

Promoting EFL Literacy Via Promoting Motivation: A Case for Writing Skills Development

Oleg Tarnopolsky

Dnipropetrovsk University of Economics and Law, Ukraine

Introduction

Developing literacy in English as a foreign language (EFL), i.e., as a language taught outside an English-speaking setting, may be viewed in different perspectives. The first perspective (basic L2 literacy) is focused on developing learners' general reading and writing skills up to the standard providing for basic reading and writing needs in whatever field. For instance, in teaching writing it means teaching spelling, words, and combining written words into sentences in accordance with the rules of grammar and syntax. Another perspective (specialized L2 literacy) is based on considering literacy formation as developing students' abilities of reading and writing only specific kinds of English texts. For instance, a curriculum for Business English studies may set the goals of students' acquiring the ability of reading several (previously selected) types of business letters, CVs, business contracts and agreements, as well as of writing business documents of the same categories.

Both approaches are often used as a sequence, the first as a basis for EFL literacy development in courses of General English, while the second one serves for the needs of different Business English and/or ESP courses that may follow a General English course. What makes both approaches quite similar is the fact that each of them presupposes attaining a certain point in learners' literacy development, and after reaching it, you need not proceed any further within the framework of a particular program.

The third perspective (advanced, or proficiency, L2 literacy) is distinguished by viewing literacy acquisition in EFL as a life-long process having no final pre-set standard of skill development to be attained. It is a process of constant self-improvement that may result not only in achieving the skill level of reading and writing in English characteristic of an average educated native speaker but even in surpassing that level.

When pursuing this approach in teaching writing, we train our students not just to write grammatically, syntactically, and stylistically correct passages in English, but to

write creatively, crossing the borderline between an academic essay or composition and a piece of literary work written not so much for a grade as for the writer's (learner's) own enjoyment and the enjoyment of other people.

Therefore, in writing instruction, for instance, this perspective of permanent literacy enhancement embraces creative writing as a set of “imaginative tasks” (Harmer, 2001, p. 259). Nowadays, such tasks play an increasing role in teaching writing both in ESL and EFL settings (see, for instance, Morgan 1994; Moulton & Holmes, 1997; Tarnopolsky, 2000). Generally the tasks akin to creative writing that they can be introduced at a relatively advanced stage of language acquisition. Otherwise, learners may lack the language for creating imaginative written works in English. Besides, quite a high level of motivation is required. If students consider imaginative writing tasks as regular academic ones with little or no personal enjoyment, there is not much hope that they will deploy all their abilities to achieve the best possible and not merely positive-grade-sufficient results.

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate a way of providing the required learners' motivation when using imaginative writing tasks for developing their advanced L2 literacy in the course of English for upper intermediate students.

Context

The material for the report was collected in the Fall semester of the 2002/2003 academic year from a group of 10 students (all females, 18-21 years of age) majoring in translation from and into English at the Department of Foreign Languages for Business in Dnipropetrovsk University of Economics and Law (Ukraine). The students of the third-fifth years of study were joined in one group for optional one-year-long training with the aim of getting prepared for the *First Certificate of English (FCE)* exam developed by *UCLES* (University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate) and administered in Ukraine by the *British Council*.

All the students have achieved the upper intermediate level in their command of English. According to the *UCLES* criteria (FCE: First Certificate in English, 1997, p. 6), they were perfectly ready for exam preparation training in all the five papers included in the FCE—*Reading, Writing, Use of English, Listening, and Speaking*. The training course was based on the coursebook specially developed or prepared for the FCE exam—*Focus on First Certificate* by Sue O'Connell (1997).

From the beginning, the students enjoyed the course and were quite successful in their work with the coursebook and in preparation for all the exam papers except one of them—*Writing*. Teaching writing at the advanced L2 literacy level proved to be the greatest problem—spelling and grammar mistakes abounded in written works, and those

works were colorless, unemotional, and obviously written to get the task done and forget about it. Extremely low motivation was visible, and that impression was confirmed by students' own comments. They were bored with doing writing assignments and therefore, did not invest much effort into completing them. Hence, most errors that occurred were just the result of carelessness and not lack of knowledge or training.

It was not the fault of the coursebook's writing assignments. They were mostly imaginative, based on genre analysis of texts to be written, and process-oriented. Nor was it a lack of interest for the suggested writing topics (e.g., leisure activities, crime, environment, life in the future, and others), because the same topics were discussed with the liveliest interest in speaking, reading, and listening assignments. It was just doing the assignments in writing that discouraged students because they simply did not like writing and were not really used to it. Writing had never been in the forefront of their activities in all these other English classes (see Tarnopolsky, 2000, on the issue). Therefore, to enhance writing skills and promote what was earlier called advanced L2 literacy, some urgent measures had to be taken to help learners become more motivated in doing their writing assignments.

Rationale and Procedure

Promoting such motivation can be achieved by making the writing tasks as personalized as possible in the sense that they can involve not only students' imagination, but arouse ambitions and perhaps a spirit of competition. All the preceding writing assignments had been done for the teacher to comment on and evaluate. Even brainstorming before writing and peer-evaluation after it, which are recommended by the process approach and were used extensively in the course, did not radically change the situation. It was a matter of unexciting work being done exclusively for the teacher's evaluation and grades, and that proved to be an insufficient incentive. The other incentive, getting ready for the *Writing* paper in the FCE exam, was not sufficient either. The exam seemed too far away (the end of the academic year) to concentrate on the tasks, which were not of the learners' preference, so they focused on what they really enjoyed doing—speaking.

The means for overcoming that reluctance of doing writing assignments and indifference to writing as a skill to be carefully developed was believed to be found in providing total student *independence* of the teacher and his grades. That independence (learner autonomy—see Benson & Voller, 1997) was combined with mutual *interdependence* of students as evaluators of each other's works. We believed that mutual evaluation would encourage ambitions and the spirit of competition because writing would be done only for peers as readers and not for the teacher.

To create such an environment for doing writing assignments, a change in teaching procedure was undertaken. The change was introduced when students were working on Unit 3 *Enthusiasms* of the coursebook *Focus on First Certificate*. The final writing assignment in that Unit (p. 54) is as follows:

You have been asked to write a short article for a students' magazine on a sports or leisure activity of your choice. It will be a part of a series of articles called "Time off" in which writers describe the activity they enjoy and encourage others to take it up. Write your article in 100-150 words.

After giving this assignment and informing students that it should be completed before the next class (three-day period), the teacher declared that he himself would not read, comment, grade, or evaluate it. Every student was appointed three peer-reviewers (evaluators) to whom she had to give three copies of her work. The evaluators were required to read the work submitted to them and individually and independently of each other provide its oral critique in the class that followed (before the critique, the work was read aloud for the benefit of the whole class). After all the critiques were listened to, there was a whole-class discussion where the student whose work was being discussed could give her ideas concerning the critique, justify her approach, etc.

As to the specific assignment given above, the evaluators were requested to focus on three questions in their critiques:

1. If you really came across that article in a students' magazine, would the title and the first sentences catch your attention so as to make you start reading? If so, why? If not, why? Give your reasons.
2. If you started reading such an article, would you read it to the end or stop before finishing it because the article was too boring and unexciting? If so, why? If not, why? Give your reasons.
3. If you read the article to the end, would you feel convinced by the author and encouraged to take up the suggested activity? If so, why? If not, why? Give your reasons.

It was also declared that from that moment on, all the written assignments would be done in a similar manner. The teacher stopped commenting on and evaluating the students' works either when they were being discussed or later—unless such comments and evaluations were specifically requested. Thus, total teacher-independence and mutual student interdependence was ensured.

As can be seen from the guideline to evaluators given above, they concerned mostly the content of the written pieces, their styles, format, etc. and not so much their language form. At the same time, the evaluators were encouraged to point out the language faults that spoilt the overall impression made by the written work being

evaluated. The other encouragement was the request to pay special attention to the success, or failure, of the writer to express and share her feelings and emotions. Special attention was also to be paid to the imagination, creativity, and originality of the writer as demonstrated by her written piece.

In this way the evaluators were indirectly encouraged to evaluate not only the written works, but also the personal qualities of the writer—intelligence, imagination, originality, ability to interest other people, and recognize her ideas as attractive and exciting. One already mentioned fact should be strongly emphasized once again—the assessment was not made by the supreme class authority, the teacher, but by peers. At the same time, there was little danger of students' lack of objectivity in their evaluations and comments. Everybody was both an evaluator and a person evaluated by others so that everybody had to be fair in order to be treated fairly. It was hoped that such an approach would not fail to awaken students' ambitions and the spirit of both cooperation and competition, making them *do their absolute best* in every writing assignment. The efforts to do one's best, in turn, could not fail to promote rapid writing skill development, thus promoting advanced L2 literacy as the basis for really imaginative writing.

Outcomes

The highly positive writing results were the immediate outcome after introducing the changes in teaching procedure discussed above. The students started producing pieces of writing of the quality that they had never attained before. It can be seen from the two sample pieces below. They were written by two students who gave their permissions to publish their '*articles for the students' magazine*' but preferred to stay anonymous. The samples are published exactly as written by the students.

Sample 1

Cause the Sun Will Shine Again

There are days that make you fly, as well as days you want to cry. I suppose, there is no need to ask what to do when everything is fine, you just feel good and don't care about the answers. But have you ever asked yourself what to do when you are bad? Of course, you have. And what are your solutions? Eating tons of chocolate? Buying new clothes/books (choose the right variant) for yourself? Drinking? Mine is taking a walk out in the rain, but without any umbrella.

Ready? Just put on your favorite anorak and go out! It's really cool, believe me! There aren't a lot of people, only few, perhaps as crazy, as you are. Your soul is just like this rains! Tears are falling from your eyes and from the sky. This moment you feel as one with nature. And with those tears all your troubles and problems are going outside as well.

Take a good breath of the air full of ozone! Have you ever noticed that it smells so good! Don't say to yourself: "yes, I have", just breathe it. You are passing street after street . . . Have you noticed that the trees are different from those they were the day before? Everything has changed, because everything is constantly changing.

Here you begin to understand that your problem will stop worrying you, just like this rain. Have you ever seen a never ending rain? The same thing here is with your troubles, so straighten yourself up and smile, cause the sun will shine again . . .

Sample 2

I saw you flying . . . A daydream? Not it was real!

Tired of monotonous shaping with fat women around eating after each training or jumping in front of TV trying to look like Cindy or Claudia ...? Well, there are two ways out: either die ugly and forgotten or go in for dancing.

I always dreamt about dancing, but how afraid was I to be the worse, to be laughed at . . . At the end of my long-long life (which usually comes when you're twenty) I decided "why not", so I was right.

Your body aching . . . Your soul singing. Sounds like lunacy? No just too close to harmony. And you are dancing with music filling each millimeter of your flesh, each your nerve, each your cell. Elation is your only state since now.

No doubt, a lot depends on your trainer. I am lucky to have the best one, who is in love with dancing. Imagine, I feel happiness just looking at him and peace and never ending calmness.

Hey, you, quit reading all this stuff! You're still sitting in an armchair and eating a cheeseburger? I saw you dancing, I saw you flying and you were happy, extremely happy.

The two written works are different from what the students used to write before in several aspects:

1. Highly imaginative and emotional character makes the written pieces genuine passages of English prose. It is felt that the students were really doing their best and invested considerable efforts to attract their readers' attention, to make reading an exciting experience for them.

2. Highly personalized character of writing was never observed before, with obvious attempts to demonstrate the positive, attractive features of writers' personalities, thereby arousing interest in those personalities by other people (readers).

3. Attempts to use all the language means at the writer's disposal ensures those characteristics of the written pieces that were indicated above. The careful selection and handling of the language means, which the learners admitted to in interviewing, made the written passages quite sophisticated for average students. The writers did say later that it had taken a lot of their time to think over the language of what was to be written and a lot of work with dictionaries, reference books, and other sources to find "*just the right way*" of expressing themselves.

4. Ruthless self-editing was done by writers before submitting their works to evaluators for evaluation. When being interviewed, the writers admitted to that self-editing, saying that never before had they been so thorough and taken such pains in doing the self-editing job. The reason was their reluctance to spoil by language errors the impression made by their manuscripts, and that reluctance resulted in elimination of most of those errors so that only minor ones were left in the final versions of written passages.

The same characteristics distinguished the writing done by all the students from the moment when the described procedure was introduced. As a result, writing ceased to be a problem in the course as a whole. The students became willing and enthusiastic in doing their writing assignments, and that enthusiasm is obvious in one more piece of writing done at a later stage in the course by another student who also granted her permission to publish her work anonymously.

Sample 3

Wake Your Talent Up!

Suddenly a terrible blood-freezing howl was heard: a long and hollow scream rose languidly from the woods—it was the sort of scream you might expect from a she-wolf dying in extreme agony and extreme fear. A thin sliver of moon was floating dead in the inky sky.

Then dead silence fell down, not a leaf moved, not a tree creaked. Then it came back. The scream climbed with a crazy ease through octave after octave, finally reaching a glassy, freezing edge. It hung there for a moment and then whirled back down again, disappearing into an impossible bass register that buzzed like a monstrous honeybee. That was followed by a burst of mad laughter . . . and then there was silence once more. “Hey you!”, suddenly another voice cried again, but this time much closer. You feel that your hair stood on end. “Stop that writing, you lazybones, and do the washing up for a change!”

Yes, the last voice was the real one and all this horrifying things before were nothing but imagination that was written on a sheet of paper. You may call it also creative writing, inventing, story-telling or whatever you like. The main principle is one and the same: use your own fantasy, create your own world, make it the way you like and enjoy yourself!

Just think of enormous possibilities that are kept back in you. Take a white sheet of paper, a pen and turn on your imagination. Don't even dare think you don't have any! Remember your childhood and all horror stories you've told each other in the camp, all the romantic, historical, adventurous stories you've heard. Maybe you didn't like their endings? So write the one you prefer! Make the tale just the opposite, turn a touching romantic story into a comic one if you find it too sentimental.

All in all it just your choice, your fantasy. You can write it only for yourself, for friends, you may create one even for a newspaper or a youth magazine. Try and convince yourself that you are talented and have your own way of thinking and feeling.

It requires no special proofs to assert what great positive influence such students' attitudes exert on developing their writing skills. The same may be said about advancing their L2 literacy. Those attitudes are the basis of learners' gradually becoming genuine and enthusiastic *writers in English* instead of always remaining students of EFL writing, reluctantly mastering the skill to provide for some practical needs, like, for instance, taking an exam.

Conclusion

Writing is rarely, practically never, an activity that students prefer or are interested in, even at advanced stages of acquiring English. “For many students writing is a chore to be got through for a grade, and to many others, not only is it a chore, but a

boring one at that” (White & Arndt, 1991, p. 11). Such learners’ attitudes make the development of L2 writing skills and advancement of their L2 literacy a very slow and precarious process. The solution lies in changing the attitudes, and that can be achieved through changing learning motivation for writing. The approach suggested in this report has proved to be very effective in attaining the desired motivation change so that rapid development of skills and L2 literacy is assured. That is why the approach seems to be promising for all similar conditions of EFL teaching and learning.

References

- Benson, P., & Voller, P. (Eds). (1997). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London and New York: Longman.
- Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (3d ed.). Harlow, England: Longman.
- Morgan, C. (1994). Creative writing in foreign language teaching. *Language Learning Journal*, 10, 44-47.
- Moulton, M. R., & Holmes, V. L. (1997). Pattern poems: Creative writing for language acquisition. *The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning*, IV, 84-90.
- O’Connell, S. (1997). *Focus on First Certificate*. Harlow, England: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Tarnopolsky, O. (2000). Writing English as a foreign language: A report from Ukraine. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 9(3), 209-226.
- White, R., & Arndt, V. (1991). *Process Writing*. Harlow, England: Longman.

About the Author

Oleg Tarnopolsky is Doctor of Pedagogy (EdD), Full Professor at Dnipropetrovsk University of Economics and Law (Ukraine) where he chairs the Department of Applied Linguistics and Methods in Foreign Language Teaching. He is engaged in EFL research and is the author of books and numerous articles on EFL teaching published not only in Ukraine and Russia, but also in the USA, France, Great Britain, Spain, and China. He has made numerous presentations at professional conferences in Europe, the USA, and many countries of the former USSR.