

#### **Taking it to the classroom ...**

The approach described in task 3 is only a suggested approach. It is also possible to start with the product and work backwards. You can ask your students to write a text without having read a model or example. Having done this, students could look at a model and notice differences between their first drafts and the model text. They could then re-write the first draft incorporating features they have noticed. This approach is similar to a task-based model of teaching and learning.

#### **Want to find out more ... ?**

Pages 323 - 342 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4<sup>th</sup> edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007) contain more ideas for focusing on both language accuracy and the whole text in writing lessons.

Pages 192 – 205 of *Learning Teaching (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005) include further reading on staging successful writing lessons.

#### **Related TaskBook lessons...**

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to writing lessons:

- **Unit 3 h) Writing 2: a Process approach** (*a useful follow-up to this lesson*)

**Answer Key**



**Task 2 – Feedback**

- 1) d
- 2) c
- 3) e
- 4) a
- 5) f
- 6) b

**Task 3 – Feedback**

- 1) e
- 2) g
- 3) b
- 4) i
- 5) d
- 6) a
- 7) h
- 8) f
- 9) c

**Task 4 – Feedback**

**Language accuracy: 1, 5, 7, 8**

**Whole text: 2, 3, 4, 6**