AN APPRAISAL OF THE WRITING TASKS OF ADVANCED SPANISH STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AS L2

Roberto A. Valdeón García
Universidad de Oviedo

The communicative approach has based its teaching techniques on the division of the process of learning languages as L2 into four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. The importance attached to the spoken word has benefited the latter two at the expense of the reading and writing skills, which fell in a state of semi-oblivion. Course writers of the 1990's have re-introduced the printed word as a fundamental part of the learning process, since foreign students will be required, sooner or later, to understand a written text or write an application or a letter. ELT specialists have also become interested in the written word and, thus, new books on the subject have recently been published while older ones have been revised and updated. This article aims at examining the importance of including the written skill in our syllabuses (from the evidence that correcting our students's compositions provide) and at suggesting ways of making our students aware of the need to improve their writing tasks.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE WRITTEN AND THE SPOKEN WORD

The main problem that the teachers and students of English alike encounter when facing a writing task is the lack of immediacy of the written word as opposed to that of the spoken one, which had been given total prominence in course books in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Coursebooks such as *Interaction* (O'Neill 1976) aimed at using structures in conversational English, with little space left for the written word, whereas others like *Broader Context English* (White & Davies 1975) presented the composition tasks in an unappealing way without much guidance from the authors. The trend has changed in the last decade with courses like *Headway* by J. & L. Soars, which provide writing exercises in varied and effective ways allowing the students to have the feeling that they are using their English to communicate.

This is precisely one the factors which we should take into account when designing our syllabuses, that is, the fact that the written language is also an act of communication and that it should be treated as such in the classroom, not outside the classroom. As White and Arndt point out: "It is precisely this capacity of written language to transcend time and space that makes the teaching and learning of writing such an important experience" (1991: 1). This should make us consider the need to teach and help our students with the difficulties that arise when practising their written English. These might be greater than their spoken difficulties, considering that the tendency is to reduce the amount of time dedicated to writing techniques and correction in the classroom to a minimum, since we seem to believe that writing is a task which can be carried out as homework without the teacher's guidance or assistance (maybe because, as Howard points out, "the emphasis has recently swung from written to spoken English" 1985: 3). Nevertheless, as when producing any other act of communication in the target language, the student will require our help to succeed in conveying a message. Let us not forget that, as Hedge says, "most of the writing we do in real life is written with a reader in mind –a friend, a relative, a colleague, an institution…" (1993: 9) and, therefore, it will require the same level of accuracy as the spoken word, or even greater since the written language is registered and, consequently, the recipient will be able to read it as often as desired, while the spoken word tends to be more relaxed and can be corrected immediately: style in writing cannot only be explained "by reference to grammar and vocabulary" (Carter & Nash 1990: 15).

Consequently, the first characteristic of the written language to be taken into account is its dissociation from the spoken word, since there are considerable differences which should be emphasized even before examining other points. We shall follow Lewis' clear points (1993: 11-17) implemented by other authors' ideas and by our own experience. Here are the important differences for our students to bear in mind, even before attempting to tackle a written task:

a. The spoken word is used often to establish and maintain personal relationships, while the written one is often used for more formal purposes (e. g. , letters to a bank).

b. In speech the "audience" is present, specific, and often known personally to the speaker, while when writing the recipient/reader is usually distant and, on some occasions, unknown to the writer.

c. The listener usually gives an immediate reply, if required or requested, while the reader provides a delayed reply or no reply at all.

d. In spoken English, there are repetitions, pauses, gaps, etc. which are specific to the English language and which help the listener understand the message; when writing, we use words following established patterns which are not flexible. Punctuation should be paid special attention to.

e. Speech cannot be replayed and, consequently, certain mistakes made by the student of L2 may, and in fact will, be forgotten or even pass unnoticed; some mistakes can be easily corrected. Writing is permanent and, therefore, can be read as many times as desired: the mistakes will remain unchanged, leaving a permanent bad impression.

f. In spoken speech, we tend to use more words, while in written English we tend to condense all the information in brief and precise paragraphs.

g. Gestures are also a feature of spoken English (although less so than in Spanish or Italian): body, expression, movement are often important in conveying meaning. In

a written text, specially the type of tasks our students are required to do, all the meaning is usually in the words.

Our students should be familiarized with these guidelines at the start of each new course, and even before initiating a writing task. This outline will make them aware of the differences between the two modes, which, in its turn, will help them define each written task as well as understand the corrections made by their teacher.

2. A CLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS' ERRORS

Before we consider our students' mistakes and attempt to classify them, we should specify both the corpus of written texts we have analyzed and the levels of our students. The mistakes in the following classification will be based on approximately eight hundred compositions corrected over a two-year period corresponding to the academic sessions 1993-94 and 1994-95, and on a five-year observation of our students' mistakes in written exercises. The list does not aim at covering all those mistakes systematically, but rather at providing a clear definition of common errors and suggesting ways of improving them, both through individual work on general problems and through monitored work carried out in the classroom. Therefore, for reasons of clarity and emphasis, some of the difficulties listed below will overlap one another. In this paper, we shall obviate previous differentiation between errors and mistakes (Chomsky 1965; Corder 1973: 256-57 & 282-92; Van Els & al. 1984: 48-49) and use both terms without distinction.

As regards the level of the students, we will be dealing with compositions written by advanced students of English who have passed their first two courses of their English degree and who are following either their third or fourth year at the English Department of the University of Oviedo.

Let us begin by considering a composition submitted by a third year student in the final exam of the academic session 1993-94. This text will help analyze the first problem of our students, organization of their ideas, as we shall see below:

> Ex. 1
> Dress as an expression of attitude
> From the beginning dress was only used in order to cover bodies and protect that bodies from the weather, keeping them warm.
> But as the times went by, this changed; and changed in the sense that people realized that dress could reveal social status, so they used dress as a way of differenciate people from upper classes than rest (lower and middle classes).
> But dress even would be an extension of man's character and personality. Thus, in Middle Ages knights revealed their high class and personality through his dress.
> Actually we have no longer knights, but we can guess man's character and personality according to the way he/she dress.
> First we have people who keep off current patterns, that is, who dress on their own way with the so known Levis and shirt.
> We can make another group with those who use T-shirts as a way of expressing their political ideas with sayings like: "Yankies go home, submission, etc."

> And finally we have those people who follow the patterns established by the actual fashion designers. They follow the religion "Back to the 70's". I consider the current "Back to the 70's" as a "religion" in the sense that they discover past culture of the 70's through cult to that age that fashion imposed in the early 90's. In a nutshell, they re-dicover the 70's fashion, but they also found its music, and, cult of the drugs which is very dangerous for teenagers because they do not know anything about them and they would use them without knowing their effects on them. I look up the way people like to dress, but I do not agree with people who subject their lifes (or most of their lifes) to they way of dressing. The clothes are simple clothes.

The first four points that we are going to discuss are usually difficult for us, teachers, to handle when our students have poor results in their exams or written homework, and they do not see much "red" in their piece of work. The traditional question is: "Why do I get this low mark if there are so few mistakes marked?" The problem might become even more difficult to handle with advanced students, or students taking advanced courses, who have a certain command of the language and make few spelling or grammar mistakes. However, their compositions are poorly organized as well as unadventurous. The importance attached to the aspects of the written work must be underlined from the very early stages of the course so that the students become aware of the need to produce a coherent text which attempts to use structure and vocabulary acquired during the year. The teacher should assess the percentage allotted to each aspect of the composition and the time required to achieve the objectives would depend on the needs of the group (the personality of the group plays a fundamental role in deciding the time devoted to each task: the students of a group might require fewer listening activities and more extensive practice to improve their writing) and the level the students are expected to reach by the end of the course. Some authors claim that the content and organization of the composition or essay should be allocated as much as fifty per cent of the final mark (White 1987: ix). Our assessment criteria are detailed below and follow similar patterns, although we believe that marks should be given as a whole rather than assessing the different aspects of the text. However, it is true that some compositions are weak for one general reason: they are poorly organized.

2.1. Poor organization

The composition that we have reproduced in our Ex. 1 is a clear example of poor organization. The writer has produced a number of sentences with not much connection among them, resulting in a unappealing text. This, in its turn, leads to:

-Repetition of ideas
-Platitudes/truisms
-Deviation from the topic
-Irrelevance

2.1.1. The opening sentence itself provides the reader with a hint:
The writer has not been able to organize the topic succesfully and, consequently, begins with a truism: an uninspiring definition of the main topic. Another good ex-

ample of this type of composition is the following opening sentence of a text written by a fourth year student: "Nowadays, diets have become really fashionable, which is good in a way."

This very simplistic sentence predicts the uninteresting shape that the composition is going to take. To begin with, the sentence commences with an adverb commonly used by Spanish students in their compositions, which obviously lacks originality. The idea that the sentence tries to convey does not fulfill the objective of an opening sentence: to attract the reader's attention to keep him/her reading with interest. In addition, the relative clause is unnecessary, inconclusive and repetitive, and the writer uses two colloquial expressions in a composition which expects the student to demonstrate his/her linguistic competence as a writer of rather formal English (for bad opening sentences see White & Arndt 1991: 103-106).

2.1.2. Irrelevant or unnecessary information

In many cases, writers only aim at filling the blank page with words instead of trying to produce what we might describe as a coherent text with substantial ideas and proper use of connectors. The information provided is not required in the type of composition that he/she has been asked to write. This frequently happens in the case of formal letters. Most languages tend to be both precise and concise in this type of letters. The writer must focus on a very specific point (or points) and provide all the relevant information concerning that point (or those points), since, otherwise, the recipient will find it inappropriate to read information which is not unnecessary to a particular case. As an example, we can mention the case of a writing task set in the academic year 1994-95: a letter to be addressed to an insurance company. It was a monitored task as the students were required to include the following information: report on accident with specific information of the place and the time when it had occurred, the extent of the damage and the actions taken so far. An example of irrelevant information is the following paragraph:

> Ex. 2
> It was a very stormy day and I should have stayed at home, although now it is very late for complaining about it …I wanted them to come very soon and take my car to their garage. They did it; then I was very happy. But now, I'm not so happy.

Here, the writer reproduces personal feelings instead of objective information. In other cases the writer does not provide the reader with any information whatsoever. He/she just aims at filling the page by producing *platitudes*, that is statements which lead the writer nowhere and are obvious to the reader. Further examples of this are:

> Ex. 3
> ´ Nowadays there are many women's magazines.
> • They work out of their house, not as housewives (speaking of women).
> • That's why all magazines are different, although they may have certain things in common.

2.1.3. Paragraphs

When organizing their ideas, one of the main difficulties that students encounter is the division of a composition into paragraphs. They tend to have too many paragraphs or no paragraphs at all. The composition we have included as our Ex. 1 illustrates this problem since we have seven paragraphs, five of which are scarcely two lines long. Our students must realize that such a composition provides the teacher/ examiner/reader with the impression that the text is a collection of loose ideas without much connection among them instead of a carefully organized piece of writing with a set of ideas to convey. In the text each paragragh seems to have been written without rethinking or considering the relevance of the line with respect to the previous or following statements.

2.2. Sentence structure: overlong sentences

Sentences tend to be shorter in English than in Spanish; for this reason around forty-three per cent of the compositions corrected sounded awkward: the reader would be unable to link the subjects, verbs, relative pronouns and conjunctions of a paragragh without any full stops. Long sentences are generally more complicated than shorter ones and, consequently, the writer is more likely to confuse subjects and verb tenses (even though one should be aware of the fact that English keeps a very strict tense sequence). Some authors advise learners to produce shorter sentences until they have gained enough confidence to write longer ones (Jordan 1980: 93). However, advanced students should also avoid overshort sentences, which indicate a poor command of linking devices in English. A good example of this problem is illustrated by the second paragraph of our Ex. 1.

2.2.1. Punctuation

Even though punctuation in English is similar to the Spanish one, it does not work in exactly the same way; there are important differences one must be aware of. An example of wrong punctuation was quoted in our previous point: "But now I'm not so happy" where the comma is unnecessary.

There are two types of mistakes as regards punctuation: on the one hand, a general inability to punctuate a text correctly (this was traced in over thirty per cent of the texts corrected), which implies a general lack of commas and stops, making it impossible to read the text aloud, and, on the other, minor mistakes related to differences in punctuation between L1 and L2 (found in around seventy per cent of the texts). Although it is assumed that students who have followed English courses in their secondary school should be able to punctuate texts correctly, we should envisage introducing exercises to help students correct these mistakes. Thus, the evidence resulting from the data analyzed for the writing of this paper made us consider the need to introduce punctuation practice in class, either with specially prepared exercises or simply by using original texts removing all punctuation marks. Although some teachers might regard these exercises as time-consuming, they can be used to fill the last five-ten minutes of a class, as long as this is done on a regular basis so that the aim is finally achieved and the rest of the class can be devoted to other activities. Additional help should come from individual readings of modern newspapers and magazines rather than rely merely on the compulsory readings for literature subjects (which they often read

through only to familiarize themselves with the plot and, thus, be in a position to secure correct answers to exam questions).

2.3. Influence of Spanish, or interference, is reflected in the choice of vocabulary

Words like "machism" or "macho" are used in English, but they are not exact equivalents of the Spanish words. In other cases, the writer uses Spanish prepositions in expressions like "under my point of view" (instead of "in my point of view") or even uses a preposition with verbs which do not require it in English. Here are some examples of these two types of frequent mistakes taken from 4th year compositions:

> Ex. 5
> • I'm being a bit exaggerated
> • I was sat on the...
> • call to someone
> • phone to someone
> • send to someone

Cognates also originate important mistakes in compositions. These words are also called *false friends* when their meaning varies; thus, the misuse of words like "sympathetic" or "actually" is general, despite our insistence on their different meaning from Spanish. Extensive reading is usually the best solution to this problem. The student frequently knows the difference in meaning between the Spanish and English words, but if he/she is not familiar with the everyday use of these words, he/she will be unable to use them correctly:

> Ex. 6
> • It's fashionable to have a thin silhouette (instead of "slim figure")
> • It's their unique language (instead of "only language")
> • Books, lectures (instead of "readings")

Unfortunately there are even less acceptable instances of the influence of the mother tongue of the students on their pieces of writing: the coinage of words in English from Spanish, which turns their compositions into irritating exercises full of words they have not even checked. Around twenty per cent of our students tend to make these mistakes repeatedly and we, as teachers, must emphasize the importance of checking every word they are unsure of, and the need to avoid the doubtful word and trace possible alternatives if the students are under exam conditions. The following examples come from 4th year compositions, and they show how deeply rooted the problem is:

> Ex. 7
> • Other factors that intervine are...
> • I esteemed it is one of the best magazines in Spain.
> • People with strong constitutions will not put on weight...
> • It is very important to mentalize one's self (sic)...
> • But these things are relationed...

• People nowadays are consternated...
• It is important to follow an equilibrated diet.

2.4. VOCABULARY

There are a number of words which are commonly used in spoken English, when rapid speech prevents us from thinking carefully of what we are going to say next. Words like: "things", "get", "do" "lots", "everybody", "something"… should be avoided in formal written English whenever possible. This does not mean that the writer is not allowed to use one of them occasionally, but they should be avoided if we find a more precise term. Here are examples:

> Ex. 8
> • "find out these things…she talks about real things…everyday things" I con-
> sider things such as furniture as trivial things, and things you see in...
> • ...Spaniards were very interested in this case and lots of people...

On the other hand, students also tend to use the same terms far too often. A lack of variety in the range of vocabulary used in compositions reflects the student's inability to express precise ideas or feelings, which obviously implies superficial knowledge of the language and unsuitability for a specific level. The following example is a case of extremely repetitive vocabulary within one single paragragh in a composition dealing with the topic "Women's magazines":

> Ex. 9
> Many women's magazines which are published nowadays are aimed to that
> purpose. Is that the real purpose of magazines in general? Certainly not. The
> purpose of a magazine should depend on the issues to be dealt with in a maga-
> zine. But the real purpose of an editor when he publishes a magazine is that of
> selling as many magazines as possible. He should carefull think over the kind
> of public a magazine is addressed to.

Extensive reading is, once again, the best way to solve this problem. As Kanelli (1977: 2) points out, extensive reading helps students gain some fluency of expression, makes students think about certain problems either for the first time or, at least, in a new light (thus, they can gather information that can be used later when writing a composition), and encourages them to read further. Therefore, reading will definitely help students avoid a large number of errors and produce a well-structured composition.

2.5. GRAMMAR[1]

Compositions should also reflect the student's command of the English grammar. However, the number of grammar mistakes made by advanced students is relatively high. In this article we dot aim at listing their grammar difficulties. Authors, such as Jordan (1980: 94-95), already provide us with lengthy lists of the main problematic areas as far as grammar is concerned, whereas others include long lists and examples of aspects to be improved, such as the use linking words (Pogemiller 1987: xvi-xviii;

Soars & Soars 1989: 85). Thus, we will only mention a number of common mistakes which are indicative of the importance of revising compositions before handing in:

> Ex. 10
> • other purpose; • everybody glance; • advices
> • other bulk; of make; • they have her job
> • are your husband…?; • they are used to run; detail information

Syntactic features are also altered, which make is relatively common to read sentences like:

> Ex. 11
> • I wonder what reasons can they have to do such a thing or
> • Depending on how much energy do you spend the day

where the indirect question follows the Spanish pattern.

Mistakes like the ones listed above are all too frequent in compositions. Although it is true that the university learner of English aims at using his/her English spontaneously, and, therefore, at attaining near-native fluency, which implies a degree of flexibility since even speakers of English as L1 make mistakes (some of them, such as lack of concord or double negatives, are widely widespread and the speaker is unaware of using a non-standard form), formal written English is stricter and requires both native and non-native speakers to use standard grammar forms. Even if we acknowledge that mistakes will be made when one is speaking, the writer has the possibility of reading his/her text and improve it or correct it.

2.6. Spelling

In connection with our previous point, spelling mistakes are also common features of compositions, in words like "iniciated" and "adress", with no change of meaning, or "to loose weight" where the meaning of the word used varies from the correct one. It is also widespread to confuse word categories when the difference in spelling is minimal: "weigh" as opposed to "weight."

Within this category we should make a special reference to the specific problem of contractions. Formal written English has traditionally avoided the use of contractions and, therefore, they must not be used in formal letters addressed to institutions, banks, people we do not know or know slightly. Contractions represent the spoken language and the students should use them in limited contexts such as when attempting to reproduce spoken English in a piece of creative writing or when writing an informal letter to a friend. These are two examples of contractions used in formal compositions:

> Ex. 4
> • I'm very pleased to hear that you have accepted...
> • Teachers don't like exams either...

However, we must also add that contractions are widely used in written American English, as can be seen in American papers and magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*.

This tendency has influenced certain British publications in recent years, in spite of which British English largely avoids the use of contractions in formal writing. In this sense, we, as teachers, should be flexible with the variety of English our students use, even though they must be consistent: the British variety would use contractions in very limited cases (in popular newspapers) whereas the American variety would accept contractions even in serious newspapers and magazines. Formal letters would require full forms in both varieties.

2.7. Register

The problems of register are associated with the choice of vocabulary, which, as previously explicited, must be careful. Written and spoken English vary considerably, as we have mentioned above. Therefore, we should avoid words used in spoken English, such as discourse markers (Ex. 12), whose main purpose is to provide the speaker with time to think while speaking. The use of colloquial English is also common as regards modifiers such as 'a lot' and 'a bit', which have formal equivalents (Ex. 13). A third category which is also worth mentioning is the case of very colloquial words used in compositions to the astonishment of teachers/readers (Ex. 14). Around fifty per cent of our advanced students seem to be unable to differenciate between spoken and written English, and make mistakes belonging to one or more of these categories, as proved by the following examples of spoken English used in formal written compositions:

Ex. 12
• Well, now I would like to say...
• By the way, this is something very...
• Of course, I would like to...
• So, I was given...
• Well, there are many possible purposes for women's magazines. They are like women's purposes, so you will never know the real one.
• To state such a thing is something really funny; at least, I think so.

Ex. 13
• I was used to eating a lot less.
• When we are a bit older...

Ex. 14
• I don't like hamburgers, fish'n'chips and such stuff.
• When you gorge something in ten minutes.

On the other hand, a smaller number of compositions, around twenty per cent, resemble transcripts of spoken English as a whole:

Ex. 15
By healthy food, we don't mean 'light' products or special food, it is just that we can eat everything, but some products only in small quantities, of course that we can eat cake, but a small piece. Our diet will be better if we eat vegetables too.

This does not mean that the writer should resort to pompous language, which normally hides the absence of clear ideas. This type of compositions is an excuse to produce some English language without much cohesion and with no points to be made. The writer aims at impressing the reader:

> Ex. 16
> However, I must confess that in many cases I find this distinction difficult to perceive and I believe that the differences between these aspects are a question merely of the nuance or even of personal beliefs. For that reason it has been rightly said that it is impossible to mark fixed limits.

The writer must attempt to produce a balanced composition where the vocabulary is in accordance with a clear organization of the topic and solid ideas.

2.8. TONE

The tone of a composition depends mostly on the reader and the message the writer intends to convey. The writer must realize that there is a considerable difference in the tone used when addressing a friend, a bank manager or a newspaper editor. When writing to a friend one is allowed certain concessions, whereas when writing to a newspaper editor one can express his/her views openly but in a more restrained manner, and when writing to one's bank manager the tone must be formal and one must be concise and accurate. Furthermore not all letters are the same, and, consequently, the tone will vary depending on various circumstances, such as on whether the writer has met the recipient, on whether it is the first time he/she is addressing the recipient, etc.. Thus, in a first letter to an insurance company one should not write, as one of our students did:

> Ex. 17
> On the contrary, I will put the affair in the hands of my lawyer, but I really hope not to come to this point.

which is obviously a threat. Our students must learn to assess the effect that their text will have on the reader: they might threaten the company once they have repeatedly contacted the institution to no avail, but their first letter should have a neutral tone. There are a number of useful books as regards letter-writing, particularly Tim & Sue Hodlin's *Writing Letters in English* (1979), but more specific material can be obtained from books designed for English for specific purposes, which can be adapted for advanced students who might need to perfect the nuances between types of letters (such as letters of complaint in Moore 1979: 201-210, which will help them decide when to request politely, when to put pressure and when to threaten).

However, although letters clearly reflect the different purposes of a written text, written language in general serves a wide range of purposes in everyday life, as explicited by Halliday (1985: 40-1) or McDonough and Shaw (1993: 175), and students must learn to discriminate since each situation will require a different approach with precise characteristics.

Now that we have examined the main mistakes made by our students, we must consider ways to solve them. These solutions could be arranged into two groups:

activities to work on the subject before starting the first draft of the composition and activities to work after it.

3. PLANNING A COMPOSITION

In the last fifteen years, linguists and methodology writers have made a distinction between writing as process and writing as product (e. g. Nunan 1991: 86-88). This distinction will be useful to achieve the final purpose of a written task and could be relevant to acknowledge the existence of two steps in the writing process, but both must be combined to make our students aware of the importance of the accuracy of the text and the type of task they have to envisage.

Our students must start by accepting the fact that planning a composition is not an easy task. However, there are a number of steps that can alleviate the effort for our students. We will highlight these steps, most of which have already been discussed by ELT writers, but which we have adapted to suit our own teaching experience. The steps will vary from teacher to teacher and from ELT author to ELT author and, for that reason, the main point to be made is that both teachers and students can adapt these steps to suit their own needs. Moreover, the needs of a group will change and the steps will need revision. The teacher should act here as a guide. Here are the main points that can serve as a guide both for teachers and students:

3.1. READING THE TOPIC

Before beginning the writing process, students should devote some time to read the topic of the composition carefully and decide what they are expected to write about. The common problem shared by poorly organized compositions is that students make a quick decision, write extensively about the subject until they reach a certain stage when they seem to have exhausted it. It is then when, to fill the page or reach the expected number of words, they add a number of loose ideas without any relationship with their previous statements. For this reason it is fundamental to consider what the set theme asks for. Lewis in his excellent book *How To Write Essays* provides us with a way to define the topic depending on the verb featuring in the theme.

Here is a reference to his so-called key verbs (1993: 24-25): if the theme includes the verb "analyse", the student should break up the topic into parts; if it says "compare", they should look for similarities and differences between two sides and perhaps reach a conclusion about which is preferable; if it says "contrast", they should bring out differences between two parts; if the verb is "define", then the aim of the student should be to set down the meaning of a word or phrase; if it is "describe", a detailed account of the topic is expected; when they are asked "to discuss", they should investigate or examine by argument, sift and debate, give reasons for and against or examine the implications; if they have to "distinguish", they must also indicate the differences between two parts; if asked to "evaluate" or "criticise", the student should give his/her judgement about the merit of theories or opinions, back his/her judgement by a discussion of evidence or reasoning involved; if they have to "examine", they should look closely into the subject; if asked to "explain", they should

make the topic plain, that is to interpret it and account for it; if the verb is "to explore", they should examine it thoroughly, consider from a variety of viewpoints; when required to "interpret" or "illustrate", they should make clear and explicit, show the meaning of it; if the verb is "justify", the aim is to show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions, answer the main objections likely to be made to them; if asked to "outline", "list" or "enumerate", they should give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasising structure and arrangement; the verb "relate" can have two possibilities: either to narrate or to show things are connected to each other, and to what extent they are alike, or affect each other; if the verb is "state", they should present in a brief, clear form; when asked to "summarise" or "review", they are supposed to give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, omitting details and examples; and, finally, if the verb is "trace", they should follow the development or story of a topic from some point of origin.

Lewis's key verbs are very general indeed, but are useful tools to guide the students and to adapt them to the different levels and purposes of our students. He also suggests the importance of key ideas that complement the verbs and which, combined, set the theme. To devote two classes at the beginning of the course to delimit the aims of writing exercises and to specify the meaning of the questions set will definitely help the students in the first stages of their writing practice.

3.2. BRAINSTORMING

This process has been widely discussed by communicative theorists and is particularly applicable to the case of the writing skills. Amongst others, Lewis (1993: 27-31), Hedge (1988: 34-35), White & Arndt (1991: 18-21) and McDonough & Shaw (1993: 185-190) have emphasized the importance of this part of the writing process since this implies that the students focus on the topic and try to find as many ideas as they can. It normally takes very little time and can help enormously to increase confidence and to shape the composition. Students can get accustomed to it through practice in class and, as Hedge suggests, "this can be undertaken in pairs or groups or with the whole class" (1988: 34) as a previous step to individual brainstorming for homework. The usual result of a brainstorming session, however short it may be, is a greater number of ideas than expected. Thus, we suggested a very general theme such as "University life" in one of our classes and the ideas were numerous:

Ex. 18
• Has it fulfilled my expectations?
• Is it a small world within the world?
• Is it useful to take a university degree nowadays?
• The relationship between the teaching staff and the students.
• My relationship with my colleagues.
• The subjects taught.
• Are there enough/any optional subjects?
• What changes are needed?
• Has the situation improved in the last few years?
• How do Spanish universities compare with British ones?

Our students will now face a different problem: which points should be included in their compositions or essays? The answer is examined below.

3.3. SELECTING

Once our students have produced a number of ideas, the next step is to make a selection of those which will conform the text. The main aim of the writer is to attract the reader's attention and even to persuade him/her (as pointed out by Carter & Nash 1990: 50-51) and this is the reason why the students must be able to select the ideas which will be developed in the number of words allocated. We might speak of three goals to be achieved:

• To avoid wasting time on points or ideas which are not essential.
• To embark on writing a composition with a clear sense of what needs to be done (in order to avoid wasting time thinking of new, and probably irrelevant, points during the writing process).
• To make sure that all the important aspects of the question have been dealt with.
Therefore, they must realize that they can discuss only a limited number of points and, consequently, the best option is to make a few points thoroughly rather than discuss a large number of points inadequately.

3. 4. DRAFTING

When we require our students to write a composition as homework, they should devote some time to write a rough draft. In an exam their draft should be shorter, of course, so that they can hand in their final version in the given time. However, to fulfill this task they must become familiar with the process of organizing the material which will eventually be used in their composition. ELT authors advise students to write this first draft, although they do not coincide on the process (Hedge 1988: 23; White & Arndt 1991: 99-114). Hedge seems to suggest that "details like correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar [should be left] until later" (Hedge 1988: 23). However, we believe that the first draft should also attempt to produce good English, even though correction of spelling and punctuation may be left for the revision stage. Around forty per cent of the compositions collected to write this paper included a first draft with a number of grammar problems which remain in the final version, whereas spelling problems were corrected by the students. This obviously implies that the syntax of the text is connected with the organization of the ideas and students tend to make no alterations while spelling and punctuation are regarded as "minor details" to be improved before delivering the exercise.

Let us first consider the advantages of making a draft:
• It is unusual that compositions come out right the first time.
• It gives students more time to phrase some points more lucidly.
• Students will produce a tidier product: presentation is important and is marked positively.
• It avoids clumsy and confused sentences.

The process will vary on the time and the needs of the students (some students will be familiar with this process already, while others may be unable to carry it out even in their mother tongue). However, our students must be aware of the importance of writing, at least, a first draft before handing it in. White & Arndt suggest even a second draft (1991: 99-100), although the aim should be to obtain at least one (and

usually to collect it together with the final version of the text). To introduce the habit of writing first drafts, we could start by asking our students shorter compositions, which will require less time for the final version. Thus, our students should begin by considering the importance of the reader rather than the importance of the writer, which would imply not only organizing information, but also attracting and sustaining the reader's attention. For that reason, the students must distance him/herself from the text and apprehend whether his/her work will appeal to the reader and whether the ideas are clearly conveyed. Key-questions in the drafting process are: Will it interest the reader? Does it manage to sustain the reader's attention? Is the development of the ideas clear? Is the closing paragraph stimulating?

In addition to these aspects, organization, division into paragraphs, clear ideas, adequate vocabulary and grammar will require a further step before handing in, checking or revising.

3.5. CHECKING

Quite often, the reader and marker of the composition is obliged to face a piece of writing with a number of mistakes which could have been avoided before handing it in, especially if it has been done as homework. Some compositions even give the impression that the writer did not bother to revise it, which makes it more difficult to read and, of course, tends to influence our marking process in a negative way. Self-criticism and correction would improve the text considerably and, therefore, the learner of English must begin by accepting the fact that very few writers, either in their mother tongue or in a foreign language, are so skillful that they do not need to change anything in their final texts. As Hamp-Lyons & Heasly suggest "this does not only mean grammar, but all aspects of a piece of writing: the mood, the emphasis, the development, the choice of effective words and word combinations, etc" (1987: 136). The learner of English must ask him/herself a number of questions when revising a composition. We have adapted the following six from Harrison (1994: 19)

1. Does the composition actually answer the question set or does it contain any irrelevant or unnecessary parts, *waffle*, i. e. writing that is simply intended to fill the space but does not really say anything, or *padding*, i. e. writing that is repetitious in order to reach the required number of words?

2. Is the composition well-organized and divided into paragraphs appropriately? The writer must distance him/herself from the final text to ascertain if the reader will follow his/her writing clearly.

3. Are appropriate linking words and phrases used for connecting sentences and paragraphs? The exclusive use of "and", "but", "or" and "so", which are common in the spoken medium, would reflect lack of resources.

4. Does it have a good range of vocabulary or is the vocabulary used mostly simple? The use of words like "something", used in rapid spoken English when the speaker has no time to select his/her vocabulary carefully, would reflect a poor command of English and serious difficulties to adapt his/her English to the written medium.

5. Is there a good range of accurate structures forming sentences that are not very simple or are the structures used mostly too basic? As the students advance in their knowledge of L2, they should be able to resort to structures used by native speakers

in certain contexts only (a structure of this type "Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me" is usually restricted to formal written English and the students should be able to use them in the appropriate context).

6. Is the style appropriate for this type of composition? The writer should always take the reader into consideration to adapt his/her English to the expectations of the latter. Otherwise, a communication breakdown could occur, and the objective of the text, that is to convey a message and, therefore, generate a response, will not be achieved.

The revision process has also been described as editing (Hedge 1988: 23), since the writer must make final "readjustments" to make sure the reader will be able to follow the ideas in the text clearly. Once the written task has been delivered, the ultimate, and quite often painful, stage takes place: the correction process.

4. CORRECTION PROCEDURES AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Our students are sometimes unable to see why they obtain low marks in some compositions, especially if the text does not seem to include a great number of corrections. Structural mistakes tend to be obliterated. However, these errors should be clearly explicited in the form of a comment written next to the mark each composition is given so that the author of the composition clearly sees the connection between a low mark and the comment made by the teacher (in the last two academic years I have even avoided writing a mark: this has had a highly positive effect on my students, since they have become accustomed to "looking for" the comment, not for the mark, as before). It might also be useful to make the learners familiar with two aspects of the correction process: a system of abbreviations and signs which will turn the corrected text into an additional exercise, and the criteria that we, teachers, follow when we are correcting a composition. The former emphasizes the importance of self-correction instead of making the student a passive receiver of the corrected task. There are various systems that can be used and ELT writers provide us with a number of them (White & Arndt 1991: 173; Hamp-Lyons 1987: 145; Scrivener 1994: 160), but each teacher should devise his/her own system, which may vary according to the needs of each group. This is a summary of the symbols we use in the correction process of our students' compositions:

• ?: the meaning is not clear. The sentence should be rephrased.
• !!!: serious grammar mistakes. The learner should not make this type of mistakes and should check it.
• SP: Spelling mistake. The students should check the word.
• HS: Spanish word or structure used in English. The student should check the word or rephrase the structure.
• RP/I: Repetitive idea.
• IR/I: Irrelevant idea.
• CT: The student should avoid using contractions in the type of composition he/she is writing.

As regards the assessment criteria, these should be based on the level that the students are expected to reach at the end of the course, so that they realize the amount of work and effort that must be devoted to the writing skill of the language. We will summarize the criteria that we use to mark advanced students. Marks are given out of 10 (that is ranging from 0 to 10) for each composition according to the relevance of the composition to the question set, the organization of the composition, including paragraph structure and linking, the range, level and appropriacy of vocabulary, the range, level and appropriacy of grammatical structure, including punctuation, and the appropriacy of style. We also make sure that our students do not lose marks through isolated mistakes, that is an occasional adjective in the plural in an otherwise good composition should not be penalized as the same mistake in a poor composition. Conversely, they might lose them if their texts are too long or too short. Marks are allotted as follows:

The composition will be given between *8* and *10* if it approaches a high level of native-speaker fluency, which implies no irrelevant information and a great number of sophisticated structures as well as good range of vocabulary, including varied and appropriate linking and accurate spelling and punctuation. The text should give evidence of a well-controlled organization and appropriate style, avoiding basic errors such as adjectives in the plural or lack of concord.

The text will be given between *6* and *8* if the English used by the writer is natural, although with some errors resulting from attempting to use complex structures and vocabulary. There should include little or no irrelevance, using accurate structures and vocabulary, including good linking and punctuation. The composition should reveal coherent organization while there should not be many errors and few, if any, basic ones.

The borderline marks, that is between *4* and *6* will be allotted to those exercises which are clear, but remain limited and unadventurous. In these texts, the reader will be faced with some irrelevance and/or repetition. The structures, vocabulary and linking are accurate, although basic. The text is reasonably organized and the style is not wholly inappropriate.

Compositions will obtain marks ranging from *2,5* and *4* whenever errors made by the writer impede communication. In this type of compositions we encounter much irrelevance and/or repetition, and the structures, vocabulary and linking are too basic with many errors. Besides, the ideas are poorly organized; paragraphing should also be improved.

Compositions which obtain betwee *0* and *2,5* are incoherent, with most of the information included irrelevant. The basic structures used by the student are inaccurate and no attempt has been made at linking sentences. Besides, he/she has used basic vocabulary and there are frequent basic errors. The text lacks coherent organization.

As can be seen, advanced students should aim not only at avoiding grammar and spelling mistakes, but also at organization, clarity and relevance. These criteria are similar to those used by the examiners of the Cambridge University Proficiency Exam in English, as reproduced by Harrison (1994: 176).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, all the information that we have gathered from our students' texts, from our experience and from ELT writers can help reach a number of conclusions that we

should bear in mind when designing the syllabus of our future courses and classes. These conclusions are listed below to close this paper:

1. This information is invaluable material to assess the needs of our students, and help us improve our teaching techniques to make them more efficient. Research into our students' mistakes can be time-consuming, but well conducted can also be rewarding and time-saving in the long run (since it will throw light on which exercises and tasks are appropriate).

2. Grammar is a key-point when correcting compositions. Its importance has been played down by the communicative approach, which focuses on writing as a process (Nunan 1991: 84); however, revising recurrent mistakes through classroom practice and, specially, through exercises based on the mistakes made by the students will help avoid repeating similar mistakes in the future.

3. Correction based on a system of symbols and abbreviations will allow students realize that compositions are not merely writing tasks. These symbols and abbreviations can be used as supplementary exercises to revise weak points: a student with a great number of "SP" mistakes will have to check his/her spelling in a dictionary instead of quickly glancing at the character crossed out by the teacher.

4. Writing is a fundamental part of the language students are learning. It is important to emphasize the communicative aspect of a writing task, not only in the case of the various types of letters, but also the classical composition in which they are required to discuss a topic. Writing tasks should take up class time, even though it has been considered that writing exercises should be done as homework.

5. Competent writing is clearly connected with reading. Students should be exposed to a fair amount of contemporary English if they want to become proficient writers, as well as speakers, of the language. Written language tends to be more formal and, therefore, will only be acquired through reading and writing in the same way as a fluent speaker becomes familiar with the spoken word by taking part in conversations.

6. Students should avail themselves of good dictionaries which can both help them find the right word (the so-called production dictionaries, modern versions of the traditional thesaurus, will be useful tools to select the word needed for a particular context) and learn to use it in the appropriate context through the examples provided.

Notes

1. We use the term "grammar" to refer to syntax and morphology. "Grammar" may also include vocabulary and spelling, but we shall use it in the same way as Greenbaum & Quirk in *A Student's Grammar of the English Language* (1990: 1).

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