USING PROJECT WORK TO DEVELOP AND PRACTICE WRITING SKILLS

Raúl Alberto Mora
Colegio San Ignacio, Medellín

Introduction

Any schoolteacher knows that probably one of the most difficult skills to develop when working with teenagers is writing, no matter the learners' age or proficiency level. It is usually seen as the "boring skill". This presentation aims to show how, by means of Project Work (mainly bridging activities), writing can be dealt with in a more dynamic and entertaining way, while you have a chance to practice other skills simultaneously.

Here I will explain first what problem I found when trying to teach writing, and why Project Work appeared as a feasible alternative. Then, I will cover some Project Work theoretical bases. Next, I will demonstrate how a writing skills program based on Project Work adaptable for different ages and proficiency levels was developed. Finally, I will mention some of the advantages and achievements obtained, as well as some of the problems you might encounter.

Writing: The "Boring Skill"?

One of the first things I noticed when I started teaching writing to my students in EFL advanced courses was their lack of interest toward writing, which does not seem to be just their problem, but of other students of lower proficiency levels as well. But, we cannot just say that they have to practice writing anyway. Their lack of interest should not be taken for granted,

that would only mean we are out of context altogether. Instead, we should consider analyzing why our students are not appealed to writing. So far, I have been able to find the following factors behind this phenomenon which is common to all of us, regardless of our students' background:

- Our global society relies more and more upon images and sounds than on text: The expression "an image is worth a thousand words" has really acquired a higher relevance now than ever, considering the presence of multimedia and the Internet. So, we need to find more convincing ways to get our students to develop writing skills.

- Our local society has mainly been oral, so even though we are dealing with an L2, our L1 influences the way we approach certain skills. Writing is no exception, so we need to help our students create a written culture awareness.

- Writing itself requires more abstract mental process than speaking does, as one needs more elaborate ideas in order to present one's arguments.

- The way writing is sometimes taught is out of a particular context that really appeals the learner. He/She is faced with topics that he/she cannot relate to, as well as a task development that is

not attractive to be carried out, thus developing the reports without any inner interest at all.

When I was faced with all these facts, I realized I had to find an alternative to develop and practice writing skills I was aware my pupils were missing.

Why Project Work Became a Solution

The chosen approach to solve the problem was project work. Project work offered a series of advantages I considered fundamental as part of a writing program:

- It is student-centered. Students are fully responsible for their learning process, in which the teacher switches from the typical "provider" to a "facilitator". This change makes the activity more motivating, as they find themselves **completely involved** in the process, as they are not just the "actors" anymore. The teacher is neither the "director" nor the "scriptwriter", now he shares those responsibilities with the students.

- To develop projects you have to take into account your students´ NIP´s (i.e. Needs, Interests, and Problems). Therefore, whatever you do in class will be completely contextualized as it is based on the students' personal reality.

- Project work encourages group work. "Although writing is often thought of as an individual activity, it can be performed collaboratively very well. Writing in a group can provide immediate feedback and editing, and can develop the sense of writing for an audience." (Reference 1, p. 104).

- It offers the students a chance to expand their creativity. The design of the end-product gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their artistic skills, not just how well they can spell.

- It provides an opportunity to practice other skills simultaneously, one of writing classes main problems. "A particular skill may be practised individually, but this does not mean that it is separate from the others. In project work the skills are not treated in isolation, but combined".

- Though many projects may require a certain level of proficiency, project work emphasized on writing is suitable for any age or level, as the procedures are mainly similar. What varies is the end-product.

- Project work focuses both on the **process** and the **product**, which is a different approach from the one many apply.

- Unlike many other classroom activities which are only to be seen by the teacher, projects are intended to be publicized and seen by others such as parents, other teachers or students.

Project Work: A Brief Overview

4.1. Project Work Characteristics

The reason why project work can be so useful in class can be found in this quote: "Often, there is a gap between the language the students are taught and the language they in fact require. It is this gap that project work can help to bridge". Projects are always a real-life (or, at least as close as possible) application of the program you

develop. The initial idea for the project can be provided by either the teacher or the students. What you have to bear in mind, though, is that regardless of the source, the students themselves make the fundamental decisions about it concerning what they will do and how, with the teacher's **advice**. Remember it is **their** project, not yours.

The project can complement your syllabus or stay away from it, depending on the characteristics of your course. However, the project requires planning, discussion, and constant evaluation. The students are the ones carrying out the project, and the teacher is a counselor and consultant. He/She cannot decide what they will do; his/her function is to guide the students in the process, providing corrections and feedback when necessary.

4.2. Kinds of Project Work

There are two kinds of project work: *Bridging activities* and *full-scale projects.*

✎ Bridging activities: We can say that these are some way of preparation for full-scale projects. The time span for these is short (about two or three classes), and they are restricted to the classroom.

✎ Full-scale projects: This in the end is the essence of project work, as they are developed beyond the classroom. The time span is much longer, and in most cases they actually require a certain proficiency level.

Bridging activities are suitable to all ages and levels. Full-scale projects, on the other hand, are more suitable for intermediate and above students.

4.3. Development

No matter what kind of project you have in mind (bridging activities or full-scale projects) there are stages of development, as follows:

1. Stimulus: Here the initial idea is presented and discussed. (Skills: listening and speaking)
2. Definition of the project: Here the project is negotiated in order to agree on the way it will be carried out. This is one of the most important stages, as students and teacher are involved in a process of discussion and suggestion, from which the project will begin to have some direction. (Skills: listening, speaking, some writing -note-taking-)
3. Practice of language skills: Here the language and functions required to carry out the project are taught, explained or reviewed. A skill in particular or a combination of some can be emphasized. (Writing -note-taking-)
4. Design of written materials: Any material necessary in order to collect data is discussed and developed (e.g. questionnaires, maps.). (Reading and writing)
5. Group activities: In this stage the student will collect all information in order to develop the project. Possible tasks include conducting interviews and surveys or searching for facts.
6. Extracting information: All the information gathered is organized in order to determine which can be used in the final stages of the project. (Speaking, reading, writing)
7. Organization of materials: Here the end-product is developed. (Speaking, reading, writing)
8. Final presentation: The project is finally presented to the audience. The

presentation itself depends on the product. (Speaking)

These stages are flexible, though. The project itself determines whether you can skip some stages and how long each stage should take.

Developing and Practicing Writing Skills Via Project Work.

Now I want to talk about how I devised the writing skills workshops for my students using project work to practice the concepts explained in class.

The first thing to decide was whether we would use bridging activities of full-scale projects. Bridging activities were considered the best alternative. There were several reasons that made me prefer these to full-scale projects:

📖 Bridging activities suited more to what I had in mind, as the main purpose was to emphasize on one skill.

📖 The nature of the bridging activities themselves. My students were not used to project work, so I had to start by motivating them.

📖 Time. The activities were not intended to take too much time. Actually, all activities lasted about three to four classes each.

Then, I had to select the topics that we would use in class. So, I looked for topics which could be carried out in a project as effectively as possible. I will mention some of the topics, along with the project chosen:

➲ Descriptive writing (designing a shopping catalog).

➲ Critical writing (writing reviews)
➲ Informational writing (Tourist broadsheets)
➲ Argumentative writing (designing a booklet based on the film "Titanic")

Next, we had to carry out the project. I am going to explain how the projects were developed using the same scheme described in part 4:

1. Stimulus: The topic of writing skills was introduced along with an explanation of what the activity intended. The kind of writing was contextualized beginning from what the students knew about that particular kind of writing in their L1 (layout, kind of language used, etc.).

2. Project objective: There was always a discussion about those elements related to the end-product, in which the whole class participated. The decisions they made were completely respected. Then, the time length for the stages of the project was set.

3. Practice of language skills: An explanation about the writing style to be practiced was part of the project. Here I presented information concerning the kind of language used or paragraph development.

4. Group activities: Students had to search for information about the kind of design in mind, or discuss what they knew about it.

5. Organization of materials: First the students wrote drafts of the texts for correction and edition. Once the texts had been revised, they started to design the end-product.

6. Final presentation: The projects were shown in front of the class and each group explained what they had written about.

6. Advantages, Achievements, and Possible Problems

I would like to mention some of the advantages I found in using project work, my students' achievements with this kind of work, as well as some of the problems you could face and some ways to overcome them.

6.1 Advantages:

📖 Motivation. As the project involves something students really like, which is drawing and displaying artistic skills, they become more involved in the writing practice. Also, they will be able to involve topics they are really concerned about.

📖 Projects allow students to develop a combination between text and graphics, and, as they are the ones in charge, they design it according to the things they like seeing.

📖 Since the projects are chosen based on what students will find in real-life written texts, they will find a closer relationship between the activities and their lives.

📖 Using project work gives new life to the writing class. They find themselves writing in a more comfortable classroom atmosphere, as they do not have to sit still and completely quiet for an hour. Somehow, boredom seems to disappear while developing projects, and they are practicing what you have in mind.

📖 Once you have started developing projects, motivation does not go down. Actually, I found that students look forward to the next project and, if you switch to a more "formal" way of teaching writing, their reaction is completely negative!

6.2. Achievements

📖 Interest in writing. As the projects related to their lives, my students found a new interest in writing, seeing it as something more meaningful. Also, they found out that a writing class is not supposed to be boring. By using project work they found out that you can work hard (writing the texts) and still have some fun (designing the end-product).

📖 Improvement. I was able to check their progress in writing. A better follow-up to mistakes was made, and the feedback provided was better accepted, as the project mistakes are not the only thing you focus on. Instead, every single detail within the project is considered.

📖 Talent recognition and acknowledgement. Sometimes you have no idea what your students are good at, especially when it comes to art. Projects gave me an opportunity not only to get to know my students' artistic talent, but to give them some credit by displaying what they did.

📖 Student-teacher rapport. Project work makes you share with your students, as they are responsible for their work. Once they feel involved, you can create better and friendlier relationships with them. You get to know a little more about them and viceversa.

6.3 Possible problems and solutions.

📖 The group might tend to leave the hard work to just one of the members. To avoid this, make sure all the members are involved in the writing process. Asking them to perform specific written tasks is a possibility.

📖 In lower levels, students will attempt to write the entire text in Spanish and then translate it to English. Sometimes this happens due to the lack of vocabulary available. Before they start the project, make sure they have all the information needed. This will help them gain confidence to try writing in English. Also, emphasize the idea that if they do it directly in English it will be a more meaningful effort.

📖 As the project involves movement, there could be some disciplinary problems. Just bear in mind that if they are all busy, it does not matter if they move, as they are moving with a specific task.

📖 The project in its final stages involves some cutting and pasting, which could lead to some problems about the mess your students might make. If possible, choose an outdoor setting for this (students love working outside; besides, in an open space students involved in a project tend to be more isolated than within the classroom). Also, remind your students to clean everything up after they have finished.

Conclusion.

We as teachers have a responsibility to help our students in their learning process. They are exposed to a lot of information, and we have to find ways to make real life an important (perhaps the most important) part of our classes. Sometimes they consider that some of the things in an English class are irrelevant, and if they do so, we have to find ways to help them realize everything is necessary in an L2 learning process.

Writing is for some the "Cinderella skill" as it is usually considered less important than speaking or even listening. However, once you find ways to highlight its relevance, students see writing with a more positive perspective.

Bringing project work into the writing skills syllabus is one good way to change that perspective. It gives you the idea that writing is not as abstract or complex to carry out as you may think. Designing written texts is closer to real life than writing a paragraph in a notebook. And, it offers ways for students to express their ideas in a more appealing fashion.

I found that by using project work to develop and practice writing skills I was able to bring back my students' interest in writing. Not only that, I was able to **keep it going**, as they found that writing can be fun if you know how to practice it. And, if your students are learning and enjoying what they are learning, then it must definitely be a good idea.

References

1. Bell, J. 1988. *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL*. San Diego: Dormac, Inc.

2. Fried-Booth, D.L. 1990. *Project Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.