

## **Mission Possible: How to Make Writing More Meaningful and Fun for Learners**

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Keywords: collaborative learning, student motivation, task-based learning, teaching writing

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### **Abstract**

How do you make writing a more relevant learning experience for learners? How do you make it more enjoyable for them? How do you make them fall in love with it? These are some of the questions that this paper addresses. It discusses the complex writing process and offers a creative option that will enable teachers to design more innovative activities by following a task-based language teaching framework. It illustrates how life-like tasks may empower students in the classroom and help them overcome blocks to writing and produce interesting anthologies. Through the use of authentic and imaginative communication activities, teachers can make writing more meaningful and fun for learners.

For many learners, writing is a form of academic torture, and for many educators, teaching it is a kind of professional agony. It is because writing is usually considered a tedious task, a lonely job, a boring chore, and even an impossible mission.

Writing is truly a difficult process to learn and a hard skill to teach because "...there is no one simple solution to how to write: different people do it in different ways in different circumstances...it is not wrong to go backwards or forwards... the writing process is of its nature recursive..." (Clark and Ivanič, 1991, p. 172, as cited in Canilao, 2008). Thus, the process approach that includes the pre-writing, writing, and post-writing stages is often advocated to enable learners to brainstorm, develop, and publish their ideas (Hedge, 1988, as cited in Canilao, 2008). Group work is also another aid to writing for it provides a non-threatening venue for generating and exchanging ideas (Fleming, 1988; Raimes, 1983 cited in Canilao, 1997 and Canilao, 2008).

The principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) allow for a design of tasks that incorporates the application of process writing and group work. Writing becomes a more essential learning experience and a fulfilling pedagogical undertaking through activities designed on TBLT principles. Key advocates of TBLT include Littlewood (2003, as cited in Canilao, 2008) and Ribé and Vidal (1993, cited in Littlewood, 2003, & Canilao, 2008) who have examples designed based on the framework. Essentially, the TBLT framework focuses on three generations of tasks. First generation tasks focus on communicative development that enhances the learners' ability to use the language in a particular situation (e.g. asking students to look at a map and talk about the best direction to take). Second generation tasks focus on communicative development and cognitive development where in addition to being able to use the language effectively, learners are also challenged to use thinking strategies (e.g. asking students to conduct interviews, gather data, and report their findings on tourists' perceptions). Third generation tasks focus on communicative development, cognitive development, and global personality development in which the third aspect of development provides avenues for learners to hone their interpersonal and creative skills (e.g. asking students and teachers to brainstorm an issue such as the environment; grouping students according to common interests and asking them to research on their areas of interest and present their findings; asking students to evaluate the activity). This framework guides teachers in designing tasks that give learners productive, creative, and interactive opportunities.

It is the same framework that I consider in developing my lessons for the courses I teach at the Ateneo de Manila University, a private Filipino and Catholic institution that fosters student-centered learning practices (Ateneo de Manila University Loyola Schools Faculty Manual, 2002; Ang, Gonzalez, Liwag, Santos & Vistro-Yu, 2001, as cited in Canilao, 2008). I also follow the process approach and employ group work to make writing pleasurable for my students.

Writing the reflection paper is the final task for En 12, the required culminating language course for college students in my teaching context. This course develops students' communicative skills and prepares them for the academic demands of their courses such as philosophy and theology. It follows a task-based approach to learning and teaching. The En12 class is usually composed of thirty-five male and female students whose ages range

from sixteen to nineteen. They are from different disciplines such as humanities, science, math, and management, and their proficiency level in communication is between average and above average. I meet my En12 class thrice a week, and each session runs for fifty minutes.

For their En12 reflection paper, students are expected to develop their personal autobiographical accounts and discuss the insights they have gained from experiences significant to them. To prepare them for this task, I conduct self-discovery activities that allow them to explore the various facets of their personalities. I guide them in recalling their grade school and high school days and in thinking about their college life. I ask them to use metaphors to describe their personalities in these various stages of their lives. I also give personality tests that mirror their preferences. We discuss the difference between how people perceive them and how they see themselves. For their mini-writing task, I ask them to compose a “Who I’m Not” paper that reveals the dimensions of their personalities that are usually unknown to others. These task-based activities enhance communicative and cognitive development (first and second generation tasks), and they run for about three sessions.

Next, I ask them to read different examples of autobiographical accounts and analyze content and structure. After we analyze one account by class discussion, we form four groups and specific selections. Each group is required to come up with a short creative presentation that shows the following: the gist of the account; its flow and structure; the tone and style used by the author; and the insights that may be gained from it. Groups are given the freedom to develop their concepts for their presentations. The presentation may take the form of a role play, a panel discussion, or a news report. After the presentations, I summarize and synthesize the main points with the entire class for processing purposes. This stage which runs for about three sessions also focuses on communicative and cognitive development (first and second generation tasks). Such activities enable the students to experience authentic interaction that encourages them to communicate effectively and think strategically. Moreover, it increases students’ awareness of various techniques in developing narratives and prepares them for the final oral presentation task which I will discuss in the succeeding parts of this article.

After studying the sample accounts, the students begin writing their drafts for their reflection papers. The next stage enables them to work in publication teams. Again, four groups are

formed. Each group is assigned to produce an anthology of the members' reflection papers. The theme of the anthology will depend on the group's view of life. Their anthologies serve as the final task for the course.

When they meet with their publication teams, they share the issues they have explored in developing their reflection papers. I ask them to fuse their insights and describe life through a "fancy" and a "formal" definition. The fancy definition may be presented through an analogy. I give an example from the film "Forrest Gump" that compares life to "a box of chocolates" (fancy definition) which means that life is unpredictable (formal definition). When they are ready with their fancy and formal definitions, they prepare to defend and illustrate their analogies through another group presentation. Their definitions will also guide the themes of their anthologies. This stage takes about four sessions. This final stage encompasses third generation tasks that focus on communicative, cognitive, and global personality development. The students exchange their insights, articulate their views, conceptualize their anthologies, and produce creative presentations in publication teams that approximate real life writing situations.

The [anthology](#) includes the following elements: the title that reflects the theme; an introductory page that spells out the team's view of life (their fancy and formal definitions); and their individual reflection papers. The layout, format, and design of their anthology also echo their theme.

One of my En12 classes came up with the following fancy definitions of life:

["Life is like a party."](#)

"Life is like a fashion show."

["Life is a battle."](#)

"Life is like a musical composition."

Each group produces a twenty-minute presentation complete with costume, music, and props. They transform the classroom into a mini-theater and illustrate their definitions through meaningful skits. Those who describe life as a party welcome their classmates in an actual gathering and serve them food and beverages. They then have a role play that shows various

characters in a party with their different conflicts. Those who see life as a fashion show, on the other hand, transport the class into the catwalk where the group performers model sets of clothes and prove that people have different choices in life in terms of “what to wear” and “how to wear it.”

In the next session, those who define life as a battle divide the classroom into sections where they show different kinds of struggles: a reality show, a game show, and a boxing match. After showing each segment, they explain the ordeals of life that people have to face daily. The last team presents a spoof of [American Idol](#), a popular TV program, and shows three singers who interpret the songs of their lives. The group reminds the audience that each life is a unique song.

The four presentations take two sessions. Two groups perform in the first session and the other groups in the second session. They are also given two extra sessions for consultations, preparations, and rehearsals. The last session includes a processing of the activities. The students evaluate their presentations and share further insights on what life is all about. Afterwards, I give the class general feedback and call each team to share with them my comments and evaluation. I commend them for their strengths and point out areas for improvement before I give them their final score. Next, I talk to the whole class again and give them reminders for their final papers and their group anthologies. In evaluating their individual reflection papers, I look at the following criteria: substantiation, style, and structure. For their group presentations and anthologies, I assess them according to content and creativity. Through in-class and scheduled consultations, I guide the students in completing their final task.

Providing the three generations of tasks defined by Ribé and Vidal (1993 cited in Littlewood, 2003 and Canilao, 2008) is helpful in enabling the students to scaffold their learning, articulate their ideas, sharpen their reflective thinking abilities, and improve their interpersonal skills. I have observed that some students who are usually hesitant to interact and write become more eager and motivated in doing their tasks and working with their classmates. It helps that the context for writing is defined through challenging task-based activities. Furthermore, the collaborative effort of the publication team boosts the confidence of the students in writing, and their presentations enable them to share their insights and learn

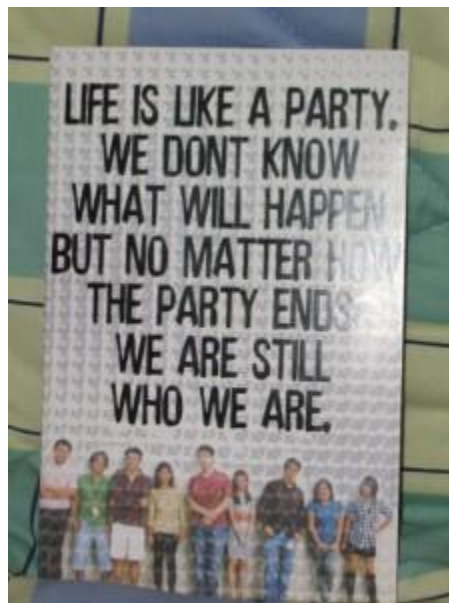
from one another. I have sensed their delight and witnessed their best in their performances. The same kind of creativity that the publication teams show in their group presentations is usually manifested in the way their anthologies are designed. Most of their final papers are also more moving, more substantial, and more organized. It is probably because they write for a purpose, work for a goal, and win for a reason. Making writing a meaningful and enjoyable experience for learners can, therefore, be done. It is not impossible to make our mission possible in teaching.

### Anthologies



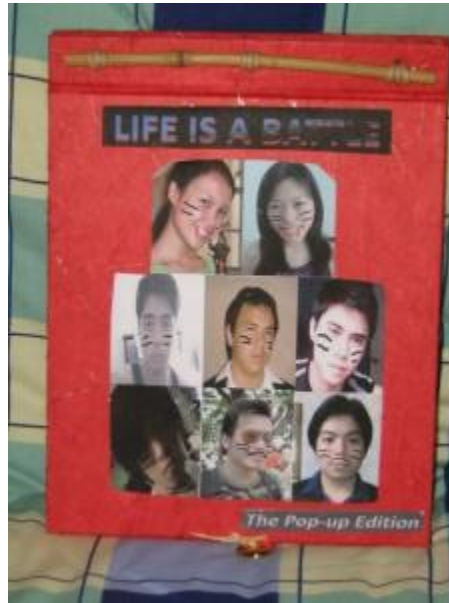
Anthologies (click to enlarge)

### Life is a party



Life is like a party (click to enlarge)

Life is a battle



Life is a battle (click to enlarge)

Idol



Idol (click to enlarge)

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### **About the Author**

Maria Luz Elena N. Canilao has an M.A. in Literature and Language from the Ateneo de Manila University and a Certificate of Advanced Studies in the Communicative Teaching of English (with Distinction) from Lancaster University, UK. She is an ELT trainer and an English instructor of the Ateneo de Manila University. She was the chairperson of the Ateneo de Manila High School English Department from 2000 to 2003. She is currently enrolled in the Ph.D. ELL (English Language and Literature) Program of the Ateneo de Manila University.