

Developing Task-based Writing with Adolescent EFL Students

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Introduction

Writing is a social act. Even when writers are English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in a language classroom context, their texts always reflect their ability to solve a rhetoric problem, and their awareness of their own communicative goals, of the reader, and of the writing context. (Atkinson, 2003).

Consequently, the text produced by EFL writers is always, as in any other writing situation, the product of a socio-cognitive process which requires complex cognitive abilities, as well as linguistic and cultural competence (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Johns, 1997).

This text describes a learning sequence designed for an English as a foreign language class of Portuguese ninth graders, with five years of EFL. The learning sequence is planned according to the principles of task-based learning methodologies, in a communicative language teaching approach.

Writing a Letter Asking for Advice

In order to write a letter in English students have to be able to activate:

- their knowledge of the specific genre configurations of the letter, starting with their representations of the letter structure in their own native language;
- their textual competence in foreign language (knowledge of cohesion and awareness of aspects that contribute to textual coherence);
- specific language related to topic (vocabulary);
- their communicative intentions, and
- the linguistic and the sociocultural profile of their readers.

The task here described requires the students to discuss multicultural patterns of interactive relationships among teenagers. Students are challenged to work collaboratively as well as individually. They are asked to think of a problematic situation concerning interactive relationships among teenagers and to write letters asking for and giving advice to help solve a problem.

Adolescent students are usually concerned with their relationships with their peers, as well as with the way their self-image is portrayed in these relationships.

Portuguese adolescents, due to the high cultural significance they give to social interactions, value the ability to communicate with others, particularly with boys and girls of their own age. They also have a tendency to more easily rely on their peers' advice rather than on adults' advice whenever relationship problems occur.

The discussion of their eventual interactive problems in English, rather than in their native language, might facilitate the approach to the topic by means of the emotional distance that the foreign language provides as a communicative tool.

The critical, unprejudiced analysis of this fact requires the teacher to assume a non-traditional role in classroom, which implies

his/her ability to problematize and to facilitate collaborative knowledge construction.

The knowledge of the sociocultural needs of the students will help the teacher to be able to challenge the students and to promote their involvement with the task presented – Writing a letter asking for/giving advice.

Negotiation of the Task

The occurrence of negotiation between the teacher and the students is one of the characteristics of the collaborative language learning process in a communicative language classroom. It provides the opportunity for students to interact with their teachers and with their peers, and, at the same time, it helps to set the pedagogical climate for the development of the task, which requires the active involvement of students.

The teacher might approach the task by questioning the students about the interactive pattern of the relationship between teenage boys and girls:

- how different these relationships are from the past;
- the roles of boys and girls in interactive relationships;
- the eventual problems that occur in the relationships.

After the introduction of the topic -- the need to ask for advice through writing--, the teacher highlights the advantages of the written text compared to the verbal oral interaction. The advantages are:

- it gives the author the possibility to specifically focus on the problem, without the need to supply extra personal information, usually shared with a friendly advisor on a conversation;
- it protects the identity of the writer, by allowing the use of an invented name;
- it promotes the chance of receiving a more objective suggestion for the solution of the problem because the advisor ignores the real identity of the writer.

Assigning Roles

A clear understanding of the role students are expected to perform in the classroom facilitates their own engagement with the activities they are required to do. In this case, students are asked to work in pairs, while they perform the roles of adolescents who ask for and who give advice on the subject of conflicting relationships.

Each pair of students thinks of a relationship problem that might occur among teenage friends (boys and girls). They are then asked to invent the character, to set the setting and the context of the conflict.

Once the letters are written, they are exchanged with other pairs of students in class, who then have to give advice on how to solve the problem described in the letter they receive.

Each pair consequently has to write one letter asking for advice and another letter giving advice. This way, all the students have the chance to try both roles.

Exposing Students to Similar Texts

The development of the ability to write a particular genre requires the learners to be given the opportunity to contact with texts that are examples of that same genre. Through the exposure to similar texts students can notice the specific configurations of that genre. They can also activate their memory of previous reading and/or writing experiences of texts similar to the one they are being challenged to produce.

In this task, in order to give the students that opportunity, the teacher introduces the students to the existence of Dear Abby's advice letters, and contextualizes the cultural and the social role of that particular letter writing.

Students are then given examples of letters written to Abby in different times - today and in the 50's, for example. Still in pair-work, they are asked to critically read the letters and Abby's answers, reflecting on the cultural referents of boys and girls' relationships in different times and in different cultural contexts.

A list of reading-comprehension questions might help the students to focus on relevant information.

Genre Specifications

Departing from the students' knowledge of the letter structure in their own language and culture, the teacher draws the students' attention to the structure of the Dear Abby's asking for advice letter.

The students attend to the organization of the text while they focus on: who the writer is, the description of the problem (settings, characters, conflict, etc.), and the communicative function of opening and closing paragraphs. Students are also helped to focus on the linguistic features of the written texts (the register and style used by the authors).

These activities of textual analysis should be accomplished with the help of supportive pedagogical materials, namely worksheets that might include questions concerning the use of specific vocabulary, language structures, cohesive devices, etc.

Writing the Letter

The writing process begins with a time to think about the rhetorical situation (Who writes to whom, why and what for? How?). Students are asked to think of reasons why the character they invented (a teenager just like them) would write a letter asking for Abby's advice. Afterwards, students have some time to plan their text in accordance with the genre specifications of the advice letter, included in the worksheet handed out by the teacher.

Students write their letter with the help of English language dictionaries.

Revising and Rewriting

Students are expected to revise each sentence and each paragraph of their text, prior to the delivery of the letter to the other students.

The revision and the rewriting activities might be supported by another worksheet handed out by the teacher, in which students are reminded of common problems in the use of English syntactic rules (subject-verb agreement, connectors, 3rd person verb flexion, etc.).

Exchanging Letters and Roles

When students feel that their letter is ready to be sent to the reader, the teacher exchanges the letters among students in the class.

Assuming their roles of readers and advisors, the students are now asked to give proper attention to the problems described in the letter they received and to write a short advice for their solution.

The writing process is once again initiated and students have to plan, to write and to revise their advice before it is finally sent back to the students who wrote the letter asking for advice.

Closing the Learning Sequence

The sequence is closed with a time for the discussion of the problems presented, and also for the discussion of the suggestions given for their solution. This oral activity might benefit from the help of the teacher in reminding the students of the language used to express personal opinion, as well as of the language used to agree/disagree with the opinion of others. Once again,

students have the opportunity to discuss their views and interpretations of the facts and the reasons associated with interactive conflict among teenagers.

Concluding Remarks

This learning sequence has been developed with a real class of EFL portuguese 9th grade students, with five years of English. It has contributed to the integrative development of the language competence of the students to whom it was designed, since it focused on the use of English to read, to speak and to write. All the language activities were grounded on the knowledge of the students' cultural background and psychological needs. The task was also designed in accordance with methodological principles of the communicative language teaching approach: it provided time for negotiation between the teacher and the students, and among the students themselves; it included real communicative language activities that required the students to interact meaningfully; it allowed the students to think about topics that interest them and also to share their opinions on these same topics. The task described here has also given the students the opportunity to develop their awareness of the target culture, by giving them the opportunity to critically analyze their beliefs and behaviors and to infer the beliefs that underlie the social behaviors of others.

References

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