Tech Gems for Writing: 5 Ideas for Your Teaching Toolbox
By Lea Sobočan

I live and work in a country, Slovenia, where we have a very interesting situation—my students are able to speak quite well; I frequently hear fluent English in my classroom; and the students can often use idioms and slang, and make elaborate English jokes. Where it all goes a bit pear-shaped is writing. Spelling is a constant act of warfare, and some students approach writing along the lines of "Let's throw these letters together and hope for the best!"

The reasons for this situation are plentiful and complex, but I suspect the main reason is the students' exposure to the spoken word from films, music, and TV. Whatever the reasons may be, I do try and deal with the situations that arise.

So how do I make writing relevant for my increasingly more connected students? I try to introduce writing exercises as much as possible, and technology often comes to the rescue. I try not to use complex apps or online tools too much, as I only have one computer in class, but instead try to find motivating tasks and, above all, to take the principles underlying the tools and make sure we can use it either in a low- or high-tech environment.

So here are a few writing exercises that work in a wide variety of contexts and are adaptable to several topics and levels. I will start with writing very short texts and progress to ideas for writing longer texts. The links below are free to use, bar one, and are my personal preferences.

Task 1: Writing and Snapchat

Snapchat often gets a bad rap because of its association with "sexting," but the possibilities that the principle of Snapchat offers are endless.

Simply ask the students to take a picture of something connected to your lesson and write a caption. For the topic of living abroad, I asked my students to take a photo of a scene or an object that people moving to our country might find surprising and write a caption for it. You can make the exercise more challenging by giving the students a word they are required to use meaningfully in their caption. Similarly, you can have students show their photos to their classmates and have the classmates come up with a caption for it.

Snapchat offers its users the option to caption their photos, limiting the space to 34 characters. The character limitation can be viewed from two aspects: either you can see the opportunity as very limiting and therefore challenging, as the students need to compress their thoughts as much as possible, or a very liberating experience—after all, anyone can write 34 characters.

Task 2 : Short Bursts of Creativity With Twitter

Twitter is another principle that can be adapted to various levels and activities. You can ask your students to summarise your coursebook or ESP texts in 140 characters or fewer, or you can find a short Twitter story and have them write a full-length story based on the tweet, if they are advanced enough. You can give them some hashtags connected to your topic (like #pollution, #oceans) and ask them to come up with a tweet from a character in a story you are reading, or about the topic you are currently discussing. Don't be afraid to go a bit out on a

limb! For example, ask them to come up with a tweet Abraham Lincoln would post about #elections2014 or #SATresults.

Task 3: Leaning on the Already Written

Tackling a longer, more connected text is the first hurdle to my students' path to success. I won't pretend these next tips are foolproof, but I generally find that leaning on an established text prompt makes it much easier for the students to go about producing something of their own. But instead of a model, I try to urge students to creatively explore texts.

Text generators are quite well suited for this purpose for two reasons—first, you can use them again and again with different results, because the text they will generate will always be different, and, second, they are sometimes nonsensical or silly, which makes my students giggle. If they're finding the text amusing, they will remember it better.

Generally, I use two different text generators: Movie Plot Generator delivers cookie-cutter movie blurbs and demands very low preparation time, whereas Plot Generator is extremely adaptable, as it allows you to set parameters and is therefore very useful if you want to practice specific vocabulary.

Here are some examples of adaptable exercises leaning on the text produced by the generators:

- Write a dialogue or a scene where the two main characters first meet.
- Write a flashback scene just before the big climax.
- Write a passage in the novel the main character is reading right now.
- Write the passage where the hero realizes he has been betrayed.
- Write the opening/closing scene of the movie or paragraph of the novel.

There are many more that you are sure to come up with, and the students might enjoy suggesting their own tasks.

Task 4: Guiding You Through the Process

If your students enjoy exploring on their own, they might want to check the website The Amazing Word Tamer. An animated adventure in story writing, perhaps more suited for younger students, will take them from character portrayal through genres and plot points. If you have only one computer in class, it is still doable—create a collaborative effort where students can vote on which of their ideas will be finally typed into the computer.

Task 5: Writing Prompts

Teenagers make up the most inventive stories. If you doubt, take a look at any site that publishes "fanfiction" (fiction based on existing literature, television, movies, etc.). For inspiration on prompts that will interest your learners, might I suggest browsing through the following sites:

Reddit Writing Prompts: Take a look at the Writing Prompts, Constrained Writing, and Picture prompts. Reddit is populated mainly by young people, so you're bound to find a prompt that will interest your students.

Writing Exercises and Write About will give you random subjects to write about, random characters, random first lines, random dialogues to incorporate into your story…basically, a wealth of ideas you can use with little to no preparation in your classes. Writing Exercises is a free-for-all, however if you want your students actually publishing to Write About, you will need to pay a monthly fee. If you're only looking for ideas, though, or would like to contribute to the website yourself, it is free of charge.

Of course, all this writing might lead to a pile of papers you might feel obliged to grade. Let them grade themselves, let them come up with their own grading rubric, let them take charge of their own learning. The purpose of the exercise is not to burden the teacher with editing texts, but to lead students onto a path of self-regulated learning and responsibilities.

The basic idea behind this article is that the best ideas for writing seem to be coming from the global community of young and old alike. So embrace this wonderful opportunity that is given to us and allow yourself to be inspired and use this wonderful source of writing ideas that is the Internet.

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