Chapter 8 **Learners' texts**

If literary texts are highly valued, *learners' texts* occupy the other end of the scale. Their purpose is primarily display (rather than, say, pleasure or information), their content is often overlooked completely in favour of niceties of grammar and punctuation, and their lifespan is typically brief and inglorious. (I had a colleague who, I'm ashamed to say, used her students' homework to stuff a pouffe.) Yet learner texts offer a rich resource for language development and it is the purpose of this last chapter to re-evaluate their usefulness.

The main benefits of learners' texts are that they can be used as

- data for diagnosis and evaluation
- data for language awareness raising
- texts in their own right.

Moreover, when students see their own texts used for analysis in the same way as, for example, a poem or a newspaper story, it can be very motivating, even flattering, and serves to break down the distinction between language *learner* and language *user*.

Diagnosis and evaluation

Texts, especially written ones, have a long history as testing instruments, especially where fluency and coherence are valued. Simply testing learners on their ability to write, or complete, isolated sentences is clearly unsatisfactory if their overall ability to communicate at the text-level is an objective. However, even when whole texts are used for testing or diagnosis, there is a tendency for many teachers not to be able to see beyond their surface grammar errors, or to appreciate their strengths irrespective of their weaknesses. To ensure a broader, fairer view, more comprehensive criteria for assessing texts are needed. Fortunately, such criteria are now available, thanks to the work of various examining bodies, and can be used not only for testing but for diagnosis.

For example, the Cambridge Advanced English examination (CAE) includes a writing paper in which candidates are set two writing tasks of approximately 250 words each. The completed tasks are assessed according to the following criteria:

- **content**
  Does the text cover a sufficient range of points, according to the specifications of the task?
- **organization and cohesion**
  Is the text appropriately organized, laid out and linked?
- **range**
  Is there a sufficiently wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures?
- **register**
  Is the style appropriate to the topic, text type, purpose and target reader?
- **target reader**
  Has the writer kept the reader in mind? Would the text achieve the desired effect on the target reader?
- **accuracy of language**
  Is the text accurate in its use of vocabulary, grammar, discourse features, etc?

These criteria can usefully be applied to any text, at any level, in order to assess its strengths and weaknesses.

Discovery activity 8.1   *Evaluating learners' texts*

The text below was written by a pre-intermediate Spanish-speaking learner in response to the following task:

> You have answered an advertisement for a penfriend and you are writing a short description of yourself to your new friend. Include information about where you live, your work or studies, your interests and your family.

Evaluate the learner's strengths and weaknesses according to the criteria above.

8.1

Dear Luis,

I'm very pleased that we're going to be penfriends. I'll tell you a little about myself and you can do the same when you write to me.

I live in Barcelona in an area apartado of the centre, but is an area very populated and too much new.

I'm working of a taxi driver, is a profession very stressant, but the same time very distracting because I'm speaking with the people about lot of historys.

I like doing sport, overcoat running, is marvellous! because after of the run I'm perfectly.

I'm happily married with a woman very nice and we have got thre children, two soons and a daugther, my first soon, he has an arquitect and my daugther, she's going to at the University. Well, I hope you notices soon.

Best wishes,

Carlos.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

- **content:** The text covers all the areas outlined in the task, although fairly minimally, it must be admitted.
- **organization and cohesion:** The text is logically organized: there is an introductory paragraph and a rounding-off sentence, while the intervening topics have been covered in the prescribed way. New topics are separately paragraphed and the layout is appropriate to the kind of letter it represents. There are few connecting devices, but on the whole the organization of the text is transparent enough not to require overt signposting. Some topic signalling devices – such as *As for my job…, Regarding my free time…* – might provide a bit more variety, however.
- **range:** The range is fairly limited, as might be expected in a learner of this level. Core vocabulary words, such as *very, because, like, nice* and *and* are used where a more advanced learner might have chosen *extremely, since, love, charming* and *also*, for example. Where attempts have been made to use less general terms, they usually fail, either because direct or indirect borrowing from Spanish is

used (*apartado, stressant*), or because the word chosen is a false friend (*distracting* rather than *entertaining, historys* rather than *stories, notices* rather than *news*). Grammatical range, too, is fairly limited, although some sentences – especially in the first paragraph – achieve a relatively sophisticated degree of complexity, with subordinate clauses and a variety of verb phrase constructions.

- **register**: On the whole the style is appropriate to the kind of letter this is – neither too chatty nor too formal. The greeting and final salutation are well judged.

- **target reader**: Inasmuch as this is an 'invented' task, and therefore the target reader is imaginary, the writer does take the reader into account, addressing him directly, at least in the opening and closing. But, apart from this, at the interpersonal level the letter is a bit flat. More expressions of the type *as you know* and *I'm sure you know what I mean,* or direct questions, such as *Do you also run?* would have ensured a more positive, engaged reader response. Likewise, giving his family members' names would have made the text more intimate as well as more informative.

- **accuracy of language**: Despite the (suspiciously?) promising beginning, there are a number of basic problems with grammar and lexis, one of the most persistent being the tendency to place adjective phrases after, rather than before, nouns: *an area very populated, a woman very nice*, etc. Most errors, apart from those Spanish borrowings mentioned above, don't seriously threaten intelligibility. However, there is one that only English teachers working in Spanish-speaking countries will be able to explain and that is the use of the word *overcoat* (*overcoat running*) – a problem due to flawed dictionary use, where the learner has looked up *sobretodo* (overcoat) instead of *sobre todo* (above all).

On balance, however, the text rates passably in many of the criteria outlined earlier, especially for a learner at this basic level. It is worth underscoring the point that simply working on grammatical accuracy is no guarantee that the learner will improve on this kind of task and that remedial work might be more usefully spent on extending and refining vocabulary and on developing ways of engaging the reader more directly. ■

Language awareness raising

Just as real texts and coursebook texts provide data for language study, so too can learners' texts be exploited for the same ends. In fact, there's a good case for learners' texts being the *best* resources for a focus on language. After all, learner-produced texts are more likely to be *closer* to the developmental stage that other learners are going through (their *interlanguage*). One disadvantage of using literary texts as models for language instruction is that most literature (especially of the capital L variety) is at such a far remove from what learners can realistically achieve that it may in fact be de-motivating. And the sophisticated, often subtle, use of language in literary texts will either be lost on learners, or be of little relevance in terms of their immediate language needs. On the other hand, learner texts are more likely to include features that other learners can appropriate, given the current state of their interlanguage.

Of course, learner texts have an image problem, being neither 'genuine' nor native-speaker productions and most learners will be justifiably suspicious of a diet of unmediated other-learner input. For a start, how will they know what is acceptable usage (ie standard usage) as opposed to 'error' (ie non-standard usage)? To meet this concern there are a number of strategies available to teachers:

pre-editing

The learner text is 'tidied up' before being made available to other learners. For example, errors are corrected and awkward wordings are reformulated. Yet the content – and ideally the flavour – of the original remains the same. This is analogous to the way that teachers (and coursebook writers) simplify, or adapt, authentic texts, both to make them easier to process, but also so as to maximize their language learning spin-off. What can be particularly revealing for learners is to see the two versions, the original and the edited, side-by-side and to make comparisons and notice differences. In other words, the awareness-raising process is self-initiated, rather than teacher-directed, although, of course, a certain amount of 'nudging' on the part of the teacher is perfectly legitimate.

guided self-editing

This strategy requires learners to do their own editing, but with teacher guidance. Traditionally, this takes the form of the teacher flagging errors in the text, using codes, such as *Sp* (spelling), *Gr* (grammar), *MW* (missing word), etc, and the learner then re-writes the text, incorporating the teacher's corrections. A more time-consuming, but ultimately more helpful approach is *conferencing*, where individual learners meet with the teacher and talk through the text that the learner has produced. In this way, the editing process is both more personalized and more interactive. The learner then re-drafts the text, taking into account the suggestions that came out of the 'conference'.

Self-editing need not involve written texts only. Recordings of spoken texts can also be subjected to similar scrutiny. Here, a teacher describes how he uses recordings to prepare groups of Japanese learners to make joint oral presentations[105]:

> Two weeks before the scheduled final presentation, each group of three students performed a private rehearsal, with me as the only listener. The rehearsals lasted approximately 20 minutes and were tape-recorded. These rehearsals, like the final presentations, were given without the use of scripts, though students were allowed to use small cue cards. I asked the students to transcribe a five-minute segment, which included equal contributions from each of them. They first of all transcribed the extract 'warts and all', including any errors that they made. They produced a typed transcript with double-spacing and made their own corrections in red pen. When they were finished, I took the copy and indicated any corrections or improvements that they had missed. This completed the task and the paper was returned to them one week before they were due to give the final presentation.

In the final presentations, the teacher noted that there was marked improvement in a number of language features, particularly in the use of articles and prepositions, as well as in the overall organization of the content.

guided collaborative editing

Here the editing is done by other students, working as a group, but with teacher supervision. It's important that the process be seen as an editing, rather than a correcting, one. In other words, the purpose is not simply to correct inaccuracies, but to make the text optimally effective, given its purpose and audience. This might involve adding extra content, if desirable. It can be relatively easily managed if the pre-edited text is available on an overhead transparency which is projected on to a whiteboard, and the reformulations can be done by writing either onto the transparency directly, or onto the board. Using this technique, here is how a groups of students, working with their teacher, reformulated Carlos's penfriend letter (text 7.17):

8.2

> *Dear Luis,*
>
> *I'm very pleased that we're going to be penfriends. I'll tell you a little about myself and you can do the same when you write to me.*
>
> *I live in Barcelona in a densely populated but modern area away from the centre of town. Do you know Barcelona?*
>
> *I work as a taxi driver. It's a very stressful job, as you can imagine. But at the same time, it's very entertaining. You won't believe some of the stories I hear.*
>
> *I like doing sport, above all running. Running is marvellous because after a run I feel fantastic. Do you do any sport?*
>
> *I'm very happily married to a wonderful woman called Aurora. We have got three children, two sons and a daughter. The eldest son, Sergio, is an architect and my daughter, Olga, goes to the university. The youngest son, Esteban, is still at school.*
>
> *Well, that's enough about me. I'm looking forward to hearing all about you.*
>
> *Best wishes,*
>
> *Carlos.*

guided collaborative production

In this strategy, the text is produced collaboratively and with teacher intervention. The learners provide the content and the teacher shapes this, by, for example, reformulating what the learners want to say, or write, into more acceptable language. One way of doing this is through the technique known as *Community Language Learning* (CLL). Students sit in a circle and have a 'conversation' about a topic of their own choosing, taking turns to speak, and recording each turn. But before each turn is recorded it is rehearsed for approval. The teacher acts solely as consultant, supplying vocabulary and expressions as needed, but does not attempt to direct the course of the conversation – neither the content nor the turn-taking. Utterance by utterance the conversation is built up. Then the entire conversation is played back and written up on the board. Language points that emerge can be highlighted and commented on.

Here, for example, is the 'raw material' that resulted from a CLL session with a small class of adult beginners in Barcelona:

S1   Emma, where are you going tonight?
S2   Tonight I am going to have supper out.
S3   Where are you going to have supper?
S2   I don't know. I am being taken out.
S1   Who are you going with?
S2   I'm going with, with a guy, but he isn't my boyfriend.
S1   And where is your boyfriend?
S2   Do you mean now?
S1   No, not now. Where will he be this evening?
S2   He's going to play waterpolo.
S3   Hmm, waterpolo. Very interesting. Is your boyfriend hunky?
S2   Yes, he's very hunky.

Learner-generated texts can be used, like any others, as a focus for language work. Often, as we have seen, the process of transcribing a spoken text, or comparing a written text with its re-edited version, is sufficient to bring problematic language issues to conscious awareness.

Learner texts that are stored electronically provide a useful *corpus* that can be consulted to provide data for language analysis, including error analysis. For example, I was once tutoring a Danish student on-line. She had been studying with me for over a year and so I had accumulated a fair number of written texts, including e-mails, from her over this time. In one e-mail she expressed surprise and perplexity at my correction of the following (from a composition of hers):

> *I can't think of any sort of fast food we don't like, but if we have it too often we get tired of it and look forward to have a home made supper.*

I had simply re-phrased *look forward to have* as *look forward to having*, without comment. Now that she had raised the matter, I had a strong suspicion that this was not the first time this error had come up. Simply searching our joint corpus, it didn't take me long to find the following examples from over a year earlier:

> *I look forward to see the vegetable grow … I look forward to my next holyday*

both of which I had corrected, adding a brief explanation of the rule. Also interesting was the fact that in my e-mails to her up to that point I had used the *look forward to* construction eight times, seven of which were followed by an *-ing* form (the exception was followed by a noun phrase). For example:
Look forward to hearing from you then.
Have a great time in Italy – looking forward to hearing about it.

At one point she had produced the correct form herself:

> *I'm looking forward to having peace in my new home.*

But there were several other instances where she had 'slipped'. Cutting and pasting a brief 'history' of our joint use of *looking forward to* helped bring it (back?) to her conscious attention.

Learner texts as texts in their own right

Few learners of English will achieve the degree of mastery achieved by, say, the novelists Joseph Conrad (a Pole) or Vladimir Nabokov (a Russian), but that fact shouldn't dissuade teachers from encouraging creative writing in their classrooms, at least from time to time. The satisfaction of playing with language, of breaking rules and of unleashing the imagination, can be a powerful source of motivation. And, when the resulting texts are 'valued', by being read aloud to the class, for example, or displayed in a class magazine or wall-poster, or on a class web-site, the texts – unlike most learner-produced texts – assume a life of their own.

Poetry lends itself to language play and creative rule-breaking. A writing cycle might typically begin with a theme, or with a model text. Here, for example, is a poem Francesca Verd, a teacher in Majorca, gave her 12-year-olds to read and then to 'mine' in order to create poems of their own[106]:

8.3

> **Only One**
> *Hundreds of stars in the pretty sky,*
> *   Hundreds of shells on the shore together,*
> *Hundreds of birds that go singing by,*
> *   Hundreds of lambs in the sunny weather.*
>
> *Hundreds of dewdrops to greet the dawn,*
> *   Hundreds of bees in the purple clover,*
> *Hundreds of butterflies on the lawn,*
> *   But only one mother the wide world over.*

Here are two of the poems the children (from the 1997 IESO class, IES PAU Casesnoves school, Palma de Mallorca) produced:

8.4

> *Millions of snowflakes in the blue sky*
> *   Millions of swallows on the beach together*
> *Millions of flowers on the grass*
> *   Millions of lions in the sunny desert.*
> *Millions of raindrops falling from the sky*
> *   Millions of fish in the blue water*
> *Millions of stones on the lawn*
> *   But only one father the wide world over.*

8.5

> *Your body is as beautiful as the sea*
> *Millions of fish jumping in the sea*
> *A lot of stars shine in the black sky*
> *In the rainy stones in the country and the beach*
> *Only a swallow in the cold desert*
> *A lot of birds running in the grass*
> *In the winter a lot of snowflakes fallen*
> *As white as the light*

The teacher commented, 'I had a few problems making them understand what poetry is about, but in the end I think at least they got the message that they should be free to experiment because there is no right or wrong… I gave them some words to substitute for *hundreds of: millions of, thousands of, a lot of*, and then we worked to see which other parts could be substituted and we wrote all we said on the blackboard. Then it was their turn to make whatever changes they wanted, on their own or in pairs. Some of them only changed the first verse, others the whole poem; some adjusted to the initial structure, some just changed the whole lot.'

Learner-chosen texts

There are more ways that learners can contribute texts to the classroom other than by writing them themselves. Nowadays, especially if Internet access is available, there is no shortage of texts in English that learners can use as a resource for classroom work. By selecting texts that are relevant to their needs and interests, and that derive from their own immediate world, learners can participate in the kind of 'glocalization' of the content of learning that was mentioned in Chapter 6. That is, a global language (English) is the medium for addressing local concerns, reflected in the learner's own choice of texts.

One Ukrainian teacher, Olga Kulchytska, extended this idea by organizing an advanced class into writing their 'Alternative Textbook', choosing their own themes and texts. 'All the creative work would be theirs and I would just be the administrator. Something amazing happened when I said, "Don't pick topics for teachers – you are going to write this textbook for yourselves and for the next few generations of students." My inert students started naming issues I had never suspected they were interested in.'[107] Themes chosen by the students included such 'PARSNIP' themes as

1 The Individual and Society
   a Alcoholism, Smoking, Drug Abuse
   b AIDS
2 People's Values
3 Human Rights
4 The World after World War II
5 Careers
6 Man and Nature
7 Youth Culture
8 Women and Society
9 The Art of Love

Together with her students, Kulchytska designed a standard unit structure for the course, based on textbook models that they were familiar with, but adapted to suit their own preferences. Each unit followed this progression:

1 Dilemma
2 Facts and Figures
3 Conversational English

4 Text work
  4.1 Text
  4.2 Vocabulary items
  4.3 Words and definitions
  4.4 True/false statements
  4.5 Matching ideas
  4.6 Translation drills
  4.7 Literary translation
5 Communication Activities
  5.1 Discussion
  5.2 What's the difference?
  5.3 Role playing
  5.4 Essay writing

Commenting on the experience, one of the students said, 'Working on the Alternative Textbook gives us the opportunity to choose themes which are more important and useful than those in the textbook. Besides, it makes us read a lot of authentic texts.'

A similar initiative, but one which also incorporates learner-produced texts as well as learner-chosen ones, is described by David Hall, who was working with a group of students of technology in Thailand on what was called the 'Talkbase' course[108].

> On the first morning of the course, the only teacher-provided 'material' of the first week is given to students. This consists of a slip of paper, on which are written the words:

> 'Welcome to the Talkbase course. We would now like you to leave the classroom and to come back again this afternoon ready to talk for a few minutes about X.'
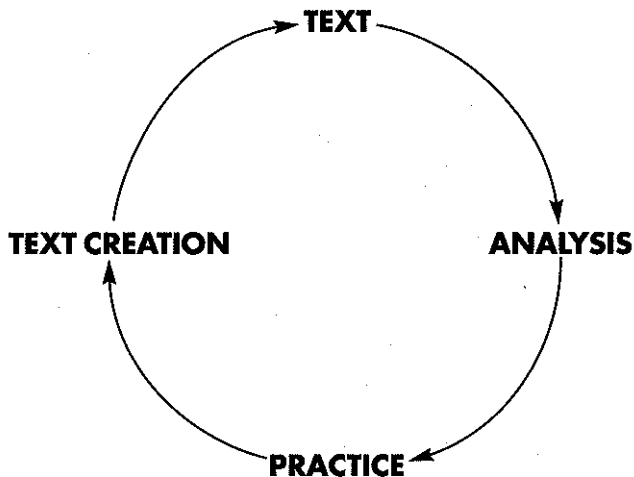
> 'X' is a single word or a phrase chosen by the teacher. Examples are: Drying; Unexpected Outcomes; Autonomy; Water; Technology; Saving.

> First presentations by students are normally short and not particularly coherent, but they are discussed by the teacher and all the other students, normally in groups. At the end of this, students have to plan again, informed now by feedback from others and by their experience of what others have done. They then go off and report back a second time. On the third occasion, they report in writing and writing is passed around among the group for comments. As the first week develops, students begin to find personal meanings in their 'word' and gradually the very wide area covered by the original word is delimited to a topic which is of personal interest to the student.

> As the course develops and students begin to analyse published and unpublished academic discourse produced by others, both form of presentation and organization of content improve markedly and communication within the classroom, as well as outside it, becomes committed and almost totally student-dominated. Except at a very few places, such as the example from their first day of the first week, texts (recorded interviews, journal articles, etc) are found and brought to class by the students themselves, so that the course content is generated by students, not by teachers.

Conclusion

Texts – authentic, genuine, invented, simplified, adapted, spoken, written, literary, found, jointly constructed or learner created – they all have a place in the language classroom. Language learning, I have argued, should both begin and end in texts. The starting point is whole texts, whether the learners', the teacher's, or the coursebook's. These are subject to study and analysis. Individual features of these texts are extracted, manipulated and practised. And then, using these features and with reference to the original texts, new texts are constructed. The process looks like this:

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                    ┌──────►  TEXT ──────┐
                    │                     │
                    │                     ▼
      TEXT CREATION                     ANALYSIS
                    ▲                     │
                    │                     │
                    └────  PRACTICE  ◄────┘
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The cycle can continue – as we saw in the Talkbase example – as long as is necessary, as texts are progressively fine-tuned, elaborated, reformulated, critiqued, corrected, responded to and personalized. But always texts.