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# Using YouTube to Encourage Authentic Writing in EFL Classrooms

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Teaching writing to learners of English as Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) is one of the most challenging and difficult tasks for the language teacher. Such difficulty is due to a composite of different factors among which the very complex nature of the writing skill in and of itself is central. Writing imposes huge cognitive, linguistic, and social demands to both native speakers of English and EFL learners, but the demands are truly higher for the latter group (Brown, 2004; Kern, 2000; Nunan, 1999). Another factor lies within the practical conditions in which teaching takes place. EFL classrooms often offer learners limited opportunities to experience authentic writing. In recent years, a number of teachers and researchers in ESL and EFL maintain that the addition of Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) represents an option that may diminish such limitation to a significant extent (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Ward, 2004; Wu, 2006; Wu & Hiltz, 2004; Zeinstejer, 2008). Most notably, a strong case has been made in favor of distribution lists or online forums, wikis, and blogs. This argument appears to have motivated many EFL teachers to integrate ICTs into their classes. The goal of this article is to include another accessible, familiar, and easy-to-use resource to the ones listed above: YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>).

YouTube (YT) has gained enormous popularity in a relatively short time. This online video-sharing social network has been enthusiastically welcomed by EFL teachers because of its potential to provide countless hours of exposure to spoken English (Godwin-Jones, 2007). By browsing videos in YT, teachers and learners can find videos on almost any topic (politics, science, math), spoken in different varieties of the language (standard, foreign accented, etc.) and at different levels of difficulty. However, the potential of YT as a resource to aid EFL writing seems to have been overlooked. This article provides a pedagogical rationale for the use of YT as a resource to develop writing skills along with descriptions of different teaching implementations based on that rationale.

## **The Role of Internet Communication Technologies in Providing Contexts for Authentic Writing**

The term *authenticity* has been surrounded by both praise and controversy in the TEFL literature. It has been interpreted at the level of input as the use of samples of written or spoken language that were produced in the course of real and meaningful

communication and not for pedagogical purposes (Nunan, 1999). Such view has been questioned on the grounds that this kind of input is all too often incomprehensible for the beginner and intermediate learner (Doughty & Long, 2003; Krashen, 1982). Another perspective of authenticity is at the level of task. Nunan (1989) made the important distinction between everyday or real-word tasks and pedagogical tasks (i.e. tasks performed in the classroom for instructional purposes). At the rise of task-based instruction, Nunan claimed that the effectiveness of pedagogical tasks in language learning depended largely on the extent they resembled real-world tasks. Yet for some authors, reproducing authentic tasks under the artificial circumstances of the classroom is too ambitious and maybe unattainable (Widdowson, 1998). In response to these observations, Ellis (2003) proposed a further distinction of authenticity: situational and interactional. A task is situationally authentic to the extent to which it mimics real-world language-use situations (such as role playing a customer-waiter exchange). A task, on the other hand, that elicits language behaviors (not situations) that are likely to be used to carry out communicative goals in the real world is interactionally authentic although the task in itself is unlikely to occur outside the classroom. An example of this kind of task would be an information gap task in which two participants compare two images without seeing their partner's image. These two notions, Ellis adds, are not two separate distinctive concepts but rather opposite ends in a pedagogical continuum in the curriculum. Finally, Widdowson (1978, 1998) considers that language that is extracted from its original situational and pragmatic context to be reproduced in the classroom is indeed genuine, but not authentic. Authenticity in this view is not an all-or-nothing inherent property of the text, but a relative one that depends on the social and cultural connections between the speaker or writer and the audience (listener or reader). Because genuine texts are not intended for the learner and thus make the learner feel socially and culturally foreign to the message of the text, there would not be the same involvement between author, text, and audience that distinguishes authentic communication (Widdowson, 1978, 1998).

These views of authenticity provide a framework for defining authentic writing. Thus, writing that is produced by learners in the classroom should be done under similar conditions to those faced by writers in the real world and include a meaningful level of involvement among the learner-writer, the message (text), and the intended audience. By reviewing recent literature on ESL/EFL (Brown, 2004; Cumming, Cantor, Powers, Santos, & Taylor, 2000; Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997; Kern, 2000), I suggest there are three essential features that define authentic writing when an emphasis is placed upon communication.

- *Authentic writing occurs for a communicative purpose.* The writer usually has an intention of communicating something. The writer might be motivated out of sheer emotion (as in the case of poetry, for instance) or out of a social requirement or need.

For most people, the second motivation is the most common. Flower and Hayes (1981) called this often external need the “rhetorical problem.”

- *Authentic writing is intended for an audience.* As writers have something to express, they usually need to express that something to someone else. The audience might be close and small (an email to a friend) or distant and large (an article in a refereed journal) (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997). The intended audience determines the choice of key elements of discourse and style as well as imposes higher or lower demands on clarity and specificity (Toh, 2005).
- *Authentic writing is usually integrated with other receptive skills.* Most cognitive views of writing seem to view writing as an isolated process in which begins with the writer’s previous knowledge and perspectives about the world. Nevertheless, most writing, and particularly academic/professional writing, begins with knowledge the writer has obtained and processed from other sources (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Cumming et al., 2000). Frequently, this integration takes place between reading and writing as the writer takes other written texts as sources of information (Asención, 2004; Grabe, 2001; Hirvela, 2004). However, and given the rapid development of digital and electronic audiovisual media, writing is now frequently integrated with listening as well (Pino-Silva, 2007). Based on this, Cumming et al. (2005) have coined the term *integrated writing* to encompass both reading-to-write and listening-to-write tasks.

Many teaching practices in EFL writing fail to provide these features in their classrooms. Most often, teachers assign the topic, purpose, and a hypothetical audience. Prompts such as this one are common in textbooks and writing courses: *imagine you are a customer at a hotel and there is a problem in your room; write a two paragraph complaint letter.* Such a task resembles a writing task the learner might or might not have to perform in the real world (situational authenticity); but in the immediate situation of the learner, it may not mean much. To begin with, learners are given a pre-packaged purpose, one that does not correspond with their needs or motivations at the time of the task.

Secondly, the intended audience is imaginary—a hotel manager who does not exist for the learners. Some might already have schemata on what hotel managers are like and about complaints in hotels, but many might have never been through such a situation. Actually, the real audience for that piece of writing is usually just the teacher and maybe some learners’ peers if peer-review is encouraged. In many cases, learners are aware of this, and thus, they write for these “real” readers. As a general rule, most learners think (and even expect) that teachers focus exclusively on syntax, vocabulary, and spelling and give priority to these aspects over the message. This belief usually results in learners’ producing an artificial and unauthentic text.

Finally, writing is happening in isolation. The learner reads the prompt, and it is very likely that before encountering the prompt there were model dialogues and grammar drills or even a model letter with a complaint to the hotel manager. However, the message is expected to come from learners. They are expected to derive form, not meaning, from those models prior to the prompt. They have to make up a believable complaint and merge it with the structures presented along the lesson. In integrated writing, writers construct meaning from their sources and adapt or transform those meanings to generate their own (Hirvela, 2004; Kern, 2000; Pino-Silva, 2007).

By the introducing ICTs into writing classes, learners can meet with most or all of the above-mentioned features of authentic writing. In blogs, for example, as learners write and publish their texts online, they go through the experience of writing for a real and wider audience than just the teachers and classmates (Ward, 2004). In addition, learners can write about topics they identify with and consider relevant for them which in turn helps them connect with that broader audience. The dynamic nature of hyper text enables and facilitates the process of finding external sources to write from (web sites, other blogs). Wikies, while having many applications similar to those found in blogs, include features that enable multiple users to edit and add to one text, fostering collaborative writing (Zeinstejer, 2008).

### **YouTube and Writing**

Nowadays, most people are familiar with YT. It is one of the most popular websites of recent years (Long, 2008). Anyone on the Internet can access YT and watch online videos on almost anything from the more professional (movie trailers, sitcom episodes, news broadcasts) to the more amateur (usually produced by individuals with a home camcorder or even a cell phone). Videos in YT are formatted as flash videos (or .flv) which makes their storage, retrieval, and transportation easier without serious quality loss (Godwin-Jones, 2007). However, YT is more than just another video-based website. It is a social network site (SNS) in which people can join efforts to be active participants in a continuous process of collaborative meaning construction (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The main difference between YT and other SNSs, such as Facebook or Hi5, is that its main means of interaction is video-sharing. While visitors can only watch the videos, members can upload new videos, rank existing videos, create their own “channels<sup>1</sup>,” create a profile of favorite videos, send video replies, and post comments about existing videos (Lange, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup>A channel is a customized personal web site within the network. YT members can subscribe to other members’ channels and thus create an inner network inside the wider network. The channel works in a way that it resembles Facebook profiles. A channel can be kept public or private.

The comment-posting feature in YT is the focus of the present work. These brief written comments may display all the features of authentic writing: a) the author of the comment writes about the video content<sup>2</sup> (thus integrating listening and writing); b) if the author has decided to post a comment, it is most probably because of feeling compelled to do so for personal reasons (communicative purpose); c) the author might be writing to the YT member who originally uploaded the video but knows that anyone else who watches that video is likely to read the comment (real audience); and d) since there are no evaluations other than what other YT members might provide in a reply, the viewer focuses on the message and on making that message reachable for the readers rather than focusing on form. Moreover, these comments have been found to be highly socializing factors as strong social bonds can develop over time among YT members through comment posting, video-sharing, and “friendling<sup>3</sup>” (Lange, 2007).

The idea that these comments can have an impact on ESL/EFL writing skills originally comes from the video-based short-comment writing task (VC task) designed, implemented, and studied by Pino-Silva (2007). Roughly put, the VC task consists in showing learners a short videotext, and having them write a comment on its content. The term comment, as used here, refers to a text that is constructed from another text (in this case, an audiovisual one) with the aim of evaluating, expanding, criticizing, or questioning the original (Mayora, 2008). In the VC task, no restrictions on what or how to comment are imposed on learners. They are simply asked to express freely their own ideas about the video content, thus opening a chance for expressivity and fluency (Pino-Silva & Mayora, 2006).

The task of writing such free comments involves the integration of listening and writing as learners are required to comprehend the video, react to it, organize their reactions, and convey them in written language (Pino-Silva, 2007). Pino-Silva adds that by giving the learners the chance to choose what to write about the video and how to write their comments, critical thinking may also emerge from the task.

Moreover, the VC task has both situational and interactional authenticity (Mayora, 2008; Pino-Silva, 2007). It has situational authenticity since writing a comment based on audiovisual material is a situation that happens in the real world and the learner is likely to encounter it. Even before the appearance of YT, some TV networks elicit viewers’ comments on their broadcasts via emails or short text boxes on their web sites. Likewise,

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<sup>2</sup> This might not always be the case, since some YT users may comment on visual aspect with no reference to the linguistic content.

<sup>3</sup> *Friendling* is a feature in YT that enables members with a personal profile and channel to keep track of the activities and maintain continuous communication with other YT members.

the VC task has interactional authenticity since reflecting on media content and commenting on it (by supporting, complementing or criticizing) is a kind of linguistic and communicative behavior learners will have to face in the real world even when it is not based on video (as writing an argumentative essay based on a book chapter). At the same time, when the learner is asked to interpret the video and becomes involved or identifies with its content, rather than just being a passive recipient of information or a static repeater of it, the video is authenticated beyond mere genuineness (Mayora, 2008).

Although Pino-Silva originally conceived the task to be carried out offline within the context of a technology-enhanced language learning program for high school EFL learners (Antonini & Pino-Silva, 2001; Pino-Silva, 2007), the chances for this task to be implemented online and its potential as an autonomous self-directed-learning task have been considerably enlarged in recent years by the growth in popularity of YT and other video-sharing-enabled ICTs such as video weblogs.

Most websites that elicit comments on video provide a limited number of characters for visitors to leave their comment. YT, for instance, imposes a maximum of 500 characters. Is it possible that by writing texts of such a short extension learners can develop writing skills? According to preliminary descriptive research, the answer seems to be yes. The key may lie in doing it repeatedly and for a sustained period of time. In his article, Pino-Silva (2007) observes that by writing video comments over a school year “students gradually begin to feel comfortable writing in English without fearing being critical, in ways that long argumentative tasks do not appear to achieve” (p.325). As a matter of fact, in a first implementation stage in its original context, learners were given the choice to write either in their native language (Spanish) or in the target language (English). This resulted in a minority of students writing their VCs completely in English, a small group writing in both languages but more often in Spanish than in English, and a majority writing their VCs completely in Spanish. As the school year progressed, the proportion of VCs written in English gradually increased to the point that by the end of a school year the VCs written in English outnumbered those in Spanish (Pino-Silva & Mayora, 2004, 2006; Mayora, 2008). Furthermore, in a study comparing high school EFL learners performance in the VC task to their performance in another video-based writing task under more controlled conditions (longer texts and test-like conditions), Mayora (2008) found that although there were no correlations between the performance of the learners in both tasks, there were considerable similarities in the texts written by the learners at the qualitative level.

These preliminary studies support the idea that by having learners extensively write VCs, they can improve writing skills. This, however, does not imply that other instructional teacher-guided teaching techniques should be abandoned all together. As it is often the case in language teaching, what seems more beneficial is the combination of

the VC task with other writing tasks both in isolation and integrated to other media (Hirvela, 2004; Mayora, 2008; Pino-Silva, 2007).

After having discussed the theoretical and pedagogical rationale that underlies the use of YT for writing, what follows is the description of how to implement it. This description should be taken as a body of pedagogical suggestions instead of a fix set of instructions. Indeed, each teacher could and should make the adaptations considered relevant to the learners' needs and contextual characteristics. As the description proceeds, it will become clear that the procedures do not only foster the integration of listening and writing, but that of all four language skills.

### **An Instructional Implementation of Video Comment Tasks for Contexts with Easy Access to the Internet**

The first implementation to be described is intended for teaching contexts in which both teachers and learners have easy access to Internet either in multimedia-enhanced classrooms (Internet connection, a computer, a video beam, etc.) or a computer lab (a room with a considerable number of computers all with access to the Internet). It is highly recommended that teachers interested in implementing this model join YT and create their own "channel."

An essential first step is to familiarize the learners with the comments. A video must be selected and viewed with the learners in class. The teacher may encourage learners to express orally their first impressions and opinions about the video. Then, learners' attention should be directed to all or some of the comments posted for that video. Learners can discuss as a whole class or in small groups: a) what the comments are like (length, level of formality); b) what aspects of the video they focus on (content, ideas, images); and c) what communicative functions are expressed in them (evaluating, criticizing, giving additional information). Learners' attention should also be directed to the fact that some users do not comment on the video as such but reply to other members' comments either to agree or disagree with them. It would be ideal if the selected video is one that has provoked a relatively large number of comments.

The next step consists of telling learners to draft a comment for that specific video. This can be done on paper and these comment drafts can be later read aloud and discussed in class. After discussing the messages of the comment drafts, teachers might encourage peer editing.

Finally, learners must be instructed to join YT so that they can post their comments online. Some learners might be reluctant to post their comments because they fear that their English is not good enough. That would be a great opportunity to encourage the learners to create a second or even a third draft. It is also possible to have learners with similar opinions to team up and write a comment (hence promoting collaborative learning as well). Once the learners feel satisfied with their comment drafts, they are ready to post

them. It is motivating and satisfactory for them just to see their comments posted online along with many others written by a multitude of native and non-native English speakers. Likewise, their motivation and feeling of achievement could be greater if they get a reply from any other YT member that is not a classmate.

These procedures can be repeated twice or three times more with the learners in class. The videos for further sessions could be selected by them and negotiated between teacher and learners to increase learner-centeredness. Nevertheless, the goal is not that this becomes an in-class routine since YT has the potential of being a vehicle to promote learners' autonomy. After the first teacher-guided and peer-aided sessions, learners must be encouraged to do the video-browsing and comment-posting on their own any time they want and on self-selected<sup>4</sup> videos.

If teachers have their own channel, then they can have students to subscribe to them. This will make it easier for teachers to keep track of what videos learners have watched, which are their favorites, and on which videos they have posted comments. Additionally, teachers can post in their channels a list of recommended or compulsory videos for all learners to watch. In case teachers do not want to create a channel within YT, other simpler devices can be used. For instance, learners can be asked to keep a log or diary in which they write down what videos they have watched, the link to those videos, a draft of their comment, and other relevant information.

### **An Instructional Implementation of Video Comment Tasks for Contexts with No Access to the Internet**

Teachers who read instructional recommendations or teaching techniques that require ICTs often feel frustrated to find that such recommendations are inaccessible for them since they do not have access to computers in their schools. In some countries, in fact, only a few people have a computer with Internet at home. The VC task has the advantage that it is not Internet dependent. As a matter of fact, Pino-Silva's (2007) original design of the task was for offline use.

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<sup>4</sup> A word of caution seems necessary at this point. Deciding if learners are to watch anything they want to will depend on the learners, their age, characteristics and purpose for learning English. ESP/EAP learners will probably prefer to search for videos related to their profession or field. When working with teenage learners the teacher would probably prefer to establish certain restrictions or just more control on the kind of videos learners are to watch (being specially aware of adult, political or other inappropriate materials). Teachers need to set clear guidelines for learners on this kind of material in advance. Another issue is related to the large amount of videos without linguistic content (displaying images and captions and no words). Teachers working with teenagers might prefer to make a list of the videos learners are to comment on and not permit other videos that are not on the list. Again, this will depend on the learners' needs and characteristics.



In this case, the teacher needs to have a collection of off-the-air materials of different video genres, durations, and topics either on VCR or DVD. A sample of comments from YT can be downloaded and printed so they can be handed out to the learners for in-class discussion much in the same way it was described in the implementation for contexts with easy access to the Internet. The videos can be watched on a big screen TV and played on a DVD player or VCR (depending on each context). The rest of the procedures are the same as described above: learners watch the video, discuss it in class, read and discuss the sample comments, and finally draft their own comments for that video. The key difference is that these comments will not be posted online. In order to promote interaction, the comments can be transcribed with no identification and then distributed among the class or to students in another class with more or less the same level. Then, the learners can be encouraged to reply to those unidentified comments and to try to emulate what happens in YT. Exchanging the comments from one class with another will provide a more realistic audience for the students' comments. This procedure can not match the wide audience and authentic conditions of going online to YT, but it does provide more authenticity (skill integration, an audience other than just the teacher, communicative purpose, etc.) than writing letters to unreal hotel managers.

## Conclusion

In this article, I am proposing that YT can be a helpful online resource for encouraging authentic writing in EFL classrooms. The support for this lies in a) the features of authentic writing; b) the often cited role of ICTs in promoting realistic communicative practice with the skill of writing; and c) the description of the VC task (Pino-Silva, 2007). After discussing the theoretical rationale for using YT to promote writing, two instructional implementations were outlined: one for contexts in which there is easy access to the Internet and one for those which do not have such access. Both pedagogical procedures aim at the integration of other skills with writing and providing learners with a wide and more realistic audience than just the teacher. Other principles from educational theory such as learner-centeredness, collaborative learning, and learner autonomy are also evoked by these practices. Both pedagogical procedures are feasible for many different contexts and for learners of different linguistic competence and with different goals to learn English. They are not intended to be sets of rigid steps to follow or a method, in the strict sense of the term, but rather pedagogical orientations that can and should be tailored and adapted by each teacher. Once adapted and implemented, teachers should carry out action research to evaluate their benefits and limitations. As a matter of fact, I have based this proposal on YT given how popular the site is among most learners. However, other teachers might prefer other video-sharing sites that they consider more adequate.

To conclude, the content of this article is just one more demonstration that the available technology can be put at the service of the learning process and it can be

exploited in different ways as long as it combines a sound pedagogical base and empirical knowledge collectively produced by teacher-researchers.

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## Conference Announcements

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**1st TESOL Philippines International EFL/ESL Conference.** August 7-8, 2009. Held at the Crown Regency Hotel, Cebu, Philippines. Sponsored by the *Asian EFL Journal*. Web site <http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/call-for-papers-Cebu-2009.php>).

**The 4th International and 40th Annual ELTAI Conference, English Language Teachers Association of India: Managing Mixed-Ability Classes.** August, 7-9, 2009. Chennai (Tamilnadu), India. E-mail [eltai\\_india@yahoo.co.in](mailto:eltai_india@yahoo.co.in). Web site: <http://www.elta.org/>

**EUROCALL Conference.** September 9-12, 2009. (Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Gandia campus) will focus on New Trends in Computer Assisted Language Learning with a special emphasis on innovative ways of collaborating and working together. Web site <http://www.eurocall-languages.org/confs/index.html>

**LLCMC Conference** (The Language Learning in Computer Mediated Communities). October 11-13, 2009. (Honolulu, Hawaii). A pre-conference, CULTURA: Web-based Intercultural Exchanges, will take place October 10-11. Web site <http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/llcmc/call.html>

**TBLT 2009.** October 13-16, 2009. The 3rd Biennial International Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching Tasks: Context, Purpose and Use. Lancaster, UK. Web site <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/events/tblt2009/>. E-mail: [tblt2009@gmail.com](mailto:tblt2009@gmail.com).