

"Education is not a matter of filling a pail but of lighting a fire."

William Butler Yeats 1865-1935

(Irish writer of poems and plays, considered as one of the most important Irish writers, winner of the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature)

I would like to divide my speech into four different sections. In the **First Section** I will explain why I chose the development of writing skills in the EFL class as a topic worth studying in depth for my thesis. In the **Second Section** I will talk to you briefly about the different approaches used by different methodologists as of the second half of the 20th century. I will concentrate on the three classical approaches that have been most used and acknowledged. In the **Third Section** I will talk about my modest and original contribution to the field: that is, the introduction of individual situations in the approach to writing, the individual and cultural situations of each group of students and the reality they are immersed in. In the final **fourth section** I will give you my conclusions concerning this issue.

Let us begin with the first section concerning the reasons why I have chosen writing skill to research into. Four main reasons come to mind:

- 1) **Creative thinking.** When talking about creative thinking, the first thing that comes to my mind is an equation in which I see Creative Thinking with its own goal: **A piece of art** because students can do wonderful things, although teachers should guide and encourage them. How? I will deal with that later. **The skill of writing is unique in the sense that it is the only skill which allows students to produce a work of art.** When that goal is attained we simultaneously

become aware of something else that has taken place quite imperceptively: we have grown. **Personal growth** in that search for that work of art. Together with the students we have done research, we have read authors, exchanged ideas with friends or colleagues; we have listened to music, attended lectures, researched information from reliable sources. Therefore, the person who becomes the author of that piece of art is no longer the person who started writing that piece of art. Simultaneously, when you have become an "artist," you are at the same time in a position to gain a certain amount of personal growth. The equation goes like this:

Creative Writing ⇨ Creative Thinking ⇨ Artistic expression within a piece of work ⇨ Realizing personal growth in the student

Creative Thinking ⇨ Creative Writing ⇨ Good Written Piece ⇨ Work of Art ⇨ Personal Growth

Of all the different skills that we are supposed to teach and develop when teaching a foreign language, only speaking and writing are productive skills. Of course, I would not like to underestimate the importance of speaking. However, in my modest opinion, writing is the skill to be developed and should occupy a privileged position with respect to the other language skills because it ranks first in developing Creative Thinking. Consequently, it enhances the essence of the human being, the only creatures God meant to think creatively and use reason.

The development of Creative Thinking in a person will make him a **free, reliable, knowledgeable and full-fledged virtuous** human being and this is the ultimate goal of education. I think that of the productive skills, writing is the most closely concentrated on this idea of developing educated human beings, if we mean by an educated person one who has the characteristics I have just mentioned.

So it is this "human" aspect involved in the teaching of how to develop writing skills that made me choose writing as the key skill for being—in my opinion—the most enriching one, for teachers as well as for students.

Reason Number Two: The Power of a Pen in the sense that spoken language for being informal, spontaneous, not being orderly or methodical lacks the form needed to make an impact, a strong impression on others. While preparing my speech, I remembered **Isak Dinesen**, the author of "**Out of Africa.**" In that book she describes the men from the KIKUYU TRIBE, their first exposure to written texts. She says: "I learned that the effect of a piece of news was many times magnified when it was imparted by writing. The messages that would have been received with doubt and scorn if they had been given by word of mouth, were now taken as 'gospel truth' "

If we look back on Argentine history, I remember one of our patriots, the teacher D.F. Sarmiento also writing about the power of the pen. And another historical character, the French General Napoleon, said that he was more afraid of a pen than of 1,000 bayonets. This is precisely the advantage of writing, because writing implies putting the brain to work, reflecting and thinking and that is why the force of a

written word is regarded as more powerful than the force of a spoken word.

Third Reason. A moment of sharing is especially better than speaking. Writing is always **message oriented**. I want to send SB a letter, a mail nowadays, a postcard to a friend. Also to apologize to SB, perhaps together with a bunch of roses, etc., a box of chocolates. I modestly think that writing and music are the **Art expressions** capable of awakening the most tremendous and wonderful feelings and sensations in the mind and soul of a human being. These are the arts **per excellence**. We are not the same after having written or read certain books and we are not the same after having listened to certain music. This is also the reason why I connected writing with music, as we shall see later.

Creative Writing ⇨ Creative Thinking ⇨ Production of a work of Art ⇨ Personal Growth ⇨ Education

Fourth Reason. This leads me to the fourth reason, the skill of writing: a moment for **sharing**. This by itself is motivating, especially if the class is a workshop in which the student can share experience with his peers and teachers. This is highly motivating by itself. When each contributes with his personal ideas, ideals, knowledge, expectations, feelings, etc. (The four skills are practiced, White and Arndt workshop, process app.) We are not just teaching English writing to students. We are pointing at something higher—education.

Second section Product approach

In this second section, I would like to describe briefly the three classical approaches to writing that have mostly

been used during the last few decades, together with the aims they pursue.

I will first refer to the **product approach** which tends to focus on **FORM AND ACCURACY** at sentence level. Classroom activities typically involve students working with models of correct language to copy and imitate, along with models of incorrect language to improve upon and change. We can speak of its structure as the following:

Pre-writing Phase ⇨ **Writing Phase** ⇨ **Post Writing Phase**

The writing is **linear, not recursive**, as we shall see in the process approach. The **source of feedback** is the teacher and the work which results is always **individual** in nature. The writing is guided all the time. The **typical writing activities** involved in the Product Approach are:

- Filling gaps in sentences
- Using a model sentence to construct similar ones.
- Writing sentences following a model.
- Translation of sentences (Numan 1989)
- It focuses on the end result of composing (a letter, essay, etc., the finished product.
- The teacher's main concern is to ensure a final product which is grammatically correct.
- In class the emphasis is on copying or imitating.
- The teacher participates at the beginning of the assignments of a task and at the end to evaluate the accuracy of the finished product.

Byrne gives some credit to the product approach by saying that for certain concepts there is no other possibility. Let me tell you my opinion about this and what I personally do with this approach. What

happens is that I cannot discard anything; perhaps in the past we adopted an attitude of approval or disapproval but in my case my attitude is of **blending**. What does this blending refer to? I need to deal with the two other classical approaches to answer this question. I will do that later on.

The Genre Approach

Just two words about the Genre Approach. It was developed by Swales in the 1990's. It's aim is to turn writing into a **communicative tool** without losing sight of grammar and text organization. It puts the emphasis on:

- How to write with a common purpose in mind, aware of reader's expectations.

- Appropriateness valued over accuracy. It highlights interaction between reader and writer.

- It is socially oriented.

- The student should take his audience into consideration, as well as the cultural and social background of the potential readers.

SWALES SPEAKS OF GENRES WHICH EMPHASISE COMMON EVENTS, THE MEMBERS OF WHICH SHARE SOME SET OF COMMON PURPOSES.

Three. The Process Approach

It is known that writers in real life do not write in a simple, linear progression. On the contrary, their minds are always generating ideas and even when creating a text they go through some recurrent steps. Therefore, there has been major change which stems from writing instruction. This change has been a **profound shift** in the conception of what writing involves.

Current approaches to the teaching of writing emphasize the cyclical, recursive and complex nature of writing processes and are reflected in a model of writing that does not work in a **linear fashion** but instead constantly revises what is written in the light of what has been produced so far. According to the Process Approach, the three major stages are:

Pre-writing ⇨ **composing and drafting** ⇨ **Revising** ⇨ **Editing**

Pre-writing is the starting point where writers ask themselves questions dealing with why and for whom they are going to write (connected with the *Genre/Social Approach*). These two questions: sense of purpose and sense of audience are present. The second stage (after ideas have been generated through class discussion, brainstorming, mind mapping, etc) is called **composing and drafting**. Writers are in a dynamic interaction with the text and with the potential readers they mean to reach. At this stage (White and Arndt) put the emphasis on the coherence of the writing more than on grammar accuracy. There is a constant exchange of ideas: teacher, students, student-student, so the class turns into a workshop in a **sharing atmosphere** capable of motivating the generation of ideas.

The Third Stage

This is the **revising-editing** stage. It consists mainly in checking several major points: the information provided must be sufficient and relevant. Students are encouraged to revise in order to make any necessary adjustments. How to say something in a better way, how to improve what has been written.

To summarize, we can say that these recent developments have in turn brought about a significant change in the role of writing in the curriculum. While in the past, writing was considered merely a

means to achieve a better command of the target language, (writing used to be typically assigned for homework and it usually involved meaningless drills to master grammar structures or writing compositions in which form accuracy prevailed) nowadays writing is viewed as a **process**, as communication with an audience and as serving a common purpose (**writing is now denoted class time**, it is taught as a skill in itself and teachers are encouraged to attend to **content** before **form** and to respond to student's writing as work in process rather than judging it as a finished product (Samuel 1975).

These two crucial changes are reflected in the current Argentine writing curriculum: According to the Federal Law "Writing is a communicative, constructive and interactive process. In the writing process, the writer, guided by a purpose, organizes information or opinions which he wants to get across to a reader. Texts are not produced instantly. Given the nature of writing, it is necessary to draft and re-draft a piece of writing until it reaches the standards set by the writer." (**Contenidos Básicos Comunes para la EGB 1998: 13**)

The development of the writing skill should aim at personal expression, focusing not only on the final product but also on the process of writing. This implies that strategies that facilitate the composing process need to be developed, such as generating ideas, planning, structuring, drafting, editing to achieve coherence, cohesion and suitability in terms of form, organization, style and lexis. (**Contenidos básicos comunes para la Educación Polimodal 1997.11**)

(**Tribble (1996)** makes a distinction between writing to learn to practice the target language in a controlled way and "learning to

write" (to convey meanings effectively). This distinction is crucial for both teachers and students.)

Each group had distinctive characteristics, distinctive needs, distinctive interests, distinctive capacities and this was what turned my class into a **challenge**, not only for my students but for myself as well. And that **challenge** was greatly responsible for the **birth** of my final contribution.

Section Three

The time has come for me to talk about my original contribution and that is the individual situation approach to the teaching and development of writing skills in a foreign language. I can tell you that throughout my teaching career, no matter the essence of groups, schools, institutions, etc. I have always encountered three main problems that prevented the students from developing their writing skills.

Problem Number One. It's extremely difficult to write about things you ignore.

Problem Number two. It is vital and extremely important to stimulate the production of ideas (how to do it).

Problem Number three. Students in general, except at university level, are rarely aware of the importance of writing as a communication tool. So the challenge as I have told you was to find a concrete and practical answer to these three problems. The individual situation approach is essentially the answer to these three problems, present in our Argentine classrooms. (Reading, Pictures, Music).

I understand that the **lack of interest and boredom** shown by the students was due to the fact that more often than not, they

were asked to write about things or subjects which were far away from their interests. If you want to attract SB's interest or curiosity in any aspect, you must start by talking to that person about his/her world, about issues familiar to them. For that reason I decided to leave aside technicalities for a while and face the real challenge: how to arouse curiosity and interest, how to **engraft** that thirst for knowledge and that desire to write creatively, that is to say, how to light the fire Yeats referred to. So, in answer to Problem Number One, I would say that this approach focuses attention on the interests of the students. The student's world becomes the starting point.

I must confess that I have often observed students looking blankly at the sheet of paper before them, not knowing what to say or write. Do I question what can be done to add sparks of light to their apparently dull creative process? **Here the role of the teacher as a presenter is vital.** He will have to awaken curiosity and active concern for issues of interest to them, their families, their neighbors, their school and their community. Why nuclear contamination? There may be a leaking pipe next door, drains that always get clogged when it rains, an abandoned house around the corner visited by rats or thieves. These are all topics they can write about because they know about them, they are informed about them and that is in itself highly motivating. Familiarity with or interest in the topic at hand always triggers good production. **I honestly believe that the individual situation of the students is the very source from which to draw topic choice and this means to ensure creativeness in writing.** (I agree with Ortega y Gasset at this point when says that a human being cannot be considered unless his surrounding circumstances are considered. And obviously this idea is very closely connected with teaching in general.

I have used the overall situation of the students in their writing practice for I believe this is the ultimate goal of education: **to help people develop as persons who can think and discuss, who can freely express their opinions and who can write about their known living reality.**

Let me share techniques I have used to put my ideas into practice. A careful selection of reading materials again adapted to the characteristics of each group, has always proved an excellent resource.

Once, I asked a group of adult students (intermediate level) to read a poem, "Interval" that had been written by another student, a 72 year old lady who had just gotten divorced. Then I asked the group to elaborate a piece of writing based on the poem. Let me read the poem for you:

Interval

"John, we have visitors.
Let us pretend to be happy.
The house all organized.
Let us pretend to be in harmony
And emotional equilibrium.
Let us have the maid wear an apron.
Let us smile serenely
Speak in hushed tones and step
Lightly (just as if tranquility were
Our permanent guest).

Lay the table, a flower in the vase,
Serve the tea with lots of ceremony.

Comments in general.

"John adores it, you too? That's funny."

Yes, life is like that.

However, there does not exist a problem which cannot be overcome—and then with everything functioning with

Total perfection, every guest measured,

To create a good impression

Everything in the right place.

The heart in synchrony.

John, we have visitors.

Get the newspaper off the sofa.

Hide the anguish in the cupboard."

(María Jesus, 72 years old)

This work was the last stage after weeks of reading about marriage, happiness and individual worlds. So I asked Ms Lucia to read out her poem and secondly I asked the group to recreate the topic of the poem and write a good piece of prose.

Olga, a 45 year old married lady wrote the following:

"Evening Guests"

John was a bit stiff at the beginning. I noticed some sadness in him. He did not want to speak much. He made some brief comments

and kept looking out of the window as if he were not there. He seemed to be thinking about something else. His soul in sorrow.

"What should I do?" Should I force him to speak? I wondered. In the meantime, I was paying attention to our guests. They were important to me. I could get a good, a higher position in a British company. The very idea of a promotion at work cheered me up a little but I was not in the least happy. I was aware that my marriage was succumbing and I had no idea of how to handle the situation. However, I knew I had to enjoy the moment with our guests. I sat by John, half my back on him, addressing them all the time. I had a cup of coffee in my right hand. All of a sudden, I dropped the spoon which I had used to stir my coffee, onto John's feet. I had to make him join our conversation. He looked at me, then down at the spoon and leaned downwards to pick it up.

"Thank you John," I said. Why don't you join in?" I added, smiling at him. "Sure," he answered and as if this had clicked him back to reality, he made us laugh with his funny comments.

"What a wonderful change!" I thought. He might have been waiting for me to ask him to participate in our conversation. I was not sure about it. He was quite unpredictable at times. Time went by. It was late at night when our guests left. I was tired. I was perhaps a little happy now as I felt I had made a good impression on them. John said nothing and went to bed. If only I had known what he was thinking about!

I lay on the sofa in the living room. The light was dim and daydreaming about my future, I fell asleep." (Olga, 45 years old)

So the different ways to generate ideas like readings, poems, charts, short stories, fables is enormous. The same happens with

pictures. But the vital point is that this material should be closely connected with the **cultural background** the student is immersed in.

(End)