I set the different steps for homework for the following tasks and remarked them again and again, asking whether they have done it (besides their normal homework). When I get their texts, I first comment on the content, then correct the received texts in a way that is appropriate to the students’ level. When I get the printed copy and still find errors that I have overlooked after repeated proofreading, I remind myself of Tim Murphy’s kind mantra: “I love mistakes. Mistakes show I’m trying.”

Sometimes, even ex-students are willing to contribute and earn their copy that way. The latest Rollercoaster issues even contain a part in Spanish with contributions from the former Upschool students and my classmates in my Spanish class, who were quite happy to contribute. What has motivated me to invest effort, time, and money on 29 Rollercoaster issues so far is, among other aspects, expressed by one of my students, and by an ETAS friend.

Feedback from one student

“it was very interesting and exciting to read all these many different reports of relationships. But it was quite difficult for me to understand all the statements very well. I spent a lot of time reading the Rollercoaster and doing the quiz, it took me many hours, but I learned new words. And it was good entertainment and a pleasure for me.”

Feedback from my ETAS friend Allison

“The Rollercoaster, by the way, is brilliant. I sat down and read them in one fell swoop – once I started I just couldn’t stop, so many lovely writings on people’s lives. Even the smallest and smallest of our kids are just great.”

What I wrote in my editorial to the 2009 Rollercoaster issue on the topic “important” is true for any topic and is something that also makes our ETAS Journal worth reading and contributing to (see also Readers’ Cafe!) “What makes this Rollercoaster issue so rich as the others in the past is, among other things, the simple fact that all our writers have different backgrounds and look at a given topic from their own perspectives. By adopting any writer’s point of view, the readers of this issue will see their own world in a different way, perhaps through the lens of a camera or by reflecting on our memories, dreams or the reasons for learning – by revealing new perspectives to interpret the daily incidents or experiences with other cultures in meaningful ways.”

English At Home’s Rollercoaster invites submissions from teachers and students to our annual Issue 20. Contribute and earn a printed copy. Please email me at englhome@bluewin.ch

Reference


Appendix 5

Recipe: How to become a diary writer*

By Susanne Buschgang

Ingredients:

Booklet: Devote enough time to choosing a beautiful little book even when you have to spend some money on it, because it will accompany you for a long time, keep you busy for hours and days, and it is cheaper than anything else (cinema, going out, etc.)

Room: Look for a proper place for your booklet somewhere in your flat. You must be able to grab it any moment, for instance, when you hear a quotation on the radio and you want to jot down immediately.

Time: Don’t think about it! You’re not supposed to sit down and write and wait. Your diary is patient. It’ll be happy to be opened for some short moments. Don’t expect to write every evening! Just write whenever there’s something worth remembering.

Focus: Practice! Get a good eye for interesting situations. Your day is full of moments. Then note down the most fascinating ones.

Hints: Research in the Field: When you have a time for a cup of coffee or go for a drink, take your diary with you. You might hear something interesting talked about on the next table or see a beautiful film outside the window that might prompt you to reflect on something that is worth jotting down.

For my part I appreciate when Elisabeth (my teacher) has a look at my English attempts and even comments them. So my diary is a correspondence with her, too, which means: I’m highly motivated to write again.

But because I don’t want to do without my diary for several days I photocopy some of my entries for Elisabeth. And later I complete them and am happy to re-read my own thoughts …

*Susanne Buschgang was a student at English At Home when she submitted this piece above to one of our Rollercoaster issues. She is a primary school teacher and mother of two. She kept up diary writing in English for several years and gives me most of it for correcting and commenting, and a very rewarding task for me as a teacher. Not content to keep her notes published here, she stressed the importance of teachers being a source of motivation to continue writing.

Sample diary**

Today: Hands on a window pane. An enormous window pane. Hands with blue nails, all of them. Men in overalls. Eight with their backs to me, two looking at me, behind the huge window pane, in a shop. Copy, Read, Real teamwork. Eight men removing a huge window pane with Copy Quick printed on it. Slowly, carefully. One of them watching, directing. Nine working, Slowly, slowly removing the window pane. Pulling it onto a long, low cart. Nine blue men pushing the long window pane cart loaded with a huge window pane towards a huge car loaded with other huge window panes. One man, the same as before, walking next to them, trying very hard to look busy.

And immediately I realize how badly I need a camera including a photographer’s skills. But neither do I have a camera at the moment, nor do I have the skills in general. So I stick to my note book!

**The above is an excerpt from Susanne Buschgang’s diary which was published in Rollercoaster (2009). The style, words and the content, depending on mood, experience, and situations. The excerpt is special because of its chosen style that sounds more like a poem (creative writing in its most personal, poetically correct parts). Susanne was sitting in a cafe when she observed the scene described above. I especially like her conclusion.

Appendix 2: Examples of “creative writing in its strictest sense” that have been included in some past Rollercoaster issues:

Acrostic poems by B2 students:

Winter: I think about diving
Into the warm sea.
Never of cold nights and fires
Roasting toasting.
Tiger beer instead of hot tea
Excellent fish instead of Fondu
Roasting clouds instead of gently falling snow.

Winter
Prevent
New
Thorns of
Optimistic
Realities

Contributions by A1/A2 students:

My hobby
Knitting, knitting is my great hobby.
I knit socks, jumpers, caps and trousers of wool and cotton.
In June I’m going to become a grandmother.
I’ve just got the wool for baby socks and trousers. Now, I must knit!

Silence

I need moments of silence every day.
Silence is medicine for my soul.
Silence gives me energy.
Silence makes my body relax.
Silence should be a daily exercise for all people.
Talking in silver and silence is gold.

About the Author

Elisabeth Miélet first trained as a Swiss primary school teacher before studying English literature, where she earned her Lic Phil I (Diplom für Pädagogische Lehrerausbildung an Schweizer gymnasialen Schulen) in 1978/79. In 1987 she opened her own language teaching centre EFL. In adults 18+0. An active member of ETAS for many years, Elisabeth is a regular workshop presenter at EFL 90 Days and Annual Congress and AESM, where she shares her long teaching experience and love of English.

The greatest creative writing activity ever

ADAM JOHN SIMPSON

Before you start reeding, I would like you to consider these questions: Have you got a favourite lesson plan or class activity that you come back to and use again and again? What does it consist of? What makes it work?

What follows is my response. This is an activity that I have used probably with every class I have taught in the last 12 years.

First, I will describe the activity, and then I will tell you why it is great.

1. Write the following questions on the board:

1. What have you done on the planet?
2. Why did you go there?
3. Describe the two people who are with you.
4. Why is your spaceship damaged?
5. When you decided to leave your ship, how far did you walk?
6. What were you looking for?
7. Did you realise that someone was following you?
8. Describe the creature.
9. While you were running away, you tripped and fell. What happened?
10. What was the big surprise at the end of your story?

2. Explain what the learners are going to do.

1. You are going to write a paragraph that tells a story.
2. Your paragraph will be a response to these questions.
3. Any sentence you write is OK, but you must follow the sequence of questions.
4. You can ask me for help while you are writing.

3. Go through one or two questions with the group. What kind of language use might we use to answer the first question?

1. We have been on the planet for two weeks/since last month.
2. We arrived here yesterday.

How would we describe the people who are with us?

4. Assign a period of time for learners to write, 20 minutes is long enough for most to finish.

5. As learners finish, get them to swap their stories with each other and let them read. This keeps the eager finishers busy, while the slower writers are not disturbed and can get on with their writing with.

Why does this work so well?

1. You can adapt this to the level of your course. For instance, you can phrase the questions so that they are all in the simple past, so that it is what you wish to practice.

When did you arrive on the planet? Why did you leave your friends?

You can equally make it more complex:

Parallel past continuous: While you were escaping, what was chasing you?

Passive structures: Describe the creature that was following you.

2. It is structured and yet very creative. The format, in which the progression of the paragraphs follows the questions, creates a comfortable framework to work in. Nevertheless, there is a huge amount of freedom for each learner to express themselves when answering each individual question. You are guaranteed to be bombarded with questions with the adjectives they want to use for description and verbs they need for specific actions. The questions are designed so that they always lead on from the previous, regardless of how question has been answered.

3. It is adaptable. I use the above model with my teenage university students. I’ve changed the setting to a car that’s broken down near a scary haunted house for adult learners, and even a car breaking down on the way to a train meeting in a Business English class.

Fun and have let me know if you use this. As I said, this is an old favourite, not just of mine but of every learner I have used it with. I believe that this is an adaptation of a similar activity in a resource book called Recipes for tired teachers: Well-seasoned activities for the ESL classroom (1984) by Chris Sian.

Editor’s note: This article originally appeared as a post on Adam John Simpson’s blog Teaching English: http://www.teachingflesh.com/2013/04/the-greatest-creative-writing-activity-ever/ Reprinted here with the kind permission of the author.