

Writing informal correspondence in the primary classroom

Daniel Xerri, Lecturer, University of Malta

This article explores how pupils can improve their writing of informal letters and e-mails through paying attention to linguistic and discourse features.

A new kind of communication

The advent of new forms of technology means that writing informal correspondence has become hugely popular and young writers need to be adequately trained to engage in it, especially since 'This new kind of communication has its own peculiar rules and rituals' (Scrivener 2011, p. 234). Teaching pupils how to write informal correspondence effectively is of paramount importance especially in the contemporary communication environment.

Communicative considerations

Purpose Every writer of informal letters or e-mails has a purpose for writing, for example, inviting a relative to an event, making a request, or catching up with a friend. Therefore it is important to have a communicative purpose for writing informal correspondence in the classroom. A sense of purpose is significant for writers because it determines 'not only the type of text they wish to produce, but also the language they use, and the information they choose to include' (Harmer 2004, p. 5). These are important considerations that can only be accounted for with a proper understanding of what one's writing is meant to achieve.

Audience Being aware of who will read the letter or e-mail allows the writer to follow the right set of conventions. The real audience of an informal piece of correspondence is usually someone the writer is highly familiar with and that is why an informal style is chosen. However, sometimes what starts as a formal exchange quickly becomes more informal based on the audience's response. For example, if I address someone as Dear Mr Parker and he replies to me using his first name and addressing me by my first name I will reply to him in a similar fashion. Thus 'Writers engaged in an e-mail correspondence modify subsequent communications on the basis of the reaction of the people they are communicating with' (Harmer 2001, p. 248).

Discourse and linguistic features

Beginning and ending informal correspondence

The salutation in an informal letter usually consists of 'Dear' followed by the recipient's name. For informal e-mails the most common salutation seems to be 'Hi' or 'Hello' followed by the recipient's name. The opening sentence

usually explains the reason for writing and 'An explicit acknowledgement of the existence of a previous message is common' (Crystal 2006, p. 118). An e-mail's conclusion 'is where you tell the reader what kind of response, if any, you expect' (Chapman 2007, p. 7) and this is followed by the close. 'Regards' and 'Best wishes' are the most popular and can be used in both formal and informal e-mails. 'Bye', 'All the Best', 'Best' are also very common in informal e-mails as is the use of only the writer's name. Bly (2004, p. 23) suggests that you should 'refer to your correspondent's last letter, and make your winding-up at least as friendly as his: in fact, even if a shade more friendly, it will do no harm!'

Body of informal correspondence Informal correspondence is quite often made up of a few short paragraphs and is 'to the point, concise, and conversational' (Bly 2004, p. xvi). The active voice is preferred to the passive and the letter or e-mail is commonly written in the first and second person. Informal correspondence usually contains some of the linguistic features of spoken discourse, such as colloquialisms like 'How's it going?'; contractions, for example 'I'll', 'we'd'; discourse markers such as 'well, I mean'; abbreviations including 'BTW', 'FYI'; and subject ellipsis, for instance.

Cohesion A writer needs to employ a number of linguistic techniques for a piece of informal correspondence to jell into a cohesive text. Lexical cohesion is achieved by means of repetition and the use of lexical chains, sets of words that are related to one another in meaning. For example, in a letter or e-mail describing someone's holiday the reader would expect to find a variety of words related to vacations. Grammatical cohesion in informal correspondence is achieved by such devices as reference; simple linkers like 'then', 'later'; and subject ellipsis, for instance 'Having a great time.'

Coherence and structure For informal correspondence to have coherence, 'it needs to have some kind of internal logic which the reader can follow with or without the use of prominent cohesive devices' (Harmer 2004, p. 24). Thus the reader needs to be able to follow the writer's train of thought easily and the writer's purpose, for example,

thinking or apologising, needs to be clear from the start and the information structured in such a way that any possibility of confusion is averted. The use of concise paragraphs having one main idea adds to the coherence of a letter or e-mail.

When teaching about the writing of informal correspondence in the primary classroom, one might have to tackle a number of learner problems. The following table indicates these and the teaching approaches I have used to deal with them.

Learner problems and teaching solutions	
Problem	Teaching approach
<p>Lack of attention to purpose and audience When pupils write informal correspondence in class or as homework they sometimes fail to keep in mind the concepts of purpose and audience and this leads to texts that are inappropriate because they do not achieve their communicative objective nor address the needs of their reader, for example, the use of an incorrect register and the inclusion of irrelevant content.</p>	<p>Ask pupils to read a news report about drivers trapped in gridlock as a result of a snowstorm. They then write two different e-mails in the guise of the same truck driver. In the first one he describes the experience of being stranded for 24 hours to his friend, while in the other one he explains why he was unable to make a scheduled delivery to his long-time boss. (Adapted from Harmer 2004, p. 95-96)</p>
<p>Lack of awareness of genre conventions for informal communications Some pupils might not adopt the right register when writing informal correspondence. They might be too formal in the way they address their recipient and in the language they use to express themselves. The format, salutation and close might be typical of formal correspondence.</p>	<p>Ask pupils to brainstorm the features typical of informal letters. Then they read a three-part exchange between two pen pals and note similarities and differences in genre features. Finally, they engage in a process of drafting, structuring and reviewing in order to write a letter in reply to one of the pen pals. (Adapted from Soars & Soars 2005, p. 115)</p>
<p>Lack of appropriate linguistic and discourse features When writing informal correspondence, pupils may not realise that some of the linguistic features typical of spoken discourse are also found in informal letters and e-mails. They tend not to be aware that with these texts it is perfectly possible to use subject ellipsis and contractions just as one does when speaking. The fact that they do not use discourse markers like 'on top of that', and idiomatic expressions like 'drop you a line' can make their writing seem somewhat stilted for informal purposes.</p>	<p>Ask pupils to read the transcript of a dialogue between two people who have just been involved in a car accident. They then compare it with the e-mail written by one of the drivers to a colleague of his at work. Pupils identify the similarities in language use in both texts. Finally, they write an e-mail from the point of view of the other driver involved in the collision. (Adapted from Coe, Rycroft & Ernest 1983, p. 12-14)</p>
<p>Misuse of referents Some pupils might have problems with using anaphoric (backward reference), cataphoric (forward) and exophoric (external) devices appropriately. This affects the way the sentences in the letters and e-mails they produce are connected to each other and the way these texts are connected to the context. They may find it particularly difficult to master how pronouns and articles help to achieve reference.</p>	<p>Ask the pupils to read an informal letter in which all the articles and pronouns have been underlined. In pairs they discuss what each underlined word refers to before reporting back to the class. Then they write a reply aiming to practise the use of referents. (Adapted from Thornbury 2005, p. 28)</p>
<p>Lack of end-weight One of the most common problems I encounter when reading pupils' informal correspondence is that they seem to have problems with mastering the principle of end-weight which is when a writer puts 'the new information in the latter part of a clause or sentence' for it to become 'the given information of the next sentence' (Thornbury 2005, p. 39). This results in writing which is difficult to read because they tend to produce sentences which do not follow a topic-comment pattern, placing the most important information at the beginning, for example: 'In Las Ramblas, a pickpocket stole Sarah's purse'.</p>	<p>This activity has initially to be somewhat guided to help pupils understand how coherence in a text is created by means of end-weight. Once they have grasped this principle, ask them to read the body of an informal letter that can only be constructed if they choose the best option for each stage of the text (e.g. 'In Las Ramblas, a pickpocket stole Sarah's purse' / 'A pickpocket stole Sarah's purse in Las Ramblas'). In each case they need to select the sentence that contains an end-weighted comment. They continue the story being told in the letter by writing their own sentences and thus following the topic-comment pattern. (Adapted from Thornbury 2005, p. 47-48)</p>

Conclusion

Based on my experience, a blend of genre and process approaches is best suited to help pupils master the genre conventions of informal correspondence and take into consideration the fundamental communicative, linguistic and discourse features of informal letters and e-mails.

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