



Review of “How to teach writing”

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A few years ago, Longman decided to stop producing teaching methodology books. Until that moment, a large number of EFL books covered a wide range of topics from teaching exam students to ESP or teaching with songs. Jeremy Harmer wrote some of them and the result was excellent. After some time, Longman started the “How to teach” series that includes a general overview of language teaching, teaching grammar, Internet in ELT, pronunciation, vocabulary and teaching for exams. *How to teach writing* is another gemstone in the series. What makes the difference between this series and the previous Longman’s teacher training series (some of whom have been retaken by Pilgrims, Canterbury, UK) is a new approach that includes a combination of latest applied research and practical class recipes (before, it used to be just a collection of class activities).

The book is divided into eight chapters, a one page introduction, a task file and a key that provides additional activities to each chapter and two appendices. Appendix A contains a punctuation table and Appendix B a very attractive list of further readings for those willing to go beyond the book’s basics.

Supported mostly by current literature, Harmer proposes that writing is both a mental and learning process (p. v), that spelling and punctuation have capital importance in writing (McMurray, 2006), that teacher (Sugita, 2006) and peer (Rollinson, 2005) feedback plays an important role in writing development and also that:

- writing can be done collaboratively (Ibrahim & Penfield, 2005; Storch, 2005),
- there is a need to improve in resources such as coherence and cohesion (Kang, 2005),
- it is important to focus both on content and form (Vickers & Ene, 2006),
- reading is extremely interconnected to the writing process (Erkaya, 2005; Hirvela, 2005),
- genre is a fundamental element of writing (Tardy, 2006), and
- journal reading also benefits writing at advanced levels (Kim, 2005; Locke, 2005).

In relation to the writing process, Chapter 1 describes this process very succinctly, emphasizing the idea that it is like a wheel with interlinked steps including planning, drafting, editing the final version. This process includes almost all types of writing. This chapter also points out the importance of the different issues in language development such as the difference between reading and writing, time and space, participants, and the product. Chapter 2 addresses genre and its different purposes, formats and internal realities within the general one such as text construction,

cohesion, coherence, register and, more important, their implications for learning and teaching. The chapter begins with a reflection of how different purposes and types of writing aim at different members of the discourse community (p. 16). Then Harmer takes the reader through a construction process. As if it were a new house, the author presents writing as a building process in which each new part in the process is like a new brick to put up the whole text. A good example of this process can be found when the author suggests how to “construct” a paragraph (p. 21). Following this, the author presents different devices and ways to achieve cohesion and coherence. It is also worth mentioning that the book stresses that “students should read before they write so that they can see how texts are organised and what language is used” (p. 30). For Harmer, the idea of reading and getting examples from texts is basic.

Chapter 3 addresses the place of writing in the foreign language classroom. Harmer believes that writing leads to learning (p. 31) because it reinforces language use (p. 32), because writing gives learners time to think and the opportunity to think about the language rules¹ (p. 33), and because they receive precise feedback (p. 34, 41). The chapter concludes by describing the role of the teacher during the writing process. Chapter 4 looks at what Harmer calls “the nuts and bolts” or mechanical activities like handwriting, spelling, punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, and texts. These mechanical aspects need to be mastered to make progress in the more expressive and creative aspects of language writing. The chapter also pays special attention to the foreign language learner’s difficulties in writing, the relationship between spelling and sounds, and spelling and word formation. The chapter is well illustrated by a variety of examples and also includes exercises. Chapter 5 deals with the humanistic aspects of writing like motivation, collaboration, communication and what Harmer calls ‘habit-building’ (p. 84). This is probably the most motivating part of the book for its fresh (but not new) ideas of supporting writing with audiovisual aids and cues. These pages are full of activities and special attention should be paid to pages 63 through 69. Collaborative writing is also emphasized but the writer fails to consider synchronous and asynchronous computer (or Internet) based communication. In the last part of the chapter, he suggests that although it is important to develop the students’ abilities in what he calls “instant writing” but, as opposed to the traditional idea of error acceptance, Harmer states that “students should not show work that has ... mistakes (for their sake)” (p. 84) which means that students should also consider the importance of form in writing.

Chapter 6, proposes that genre and sequences in writing affect each other in writing development. There is “a blend of genres study and process sequences” (p. 86). This leads to students becoming fully aware of what they are creating or as Harmer says “students are asked to think carefully what they are writing” (p. 86). Thus, it is important for teachers to be able to teach students to generate ideas (in group or as individuals), analyse genres and make writing plans. Again, Harmer provides lots of examples and proposes a number of class techniques and activities to develop these capacities. Two kinds of writing retain the reader’s attention: writing for projects as “an extended version of genre- and process-centred writing” (p. 106) and, more significantly, writing for exams (p. 104).

Chapter 7 proposes procedures for teachers to assess, to provide feedback correctly and to evaluate writing (including electronic feedback). It also discusses the importance of and procedures for peer review and correction. The last section is devoted to making homework successful (p. 122). The first part, correcting students’ work, proposes criteria for correction, marking scales and correction symbols. He subsequently gives ideas for giving written feedback or referring to dictionaries or grammar books. Most important is the section in which Harmer explains how to train the students to self-edit and self-correct (p. 117). Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the positive effects of reading and writing for teachers’ journals although the process might be a little different. The only thing that some readers may miss is a concluding chapter summarising the contents of the whole book.

As in any other books in this updated introductory series of teacher training books, *How to teach writing* lacks the necessary depth for those who might be interested in deeper debate (although much is remedied in Appendix B). On the positive side, classroom ideas are abundant, well explained and presented systematically. Some of them may be questioned by some authors

but, nevertheless, knowing them presents no harm, even for the most inexperienced teacher. Maybe the only important aspect that I miss is a special interest in developing writing for exams (like in Reichelt, 2005, and others). The examples and techniques are contextualized for EFL/ESL teachers and may be directly applied. Overall, *How to teach writing* is a well balanced and useful book both for novice and experienced professionals and practitioners who will find it both reader-friendly and of formative value.

Notes:

¹ Or to “monitor their production”, to speak with Krashen (1999).

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