Writing presents special difficulties (psychological, linguistic, and procedural) for students. These difficulties include the following:

* It’s usually a solitary, writing alone for a reader who isn’t present.
* Teenage students may not write much in their own language.
* Students may think they aren’t creative.
* Students may not know what to write about.
* Writing needs to be more precise and correct than speech. Therefore, grammatical and lexical knowledge are really put to the test.
* The mechanics? Today’s teens may be less used to writing by hand.
* Some students read less than in the past.
* After all the hard work, the result is their work handed back to them covered in red ink!

There are certain things we can do to help our students overcome these difficulties:

* Have some pair, group, or even whole class writing activities.
* Make writing ‘playful’ at times, to encourage creativity, to motivate students to want to write, and to help them enjoy writing.
* Help students by giving, or prompting, ideas for things to write about.
* Guide students with structured tasks and model texts.
* Teach students writing strategies and micro-skills which they may not have learnt or thought about in their L1.
* Make sure that students have the necessary grammar, vocabulary and linkers to write the text.
* Get students into the habit of drafting and checking their work carefully.
* Encourage students to pay attention to good hand-writing and neat presentation.
* Encourage students to get the reading habit.
* Think about how we can correct written work constructively.

Here are some practical activities that can help our students to develop their writing:

Alphabet Story

Ask students, in pairs, to write a short story which includes every letter of the alphabet. Use as a warmer, with students working in pairs. The restriction of having to use each letter of the alphabet actually helps students to use their imagination.

Word by word story

You stand at the board and get students to give you one word at a time to write a collective story, which you write on the board. Students can also give you punctuation. At the end, you can ask the class to try to improve the grammar and add linkers. The activity is creative, fun, and also gets students working together on a writing task.

Madlib Story

Ask students to write down, for example:

*1 a country 2 a boy’s name – famous, fictional, unusual… 3 a girl’s name– famous, fictional, unusual… 4 a city 5 a verb in the past simple (+ object if necessary)*

*6 an animal 7 a superhero 8 a place 9 a type of food 10 a number*

Then give them a skeleton text to put their words into. Let them compare texts. Then analyse the linkers and use those linkers as a structure for the students’ own text.

This story took place in (1) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. **It all began when** (2) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ met (3) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. They decided to go to (4) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Lots of things happened there. **First** they (5) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. **Then** they saw a big (6) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. The (6) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ attacked them but **just at that moment** (7) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ came and rescued them. (7) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ took them to (8) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and they ate (9) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. **In the end**, (2) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ married (3) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and they had (10) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ children.

The activity is very guided and structured to give the students more self-confidence with writing.

Picture story

Find a picture story with a clear, logical progression. You could (a) give the story in order and ask them to simply tell the story, (b) give whole story jumbled up, (c) give each student one picture which they must describe, (d) give half of the story - the students have to predict/invent the other half. By giving structures, we take away the fear of not knowing what to write about, and students can concentrate more on the linguistic elements of writing.

Sentence expansion – Making your writing more interesting

Give the students a basic sentence, e.g. ‘A boy walked down the street.’ The competition is to make the longest sentence they can by adding as many words as they can to the sentence, e.g. ‘A fair-haired, blue-eyed American boy walked quickly and confidently down the narrow, dark street.’ Get volunteers to write their sentences on the board and then analyse what types of words have been added (probably adjectives, adverbs, linkers of time, relative pronouns, etc.). Encourage students to use these to make their own writing more interesting and descriptive.

Opposites dictation

Dictate a story telling students to write down the opposite of what they hear. The idea of ‘opposite’ here is relative, but this is a positive thing. For example, ‘an old woman’ could become ‘an old man’, ‘a young woman’, ‘a young girl’, etc. After the dictation students compare their stories and see how similar they are. Then ask students to turn their dictations back into the original that you dictated. The guided approach allows for creativity within a very clear, concrete structure.

Using graded readers

As follow-up activities after reading a reader either show an illustration from the book and ask them to explain events before, during and after or tell the students they are directors of a film adaptation. How would they adapt the story for Hollywood? Who would they choose as actors? Would they change the title?... At higher levels, students can take a beginner/starter level reader and ‘improve’ it by using pronouns, linkers, more varied tenses etc.

Finally, it’s also important to think about is how to correct our students’ writing. Here are some questions that are worth thinking about:

1 What colour pen do you use??? Why?

2 Do you underline mistakes or ~~cross them out~~? Why?

3 Do you write the correction yourself or prompt self-correction? Why?

4 Do you use a correction code (e.g. Sp. for Spelling, T for Tense)? Why/Why not?

5 Do the students do anything with your corrections? If so, what and why?

5 Do you evaluate content as well as language? Why/Why not?

6 Do you take into account handwriting and general presentation? Why/Why not?

7 Do you write a general comment as well as a mark at the end of the student’s work? Why/Why not?

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