

Going from “have to” to “want to” – How to engage students in writing tasks.



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### **“Are languages compulsory at GCSE?”**

If you are a secondary MFL teacher, you are bound to have heard this question. Whether it is students’ “fear” of the subject, or simply because they want to make an informed choice, it is a question they ask a lot, and it always contains the notion of obligation.

We can all agree that feeling forced to do something is not the way to obtain the best results. Instead, we need to create an environment, design lessons, and provide resources that will make students **want** to learn / improve on their language skills, irrespective of whether it is compulsory, or whether they plan to use a language in the future.

So, when I’m thinking about HOW to teach some required content, the question I try to keep in mind to guide me is

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*“Why would they **want** to do that?”*

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This simple question has a tremendous impact on how I plan my lessons, and therefore on the engagement of my students.

In this article, I will focus on how we can create engaging writing tasks that intrinsically motivate students.

- I will start by summarising what can make writing tasks daunting for students.
- I will then mention different ways to create intrinsic motivation based on an example.
- To finish, I will introduce you to a book designed to engage students in writing in the target language.

*(I am also looking for teachers to beta-read the accompanying resources, I am creating. So, if you are interested, please get in touch!)*

## Why is writing so daunting?

Writing is very demanding.

- First, students have to understand what they are supposed to write, then make up sentences in their head.
- Then, they probably try to translate it into the target language.
- There might be words they don't know, and so they may look them up in a dictionary, a glossary, their book ... or else decide to write something different. (Although this is an important strategy for coping in exams, not being able to write what they originally planned can be very frustrating for some).
- When writing, they need to remember the correct syntax in the language studied, remember the spelling of words and all the grammar rules.

All the steps above demand **a lot of effort**. Then, if mistakes are pointed out, it can reinforce the internal thought that the target language is **“too difficult”**.

To increase students' engagement, it is therefore important to act on two fronts:

- **Reducing resistance** i.e. the perceived effort, and the fear of correction.
- **Increasing their intrinsic motivation** to complete the writing tasks.

### Reducing the perceived amount of effort with the 20-80 ratio

We all create differentiated resources, offer support in various ways, and make sure the resources and activities we design are level appropriate. I will therefore not cover these points here. However, I will explain the 20-80 ratio that I use to help reduce the perceived amount of effort required to complete a said task.

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*The 20-80 ratio refers to 20% of effort for 80% of fun. Even the most reluctant students won't mind putting a bit of effort if it means that it will enable them to have a lot of fun.*

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The more motivated they are, the more effort they will put into the task. Although this is not an exact science, the idea is to make the activity a lot more enjoyable than it is stressful.

Please note that I use here the term “fun” to mean “interesting, exciting, funny, intriguing” and more.

## How to increase intrinsic motivation

We can all see on a daily basis that some activities get our students excited, curious, super-motivated, and others make them try to avoid the work, get chatty, or bored. We can also witness how much more effort students are willing to put into a task if they are motivated. And more often than not, only minimal changes need to be made to an activity to make it appealing.

5 ways to make activities more engaging:

- They do **NOT look like work**: games, team competitions, etc. Writing should not feel like a chore.
- They are **relevant**: It is to be part of their world or what interests them.
- They generate **strong emotions**: Students write about what they love, hate, find intriguing, funny or shocking. These strong emotions could also be applied to the effect they want to have on the reader of their text.
- They are **purposeful**: To make the activity attractive, from the students' perspective, writing should have another purpose than improving on their writing skills.
- They allow **external validation**: This could take the form of making others laugh as well as generating admiration from the audience.
- They let students manipulate the language to allow them to write **what they want to**.

## How to make a writing task more engaging:

The more of the above we can include in designing an activity, the more engaging it will be. In order to demonstrate this, let's take the example of a paragraph we want our students to write on the topic of school.

**Step 1: Make it relevant and choose a topic they are passionate about.**

If I give them the choice between *describing their school timetable* and *giving their opinions about their subjects*, most of them, if not all, would choose the latter. Although both topics are **relevant** to them, they feel a lot more **passionate** about explaining why they love or hate certain subjects.

Although this might be enough for some students, others might still find it daunting to write a whole paragraph.

**Step 2: Make it less daunting by gamifying the activity and using the 20-80 ratio.**

Instead of asking students to write a paragraph straight away, we can introduce a dice and make it a game.

Game: "Writing with a dice".

This game consists of students answering a precise question in pairs. The questions could be **"What is your favourite subject?"** or **"Do you prefer Maths or English?"**

They work together to make a single sentence, taking turns. Each partner throws the dice and writes the number of words it indicates. The aim is to write the longest sentence possible. The game ends when one cannot think of a way to carry on the sentence, or writes something illogical.



*Why is the activity more engaging?*

The constraints of the game, and the fact that it is a sentence written in pairs reduce the pressure that writing a text creates.

Here, the quantity students are asked to write is drastically reduced. Instead of a paragraph, we are asking students to write ONE long sentence, and the dice imposes a limited number of words to write. This makes the task a lot less daunting.

The additional benefit of this activity is that it trains students to extend their sentences and add details. This game could therefore be used as a **first step** before asking students to write a full paragraph. The sentences produced here can either be used as examples for writing the paragraph, or become part of it.

Step 3: How to make writing purposeful.

Activity: "3 truths about me"

*Description of the activity:*

Ask students to write 3 sentences on a piece of paper that are related to the topic you are covering and that are true for them – e.g. School subjects.

You then collect all the papers and give them out randomly to the class. Students read the sentences and try to determine who wrote them. It is important to specify that the aim is for

them to be recognised (You can do that by rewarding the person who wrote the sentences and the person who found them). That way, it also encourages students to be specific rather than generic.

### *Why is this activity so engaging?*

It is a game (= **does NOT look like work**), and students are invited to write about themselves (= **relevant**). Writing these 3 sentences is what enables the game to be played, so writing is **purposeful**. It is an open-ended task, and students are encouraged to **write whatever they want**, and is true for them. Many students take the opportunity to write funny and cheeky sentences to make others laugh (**external validation**)

Note that students are allowed to use their books and glossaries to write these three sentences. While they are writing, I ask my students to write down difficult words that we haven't seen and that they want to use. I then write all the words on the board with their translations. This gives ideas to some students, and it allows them to understand what people write without knowing who wrote them. And it gives them a chance to find who wrote the 3 sentences.

### *How is the 20-80 ratio respected?*

I tell students to only write 3 sentences in order to make the task achievable even for students who struggle with the subject. All students are invited to focus on quality rather than quantity. This, in turn, helps students develop their sentences, and write more accurately, even when asked to write longer texts. Similarly to the previous example, these sentences can then be used as part of a longer paragraph.

### *What about correction?*

At the same time as I collect complex words students want me to translate, I point out some mistakes for students to correct. For frequent mistakes, I remind the whole class of the rule and ask everyone to check they have not made the mistake.

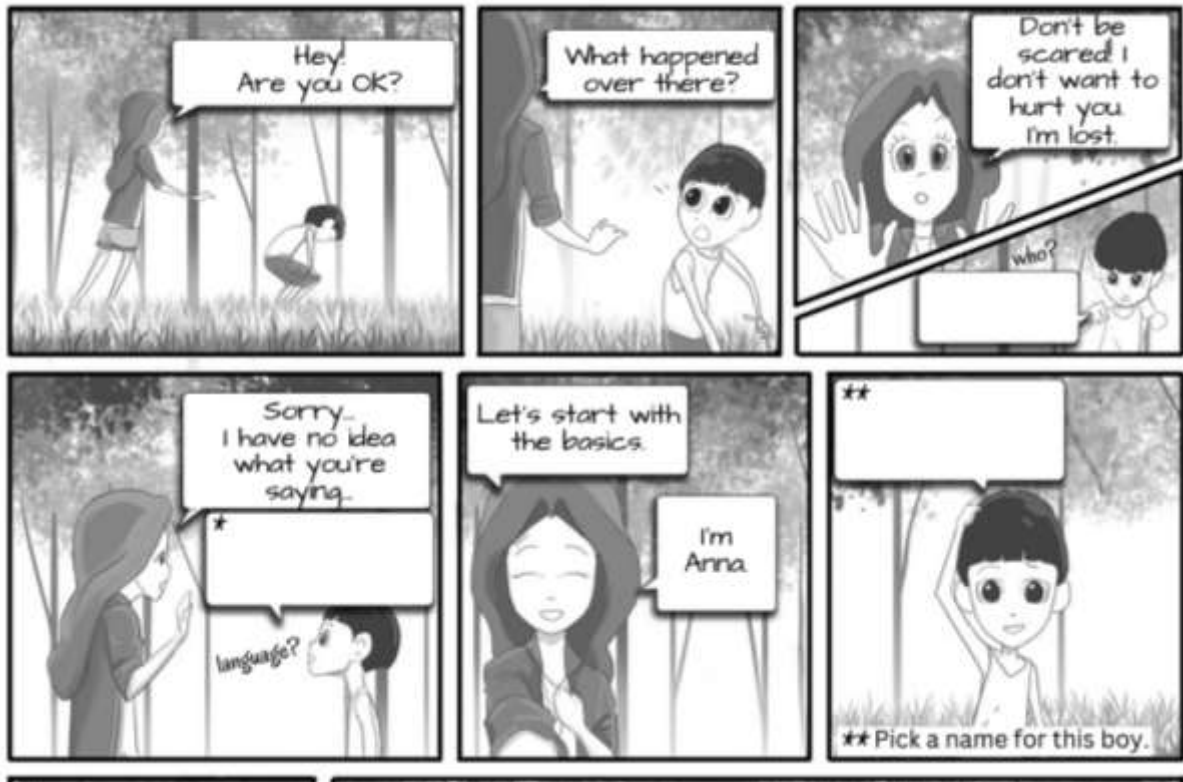
- ➔ Students appreciate my corrections as it **helps them** improve the quality of the text that is going to be read by someone else .
- ➔ When explaining certain common mistakes to the class, I do not pick on anyone individually, and by mentioning that they are common mistakes, it **removes any shame** a student could feel. I am also **empowering** students who can then correct their mistakes **on their own**.

## New book to encourage students to write in the target language.

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, I have written a book based on these observations to engage children in writing. If you are interested in reviewing some of the resources accompanying it, please get in touch (contact details at the end of the article)

It is a graphic novel (so it does **NOT look like work**) that tells the story of Anna, a 14-year-old girl who grew up bilingual but now only really speaks the local community language, and cannot communicate with her dad's family (**relevant** to many of our students growing up in a multilingual household who can speak better English than their home language). She is sent back in time and meets her granddad as an 8-year-old boy. Together, they are going on an adventure to save Anna's great-great-grandma and the family land. The story deals with the importance of languages, not only to communicate, but to connect with our family and people in general. This takes languages out of the school context and shows the importance of speaking them. For multilingual students, it will also generate **strong emotions** as they will identify with Anna).

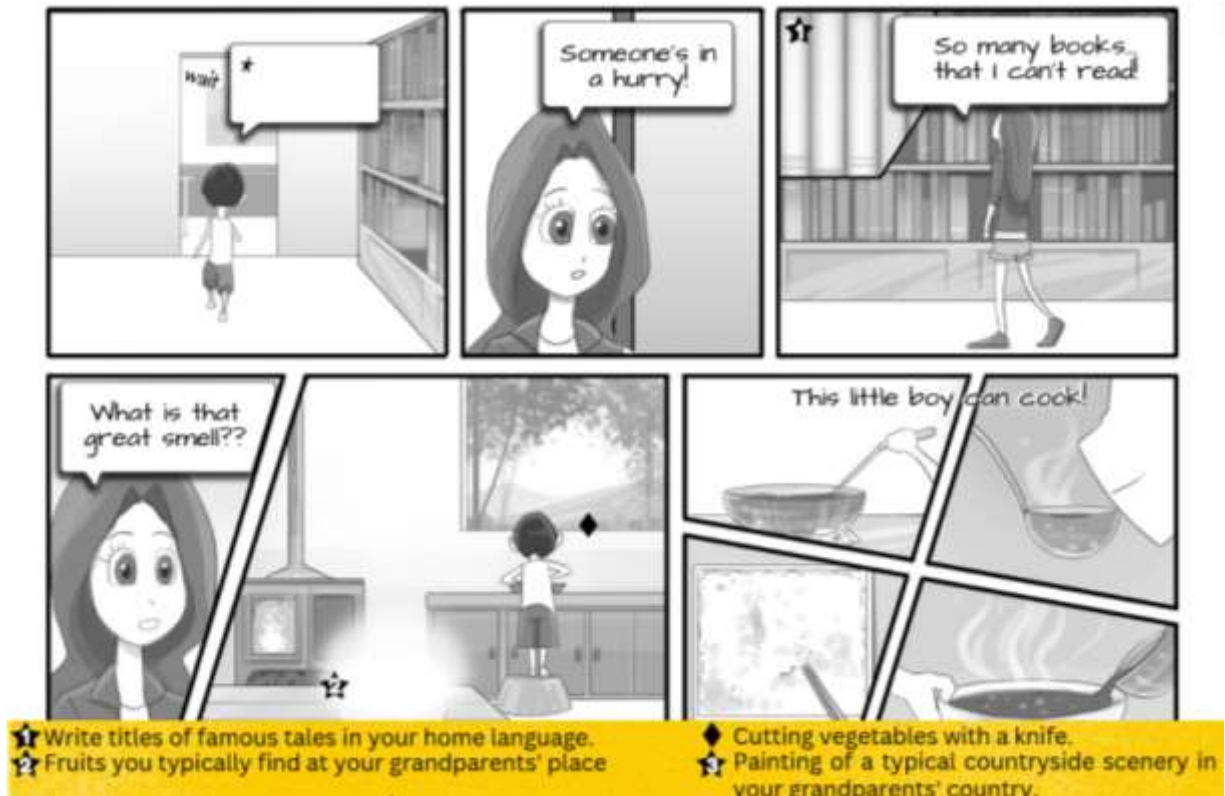
Anna really speaks one language and only understands a few words here and there when people speak her dad's language. As the extract below shows, the speech bubbles are empty and surrounded by the few words Anna understands. Based on these keywords, the reader has to complete them. The story justifies the language in which the reader needs to write – i.e. writing in that language has the **purpose** of keeping the story logical. The reader can write as little or as much as they desire. And to make the book an enjoyable experience (i.e. not a textbook) I have respected the “**20-80 ratio**” in terms of bubbles to be completed. Writing in speech bubbles in a published book gives an importance to the task. This encourages the reader/writer to make sure there is no mistake. They are therefore more likely to ask questions to check on accuracy. This is the perfect time to remind them of grammatical and spelling rules. As we are helping them shine in front of others, correction will be welcomed.



This graphic novel is suitable for all students speaking two languages:

- In an MFL classroom, the language Anna does not understand well, the one the reader has to write in the speech bubbles would be the language being learnt in class.
- In heritage language schools, the school language would be the one to write in.
- In EAL classes and international schools where students have in common the school language but all speak different languages at home, the language to write in the book would be the latter.

Not only does this book give a reason to write in the target language, it helps initiate discussions about culture via parts of the illustrations that are left empty for the reader to complete, and through onomatopoeia.



If you want to learn more about this bilingual graphic novel, feel free to check the details on [www.library4multilinguals.com](http://www.library4multilinguals.com)

And if you would like to beta-read the accompanying resources for teachers, please email me at [yoshitods@library4multilinguals.com](mailto:yoshitods@library4multilinguals.com)

Key take aways:

- To engage students in an activity, the main question to ask ourselves is “Why would they want to do X?”
- On the one hand we need to increase their intrinsic motivation to complete the task. And on the other hand, we need to decrease their fear of being corrected and of the amount of effort necessary to complete the task.
- Keeping the 20-80 ratio to balance the effort and fun of each activity helps increase students’ engagement.

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