

Writing beyond the classroom: Insights on authenticity and motivation

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(Received 05/08/18; final version received 23/10/18)

ABSTRACT

The current article aims at arguing that engaging learners with writing tasks whose products are later socialised with a wider community may promote higher motivation and English language proficiency among learners. In this contribution, we discuss recent notions on motivation and authenticity in language learning and analyse writing tasks. Finally, we put forward initiatives and pedagogical implications for transforming writing development into an authentic experience for learners and teachers regardless of their English language proficiency. Although our reflections and examples come from our experience as EFL teachers in Argentina, we believe that our insights and discussions may resonate with other contexts.

Keywords: authenticity; writing; motivation; proficiency; publicación

RESUMEN

El presente artículo tiene por objetivo argumentar que el involucrar a los estudiantes en tareas de escritura cuyos productos son socializados con una comunidad amplia pueden aumentar la motivación y la proficiencia en inglés de los estudiantes. En esta contribución se discuten nociones recientes sobre motivación y autenticidad en el aprendizaje de lenguas y se analizan tareas de escritura. Finalmente, se proponen iniciativas e implicancias pedagógicas para la transformación del desarrollo de la escritura para convertirla en una experiencia auténtica para estudiantes y docentes independientemente de la proficiencia en inglés que posean. Si bien las reflexiones y ejemplos provienen de la experiencia de los autores, las reflexiones y miradas pueden resonar con otros contextos.

Palabras clave: autenticidad; escritura; motivación; proficiencia; publicación

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CURRENT APPROACHES TO teaching writing in EFL and ESL contexts underline a need to engage learners in tasks which are relevant and have a clear communicative intent. In a recent review of language skills, Burns and Siegel (2018) note that driven by such a communicative approach writing research and practices are giving attention to feedback from teachers, peers, and through self-evaluation in teaching processes cemented on genre awareness, sociocultural theory and collaborative practices.

While such considerations on approaching writing are endorsed by English language teachers and usually developed at great length in TESOL methodology books within a communicative and sociocultural approach (for example Scrivener, 2011), situated professional practices may challenge such views and raise different concerns regarding the extent to which writing tasks and the context in which they occur are truly relevant and meaningful in learners' trajectories.

In this contribution, we briefly discuss current notions on motivation and authenticity in language learning and analyse writing tasks. Drawing on recent experiences in southern Argentina, we put forward initiatives and pedagogical implications for transforming writing development into an authentic experience for learners and teachers regardless of their English language proficiency. Although our reflections and examples come from our experience as EFL teachers in Argentina, we believe that our insights and discussions may resonate with other contexts giving a shared interest in stimulating learning that becomes relevant, engaging, and memorable.

Conceptual Framework

In our experience as EFL teachers and teacher educators, when practitioners engage in teaching writing, they often focus their learners' attention on the potential reader of their piece as a motivation strategy. This approach is what Hyland (2016) terms the reader-oriented approach. With an emphasis on context, goals and uses of a text, writing is conceived as an interactive, and therefore social, and (meta)cognitive activity (for example, Lee & Mak, 2018) where writers think of an audience, whether abstract or specifically intended, to develop their texts. Due to the interest in the term *audience*, Hyland remarks that teachers have included further instances of peer feedback not only to exercise collaboration but also to raise awareness on intertextuality across their written productions.

Through a growing focus on a genre approach to writing and with readers in mind, teachers should create learning experiences which are motivating and authentic. In this section, we briefly discuss both terms.

Motivation

The extant literature on language learning motivation research indicates that motivation should be considered a fluctuating and unstable construct which considers a person's drive to engage in the activity of learning met by their identities in context (Dörnyei, Ibrahim, &

Muir, 2014). In other words, a person's interest in, for example, learning English, is part of a complex relationship with context and the beliefs and possibilities of being and becoming speakers of English (Norton, 2016). Such a web of experiences and beliefs may be more effectively examined through a micro-lens which promotes teacher research on motivation (Ushioda, 2016). From a teaching perspective, teachers need to find writing tasks which stimulate learners to complete them and engage in social and cognitive learning processes. In this regard, motivation should be embraced through a relational view that considers tasks with goals and products which are aligned with learners' interests and needs, and present as well as imaginary future selves.

That an emphasis on motivation which considers learners in their context has revealed to benefit language learners (Ushioda, 2013) indicates that the implementation of writing tasks in the EFL lesson, the issue of this contribution, needs to be embedded in teaching practices which cater for relevance and meaningfulness. In a critical review of motivation in language learning, Lamb (2017) encourages researchers and practitioners to move away from understanding learner motivation and explore ways in which learners can be truly motivated to learn in the classroom. In this regard, Pinner (2016) suggests that the use of authenticity in various aspects of language teaching and learning can act as a motivating factor.

Authenticity

In the same manner in which it is challenging to circumscribe motivation to one single definition, the term authenticity is far from being a stable or simple concept to define. Pinner (2016) takes classical definitions of authenticity (for example, Breen, 1985), such as the use in TESOL of materials not primarily intended for pedagogical purposes or ESL/EFL learning, but extends the argument further, discussing authenticity through a continuum. From the author's view, authenticity may be better understood as a complex and interactive continuum which takes into account the social dimension of authenticity: "at one end the learner or individual and their needs, linguistic ability and personal motivation to learn, at the other the target language use community" (Pinner, 2016, p. 101). The authenticity continuum also represents the relevant contexts of learning: the classroom and the use domain beyond the classroom. Pinner (2016) stresses that in this view not only materials should be authentic; tasks, purposes, and audience should also be authentic so that learners want to do what is proposed in the lesson. Drawing on connections between identity and motivation, Pinner (2016) suggests that language teaching should give learners the opportunity to express their authentic self, i.e. themselves, in an authentic way. The author highlights that while motivation and authenticity are usually intertwined in research and practice, there is a paucity of studies which investigate the interplay between them.

From a pedagogical stance, recent experiences authored by teachers in Argentina attest to the need of developing authentic activities to enhance learner motivation. For example,

Dalla Costa, Spataro, and Cad (2017) examine their own activities designed for a pre-service TESOL programme in Argentina. The authors emphasise the importance of incorporating authentic texts and tasks for language skills integration and experiencing different teaching approaches. Similarly, García, Ledesma, and Saumell (2017) approach the creation of authentic texts and tasks through the use of technology to make the learning experience closer to what learners' technology-mediated social practices outside school. While such proposals are commendable because they respond to a variety of settings, writing seems to be ignored, and audience is restricted only to peers and teachers. Perhaps, this lacuna mirrors everyday practices and marketed coursebooks in EFL settings. In the section below, we briefly analyse writing tasks found in coursebooks used in our setting.

Writing Activities in Practice

In our experience as EFL teachers in Argentina, writing tasks for all levels may include different visions of authenticity in relation to texts, purposes, and audience. In this section we reflect on writing tasks we have found and implemented in EFL lessons. First, we refer to writing tasks with teenage learners, and secondly we draw our attention to undergraduates.

Writing Tasks for Teenagers

Writing skills development is ubiquitous in general English courses for teenagers regardless of whether learners attend private or state secondary education or private language schools.

A cursory view of coursebooks for teenagers in Argentina reveal that writing is a skill that can be embedded within every (other) unit or placed at the end of a coursebook as a separate and self-contained section. For example, in a general English coursebook (Styring & Tims, 2018) for teenage learners with an A1 level (CEFR), a section for writing skills development is placed at the end of the coursebook. While the activities are sequenced in growing level of complexity and offer learners models and as well guidance (for example a chart to brainstorm and organise ideas) for their own writing productions, the final writing tasks may lack an authentic purpose or clear audience. Table 1 illustrates our crude analysis:

Table 1. Sample writing tasks for A1 teenage learners.

Unit	Topic	Final writing task
2	A description of a family	Write descriptions of two people in your family, or other people.
4	A report about a survey	Look at the survey chart (a class sports survey) below and write a report.
8	A biography	In your notebook, write a biography of your favourite person.

We note two issues with the writing tasks listed above. The task in Unit 4 lacks a purpose beyond the pedagogical aim of helping learners transform graphical information into a descriptive text. Learners will write a report based on the same artificial information about sports from an imaginary situation. Although learners can engage in peer feedback, such collaboration may be reduced to checking for linguistic accuracy since there is no need to exchange or corroborate information. To summarise, the activity is devoid of an authentic communicative goal, and the audience is simply the learners themselves and possibly their teacher for marking. In contrast, the Unit 2 and 8 tasks provide room for personalisation as learners need to write about their family and favourite person. We believe there is a genuine goal, communicating learners' personal history and self. Nevertheless, there are no indications of what happens with the texts once they are completed. Who is the intended audience? To some extent, the original goal becomes diluted as there is no authentic audience or social engagement with the text. We presume that, again, the main reader of the texts will be the teacher.

We are aware that teachers may reproduce such writing tasks when they design their own. For instance, learners with different English proficiency levels may write a letter to an imaginary friend or reply to an email. In such cases, the goal seems to be further opportunities for practice of form at the levels of textual organisation and clause. However, there is no focus on the meaning or relevance of what is being written since there is no genuine audience who will engage with the content of the text and respond to it.

Writing Tasks for Undergraduates

With undergraduate learners, the situation may be similar. For example, Banegas taught a module on academic reading and writing in the first year of an initial English language teacher education (IELTE) programme and used a specific handbook on academic writing (Bailey, 2006). Table 2 illustrates the writing tasks included in the handbook.

Table 2. Sample writing tasks for undergraduate learners.

Unit	Topic	Final writing task
4	Formal letters	Study the following newspaper advert. You have decided to apply for this job. Make notes for your letter of application, then write the letter, paying attention to layout as well as content.
4	CVs	Prepare a CV for yourself. First make notes of all important information (with dates), using similar headings to those in the example above. Then organise it as clearly as possible.

		Finally, type it on a computer and store it so it can be updated in the future.
4	Comparison Essay	Study the information in the table comparing two cities, which both have good universities. Use it to write a report on which would be the most suitable location for an overseas student planning a one-year course. (About 200 words.)

When compared to the tasks included in Table 1, there is little difference between the tasks for teenage learners and undergraduates. The newspaper advert and the table comparing two imaginary cities lack authenticity, and therefore the aim of both writing tasks is to practise writing with a specific genre in mind. While the purpose is pedagogically valid, both activities fail to offer learners authentic opportunities, for example, to reply to a real advert or compare two cities and engage the learners in a follow-up discussion after sharing their essays. In contrast, the CV task may be assessed as authentic since the undergraduate learners will prepare one about themselves. The activity, in our understanding, does include an authenticity of purpose and audience as it is expected that the CV may be useful in the future possibly for potential job opportunities in the learners' context or elsewhere.

One important necessity, then, is to imbue writing development among EFL learners with opportunities for authenticity of purpose and audience to enhance motivation and English proficiency. By promoting writing tasks which are context-responsive and have a relevant and real audience and purpose, teachers have the opportunity to develop learners' awareness on the three basic elements of the rhetorical situation: context, audience, and purpose.

In the section below, we suggest three pedagogical proposals which could be collaboratively implemented in different contexts with the aim of promoting authenticity of purpose, audience, motivation, and English proficiency. We have selected such proposals because they have been implemented even when there are limitations such as teachers' lack of time, scanty resources, or class size. However, the proposals are active and developing at the time of writing thanks to learners', teachers' and school authorities' enthusiasm.

Pedagogical Proposals

The three proposals outlined in this section are contextualised in Argentina and involve different actors. Through such proposals, it is expected that genre-based writing development among EFL learners and IELTE student-teachers becomes meaningful and relevant, and contributes to motivation enhancement.

A Proposal with Young Learners

We believe that young learners can become engaged in writing tasks and their texts be shared with a wider community. Often, learners may produce posters, flyers, or comic strips which are shared on the school walls or magazines for internal distribution as the final task of a larger project. In addition, young learners may write emails, letters, postcards, descriptive texts, short opinion pieces, or stories as part of their usual EFL learning experiences at school; yet these are usually read by their teachers only. However, teachers and educational authorities could encourage learners to reach out a wider audience.

In April 2018, the ELT Coordination from the Ministry of Education of Chubut, a province in southern Argentina, released a project called *Chubut escribe en inglés* (Chubut writes in English). The project consists of two phases. The first phase consisted of a call to all secondary school learners in Chubut to submit a short story, comic, poem, comic or argumentative essay in English which has been the product of their learning experience. Teachers are encouraged to include this call in their practices as a project which may motivate learners to write in English. They are provided with guidelines on how to approach writing in their lessons having this call as the final stage in the process. Guidelines have been elaborated through detailed and reader-friendly instructions and language since many of the teachers in Chubut may lack formal ELT training.

The second phase includes the collection, editing, and publication of learners' submissions into a free e-book which can be later used at schools as reading material. At the time of writing this piece, the ELT Coordination has received several submissions from learners which include flyers promoting a specific city or region the province of Chubut, comic strips, poems, and brief descriptions of schools or classes.

A Proposal with Student-Teachers

In a similar vein, the second proposal is aimed at IELTE student-teachers and is led by APIZALS (Asociación de Profesores de Inglés de Zona Andina y Línea Sur), a teacher association in southern Argentina. In May 2018, they launched an open call under the title of *Future teachers write!* through which they invite student-teachers from IELTE programmes in southern Argentina to submit pieces of creative and argumentative writing which have been the product of coursework in their programmes. The aim of this call is to promote, socialise, and encourage writing in IELTE programmes and generate texts which have been developed for a specific audience, context, and purpose.

According to the organisers, the manuscripts will be selected, organised, and edited in a free e-book to be freely distributed through the association website. Based on personal communications, the manuscripts collected so far include essays, short stories, and poems.

A Proposal to Encourage Publication

The third proposal is part of an inter-institutional project we are co-developing with three

IELTE programmes in Argentina. In the last year of such programmes, student-teachers are expected to focus on genre analysis and genre-based writing pedagogy together with developing their academic writing skills. It has been agreed that through intra- and inter-institutional groups, the student-teachers would engage in academic reading and writing through genre awareness and write book reviews for potential publication in professional journals in order to enrich the writing task with an authentic audience. Furthermore, student-teachers would experience the process of writing for publication, which, in the case of book reviews, usually includes peer review from book review editors or other professionals in the field.

Based on personal communications, the teacher educators leading the project have encountered challenges such as student-teachers' English language proficiency, lessons cancelled due to teacher strikes, and workload. Notwithstanding, the project is still active as the student-teachers involved are attracted to the possibility of publishing a book review for the first time in their lives.

Conclusion

The above proposals, based on actual practices in Argentina, suggest tangible ways through which writing tasks in TESOL can become a source of motivation when authenticity of purpose and authenticity of audience are ingrained (Pinner, 2016). Through the proposals summarised above, learners' texts can transcend schools and school-based pedagogical aims and become part of the social construction of practices. In so doing, learners' identities as L2 learners (Norton, 2016) and motivation (Lamb, 2017; Ushioda, 2016) can be invigorated and transformed (Dörnyei et al., 2014) as they can see themselves as writers in a language other than their L1. It is believed that by providing learners with authenticity of purpose and audience, their L2 proficiency may also increase as they will become aware of the genuine reach of their texts.

The current article has considered how writing instruction in EFL contexts can be strengthened if writing tasks also include authenticity of purpose and authenticity of audience. Following the features of genre writing, peer feedback and collaboration are at the heart of the proposals described above. However, collaboration is not limited to teachers and learners. The three proposals rest on the collaboration and support from other institutions such as ministries of education, teacher associations, and educational institutions working in tandem to guarantee socialisation and dissemination of learners' productions.

While we acknowledge the benefits of writing tasks whose sole reader may be the teacher or whose main aim is practising within certain pedagogical constraints, we invite teachers to incorporate instances and experiences that allow learners to share their texts with a wider and genuine audience. Finally, we hope L2 writing research may examine the extent to which initiatives like the ones included in this contribution have an impact on learners' motivation and L2 proficiency.

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