

## Letters and Journals: Notes from an EFL Writing Workshop

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In 1998 I taught a course on writing, an elective subject for second year students studying English literature at Bunkyo Junior Women's College. Because the students were unstreamed they ranged considerably in ability. One student - the beneficiary of a year's ESL study at the University of Hawaii - obtaining 530 in her highest TOEIC score; the lower level students scoring less than 300. Taniguchi (1994) has summarized the characteristics of students entering previous classes: 1. They "would most likely be at the sentence level and have difficulties with paragraphing and the rhetorical organization of English writing. 2. Although usually obedient in class and willing to work most would probably not have a great deal of time outside of class to do many written assignments. 3. It (would take) students time to adjust to the "culture" of the writing classroom, which is a workshop rather than a lecture, which means most would not be used to writing in class." Class size was small, officially fourteen students.

Having experimented with a number of different textbooks in the past I decided to try teaching without a textbook and instead base the course around a modular approach. Each "module" would introduce the students to a different genre of English writing and

would take three to four weeks to complete. This time would be divided into: 1. an introduction to the relevant genre and a study of written examples. 2. writing and peer review with a one on one conference with the teacher and 3. rewriting for final inclusion into a portfolio of work on which the final grade would be given. Parallel to this would be the obligation to maintain a journal and an ongoing correspondence with a foreign pen friend, the bulk of this writing occurring out of class time.

The decision to proceed without a textbook was not without its problems; a suitable text can act as a reference and provide a sense of direction for students and with carefully worked examples and exercises a good textbook is often better than anything a teacher can produce. Despite the adage that students learn “writing by writing” texts that use exercises such as sentence combining have been successful in Japan where students “are experienced in grammar recognition but have difficulty generating and using grammatical structures in free writing.”

My prior experiences with teaching text based courses is that too often the text takes over. I wanted to spend the year working with the students on a portfolio of written work. The students were entering the course after spending their first year in a variety of textbook based courses and I felt that working on written assignments better fitted their status as graduating students. This decision was reinforced when the majority of the students said that they would prefer to work without a textbook. The problem then became one of

deciding what material would be covered during the year.

Hedge (1988), in a text written for teachers, provides a useful summary of writing types. The primary distinction between personal writing and writing for public consumption is elaborated into six categories which provide a useful framework on which to design a writing class. Her categories are summarized below:

**Personal Writing:** This is writing for oneself and includes diaries and journals.

**Study writing:** This is writing for oneself that is used to facilitate studying. It includes such skills as making notes while reading and taking notes in lectures.

**Public writing:** This is writing as a member of the general public to organizations or institutions. It includes such activities as writing letters of enquiry, complaint, letters to the editor, form filling, and applications.

**Creative writing:** This includes writing such as poems, stories rhymes, and drama. This writing can be either be public or private

**Social writing:** This is a category which includes all the writing that establishes and maintains social relationships.

Institutional writing: This is writing in the workplace that is undertaken in a professional role.

A table makes these distinctions clear.

Types of writing

Personal writing	Public writing	Creative writing
diaries journals shopping lists reminders for oneself packing lists addresses recipes	letters of-enquiry -complaint -request form filling applications (for memberships)	poems stories rhymes drama songs autobiography
Social writing	Study writing	Institutional writing
letters invitations notes-of condolence -of thanks -of congratulations cablegrams telephone messages instructions-to friends -to family	making notes while reading taking notes from lectures making a card index summaries synopses reviews reports of-experiments -workshops -visits essays bibliographies	agendas posters minutes instructions memoranda speeches reports applications reviews curriculum vitae contracts specifications business letters note-making public notices (doctors and other advertisements professionals)

Using Hedge's categories as a reference I attempted to cover a variety of writing types that would be relevant and interesting to the students. During the year the class studied the following: 1. Expository writing which was used as the basis for 2. Speech making. 3. Advertising and writing a mini drama. 4. The short story. 5. An autobiography. 6. An interview 7. Journals. 8. Letter writing which included corresponding with a foreign pen friend, writing business letters, and writing to a newspaper.

## The Journal

*Kokoro ni utsuriyuku yoshinashigoto o kakisukureba* (Follow the natural flow of your thinking and write whatever comes to mind....)<sup>1</sup>  
Yoshida, Kenko. *Tsurezuregusa* (Kamakura, 14 century)

Journals are popular in the EFL classroom because they give the students practise in writing fluently without the worry of making mistakes. As Lewitt and Houser explain in *Movable Text*, a course book that devotes one semester to Journal keeping, “A journal is like a practice ground: it is where you can make mistakes and learn from them.” Journals also give students opportunities to reinforce words and idioms from their studies by recycling them. Unlike diaries that tend “to focus on activities and events.... a journal gives more attention to thoughts, feelings, and ideas.”

Casanave (1993) in a study of student responses to journal writing found that students found this writing to be beneficial. Amongst the benefits mentioned were being able to write in English directly without the necessity of translation, a new found confidence in using English, and the use of increasingly complex sentence structure.

Many texts stress that journals are a form of private writing shared between the student and the teacher. The student guide in Lewitt and Houser’s text explains that “besides yourself, only your teacher will see your journal and everything in it is completely confidential” I believe however that students benefit from seeing and commenting on each others work as this provides a both a larger

audience and valuable reading practise. At the beginning of the course journal writing was carried out in pairs, students swapping journals weekly while I added comments fortnightly. Unfortunately the logistics of this system proved difficult maintain so in the second semester journals were exchanged on an individual basis with me.

Some teachers prefer that students be free to choose their journal topics, arguing that students will be more engaged in writing about topics of their own choosing. Deaux (1993), a teacher who has worked extensively with journals, suggests that the result is more likely to be confusion: “The assignment which appears to offer unlimited choice really offers almost no choice at all. The students do not know where to begin, what voice to assume, what purpose to attempt to achieve, even what audience to address.” His solution is to provide examples from Japanese literature such as *Makura no Soshi* (The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon), Basho’s travel diaries, and the I novels (*shi shosetsu*) of Taisho and Showa fiction. As well as following some of these suggestions I also assigned a variety of topics which students were free to adopt if they wanted to. Without guide lines students tended to produce diaries:

Today I succeeded in the last skill  
But I broke down and cried.  
Because when I rode with man’s teacher  
I was said to sarcastic about my driving.  
I know ability myself,  
It’s not what he said but how he said it that made me angry.

The scene still comes to mind. I am very mortify.

But I will overcome the difficulties.

M. writing about driving school

Sometimes however students commented (without prompting) on things that mattered to them:

In Japan we have many tests. It is a pity we study English only for tests. I want to speak English but at school we study to pass examinations. The school system in Japan should be changed don't you think?

N. writing about language learning

Journals were assessed on quantity and prolific students wrote over 40 pages during the year. Unfortunately I could discern little increase in the quality of entries during the year. The primary advantage seemed to be that reading the journals enabled me to see my students as real people rather than anonymous faces in the classroom and because of this the tone of the classes was improved.

### Letter Writing

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,  
Letters of joy from girl and boy,  
Receipted bills and invitations  
To inspect new stock or visit relations,  
And applications for situations  
And timid lovers' declarations

and gossip, gossip from all the nations... (W. H. Auden)<sup>2</sup>

As well as writing business letters and a letter to the editor of a newspaper students were also expected to correspond with a foreign pen friend. This would enable students to use their written English to communicate; give a practical demonstration of the international nature of the English language; give students insight into foreign culture; and for some provide an introduction to a lifelong foreign friend.

Addresses were obtained through International Youth Services (IYS)<sup>3</sup>. This is a 47 year old organization, based in Finland, that specializes in arranging “foreign pen friends for school children and students” IYS can potentially introduce correspondents from about 120 countries; unfortunately the number of potential partners in the 17-20 year age group is somewhat limited.

Because I wanted the students to write to a diverse range of countries and because I wanted to emphasize the international nature of English I deliberately restricted the range of countries that the students could choose from. Country names were each typed onto pieces of paper which were mixed and placed in a box. Students then drew six countries and from these chose the one from which they would like a pen friend. After that it was a simple matter of filling out the forms.

E-mail would provide an alternative method of correspondence



and there are a growing number of sites dedicated to providing EFL students with key pals<sup>4</sup>. Despite the excellent computer facilities on campus I decided to use letters. Traditional letter writing is more of an act of literature than e-mail which exists as a hybrid, half letter and half telephone call. Letter writing also meant that students could correspond with people who are not part of the on-line world. E-mail produces little that is visually exciting and I wanted the students to share their letters in class.

It was originally intended that copies of the students' replies would form part of their portfolio. Unfortunately only four class members were able to maintain correspondence throughout the year which necessitated further finding of pen friends. The letters that were received however together with their enclosed items proved highly motivating. Many students asked for further pen friends and introduced the service to their friends so that in total about sixty addresses were circulated throughout the college. I am looking forward to working with letters again and, because letters can be slow, perhaps using e-mail as well.

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## References

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## Notes

1. Quotation from: Takahashi, Y. (1993). Journal Writing for Japanese Students: What Do They Write and What Do They Learn? *Journal Writing: Pedagogical Perspectives* (pp. 78-86) Keio University, SFC
2. Quotation from: Burbidge, N., Gray, P., Levy, S. & Rinvolutri, M. (1996). *Letters*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press
3. The address for IYS is: IYS/ PB125 FIN 20101 / Turku / Finland. Their web site is <<http://www.iys.fi>>
4. For example Dave Sperling's ESL Cafe <<http://www.eslcafe.com>> or The Comenius Group Site <<http://www.comenius.com/keypal/index/.html>>. Typing the word "key pal" into a search engine such as Yahoo! reveals hundreds more.