

## MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO WRITE

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This paper arose from the perception of a very real problem that undoubtedly exists in language teaching, and indeed in the teaching of almost any subject in the modern-day world, namely the lack of student motivation to engage in writing activities in any shape or form. There is little doubt that writing is seriously undervalued by young people nowadays and possibly condemned soon to become an archaic medium. Certainly there is much less reverence for books and libraries than there was, say, as little as twenty or so years ago. Why should today's teenagers, whose socialisation and education are based upon multi-media experiences and events, attach any great importance to writing, an activity which they appear to see as both boring and unnecessarily complex? The undeniable reality with which we therefore find ourselves confronted is that our students live in a wider environment in which writing is seen as a most unfashionable activity, a thought which was always present during the course of the research for this paper.

The questionnaire now presented was prepared by two teachers of English at the *Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa*<sup>1</sup>. Although the problem of low student motivation was originally approached from two different methodological viewpoints, it was nonetheless found that both parties claimed to have identified the same attitudinal shortcomings amongst their would-be writers and were consequently interested in discovering more about an area that was obviously within their sphere of influence and which seemed to constitute a major obstacle to all those involved in the teaching/learning process. The study therefore had a dual purpose: firstly to gain a more precise understanding of the reasons for the apparent lack of student motivation to write in a foreign language; and secondly to discover possible remedies for overcoming such reluctance.

Authors frequently make reference to the «anguish» or «agonies» of written composition (Widdowson, 1983; Raimes, 1983) and Widdowson gives a depressingly honest appraisal of his own and probably many other people's attitude when he says, «in my experience writing is usually an irksome activity and an ordeal to be avoided wherever possible. It seems to require an expense of effort disproportionate to the actual result.» (p. 34). In view of this, one of the questions that had to be asked was: why write at all?

<sup>1</sup> Although I presented the paper alone at the 4<sup>o</sup> Encontro sobre o Ensino das Línguas Vivas no Ensino Superior em Portugal, this study is, to a large extent, the result of the joint efforts of myself and my colleague, John Walker, at Lisbon University.

It was felt that, as language teachers, we had a *prima facie* understanding of some of the attitudes exhibited by students, as over the years they have inevitably made comments that point to the reasons behind their resistance to written assignments. (*Do we have to do this? I've got so much other work to do. Can't we just talk about this?* etc.) Coupled with this, of course, were the non-verbal expressions of unwillingness to engage upon what we, as teachers and erstwhile learners ourselves, saw as perhaps the most important aspect of learner development: the shrug of the shoulders, the lack of enthusiasm visible in the facial expressions of our students. Not to mention the physical evidence itself of written assignments done in haste, without care or attention, without any personal investment in the activity.

Nonetheless, it was felt that we could not rely solely on our intuitions about the nature of student thinking and that we would be best advised to confirm our original impressions by addressing the problem at source, i.e. by consulting the students themselves. For this purpose a questionnaire was prepared and given to the students of the second, third and fourth years of English studies at Lisbon University. The questions and the results of this survey were as follows:

#### FACULDADE DE LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

##### Departamento de Estudos Anglisticos

Ano Lectivo 1994/95

[The results of the questionnaire were obtained from a sample of 60 students at the Faculdade de Letras, attending classes in English II (22 students); English III (18 students); English IV (20 students).]

#### QUESTIONNAIRE

Your help in answering the following questions is greatly appreciated, and will help towards a study currently being made on teaching and writing skills at university level.

Please indicate the option or options which correspond to your feelings or opinions. You may of course choose more than one alternative, or provide a different answer if necessary.

##### 1. List the following skills in order of importance (1 = the most important, 4 = the least important)

Speaking  
Listening  
Reading  
Writing

##### ENGLISH II

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Speaking	8	8	4	5
Listening	1	3	9	12
Reading	8	3	7	7
Writing	8	11	4	2

##### ENGLISH III

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Speaking	12	3	2	1
Listening	1	3	6	8
Reading	1	4	10	3
Writing	9	6	1	2

## ENGLISH IV

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Speaking	14	4	1	1
Listening	7	1	6	6
Reading	3	0	13	4
Writing	7	8	4	1

**2. Given your answer to question 1, is writing...**

- a) a very important skill
- b) as important as all the others
- c) not so important as speaking
- d) not important at all
- e) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	A, B	A	A, C
-	C, D	B, C, D	B, D

E2: important basis for development of skills; as important as speaking; a way of expressing thought.

**3. Student assessment should be based on ...**

- a) written tests
- b) equal importance should be given to written and oral work
- c) progress in written work over the course
- d) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	B	B	B
-	C, A, D	C, A, D	C, A, D

E2: written work done during the course.

E4: written and oral work done over the course; written tests and oral work only if it raises the final mark.

**4. How do you usually feel when asked to write a composition?**

- a) interested
- b) enthusiastic
- c) incapable
- d) bored
- e) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	A, C	A	A
-	B, D	B, C, D	C, D, B

E2: enthusiastic but then incapable and scared; depends on time, patience and inspiration; obliged; worried.

E3: depends on subject; afraid.

E4: depends on subject; lack of ideas; enthusiastic if inspired; interested but lack of time; apprehensive.

**5. Written homework is ...**

- a) an important part of a student's assessment
- b) frequently done in collusion with someone else
- c) a useful way of practising English
- d) a burden
- e) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	C, A	C, A	A, C
-	B, D	D, B	B, D

**6. What are the most difficult characteristics of writing? (List in order of importance)**

- a) remembering grammar and vocabulary
- b) organising
- c) thinking of arguments and points
- d) planning
- e) spelling
- f) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	B, A, C	C, A, D, B	B, D, C
-	D, E	E	E, A

E2: imagination, time

E4: linking paragraphs, time

**7. What is the most frequent impediment to beginning a writing task? (List in order of importance)**

- a) the topic
- b) lack of ideas
- c) time
- d) fear of making mistakes
- e) not knowing how to begin (lack of plan)
- f) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	B, A, E	B, A, E	C, E, A
-	D, C	C, D	B, D

E3: lack of inspiration

E4: the introduction

**8. What would improve this situation? (List in order of importance)**

- a) if the students were allowed to be more creative
- b) if the teacher gave more help with organisation and planning
- c) if the teacher gave more help with vocabulary and grammar
- d) if the teacher chose more interesting topics
- e) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	D, B	A, B, C, D	D, B
-	C, A		A, C

E2: tests not timed; more group writing; group correction; if the teacher showed us what (s)he expected.

E3: more time; if students planned more; lesson on "creating".

E4: more time.

**9. When writing a formal composition, my most important concern should be...**

(List in order of importance)

- a) the structure of the composition
- b) the ideas expressed
- c) the accuracy of the English
- d) use of the appropriate register
- e) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	C, A	C, B, D	C, A
-	B, D	A	D, B

E4: when to hand it in; the imaginative aspect.

**10. When I write my composition...**

- a) I always write a clear plan first
- b) I begin immediately — the plan is in my head
- c) the plan appears after I have started
- d) a plan is not necessary
- e) I don't have time to make a plan
- f) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	A	B, C, A	B, C
-	C, B, D, E	E, D	E, A, D

E2: depends on mood; I make a plan but it usually isn't good enough.

E3: conclusion is most difficult; plan depends on inspiration.

**11. How should teachers correct students' writing?**

- a) just correct the grammar mistakes
- b) correct all grammar, vocabulary and spelling/punctuation mistakes
- c) just correct the organisational mistakes
- d) the teacher should try to write a "good" version of what the student was trying to say
- e) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	B	B	B
-	D, C, A	D, A, C	D, C, A

E2: indicate mistakes with symbols (like you do); correct all mistakes.

E3: give credit for ideas, not just formal aspects; correct A, B and C.

E4: comment on organisation, ideas and originality; give an overall impression; attention to style.

**12. What is the first thing you do when you receive your work from the teacher?**

- a) look at the mark
- b) feel demoralised by the amount of corrections
- c) read the teacher's comments
- d) analyse your mistakes
- e) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	A, D, C	A, C	A, D, C
-	B	D, B	B

E2: read it again.

E4: see if I agree with the corrections.

**13. Are the teacher's corrections...**

- a) useful
- b) insufficient
- c) unimportant
- d) excessive
- e) clear
- f) unclear?
- g) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	A	A	A
-	E, B	E	E, D

E2: depends on the teacher.

E4: depends on the teacher; important guidelines.

**14. What do you do with the corrected version of your written work?**

- a) file it
- b) try to correct the mistakes identified
- c) list and classify the mistakes to avoid repetition
- d) consult reference books to avoid repetition
- e) ask your teacher to explain
- f) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	B	B	B, C
-	E, C, A	A, E, D, C	E, A, D

E3: read it over and try to correct mistakes

**15. List in order of frequency your main reasons for writing in Portuguese:**

- a) for pleasure
- b) necessity, e.g. leaving notes or writing letters
- c) as part of my work
- d) as part of my studies
- e) I rarely write anything
- f) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	D, A, B, C	D, B, A	D
-	E	C	B, C, A

E2: I write up notes of all classes at home.

**16. List in order of importance your reasons for writing in English:**

- a) to provide marks for the teacher
- b) to improve my knowledge of English
- c) to improve my writing skills in English
- d) to practise something I have already learned
- e) to express ideas
- f) -----

	E2	E3	E4
+	C, B	C, B	C, B
-	D, A	D, A	E, A, D

E3: for pleasure.

E4: for pleasure; write letters to friends; professional, academic and spiritual necessity.

**17. During your course at university, who are you writing to?**

- a) the teacher
- b) other students
- c) someone else (please specify)
- d) myself
- e) nobody

	E2	E3	E4
+	A, D	A, D	A, D
-	B, C, E	B, C	C, E, B

E2: C answer friends.

E3: C answer friends;

E4: C answer — some unidentified reader; friends who are away; friends and relatives, anyone who will read it.

**18. Do you think it is useful to write in class with somebody else, i.e. in pairs or small groups?**

YES/NO

	E2	E3	E4
a)			
yes	22	14	14
no	2	6	7

If YES, why?

- a) it helps me clarify my own thoughts
- b) the finished product is better
- c) it produces more ideas
- d) other (please specify)

If NO, why?

- a) it prevents me from clearly expressing my own thoughts
- b) the finished product is not mine
- c) the other student dominates the activity
- d) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	C, A	C	C
-	B, D	B, A, D	A, B, D

E2: learn from others as well as the teacher.

E3: helps me learn how to work in groups (but I don't really like it)

E4: can talk to other people first; can learn useful things together; helps reinforce relationships.

**19. How do you see writing?**

- a) as a difficult but necessary task.
- b) as a way of creating homework.
- c) as a creative process.
- d) as a means of communication.
- e) other (please specify)

	E2	E3	E4
+	C, D	C, D	C, D
-	A, B	A, B	A, B

E2: as something everybody says students cannot do.

E3: pleasure; as a means of expressing my feelings (but only to myself).

E4: way of improving English

**20. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about writing in English?**

E2 WRITING IN ENGLISH IS VERY DIFFICULT

E3 WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPENDS VERY MUCH ON HOW YOU'RE FEELING AND NOT ONLY ON WHAT YOU KNOW.

I WISH WE COULD HAVE A CREATIVE WRITING COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY.

ESSAYS ARE IMPORTANT TO TEACH US HOW TO ORGANISE AND PLAN ARGUMENTS, BUT WRITING SHOULD ALSO DEVELOP OUR CREATIVITY.

I LIKE TO WRITE FOR PLEASURE.

I THINK WE SHOULD PRACTISE CREATIVE FORMS OF WRITING MORE OFTEN. IT'S OFTEN BORING TO WRITE ABOUT A SUBJECT THAT YOU DON'T HAVE ANY OPINIONS ABOUT OR THAT DOESN'T INTEREST YOU.

WRITING PIECES OF FICTION IS A VERY GOOD WAY OF TRAINING THE LANGUAGE AND IMPROVING OUR CREATIVE SKILLS. I AM AWARE THAT MANY PEOPLE DON'T LIKE IT, BECAUSE THEY'RE JUST USED TO WRITING ON WHAT OTHER PEOPLE WANT THEM TO WRITE AND THAT IS ONE OF THE MAIN PROBLEMS OF THIS COURSE.

I FIND IT VERY DIFFICULT TO LEARN VOCABULARY AND I NEVER MAKE A PLAN FOR WRITING MY COMPOSITIONS, ALTHOUGH I KNOW HOW TO.

WHY IS ONE EXPECTED TO WRITE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN DEPARTMENTS.

F4 I ENJOY WRITING BUT I FEEL THAT I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH SKILLS.

WRITING IS A MEANS OF IMPROVING MY SKILLS IN AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE OF COMMUNICATION. ENGLISH IS AN INCREDIBLY RICH LANGUAGE AND OFTEN THE BEST MEANS OF EXPRESSING MY IDEAS.

WRITING SHOULD BE EXPLORED MORE IN CLASSES AND AS HOMEWORK.

WHEN I CANNOT EXPRESS MY FEELINGS IN PORTUGUESE, ENGLISH IS THE BEST SOLUTION.

ENGLISH IS DIFFERENT FROM PORTUGUESE — IT IS A MORE ACCURATE FORM OF EXPRESSING THOUGHTS AND CREATIVITY.

WHY IS ONE EXPECTED TO WRITE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN DEPARTMENTS OTHER THAN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT?, BUT ONE HAS TO PLEAD WITH TEACHERS IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT TO BE ALLOWED TO DO SO? WHY ARE NO MARKS GIVEN ABOVE 16?

A brief explanation of the actual sample is obviously necessary. Those surveyed were our own students at the Faculty and we were fortunate in that we were able to include three separate years or levels of English language studies. As our main aim was to analyse the attitudes of students towards writing in a university context, and as our survey was conducted towards the beginning of the academic year, it was not considered pertinent to survey first-year students, since, being in the early stages of their university studies, they might still betray attitudes (not to say actual enthusiasm or more probably the lack of it) that had been brought from the secondary school and were thus not typical of most of our students. In other words, our survey focused upon students who could be identified as having recently and successfully completed the first, second and third years of university education respectively. At the same time, it should be stressed that, as will be seen in the discussion of the results, the university course of Modern Languages and Literature, in which English language studies are incorporated, is a four-year course and generally involves the study of two modern languages. The compulsory component for the study of each language is three years, so that students of English IV have enrolled in English as an optional subject after completing the core requirement in language studies and must therefore be considered at the outset to be more able students overall and keener students generally.

The wording of the questions inevitably reflects our original understanding of the nature of the problem and our need to seek confirmation or invalidation of our hypotheses. We could perhaps have asked the question, *«Why do you exhibit such apparent reluctance towards writing as an activity?»*, but it is not difficult to imagine the sort of answers that we would have received. We were also conscious of the fact that there was always the possibility that the students might give us the answers which they considered that we would like to hear, so that in many ways the questions were designed to detect spurious answers by periodically reiterating the same idea in different terms. Anonymity was of course guaranteed to all students, with it being made clear to respondents that the survey was for our own research purposes and that we were interested in their honest opinion. As can be understood from the reading of the questions and the results which were obtained, the almost complete unanimity in the answers which they gave to certain questions and the wide disparity in their responses to others serve as confirmation of the fact that students responded as openly and honestly as possible.

The results are not presented arithmetically, although this would have been possible. As students were given the possibility of providing more than one answer to most questions, by listing items in order of importance, the responses to most questions would appear, if presented



in such a way, as a string of numbers and percentages of interest only to mathematicians. We were interested in trends and not statistics per se, as inevitably there would sometimes be widespread differences in the answers which the respondents gave. The results for questions 2-19 are therefore set out in such a way as to show the responses given most frequently (listed in order of frequency and marked by a plus (+) sign) and those given less frequently or not at all (once more listed in order of frequency and marked by a minus (-) sign).

The responses obtained in answer to the first question suggest that students generally attach equal importance to the skills of writing and speaking, with perhaps a slight tendency for speaking to be considered more important than writing as time wears on. At first sight, this may seem to represent something of a contradiction, as it suggests the reverse of the process normally followed in the learning of a language. It may, however, reflect, on the one hand, a growing feeling of satisfaction, not to say nonchalance, on the part of students with regard to their reading/writing skills and, on the other hand, a growing frustration with what they sense to be their continued inability to eliminate mistakes from their oral production. Such mistakes can obviously be filtered out more easily in writing, in view of the recursive and non-linear nature of the writing process itself (Silva 1990). Overall, however, it would seem that most students regard speaking to be as important as, if not generally more important than, writing, a fact which should not be overlooked as this is perhaps the most important underlying reason for the lack of motivation detected amongst students. Since our students have frequently been nurtured in educational terms on unashamedly behaviourist (people learn to speak before they learn to write) and misapplied communicative approaches to language learning, writing will generally have been presented to them at school as very much a secondary skill and possibly as one that they can easily master without too much effort. As we shall see, except for a few notable exceptions to be observed in the space provided for comments in Question 20, language students do not often claim to write for the purpose of learning something new about themselves and the language medium within which they are working, even though they do see writing as a useful and creative exercise.

The answers provided to question 2 confirm this impression about the lesser importance attached to writing. Although students at the level of English II consider writing to be a very important skill or one which is at least as important as all the others, students at the level of English IV once more show a tendency to give primacy to speaking. In other words, writing is considered to be an important skill by those who are beginning their university course, whereas those who are nearing the end feel that they have mastered the problems of writing and that oral fluency is their main concern. The same trend is again confirmed in the responses given to question 3, in which students appear to be adamant that assessment should not be based solely on writing, even though this is probably what happens in most of the other subjects which they study at university.

The questionnaire then attempted to make a direct assessment of the students' interest in, and commitment to, writing as an activity. The response that one might have expected to question 4 was obviously that they feel bored or perhaps incapable. However, an overwhelming majority of students claimed to be, if not enthusiastic, at least interested in writing. There is not necessarily a contradiction here in terms of the lack of motivation which we had identified earlier: students may feel interested in the prospect of beginning a writing task but, as is confirmed by later results, there is a world of difference between the idea and the execution of that idea. It is interesting, of course, to note that fear and apprehension are also invoked, although these feelings are more common in earlier years of study. Even in this case, however, students have already begun to lay the blame for their lack of motivation and inspiration upon the topics that they are asked to write about, and upon that most elusive of concepts known as «time».

Time should not of course be a major impediment in relation to homework (although students frequently invoke pressure of time in view of the demands made upon them by other subjects) and it is interesting to note — perhaps contrary to our expectations — that homework is considered firstly not to be a burden and secondly to be an essentially private exercise. The fact that, by the time that they have reached the level of English IV, students claim to attach more importance to the assessment factor in relation to homework is indicative of a certain cynicism, although it may also indicate an accurate student perception of teaching priorities. Nonetheless, the most important consideration here is that students, while on *prima facie* evidence apparently reluctant to engage in writing activity, do in fact see homework (i.e. private, unpressurised writing activity) as a useful way of practising a foreign language.

When asked to comment on the difficulties (and thereby possible deterrents) that they found in undertaking a writing activity, students responded slightly differently depending upon the year, or level, of their studies. Although, significantly, organising the writing task and thinking of arguments and points (i.e. the immediate impetus necessary for beginning any writing task) are seen by all students as the most difficult characteristics of writing, by the fourth year the actual mechanics of writing (remembering grammar and vocabulary and spelling) are regarded as barely constituting any impediment at all. Such an attitude is confirmed by the responses given to question 7, where a lack of ideas is invoked by students of English II and III as the most frequent impediment to beginning a writing task. It is again significant that fourth-year students do not claim to suffer from such an impediment and, contrary to students in earlier years, invoke time as the most crucial factor. Although this would seem unusual, in that one would expect more able students to produce their written work more rapidly and with less apparent anguish, it must be concluded that these latter students are saying that they *can* write, that they know *how* to write and *what* to write about, but that they perhaps take more pride in their finished product and are not prepared merely to scribble a text to satisfy their teachers. This conclusion may also go some way towards explaining the cynicism that fourth-year students apparently revealed in relation to the question of homework.

It has been observed that children who are learning to write in their first language often see the writing process as the surmounting of a series of different obstacles and consequently direct most of their attention to what they see as the one great obstacle to fluent writing: content generation (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1983). Any teacher who has ever set his students written composition work will testify to this. Comments such as, *«I didn't like any of the titles and couldn't think of anything to write»*, or *«I'm sorry, but I wasn't feeling very inspired»*, are commonplace. As a consequence of this attitude, the reader of the texts thus produced will note that the students do in fact seem to have been writing off the top of their heads, following a course of action in which the next thought that comes to their mind determines what is written next, and showing no evidence of the organisational procedures that suggest adherence to an overall plan.

Confirmation of this impression is to be found in the answers given to Question 7. Also seen as equally strong impediments to beginning a writing task were the topic and the students' perceived difficulty in being able to write a plan. The responses which they gave to question 8 confirm this perception: students claim to need more interesting topics and more help with organisation and planning. When, in response to these results, the students were directly questioned as to what they understood to be more interesting topics and to make suggestions for future written work, they were manifestly unable to provide anything concrete in answer to this dilemma. Inventive and committed students must surely be able to make of the suggested topic whatever they wish or whatever they think more appropriate, and in many ways this invocation of the topic (as equally the plea from third-year students to be allowed to be more «creative») is

quite probably little more than a smokescreen designed to apportion the blame for their own lack of motivation to a cause seemingly beyond their sphere of influence. The plea for more help with organisation and planning makes considerably more sense as a possible source of improvement, in that this would be a means of providing students with help in the vexed problem of actually getting started. Students of writing skills will not gain the ability to generate ideas through teachers introducing a merely cosmetic change in the titles of the subjects to be written about, but through the training provided by teachers in discussion with these same students before they actually begin their writing task. This point will be discussed again in relation to questions 18 and 19.

Somewhat contradictorily, in view of the difficulties perceived in the responses given to question 7, students revealed a serious concern with the accuracy of the language that they use when writing a formal composition and, perhaps as a corollary, tended to minimise the importance of the ideas which they express in the production of this same text. But this must surely be a reflection of their understanding of «formal» as referring simply to the form of writing that is required by outside authorities, i.e., in this particular case, the teacher and the academic discourse community as a whole. Even if this is the case, it is still difficult to see why the expression of ideas should be so downgraded in importance, unless such student perception is a direct interpretation of teachers' attitudes, i.e. a greater concern with grammatical accuracy in the awarding of marks. Once again, the exception to the rule was to be found in the English III group, who had already identified themselves as more concerned with «creativity» (Question 8) and stressed the difficulty that they had in thinking of arguments and points (Question 6).

In the production of a written text, the writer generally assumes some form of interlocutor and interacts accordingly with that person or the perceived roles of a specific discourse community. Successful speakers or writers therefore speak or write in a register which their idealised readers or listeners will appreciate and can easily understand. It is clear that students must be given serious coaching in all aspects of textual organisation appropriate to their new discourse community. They have to find a way to enter this «formal» world and the first step is to comprehend the new reality that we have implicitly foisted upon them. Unless this is achieved, they will spend their university careers feeling like outsiders excluded from membership of a very privileged club, and this will inevitably affect the effort that they put into their writing.

The question asked in relation to planning (Question 10) was formulated after a long discussion between the authors of this paper and the responses which were given fully vindicate its inclusion. There is, however, some disagreement as to the absolute need for a plan as such when writing an essay. Research has suggested that most writers rarely write to a preconceived plan or model and that it is the actual process of writing which creates the form and meaning of the final text (Zamel, 1983; Silva, 1990). Nonetheless, it seems that most students prefer, and are indeed coached, to write in accordance with a plan and this apparent dichotomy explains the rationale behind the wording and asking of Question 10. Interestingly, the students' answers mirrored to a large extent the predilections of their actual teacher. The students of an apologist for the formal planning of essays (English II) answered quite clearly that they always wrote a clear plan first, whereas those who had not been given such insistent coaching (English III and IV) suggested that they followed a more recursive approach to the planning of their writing. It is perhaps significant that the final-year students doing English as a preferred option, who would normally be expected to show greater sophistication in their attitudes towards writing, do not see the necessity for a clear plan at all. This is not to say that students necessarily write without any plan, but simply that they often prefer to write with less overall structured control.

Those who have done research into writing as a process (rather than merely being concerned with the text as a final product) divide mainly into two camps: the expressivists and the



cognitivists (Faigley, 1986). The former group sees writing as an art, a creative act and a voyage of self-discovery; the latter group sees it as essentially a question of problem-solving through the use of higher-order thinking skills, in which planning is an important first step. The comments provided by some of the English III and English IV students in response to Question 20 suggest that they are moving towards the first of these two visions of writing and go some way towards explaining their lack of concern for an overall plan.

Questions 11, 12, 13 and 14 addressed the problem of teacher correction and learner response to such feedback. It is conventional wisdom that the teacher's most appropriate response to student writing is to make copious comments and corrections on their papers, in the belief that student writing improves «in direct proportion to the amount of time teachers spend on their papers» (Hairston, 1986; p. 117). Students, it would seem, naturally expect their work to be corrected. The theory that students are irretrievably demoralised by huge amounts of red ink (Brown, 1987; Cohen, 1987) has perhaps been laid to rest here. Students certainly seem to see writing as a valuable part of the learning experience and state categorically in all three years that they wish to see all mistakes corrected (Question 11). Actual classroom discussion with students has confirmed this attitude. Although students understandably look first at their mark (Question 12 — indeed any other answer would probably have called into question the honesty of their replies and thus the validity of this survey), they also claim to analyse their mistakes and read the teacher's comments. Teachers' corrections and comments are generally seen as clear and useful (Question 13), although understandably it is said to depend upon the individual teacher. (The anonymity of the questionnaire has prevented the joker who claimed that his teacher's comments were simultaneously both useful and unclear from being identified and summarily executed!) Despite the encouraging nature of these results, it should be noted that response to teacher feedback remains an essentially private activity and very few students actually take the further step of consulting reference books, classifying mistakes or asking the teacher for clarification.

Semke (1984) found that corrections do not significantly increase writing skill. The learner's achievement is enhanced by writing practice alone (Cohen 1987). Too much importance may therefore be allotted to the role assumed by the teacher as arbitrator-reader and not enough to that of the student-writer in the development of composing skills. Such an attitude could result in students doing their written assignments so as to please a given teacher (Cohen, 1987). Although it has been claimed that feedback is only valuable if the composition is subsequently revised, it would appear that such revision takes place only infrequently. Since feedback is frequently regarded by researchers as having little impact, there are two options immediately available to the teacher: either to discontinue such feedback altogether — an obvious, but rather too easy, option; or to tailor the feedback that he gives to the needs of the particular learner in question. Both options will have the same effect of placing the main onus for writing improvement where it should be, on the student.

On the broader issue of why students write at all (Questions 15 and 16), it is interesting to note that writing in a foreign language — in this particular case English rather than Portuguese — is seen as an obvious means to be used for enhancing learning and not as an exercise designed to provide marks for the teacher. It should also be stressed that the pleasure to be derived from writing in one's native language is seen to decline as studies progress.

To be set against this encouraging information are the results of Question 17, which suggest that writing continues to be seen very much as a self-centred activity or, at best, a teacher-student interaction. Indeed, from our sample only one fourth-year student pointed to «some unidentified reader» as the addressee of his/her texts, thereby suggesting that the typical student is not consciously aware of the interactive approach to writing (Widdowson, 1983). According

to Widdowson, since the writer frequently has no obvious audience, he creates one of his own and then enacts the roles of both participants. It is these two together (the writer and the imagined reader) who take responsibility for the establishment of coherent text, even though, in the final analysis, they are one and the same person. Further, according to the same author, it is this covert interactive process which continually provides the writer with a different point of view and gives him certain insights and cognitive connections that he would otherwise not have perceived. The writer attempts to appeal to the reader through a reality upon which they can both agree, at the point where their schemata are in harmony with each other (Johns, 1990). This is the idealised view of what actually constitutes writing, but despite their apparent commitment to the activity it is clear that most students are still writing first and foremost to their teacher.

Question 18 addressed the question of peer collaboration on writing tasks and provided an overwhelmingly favourable response to the exercise. Nonetheless, the reason most frequently invoked for preferring such an activity is that «it produces more ideas», which serves to validate the response to Question 7. Such an activity is shown to be a useful means of giving writers the necessary «push» to get started, but thereafter they are generally speaking on their own.

Despite this inability to divorce writing at university from its classroom context, student responses to Question 19 leave the survey with a satisfying conclusion, in that the possible cynicism mentioned earlier seems not to be invoked. In fact, the best possible answer was probably given by the second-year student who said that «writing is something that everybody says students cannot do». If nothing else, this comment must inevitably force us teachers to question our own motives and raises a very vexed question: can it be that all too often we ourselves are the source of the apparent lack of motivation which served as the spur for the writing of this paper? Certainly, if the evidence of this survey is to be believed, the enjoyment that is to be found in writing and can serve as the motivation for students committing themselves to the activity is all too easily destroyed by teachers and the attitudes which they themselves exhibit towards writing. Ultimately, the motivation to write is an essentially personal inner driving force and not something which can be imposed from outside. The teacher of writing should not so much «teach» writing as facilitate its production. Assessment in the form of marks may often be counterproductive, although helpful and critical appraisal may be the spur needed. Writing must become less of a task or *assignment*, as current jargon would seem to prefer, and more of an exercise in personal expression.

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