



Live Moderated Chat

Welcome to ELT Forum

Today we have Jeremy Harmer in the Chat Room to discuss the current topic: Writing ... does it matter any more?

<Stephanie> Welcome to today's chat!
-Rita- Hello Stephanie!
<Stephanie> The subject of today's chat is Writing: Does it matter any more?

<Stephanie> We won't start until 1pm, so you can use the time to think of some questions.....
<Rita> Hello Stephanie!
<jeremy_harmer> Hi Stephanie, hello Rita!
<Stephanie> Hello Jeremy.
<Rita> Hello Jeremy.
<jeremy_harmer> Hi, I'm sweltering in my loft office on one of the UK's few genuine summer days...
<jeremy_harmer> but once we get going the heat will all be on this site, I hope!

<Stephanie> Jeremy, I know....
<Stephanie> I dare say this wonderful weather will have an effect on the number of participants from UK!
<jeremy_harmer> Well, Stephanie, as to that, anyone or everyone is of course welcome!!
<Stephanie> Shall we start?
<jeremy_harmer> Yes, let's do that.
<Stephanie> Are you ready with your typing fingers, Jeremy?
<jeremy_harmer> I'll try to be more efficient/effective than last time!
<Stephanie> Anyone who has a question for Jeremy....
<Stephanie> please type and send to the moderator at any time....
<Stephanie> The same with comments on what's being said....
<Rita> Should we even bother teaching writing? What do you think?
<jeremy_harmer> Well Rita, I know that in some situations people concentrate on...
<jeremy_harmer> speaking and listening rather than writing, but my own viewpoint is that...
<jeremy_harmer> writing is important not just as a skill, but also as a learning process in its...
<jeremy_harmer> own right (sorry, no pun intended!). The process of writing, even at this kind of speed,...
<jeremy_harmer> is different from speaking.
<Stephanie> do you all agree with this?
<mrabs> Of course we should. How else will students be able to communicate, especially if they want to use the net.
<jeremy_harmer> Yes, mrabs, my feelings entirely, though of course net writing is a whole different variety!
-Rita- Thanks Jeremy, I agree!
-JB- Don't we tend to teach rather outmoded forms of writing like letters and reports?
<jeremy_harmer> Hi, JB. There's some discussion, isn't there about whether things like letters are outmoded...
<jeremy_harmer> True they're not the only form of written communication any more, but my letter box goes clunk every morning with a whole...
<jeremy_harmer> lot of them, doesn't yours?

-josie-	Yes, and very few students actually need to write letters - in my experience, only business English students
<mrabs>	I don't think letters or reports are outmoded. At work we end up doing reports all the time.
-JB-	Hi Jeremy - forgetting my protocol there. Actually no - although I still love to get them I never send them any more and rarely receive them!
-Rita-	I think we still need to learn traditional writing as well as 'modern' forms of writing. The ability to write formal reports is still needed in the workplace.
-mrabs-	I feel sorry for JB. I love getting letters or even postcards from friends abroad and I write them often.
<jeremy_harmer>	Lucky you, JB! Of course a lot of written communication is done by email, but people still produce books, advertisements, letters, reports...
<jeremy_harmer>	(as Rita says) and these are needs for many students.
-JB-	The kind of writing we have been talking (reports, letter etc) about seems particularly to focus on business students.
<jeremy_harmer>	What is problematic for teachers and students, I think is that both letters and reports...
<jeremy_harmer>	are far more varied in format than once they were. Does anyone else feel this?
-josie-	I wonder whether exams test writing because it's easier and quicker to quantify, rather than because it's still a valid skill we want to teach
<jeremy_harmer>	Well, on the subject of exams, some boards and tests (like TOEFL) are moving to fully computerised...
<jeremy_harmer>	versions, but even there candidates will have to write more than just one-word answers...
<jeremy_harmer>	connected writing gives us a window into a student's (English) soul!
-Rita-	Yes, unless testing comprises of just multiple choice answers our students will be somewhat lost!
-miranda-	But students using computers won't need to learn spelling and punctuation if it's all done for them, surely?
<jeremy_harmer>	Hi, Josie. I guess the answer is sort of yes and no! it IS easier to mark written tests...
<jeremy_harmer>	but the actual thinking a candidate does is different if they're writing, isn't it...
<jeremy_harmer>	and I don't think we'd want to deny candidates that process???
-mrabs-	I still can't grasp why we wouldn't want to teach writing. So many students immediately want to write words down as soon as teachers teach them. So it's not just a skill, it's something people really want.
-Monica-	I wouldn't agree 100%% with Jeremy when he says that it's easier to mark writing ...
-JB-	All the adult students I used to teach always prioritised speaking way above writing. I felt I should keep the customer satisfied.
-Rita-	I think our students think more about connected speech if they have to communicate by writing.
<Monica>	We need to remember that as with reading, people *write* differently and this makes marking extremely



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-Monica-	tricky as markers have to come up with really detailed marking schemes
-Monica-	For one, in a writing test there's no *correct* answer ...
-mrabs-	I agree with Monica.
<Stephanie>	Comments JH?
<jeremy_harmer>	Hi Monica! yes, marking schemes are complex, and test designers are always worrying about ...
<jeremy_harmer>	reliability etc, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't try. Writing is a special skill, a special process...
<jeremy_harmer>	too and well worth tapping into for teachers, students, candidates, everybody!
-mrabs-	I don't think Jeremy said that. I don't think it is easier to mark - open to so many differentials.
-josie-	Hmmm, then maybe we aren't labeling 'writing' correctly - it should be analytical language practice or something. The students wouldn't be so turned off by a skill that a lot of them claim they don't need
<mrabs>	Does anybody think writing should not be taught? I think we all agree here.
<jeremy_harmer>	mrbas, you're probably right, though in some education systems there is a considerable emphasis on speaking...
<jeremy_harmer>	at the expense of writing.
-Monica-	No. I'd posted a question earlier where I proposed we thought of writing in a different way. I think we need to ask ourselves what should be teaching nowadays
Miranda	Yes. Students using computers won't need to learn spelling and pronunciation. It's all done for them.
<Fiona>	Do you think the process of writing actually improves grammar skills more than anything else?
-JB-	Writing involves a lot of teaching of form - more than the other skills. That make it quite culturally loaded in my opinion.
<jeremy_harmer>	Hi Fiona. Gosh....
<jeremy_harmer>	that's quite a difficult one, isn't it. I mean the process, the actual process of thinking how to put thoughts into words...
<jeremy_harmer>	must involve not just grammatical processing, but also underlying knowledge of discourse...
<jeremy_harmer>	genre, lexical chunking, etc, so I think...
<jeremy_harmer>	it's a richer process than just grammar - although at low levels...
<jeremy_harmer>	students probably concentrate mostly on getting things 'just right' rather than...
<jeremy_harmer>	aiming for more advanced genre-awareness!
-Monica-	I think writing can actually improve reading ... If you've worked had on the actual process of writing, shouldn't this give you a better understanding of how certain texts are put together?
<Rita>	I think our students think more about connected speech if they have to communicate in writing.
<jeremy_harmer>	That's certainly a possibility, Rita, especially if we're talking about email-type writing...
<jeremy_harmer>	I especially like those methodologists who talk about writing as being more 'speaking-like'..
<jeremy_harmer>	or 'writing-like' - which makes a lot of emails (and live forums!0 speaking-like, probably.

<Monica>	I think writing can actually improve reading ... If you've worked had on the actual process of writing, shouldn't this give you a better understanding of how certain texts are put together?
<jeremy_harmer>	Monica, I'm in total agreement with you there, especially if you have studied models of writing before you have a go...
<jeremy_harmer>	then the whole business of writing-reading-writing (or is it the other way round?)..
<jeremy_harmer> <mrabs>	becomes a kind of magic circle of input and output. Isn't it the other way around? I thought it was reading which helped writing skills - by looking at models this can help your work (or isn't that what we tell our students?)
<jeremy_harmer>	mrabs, I think that reading does inform writing in exactly the way you suggest, especially when we get...
<jeremy_harmer>	students looking at different genres, but when students have to think about how to...
<jeremy_harmer>	put things together in writing, it also gives them (subconscious?) insights...
<jeremy_harmer> <JB>	into the way other people construct text. I think! Would this chat room be a good Forum for students to learn writing?
<jeremy_harmer>	Well, JB, I'm not sure they'd find the topic that interesting? Or perhaps they would!
<mrabs>	not sure. It's quite disjointed and answers to specific questions.
-Monica-	There's a tendency in chat rooms to develop a *special* kind of writing - one full of shortened versions of words and all that ... really difficult to understand sometimes ...
<Rita>	How important is it to teach students about genre?
<jeremy_harmer>	My own feeling, Rita, is that genre is a comfortable term to describe the idea of providing students with models...
<jeremy_harmer>	especially where they are fairly clear. That's why lonely-hearts ads are such fun...
<jeremy_harmer>	for example, because they follow an exact format, and though students, we expect, will not...
<jeremy_harmer>	be writing real lonely hearts ads in English, still that's an illustration of what I mean.
<JB>	I don't think we should 'teach' genre. Just expose students to it and compare to other forms.
<jeremy_harmer>	Yes, JB, I think that's what I was clumsily trying to say (or do I mean write??!)
<mrabs>	And that is teaching it, I think.
<jeremy_harmer>	Sorry. mrabs, didn't quite get that
-mrabs-	If we expose students to it and compare it to other forms that is teaching it, isn't it?
<Monica>	Do you see any role for corpora in writing? Can these be used to help students be more proficient writers?
<jeremy_harmer>	Monica, I have this great dream that we really will be able to use corpora in writing...
<jeremy_harmer>	I think for advanced students. But kind of low-tech student-generated corpora...
<jeremy_harmer>	work fine without computers, I mean where they look at lots of different examples...

<jeremy_harmer>	of writing within a given genre and note down things that come up again and again...
<jeremy_harmer>	so that they can use them with confidence in their own writing.
<Monica>	What do you mean by modifying the kind of corpora available?
<jeremy_harmer>	Monica, I think we need to develop student-friendly software which uses...
<jeremy_harmer>	ordinary people-friendly language and comma and then we have to really look at assembling...
<jeremy_harmer>	student-friendly corpora, excluding some of the stuff that currently clogs up what's available..
<jeremy_harmer>	that's the GIGO principle turned into a virtue.
<Stephanie>	What's your view on your question Monica?
<Monica>	Stephanie, what do you mean?
<Stephanie>	I mean, do you see a role for corpora in writing?
<Monica>	I agree with Jeremy when he says that we need user-friendly software.
-Monica-	And I partly agree with general corpora not being ready for students. They weren't created for students on the first place.
<Stephanie>	Changing the subject.....
<Rita>	Is it still useful to take the product approach to the teaching of writing?
<jeremy_harmer>	Rita, if you mean are there still times when we go straight for the finished result, I think the answer is an...
<jeremy_harmer>	emphatic yes. Process writing - the drafting/re-drafting etc model - is a lengthy business...
<jeremy_harmer>	but getting students just to write - whossh - straight from the heart (gut?) is also...
<jeremy_harmer>	highly valuable and can be great fun!
<JB>	But when we say that a business letter uses these phrases and has this many paragraphs are we teaching English or cultural form?
<JB>	Writing involves a lot of teaching of form - more than the other skills. That makes it quite culturally loaded in my opinion.
<jeremy_harmer>	Well JB (can i come back to the trad bit, Rita, in a minute), there is a danger...
<jeremy_harmer>	with genre writing (your business letter ex) that we're just forcing students into imitating...
<jeremy_harmer>	cultural norms. So there has to be an understanding that studying a genre informs...
<jeremy_harmer>	but doesn't dictate.
<jeremy_harmer>	Writing is culturally loaded, but we want to get students to understand the underlying intention...
<jeremy_harmer>	rather than only having them parrot forms
<Stephanie>	Views form the floor?
-Monica-	I'm not so sure about that. Style and form are key players in comprehension. If someone gets a business letter that clearly deviates from the *established* form, wouldn't that person have more problems reading it?
<jeremy_harmer>	Monica, you've got a point. The thing, surely, is that when we understand the underlying intent...
<jeremy_harmer>	and the kind of way that people go about reaching that intent...



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<jeremy_harmer>	then we know how far we can go outside it and still achieve what we want to achieve...
<jeremy_harmer>	so the thing with students may be to gradually introduce them to more and more ways of doing the same thing..
<jeremy_harmer>	and then encouraging to experiment still further.
<Stephanie>	Do you agree out there?
<jeremy_harmer>	And BTW Rita, yes, I'm sure traditional writing is still worth teaching. For exams, for letters, ads, brochures, reports, fiction, you name it...
<jeremy_harmer>	The problem is we have, now, to chuck email writing in too!
-miranda-	why is adding email writing a problem?
-Rita-	yes, I think it is the only way to make writing more intuitive.
<Monica>	So going back to teaching writing for this e-mail era, what in your opinion are the key things to take into consideration?
<jeremy_harmer>	On the subject of email writing, there's a great little article in this month's development pack...
<jeremy_harmer>	but my own answer is that it's a form, a genre (with lots of little sub-genres)...
<jeremy_harmer>	all of its own and needs to be taught as such...
<jeremy_harmer>	we could have students compare email and snailmail versions of the same...
<jeremy_harmer>	thing, have them become aware of email conventions, get them to write emails in a...
<jeremy_harmer>	conversational way (we can give them paper mock screens if we're not near a computer) etc etc
<Monica>	Will you agree with a view that says that because e-mail is fast therefore is less *official* and therefore less formal?
<jeremy_harmer>	I think email is certainly less formal, but that doesn't mean it lacks form! Some day soon...
<jeremy_harmer>	I hope someone will come up with detailed studies about that form/those forms!
-Monica-	don't you feel that the moment they grab a pencil they will switch to pen-mode?
<Rita>	How important is process writing in the teaching and writing skills?
<jeremy_harmer>	Rita, I think it's vital for the teaching of writing some of the time!
<jeremy_harmer>	In other words, getting students to really think about how/what they are going...
<jeremy_harmer>	to write and then having them draft and re-draft is a really good way of getting them to really..
<jeremy_harmer>	*use* language. However, as I said, I don't think that can happen all the time...
<jeremy_harmer>	partly because of the shortage of classroom time, but also because that's not how we always write.
<Monica>	Process writing is great as it takes all the pressure off the students and gives them the actual time to concentrate on what they want to say and how to say it ...
<Monica>	rather than in the final outcome. ...
-Monica-	Most of the times students are too worried about the final thing, and this stops them from monitoring themselves
<jeremy_harmer>	Yes, Monica, I'm sure you're right that process writing throws up those kinds of challenges.

-Barry-	The trouble is with process writing is that in exams, students don't get the time to go through the process
<jeremy_harmer>	And Barry's point seems a very good one here - which is why process writing works for some things...
<jeremy_harmer>	some of the time.
<Stephanie>	Students do get bored to death going over the same thing ten times
<Stephanie>	Any more comments on process writing before we move on...?
-Barry-	no
<jeremy_harmer>	However, Barry, if students have been well-trained, they will at least edit what they write in exams effectively, and it will...
<jeremy_harmer>	be a concentration on process writing at various stages that has helped them to learn to do this.
<Rita>	What are your views on correcting writing?
<jeremy_harmer>	Correcting writing is a big topic, isn't it. I think the first thing...
<jeremy_harmer>	the teachers and students need to know is how or why correction...
<jeremy_harmer>	is going to take place. What's it for? Is the teacher (corrector)...
<jeremy_harmer>	just a language checker? Or is he/she going to respond to the content of what's being written?
<jeremy_harmer>	Is everything up for correction, or only some things? And, crucially, what happens to the correction...
<jeremy_harmer>	once it's been made.
-Monica-	One other important question is whose *responsibility* is to correct
-Monica-	...
<Rita>	Too often students rely on teachers being the ones who correct and this makes students rather dependent
<jeremy_harmer>	Yes, I think the teacher has to make clear to the student what they are correcting and why, and how important the correction is, so as not to be demotivating.
<Rita>	I think the whole point of correction, by the way, is to help students get better!
<jeremy_harmer>	yes - correction in a positive way!
<jeremy_harmer>	Monica brings us back to process, really! Really good writers correct themselves...
<jeremy_harmer>	and/or if they're lucky also have other people to look over what they've written...
<jeremy_harmer>	so that's the kind of situation it seems to me worth trying to imitate in a classroom...
<jeremy_harmer>	where teachers respond to students' work, other students respond to a student's work, and the students themselves learn how to self-correct/monitor.
<Barry>	Is correcting each other's writing a useful process?
<jeremy_harmer>	Barry, I think it is sometimes for certain kinds of writing. Intermediate students designing ...
<jeremy_harmer>	an advertisement for example. Another student or students look/s at it and responds, comments, suggests alternatives...
<jeremy_harmer>	At a later stage, advanced students read each other's work and come back with questions...
<jeremy_harmer>	and corrections.
<jeremy_harmer>	But I reckon this only really works with well-motivated co-operative students.



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<Rita>	Do you think teaching writing is more effective taught in groups to encourage discussion too?
<jeremy_harmer>	Some kinds of writing work really well in groups for precisely the reason you suggest, Rita...
<jeremy_harmer>	I've never got over Alison Piper's wonderful article way back in the early 80s...
<jeremy_harmer>	about students huddled round a monitor word processing away seemed pretty radical, then!)
<jeremy_harmer>	there's so much that goes on in that situation, cooperation, students thinking out loud, insights from other colleagues etc. But of course...
<jeremy_harmer>	that isn't a universal model. It works for some things, not others. We have opportunities for all sorts of different writing (as this forum has said) which do all kinds of different things.
<Monica>	The goal should be to have independent writers rather and pleasing writers, if you know what I mean
<Stephanie>	I know what you mean
<Stephanie>	One last question before we close....
<Barry>	How early do you think we should introduce written English to young learners?
<jeremy_harmer>	Barry, my own feeling is that we can introduce some kind of writing (if we want) as early as we think we want to introduce it in the students' mother tongue.
-Rita-	Writing relies so much on confidence though! Putting pen to paper is frightening when you are not sure if you are right. Group writing activities can encourage confidence in students and can create a more relaxed atmosphere for learning.
<Fiona>	Writing a class story (creative writing) is great fun in my experience, if you have a well motivated class....
<Fiona>and a class who are willing to listen and share ideas.
<jeremy_harmer>	Yes, Fiona, I love that. I love the story circle thing where they pass the stories around the group..
<jeremy_harmer>	and students who are prepared to have a go (and most are) really get a buzz out of...
<jeremy_harmer>	this kind of thing, and occasional poetry writing...
<jeremy_harmer>	and things like that!
<Stephanie>	Yes great fun....
<Stephanie>	If anyone has any good, practical ideas on this (creative writing) why not post them up on the message board, cos it's time to close now. There's just one more question unrelated to writing from one of our guests for you Jeremy. Are you thinking of writing anything else, either ELT or otherwise, and if so, what? - that was from mrabs
<jeremy_harmer>	Well Stephanie. I'm a writer (sort of!) so I spend heaps of my time thinking about new things to write, from ELT to fiction, to songs and poems. At the moment I am writing course materials, there is more methodology writing in the pipeline, article, The Forum, that kind of thing, (oh and a holiday away from all that stuff).
<Stephanie>	Best of luck with all that. Have a nice holiday, and THANKS to you and everyone who's been here today.
<Jeremy_Harmer>	Well, thank you Stephanie for moderating the session, and thanks to everyone who took part.
<Stephanie>	See you all next month!