

FLOW

Foreign
Language
Opportunities
in Writing

Edited by
Jan Majer and Łukasz Salski

Katarzyna Chojnacka and Łukasz Salski
University of Łódź

AUTHENTIC WRITING IN THE (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) CLASSROOM – CONTRADICTION OR DOABLE?

Abstract

Writing practice does not have to be useless and boring. It can even serve wider educational goals, sensitizing students to social and political problems. This paper shows how Amnesty International Urgent Action Letters can be used to make classroom writing practice focused and meaningful. At the same time, writing tasks designed around Urgent Actions can provide students with valuable examination practice. Such tasks can show students that writing tasks, as well as writing itself, can be useful in modern world.

1. Introduction

Boring, meaningless, difficult and unauthentic – these labels show what majority of students think about writing. Whether in their mother tongue or a foreign language, writing is a complex skill that demands hard work and commitment. On top of that, writing done for practice purposes may also seem artificial: “The purpose of writing which is produced in a school or institutional setting [...] is unfortunately sometimes little more than to exercise or demonstrate certain language skills, or – in some EFL contexts – to reinforce the learning of the language itself” (White and Arndt, 1994: 49). White and Arndt also compare the classroom writing with normal situation of writing: “[i]n the world outside the classroom, people who commit their thoughts to written language usually have a compelling purpose for doing so.” What can, therefore, teachers do to bring classroom writing closer to real-life language use? What writing practices can give students a sense of purposeful practice and meaningful communication? This paper suggests how Amnesty International Urgent Actions letters can be used to provide EFL students with meaningful writing practice.

2. Purpose, audience, voice

Experts do not leave teachers' questions and doubts unanswered. They stress that writing tasks should specify a purpose and an audience for the text students are to write. For example, Hedge (2005: 22) writes that "it is a sense of audience that facilitates communication," and Arndt and White (1994: 49) stress that "part of our responsibility as teachers of writing is to make students aware of the central role of a writer's purpose, and to assign writing tasks where the purpose is relevant and useful in terms of our students' needs and interests." Although the importance of having a clear purpose in any writing activity seems self-evident, EFL practice has frequently seen writing tasks which, while focusing on content or form of texts, appear to disregard the need for communicative value of language practice.

To make writing practice meaningful, tasks should also specify audience, i.e. people or institutions that students would be potentially writing to. Even if the audience given in task is only hypothetical, and in reality the only reader is the teacher, making the intended reader of the text explicitly clear gives student writers necessary information about the text they are about to write: it allows them to use a given register and text format, as well as make assumptions about the readers' background and the schemata they will rely on when receiving the text. As Williams (2005: 36) explains "[i]t is beneficial for L2 writers to move beyond their classrooms in conceptualizing their audience. [...] It may not always be possible to have learners write for an actual audience outside the classroom, but there are ways to get writers accustomed to considering the needs of their audience." Even though Elbow (2000: 96) admits that writing for oneself, private writing without focus on audience, gives an opportunity to gather ideas and refine a point of view, he stresses that ultimately it crucial to focus on audience and "revise carefully to adjust [...] words and thoughts to our intended audience." In his famous book, *Writing with Power*, Elbow (1993: 38) addresses the issue of audience in a very expressive way:

When you establish in your head a good relationship with your audience, suddenly your writing runs strong and clear. You can find words and they are right. You are looking readers in the eye and directing your words right to the center of their brains, not staring at their shoes or mumbling distractedly as you stare at the ceiling. When this works, everything clicks.

To a large extent, the requirement of writing for a specific audience brings a writing task closer to real-life communication.

Another concept related to audience and purpose is voice; a term which, with reference to writing, has five different meanings (Elbow, 2000: 193-210). First, the physical sounds in the text. Although written texts are silent, as we read them – even silently – we may move our lips or project the imaginary sound to our listening capacities. Voice can also be understood as dramatic presence of the character or the author in a text: readers subconsciously tend to identify the personality behind the voice they hear in text. Third, *voice*, may refer to a specific and recognizable style, which everyone develops in writing as in any other behavior. In the sense of “having a voice,” *voice* equals authority: writing is not only about producing accurate and well-composed texts, but also about speaking one’s mind and expressing opinions with power and standing by them. Finally, *resonant voice* is the writer’s presence in text, ability to be oneself in the text: expressing personal opinions, taking a stance. Elbow explains that “[one] of the advantages that writing has over speech – and why writing provides a rich site for resonant voice or presence – is that writing has always served as a crucial place for trying out parts of the self or unconscious that have been hidden or neglected or underdeveloped” (208). Bearing this observation in mind, through written assignments composition instructors, or EFL teachers, can contribute to their students’ self-discovery and personal growth. Again, most school writing tasks fail to take advantage of this opportunity.

As the central role of purpose and the need of audience is emphasized, teachers do their best to provide their students with meaningful tasks but sometimes it seems an unattainable goal. For example, because high school students are focused mainly on their school-leaving exam, and realistic communication situations come on the second place for them. School writing, as has been said, is too often deprived of voice; this is probably especially true about foreign language writing, which usually aims at formal accuracy, while in writing in their native language, e.g. about literature, students are more often expected to express their ideas. Moreover, even though exam tasks are intended to reflect real-life communication, young people often perceive them as artificial; for example, since they do not normally write letters in their native language, the letter remains within the context of language practice, rather than language use. Clearly, tasks offering a combination of authentic language use and exam writing practice would be a recommended solution. Using Amnesty International Urgent Actions may be a way of incorporate more authenticity into EFL writing practice.

3. Urgent Actions

Amnesty International is a world-wide movement of people campaigning for human rights. Their main activity is writing letters defending individuals whose human rights have been violated. As well as sending supporting words to oppressed people. Amnesty International encourages its supporters to write:

1. Formal letters (Letters and emails to heads of states, ministers, politicians who can change the situation of a person whose human rights have been violated)
2. Informal forms (postcards, emails, letters to send support to people for the rights of whom they are fighting).

Urgent Actions can be easily used in EFL context, for example while preparing students to Matura Exam writing section. The requirements of Matura Formal Letter and Urgent Action are similar:

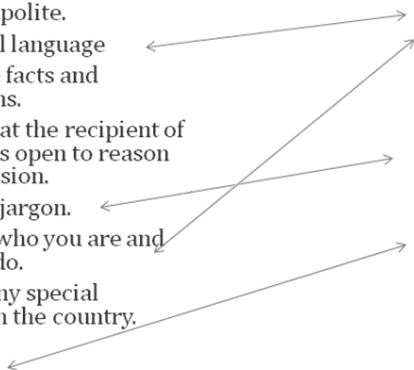
Formal Letters

Urgent Actions Letters

- ▶ Always be polite.
- ▶ Use official language
- ▶ Follow the facts and instructions.
- ▶ Assume that the recipient of the letter is open to reason and discussion.
- ▶ Never use jargon.
- ▶ Tell them who you are and what you do.
- ▶ Mention any special interests in the country.
- ▶ Be brief.

Matura letters

- ▶ Use official language.
- ▶ State why you are writing.
- ▶ Use complex phrases, passive voice and linking words.
- ▶ Don't use colloquial language.
- ▶ Write from 120 to 150 words.
- ▶ Plan your letter well.
- ▶ Start and end your letter with appropriate expressions.



As can be seen above, some of the guidelines for Urgent Actions Letters are parallel (marked by blue arrows) with the advice for formal letter exam writing (Gryca and Sosnowska, 2004). Others complement each other to make up a full list of requirements EFL teachers may possibly have. Students are expected to use appropriate and correct structures, to include adequate information, show awareness of their audience, specify their purpose for writing, organize and write concisely, maintain characteristic features of the genre. Urgent Action guidelines add the element of voice to this list. When writing Urgent Action letters,

students are themselves: they introduce themselves and stand for their arguments. This even more obvious with informal forms, as apart from the words of support an activist is free to write whatever we would wish to say. It is always an uplifting moment for an oppressed person to know that there is someone who actually cares. Of course what is then heard is the writer's *voice*.

It goes without saying that students will not be asked to write an Urgent Action letter during their Matura Exam, but by writing such letters they learn to write letters as efficiently as relying on standard exam practice tasks. The additional gain is that the same effect will be achieved in a more meaningful context. Because Urgent Actions have a specified recipient of the letter, and give students a clear sense of purpose for their writing, they also appeal to their voice. In such a real communicative context the students are more involved and motivated to write. Moreover, they have a sense of doing something important: letters written by Amnesty International supporters are proved to be effective, as there are many cases of the situations being improved.

4. Sample task and text

To ensure closer correspondence between Urgent Actions and the final school examination, or other EFL context, teachers can easily design appropriate tasks, modeled on the target format. In this way they maintain the educational value of the task (and development of the students' voice), as well as authenticity of the context, at the same time ensuring exam-focused practice. For example, a Matura task based on Urgent Action could look as follows:

Recently you have found out about the case of Konstantina Kuneva, a Greek trade union leader, who was attacked in on December 22, 2008. After acid was thrown in her face, Kuneva lost sight, and her face and throat were severely burnt. In June 2009 investigation of her case was closed even though the attackers have not been identified. Write a letter to Foreign Affairs Minister of the Director of Prosecutor's Office of the First Instance, Courts of Athens, Greece, asking for immediate action in Kuneva's case. In your letter:

1. Write how did you find out about Kuneva and express your concern,
2. State who you are and what country you are from,
3. Write that you think, Kuneva's attacker should be identified and punished, and state why you think so,
4. Kindly request immediate action.

In this way a real Urgent Action case serves as context for a writing practice which follows the examination format. Students are requested to include four pieces of information in response to the given situation. Since according to the exam evaluation criteria they are given points for including each item, it is also possible to evaluate their work in this task exactly in the same way. This way students can receive valuable feedback on their performance in an exam task.

Below is a sample student response to the task. In her letter the student completes the task; she uses appropriate and correct language, but also uses her voice to achieve her purpose writing for a specific reader. It is worth notice that she had chosen the case to support by herself – it is clear she used her own reason, criteria, sense of justice, and – simply – human feelings to write a text that she identifies with.

171 [redacted]
91-008 Lodz
Poland
14th December 2009

Director of Prosecutor's
Office of the First Instance
Courts of Athens
Building No. 16
Prin Sholi Evelpidon
Athens 10167
Greece

Your Honor,

My name is Monika. I am 16 years old. I am Polish and I live in Lodz. I am student of a vocational secondary school. Our English teacher told us, during a lesson, about Amnesty International and people whose rights are violated.

I am especially concerned about Konstantina Kuznera - a trade union leader who had acid thrown in her face in Athens on 22nd December 2008.

As far as I know, in June 2009 the investigative judge, assigned to the case, decided to end the investigation, even though the perpetrators had not been identified.

I urge that the investigation into the attack on Konstantina Kuznera should be continued leading to the perpetrators being brought to justice. I also strongly insist that other human rights defenders and trade union members in your country should be protected from similar attacks. In my opinion rights should be respected.

Thank you for looking into this matter. Please let me know when the perpetrators have been detained.

Yours sincerely,
Monika [redacted]

Even though the level of accuracy suggests that the author of the letter may have received considerable assistance or relied on a model, she did engage in

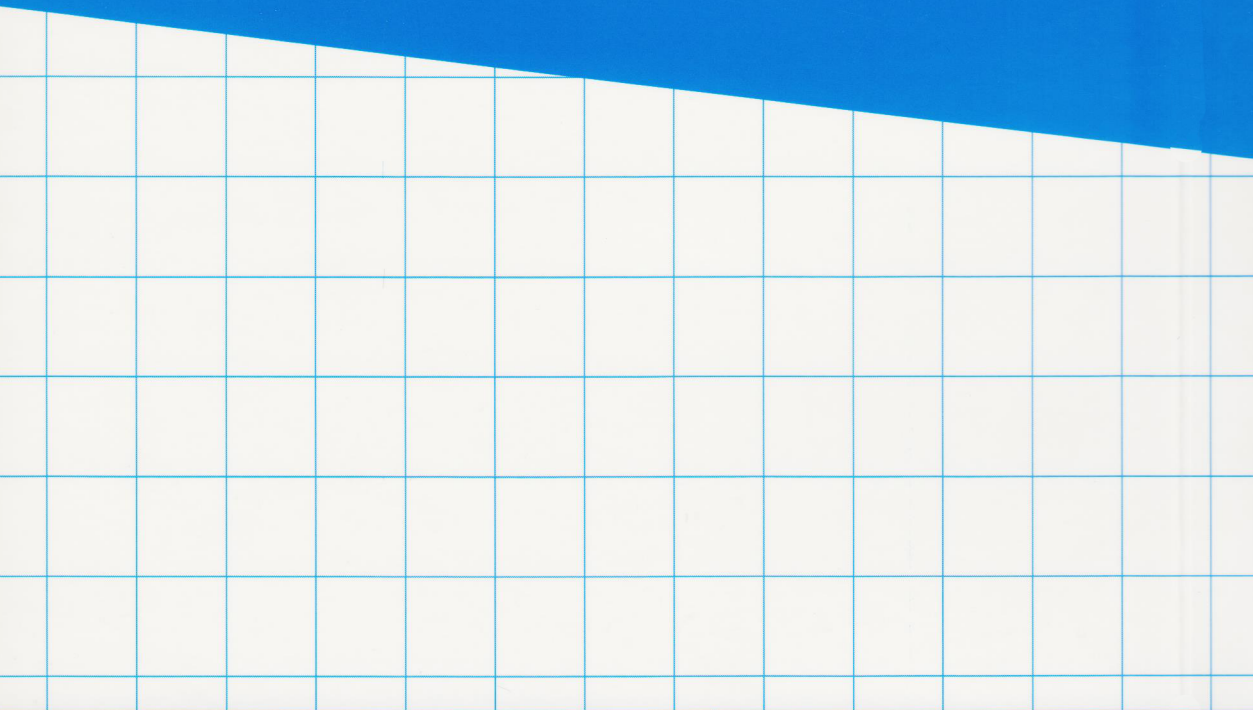
writing the letter, which brought tangible results in the form of a letter in which she used English to make her voice audible to a real audience. Such writing is authentic, meaningful, and motivating.

5. Conclusion

Urgent Action letters are one of the means of introducing more authenticity to an EFL classroom, they serve not only revising vocabulary or grammar, but also have communicative value. They may be interesting for students, and give them an opportunity to help someone. When dealing with formalized language, it is also relatively easy to devise a graded task suitable for varied levels of language competence simply by providing different students with different amounts of prefabrication in letter writing. Neither is it particularly difficult to build an integrated skills lesson leading up to Urgent Action letters, as reading texts on all the current actions are available on the Amnesty International website, and discussions on such topics are bound to stimulate teenage students. On the other hand, apart from language practice, using Amnesty International Urgent Action letter writing can bring wider educational effects: it helps students develop their voice and makes them aware of and sensitive to problems of human rights worldwide. In this way, writing practice stops being a tedious chore, and becomes – as Elbow (1998) postulated – a true act of giving.

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