Second Language Writing as A Way to Build Up Confidence in Adult Learners

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Abstract

Adult students are known to experience a range of psychological barriers in foreign language learning. Writing seems to present the greatest number of challenges as apart from the linguistic issues related to the proper use of grammar and vocabulary. Even learners at more advanced levels are faced with finding their own voice and writing style for communicating ideas in an authentic way. In the present paper, the author argues that teachers working with adult learners can create a safe supportive environment for adult writers provided they are aware of psychological challenges facing adults due to prior negative learning experiences where the major focus was on mistake correction rather than growing a learner's confidence as a language user and a writer. Offered and introduced cautiously, writing activities are capable of boosting an adult's self-confidence and even serving as a vehicle for creative self-exploration, which might potentially increase a learner's general well-being. Rather than focusing on the target language alone, tasks have to be tailored to a student's personality and draw on their own experiences allowing their multiple identities to be discovered and negotiated in writing. For a student to build up their confidence while working with meaningful tasks, teachers have to be

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empathetic readers providing feedback aimed not only at improving his/her language skills but also at boosting their overall confidence to use their English writing to reach out to a wider world, which might also grow their resilience — particularly at times of global turbulence. The author suggests writing activities which are designed with the above considerations in mind and can be used as part of a writing course supplementing a language curriculum or as a stand-alone course for speakers of any languages.

Keywords: Writing, L2 writing, writing instruction, creative writing, identity, corrective feedback

Yetişkin Öğrencilerde Güven Oluşturmanın Bir Yolu Olarak İkinci Dilde Yazma

Özet

Yetişkin öğrencilerin yabancı dil öğreniminde bir dizi psikolojik engelle karşılaştıkları bilinmektedir. Yazma becerisi, dilbilgisi ve kelime dağarcığının doğru kullanımıyla ilgili dilbilimsel konuların yanı sıra en fazla sayıda zorluğu ortaya çıkarır gibi görünmektedir. Daha ileri seviyelerdeki öğrenciler bile fikirlerini özgün bir şekilde iletmek için kendi seslerini ve yazma stillerini bulmakla karşı karşıya kalmaktadır. Bu makalede yazar, yetişkin öğrencilerle çalışan öğretmenlerin, bir dil kullanıcısı ve yazarı olarak öğrencinin kendine olan güvenini artırmaktan ziyade hata düzeltmeye odaklanılan önceki olumsuz öğrenme deneyimleri nedeniyle yetişkinlerin karşılaştığı psikolojik zorlukların farkında olmaları koşuluyla, yetişkin yazarlar için güvenli ve destekleyici bir ortam yaratabileceklerini savunmaktadır. Dikkatli bir şekilde sunulan ve tanıtılan yazma etkinlikleri, bir yetişkinin özgüvenini artırabilir ve hatta bir öğrencinin genel refahını potansiyel olarak artırabilecek yaratıcı bir kendini keşfetme aracı olarak hizmet edebilir. Yalnızca hedef dile odaklanmak yerine, etkinlikler öğrencinin kişiliğine göre uyarlanmalı ve kendi deneyimlerinden yararlanarak çoklu kimliklerinin yazılı olarak keşfedilmesine ve müzakere edilmesine olanak sağlamalıdır. Bir öğrencinin anlamlı etkinliklerle uğraşırken özgüvenini artırabilmesi için, öğretmenlerin empati kurabilen okuyucular olması ve geribildirim vererek yalnızca dil becerilerini geliştirmeyi değil, aynı zamanda İngilizce yazılarını daha geniş bir dünyaya ulaşmak için kullanmalarına yönelik genel özgüvenlerini de artırması gerekir. Yazar, yukarıdaki hususlar göz önünde bulundurularak tasarlanan ve bir dil müfredatını tamamlayan bir yazma dersinin parçası olarak veya herhangi bir dili konuşanlar için tek başına bir ders olarak kullanılabilecek yazma etkinlikleri önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yazma, L2 yazma, yazma eğitimi, yaratıcı yazma, kimlik, düzeltici geribildirim

Introduction

Writing tends to cause a lot of people to experience a great deal of anxiety. For some of them those insecurities date back to the school time when teachers were so scrupulous in identifying mistakes in their writing. To make it worse, instructors did not always have the courtesy and professionalism to deliver feedback in a way that would not hurt a young student's self-esteem. Others must have been discouraged to partake in this activity in other school classes such as Literature as they were made to believe putting words on paper takes a genius.

This is definitely the case for my home country, Russia, where school instruction is rather conservative and rigorous allowing teachers to spare no criticism. This country's literary heritage is incredibly and overwhelmingly rich that unless you think you might be a new Pushkin, Dostoevky, etc., there might be no way for you to ever dare put pen to paper.

As a result of not quite motivating and inspiring school experiences, all adults around the world might be having similar issues stopping them from writing unless their jobs demand that, which is most often, e.g., business correspondence. This type of writing is definitely not about creativity, self-expression and experimentation, which are capable of enriching a person's life and improving their emotional well-being without them having to write absolutely mistake-free or leaving an immortal literary legacy behind.

With all these anxieties associated with writing, no wonder expressing one's self in another language is fraught with even more fears. Language learning itself could be nerve-racking and damaging to one's self-confidence. The so-called foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been studied by SLA researchers and is defined as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (Macintyre, 1999). I am afraid language teachers might be to blame for that as well. Remembering their school-time failures and insecurities, adult students commonly experience difficulties with starting or continuing mastering a new language years and years after having had their writing graded and criticized. Others — especially those who began their language learning career later in life — use the well-known critical age hypothesis (Chomsky, 1957) according to which a language is easier to master till around the age of 12 as an 'excuse' for their failures. Some scientists questioned the validity of this excuse and stated that this mostly applies to first language acquisition rather than second language learning (Moskovsky, 2012).

So is there anything teachers can do to inspire their adult students to write

in a target language? Given this new type of a relationship where the whole student-teacher dynamics has luckily shifted, empowering students is now a lot easier than it used to be. Impersonal classrooms that used to intimidate and scare individuals away from even daring to think of a new language as an avenue for self-expression have now turned into tailored safe spaces where there are no grades and learners' personalities, and individual styles are respected. Nevertheless, some beliefs and ideas still dominate both teachers' and students' minds. The so-called *native speakerism*, i.e., an ideology that upholds the idea that so-called native speakers are the best models and teachers of English because they represent a Western culture from which spring the ideals both of English and of the methodology for teaching it (Holliday, 2013). This ideology can be a major factor preventing even advanced students (even their teachers as well) from pursuing writing.

Even if teachers themselves manage to break away from this 'tunnel vision' affecting their own professional self-efficacy and manage to get their students on the same page, there are still some issues we have yet to grapple with. The major one entails identity which has been researched a lot in sociolinguistics over the last few decades (e.g., Block, 2007; Norton, 2000). There is a lot of identity work and struggles associated with (re)negotiating it as an adult. Our students might be accomplished professionals and have a sufficient self-confidence in their first language to keep them advancing in their own fields. However, while being put even in the safest and friendliest language classroom, they still have to reconcile their multiple identities outside it and the one of a learner.

Adding the *identity of a writer* in a foreign language into the equation could be daunting. As teachers working with adults just like ourselves, we have to develop a gut for being able to detect those individuals who might potentially be open to the idea of writing creatively in their target language and possible emotional struggles associated with it that can sometimes be described, e.g., as feeling like a lost child in the process (Yang, Peng, 2021). It is absolutely acceptable to make an attempt in order to find out a student is only willing to do writing if it fits their current learning goals.

Regarding the level appropriate for attempting to incorporate creative writing into language learning, it is hard to pinpoint the exact one at which writing in a foreign language would be most effective. So, those who would feel inclined to go for it at early stages are more likely to eventually succeed, but there are understandably few people like that since as it was previously stated, there are lots of misconceptions and resulting anxieties associated with L2 writing. However, at higher levels writing is definitely likely to cause fewer negative

emotions and psychological benefits might be more probable as well.

As much as we appreciate the linguistic as well as some emotional benefits of writing detailed in a few engaging studies (e.g., Pennebaker, 2004), there is no denying a new and probably slightly awkward nature of L2 writing, especially for beginning second language writers. E.g., learners will sure take a while searching for their new voice (Riyanti, 2015). As they do so, we will first be their only readers. So, we have to be there gently guiding them through the process. As we might have also been the one inspiring a student to let writing into their life, the last thing we want is for them to find it off-putting. All we want is for it to be a colorful part of their learning journey. Eventually, they might even find creative writing in L2 to be a self-empowering tool (Zhao, 2015).

The beauty of any creative activity - which writing is by all means - is that it cannot be forced on anyone as it is literally something you do following your own heart and instincts. We have to strongly encourage students to read and listen a lot as doing that is by far one of the best passive ways of stepping up one's language game. So, if that is the goal for a student, provided we have enough time on our hands and no immediate aims to be reached, we have to at least suggesting adding writing to their learning diet highlighting the benefits of working on each of the four language skills in getting our adult student to their end goal.

As I am myself passionate about writing, I love bringing up to my students the benefits of it I enjoy in my own living. A student-teacher relationship is in a way like a romantic one as it all comes down to the level of connection and general compatibility. It was actually found that the teacher's emotional state and the factor of the so-called foreign language teaching enjoyment has a major effect on the learning outcomes (Proietti & Dewaele, 2021). So, I expect those of my students who stick around for a significant amount of time would be likely to at least give writing a go. Some jump at the chance right away, others seem reluctant first and then end up asking for it themselves. There are also those who never try writing, but at least they read and listen a lot.

In the language classroom writing can be used as a supplementary language activity to avoid students feeling under pressure to excel. We cannot simply manipulate adults (probably even younger learners for that matter) into doing what we think might be good for them. All we can do is respectively offer this option. With those choosing to get into it, we can further discuss how it can potentially be a new hobby or even a way to discover their own international/ cosmopolitan identity, a way to communicate their national or local one to a

wider world and become global souls (Li, 2007). Ultimately, given the current global turbulence learners are impacted by in their own ways, this process might definitely yield some psychological gains as well for sure.

In assigning writing tasks to spark our adult students' creativity, the main consideration has to be keeping writing stimuli as engaging as possible so that ultimately, writers would be focusing on their ideas rather than the vocabulary and grammar. Of course, it is still a good idea to practice and recycle certain structures, but that shouldn't be a focal point of writing.

Another thing teachers have to bear in mind is not to push a student's personal boundaries by asking them to write about something they would not be comfortable sharing. While we are working together on hopefully building our writers' confidence as language users and exploring their old and new identities, as teachers we are only our students' readers. So, before they feel confident enough with their language, we have to do what those perfect readers every writer wants are expected to, i.e., provide moral support and delicate feedback.

Below are the examples of writing tasks that adult students might find engaging:

1) *a journaling task:* A student describes their day/week/monthly results at work, etc. (at any a convenient level of detail). This would be a nice way for them to practice some work-related vocabulary we might be working on as well as to explore their own professional identity and find out that their routine might actually sound a lot more exciting in a new language.

2) *a walk down the memory lane*: This could be a narrative telling about a memory of something of significance to a student. This task might also involve some emotional reflections on an event so we have to make sure a student is comfortable sharing it. They could also be instructed to elaborate on a cultural tradition shaping their memories of growing/living in a country, which would serve as a vehicle of discovering their national and/or local identity.

3) *a response/review of a reading/listening material.* This one might sound obvious, but a lot of effort is required of a teacher to select materials that would literally strike a chord with our adult students. So whatever we assign for listening and reading has to be relevant to what they do for a living or as a hobby. In order to keep the writing point more personalized and appeal to a student's identity, we can start a writing prompt as follows *'What do you as a … think about the issue of … discussed in …?'*

4) *a travel piece*: No matter what is happening in the world, we can succeed

in at least armchair traveling or domestic adventures. Travel accounts serve as an excellent speaking and as well as a writing point. If a student has been on a trip to similar places, we can ask them to compare these experiences. If they went to the same place at different points in time (e.g., before and after the pandemic), contrasting the sensations of a location would be interesting. Alternatively, we can assign them to write about their expectations of an upcoming trip and describe how it actually went. Finally, we can ask them to keep a travel diary trying to get them to focus on specific details we know are interesting to this specific adult student (e.g., architecture, clothes, etc.).

5) *a free-writing session:* We can ask a student to write about whatever first springs into their mind continuously for some amount of time. They might also benefit from changing their traditional location (another room, outdoor setting, etc.), which might add some novelty to their experience. This is also where we can capitalize on the glamour and romance of writing generated by the mass culture and get a student pretend that they are forging a new identity (e.g., that of an established writer, or a movie character).

6) *a letter to …:* This individual could be imaginary/a student's idol/ an editor of a magazine where an article you got them to read for a class was published, etc. If you have another student attempting second language writing as well, this might be a way to connect two student writers. If you happen to have an English-speaking friend publishing their posts, you can get a student to write to them and pass on the response to this other writer and potentially keep this international correspondence going.

7) *a response to the teacher's own writing:* A lot of teachers assigning such a sort of writing tasks are likely to be writers as well. This is a kind of a (selfish) way to get an extra reader for us, but we have to remember not to set our own work as an example to follow. Think of this as a chance for a student to ask us directly about things we write about. If we can take something from a student's response on board and improve our own work, this would definitely boost both writers' confidence.

8) *a text/photo prompt:* Sometimes we can keep a writing task as short as possible and leave it to our students to find a way to frame their answer. This might be something random — provided they love surprises or related to whatever issue you have been discussing in class.

9) *a social media post:* Ultimately, we might aim to get our students to start publishing their writing. Modern professionals have to resort to writing in English as a way of promoting their business/personal brand, etc. If they try

to create a real-life post, they would have to outline their own unique identity and get clear about their target audience. Finally, they would realize all/some of the above tasks might have been building up to this one.

10) ***reflections on the overall writing/learning:*** In order to get a student's feedback, we might want to ask them (with any level of frequency) to elaborate on their experience in our class (what they enjoy/would love to see you two do more/less of, etc.) or focus on the challenges/positives of writing all/any of the above tasks.

These tasks can be used in any combination/sequence/order as long as our writer students feel inspired and happy to carry on writing. Of course, for writing to really boost their language level, it has to be consistent. It is a teacher's (and a student's) job to keep it that way without disrupting the artistic creativity of this intellectually and emotionally stimulating activity. We are not psychotherapists, but we can also hope that practicing writing in a foreign language connecting with their multiple identities as well as various individuals and communities, our students would also reap lots of psychological benefits out of the process going beyond their purely linguistic and professional goals.

When it comes to using writing in language classrooms as a means of boosting adults' confidence, teachers have to think carefully about how to provide their feedback. As much as we would like for our students to enjoy writing, this type of productive language activity is there to improve their proficiency as well. Hence, these two considerations, i.e., balancing creativity and language practice, are central to our feedback choices.

First of all, technically it is quite handy to use Google Docs for written exercises for on the student's and teacher's end. However creative a writing exercise might be, students will still likely expect to get traditional corrective feedback, which is crucial in improving students' writing performance (Fan & Ma, 2018). That is why whenever there is an issue with grammar or vocabulary, we cannot let it go unnoticed. It seems a good idea to use different colors for different mistake types. In the margin we might want to include references to grammar materials for a student to revise a corresponding rule or practice more. For vocabulary inaccuracies we can offer links to dictionaries explaining the differences between synonyms or defining words which are new to a student but could have been a better choice in this particular context. There might also be some issues that are a bit harder to pinpoint so we can ask a student what exactly they meant offering two or more options for possible correction depending on their answer.

As cohesion and coherence are also the essential elements of 'good' writing (Yang et al., 2018), we have to provide feedback on the bigger picture of the text — i.e., use of topic sentences, linkers, paragraphing, etc. In providing comments of such a nature, we have to be as respectful to a student's original ideas without ending up asking them to make revisions getting them to basically rewrite the whole piece. If there are some particularly impressive ways of structuring the text, a teacher has to make sure to provide a comment showing how much they appreciate a seamless flow of ideas.

Putting writing as a language activity aside, apart from playing the customary role of a teacher, as was stated above, we also have to be our students' readers and respond to the ideas and messages they are getting across in a foreign language. We must try to provide personalized comments showing how appreciative and attentive a reader you are by saying, e.g., *Congratulations on ..., I'm sorry you had to go through this, I'm afraid I have to disagree with you on this, etc.*

I would also suggest giving a final overall comment summarizing the previous ones (classifying the types of mistakes, making comments on the general progress, etc.) as well as acknowledging the time and effort a student must have put into a piece *(*Thanks for taking the time to write this. I guess it hasn't been easy to discuss ... in English, but you've done so well!). When it comes to mistake correction, a student might want to rewrite some parts of a piece or they can also take your corrections on board for future tasks (esp., for repetitive mistakes).

We might even want to ask them to write a follow-up piece based on our comments or ask another student/teacher/international friend of ours to provide their feedback on a student's writing. The idea is to encourage our adult students to keep writing, improving their language skills and building up confidence as language users. In order to facilitate this, we have to be sensitive language teachers and readers.

In the digital era language instructors have turned into teacherpreneurs, i.e., professionals who provide virtual private tutoring services to students, develop and sell their instructional material to other teachers on the internet (Lasekan et al., 2020). This has allowed us to be more flexible and deliver learning materials tailored to our students' specific needs. That is why all of the above writing tasks can be made part of a writing course to be used as a supplementary material or on its own.

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