Learning and teaching writing for 14 year old Junior Certificate learners of German

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Abstract

The Junior Certificate examination requires inexperienced learners to write a letter and short note to a fictional reader. In this paper, written samples are analysed and questionnaire results presented from a small group of young, inexperienced learners preparing for this examination. Empirical data was collected from written samples, a game, and questionnaires. The data suggests that learners plan their German Junior Certificate short note in both English and German. They predominantly rework what they have written not by exchanging single words, but by replacing large sections of their sentences. Data obtained from questionnaires suggests that these learners' experiences of writing in German come mainly from homework with pre-set sentences. Learners show low motivation and a lack of ownership of their work. Discussions of foreign language (FL) writing theories, models, teaching methods, and writing task design, and of practical ways of improving young learners' attitudes to writing in the FL are included.

Introduction

In this study, empirical data is presented that was collected from a small group of six beginner learners of German (aged 14) in the Goethe Institute, Dublin. As part of preparation for the Junior Certificate German Higher Paper the group had particularly requested extensive written practice. Most learners in this group found it difficult to write the required amount of words, made common mistakes (Department of Education and Science 1999: 6-7), and brought negative attitudes and low motivation to the task.

The objective of this research was to find out about the learners' experience of, and attitude to, writing in German. However, none of this data would be complete without investigation into the institutional setting of the FL writing since, as Redder (2000: 643) puts it, 'der Begriff des Lehrens [kann], bei genauer Betrachtung, nicht unabhängig von einem Institutionsbegriff diskutiert werden'

['the concept of teaching cannot, on close examination, be discussed independently from an institutional context' – *ed.*]. This institutional aspect also defines the social setting of the 'gezielte Steuerung von Lernprozessen ... insbesondere die Lehrperspektive' ['purposeful management of learning processes ... in particular teaching perspectives' – *ed.*] (Krumm 2001: 777).

FL teaching in the classroom has historically concentrated on the four skills of writing, speaking, listening, and reading. Listening and speaking are termed 'spoken language' and require direct communication, while writing and reading refer to written language and are used for indirect communication. The writer has more time to decide what to write and how to express his or her ideas.

Theories about how students write can be divided into L1 studies and L2 (or FL) studies. Models have been posited and the writing process has been divided into the sub-processes of planning, writing, and reviewing or revising. I have chosen three L1 models and two L2 models that deal with young and unskilled writers such as were used in the study below.

Hayes and Flower (1980) (quoted in Eßer 1997: 101ff.) posited the notion that the ability to write develops in tandem with the development of such cognitive abilities as processing information and problem-solving. With increased age and practice, different writing types (e.g. reporting, describing, or hypothesizing) become automated and integrated into the existing level of writing ability. Bereiter (quoted in Eßer 1997: 102) distinguishes three succeeding levels of writing style. The first he calls his primary level *Assoziatives Schreiben* ['associative writing'], where the actual writing is spontaneous and bound to content. At the next stage of a writer's development he or she incorporates spelling, punctuation, and syntactic rules. Bereiter calls this *das Regel-gemäße Schreiben* ['rule-governed writing']. What he terms *das kommunikative Schreiben* ['communicative writing'] follows *Regel-gemäßes Schreiben* when the writer is able to consider the potential reader (real or fictional).

The L1 models of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1985) (quoted in Eßer 1997: 109ff.) deal with 'how children acquire the ability to handle complexities of prose compositions' (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1979). Bereiter and Scardamalia found that skilled writers have the ability to reflect on their writing. The skilled writer moves between considering the content and the language of their

writing. Beginners, i.e. unskilled learners, do not have this ability of reflection. Their texts originate without previous global planning processes.

How well theories from L1 writing can be transferred into L2 theory has been a question for L2 research into writing. It was thought that L1 writing skills could not be transferred into L2 since the types of writing used in FL classes are radically different from the types of writing used in L1 or L2. However the L2 model developed by Krings (1992) (quoted in Eßer 1997: 104ff.) illustrates that there is interplay of L1 and L2 strategies, particularly for the sub-processes of planning and revising.

Börner's (1989) model of writing in the FL was adapted from Hayes and Flower's (1980) L1 model. Börner (1989: 352) felt that the role of 'Intertexte als Glied einer Kette von aufeinander aufbauenden Texten' ['intertexts as part of a chain of texts which build on one another' – *ed.*] had been neglected by Hayes and Flower, and he posited that, unlike L1 writing, the FL 'writer's means of expression are systematically below his or her needs of expression' (Börner 1989: 348). (Intertexts are texts that are formed in the writer's mind as part of the writing process. They are unfinished thoughts and intended sentences that are then converted into the written text.) Börner postulated from his results that no more than single parts of sentences or single sentences are planned at the same time.

These models have formed the theoretical framework for exercises in FL writing, but FL teachers deal daily with the problem of what to teach and how to teach it. Changing teaching methods have, over the last 50 years, directly affected classroom activities by changing the structure of writing tasks. Highly controlled essays, pattern drill exercises, and the transcription of dialogues were used in FL classes when the Grammar-Translation Method in the Audiolingual Method were in vogue. The Communicative Approach (CA) and the developments in the pragmatic outlook of FL teaching led to approaches to teaching writing such as the textlinguistic approach (e.g. Portman 1991 and Tütken 1993, quoted in Eßer 1997: 124). Aspects of text production such as idiomatic expressions, logical sequencing of arguments, and cohesive elements received more attention. Writing is mostly a social interaction in which the socio-cultural context plays an important role. We write to someone about something, and how we go about this is dependent on cultural expectations, which vary from country to country.

The written tasks used in this study come from the Junior Certificate German Higher Paper; they are communicative tasks with a communicative aim and a stipulated reader. Further developments shaped by the Intercultural Approach led to different writing tasks, according to 'Inhalten, die dem Lernenden etwas bedeuten, d.h. ihm helfen, sich in der fremden Welt zu orientieren und dabei eine neue Perspektive auf die eigene Welt zu entwickeln' ['contents which mean something to the learner, i.e., help him to orient himself in the foreign world and thus develop a new perspective on his own world' – *ed.*] (Neuner and Hunfeld 1993: 104). Writing has now become an important activity where 'interkulturelle Unterschiede in den Schreibstilen intensiv erforscht werden' ['intercultural differences in writing style are intensively explored' – *ed.*] (Eßer 1997: 135) and has led to the present revival of writing in FL teaching.

The study

The research tools used in this study were two questionnaires, two written samples, and observations collected during a game. In the first questionnaire, students were asked to give some background information and describe class activities during their English and German classes at school. They were also asked to rate their ability in both subjects. The second questionnaire was filled out after students had completed both written tasks and it served to question students retrospectively as to what had directed their thoughts and actions before, during, and after completion of the written tasks.

The written tasks had been taken from the original design used in the written expression section of the Junior Certificate German Higher Level Examination, which consists of a letter, a short note, and a postcard. The postcard and short note task were chosen in preference to the letter for three reasons. First, the instructions for the postcard and short note are always given in English and therefore L1 interference, should this occur, was thought to be more obvious. Secondly, the tasks are short and quick to carry out in class. Finally, they are always directed towards a specific reader (usually a pen pal, pen pal's parents, or the owner of a youth hostel or camping site).

Eighteen sentences containing one mistake each, taken from five different categories from the *Chief Examiner's Report German*

Higher Junior Certificate 1999 (Department of Education and Science 1999: 6-7), were presented to individual students. They were asked to identify the mistake and then correct it. The sentences had been reworked into a game along the lines of 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?'. It was hoped that more observations of learners' behaviours would be found.

Data of interest from the written sample included the length of the writing, i.e., how many sentences were used and the number of words per sentence; the style and readability of the writing; and the role played by the intended reader. Evidence of planning such as doodles or notes in the margin were noted and evidence of revision and the choice of strategies such as crossing out words and changing sentences or letters were noted.

Due to the small sample size of only six students, qualitative data from written samples and from the questionnaires were separated into individual student profiles. From these, aspects of attitude, planning and writing procedures, and evidence of revision at sentence and word level were analysed.

Findings and analysis

All of the learners found writing in German difficult. They encountered problems in planning what to write and how to write, and lacked skills to revise their postcards and short notes. They were generally dissatisfied with their ability in German. Three main groups of findings are analysed and discussed below.

Observation 1: Written content is planned in both English and German but created by translation of the English task design and without consideration for the intended reader.

Evidence of planning in the form of retrospective data showed that over 80% of the group claim to think first about what they will write, i.e., they plan the content. Sixty percent plan their work in both English and German, while 20% use only German and 20% only English. In the literature it is claimed that 40% of the planning is verbalized in L1 prior to writing, indicating a strong role of the mother tongue in the steering of the FL writing process (Krings 1992: 60). This mechanism was observed during the writing and during the game. The more skilled writers, especially, mumbled and mouthed words and sentences. Börner (1987: 1344)

also found that L1 is used during planning for items that relate particularly to parts of the 'Lexikon, die Kollokationen sowie manche textgrammatischen Schemata' ['lexicon and collocations as well as some textgrammar schemata' – *ed.*].

Learners either assemble the short note or postcard together as an entire text in their mind (40%), write down sentences (20%), write the postcard or short note bit by bit (20%), or 'don't know' (20%). Evidence from the written samples suggests, however, that learners write down sentences, parts of sentences, or single words. Börner (1989) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1985) had also observed this, stating that not more than single parts of sentences or single sentences are planned at the same time.

Content data from the written sample showed that students write similar-length pieces: 3-4 sentences or a total of 18-28 words. The short note in the Junior Certificate German Higher Paper Section C requires learners to write 25-35 words, so the notes were all on the short side. The content was most often derived by a direct translation of the English task instructions, e.g., 'say there are three of you together' became *wir sind drei zusammen*, causing content to be stilted and unnatural and the writing to be stylistically inferior.

All respondents remembered encountering problems of expression during writing, i.e., how to say something in German or specific words in German. This should not be surprising since 'FremdsprachenlernerInnen haben vielfach Angst davor, Texte in der Fremdsprache zu schreiben ... . Viele beklagen sich über Formulierungsschwierigkeiten, Korrektheitsdruck, Unkenntnisse der inhaltlichen, strukturellen und formalen Anforderungen'[1] (Eßer 1997:169).

The difference that exists between wanting to express oneself and being able to express oneself can cause the text production to become laboured, take more time, and cause dissatisfaction 'denn das Beabsichtigte kann nicht in der aus der Muttersprache gewohnten Weise und Nuanciertheit ausgedrückt werden' ['because the intention cannot be expressed in the styles and nuances which are familiar from the mother tongue' – *ed.*] (Eßer 1997: 116).

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[1] Learners of foreign languages are often afraid to write texts in the foreign language ... . Many complain about difficulties of phrasing, pressure to be correct, ignorance of the requirements of content, structure, and form. [– *ed.*]

Observation 2: Learners know how to improve their writing but show a lack of automatization of vocabulary and grammatical structures, as well as a general lack of writing skills.

Learners had been asked in the questionnaire which 'extras' were good stylistic devices that would make a piece more enjoyable to read. One third said using link words such as *dann* 'then' or *später* 'later' and giving extra information would be good inclusions. Fewer would choose to ask some questions or to describe how one felt. Learners are therefore aware of how to improve the readability of their work, but only one learner actually used some of these devices. It is interesting that this learner stated in the questionnaire that he thinks about the pen pal or person to whom he was writing, and his written samples are most readable. The writing style of his postcards is more fluent, with use of conjunctions, giving the impression that he writes with the intent of meaning and content. He also uses stylistically more elaborate constructions, such as *Es tut mir leid* 'I'm sorry' rather than *Entschuldigung* 'Excuse me', and he wrote the longest postcards, fully answering the questions. The other learners just carried out the task rigidly as it is laid down, word for word.

As the written samples were produced under exam-like conditions, learners were not able to use dictionaries or other course material. Yet when asked what they would do, pupils had a variety of ways of dealing with problems of expression. Twenty-nine percent of learners claimed they would leave a blank in the postcard or short note. This behaviour was not evident in the written samples, where no blanks were found. When learners were asked how they would deal with a nagging doubt about how to spell or change something they were unsure of, 38% replied that they would put down what looks right and 38% what sounds right; the rest did not know. It was evident from the way learners reviewed their work that spellings were changed often due to visual or auditory stimuli, e.g., <geschenk> was changed to <Geschenk> (*Geschenk* 'gift') and then straight back down to lower case again, or <carde> was changed to <carte> (*Karte* 'card'). Visual patterns proved the most successful for revision.

Using rereading of the written work and visual cues is, of course, also an L1 writing strategy, and the learners have adapted this L1 strategy and applied it to their L2 writing. Results show, however, that the outcomes of this revision strategy are often not successful.

The replacement of words that learners were unsure of often took the following pattern. The learner would write something like *Ich hoffe dich magst die geschenk* then <geschenk> would be crossed out and rewritten correctly as <Geschenk>. Crossing out was often followed by evidence of revision such as substitution of words. In the relevant research literature it is suggested, 'Diese Revisionsphasen haben unterschiedlichen Charakter, in der Mehrzahl geht es jedoch um die Wiederholung von bereits Niedergeschriebenem, um ein Sich-Vergewissern' ['These phases of revision have different characters; in the majority, however, it is an issue of the repetition of things already written down, of self-reassurance' – *ed.*] (Faistauer 1997: 92). This was often noted. One student, for example, found it difficult to decide between using *möchten* and *lieben* — both of these verbs are thought by many learners to mean 'to like'. He started with *möchten*, crossed it out and rewrote it again, crossed it out a second time, and replaced it with *lieben*. Approximately 60% of all revision quoted in previous research in L1 and L2 were single word changes. This trend was also apparent in this study.

The learners' revision procedures raised two hypotheses. The first arose from the way learners crossed out single words and the second from the way learners actually corrected mistakes.

On looking at the way pupils crossed out words, an interesting feature could be noted. There were great differences in the number of strokes of the pen that were used by each pupil to cross out mistakes. This might give an indication about how learners engage with their correction. A learner who uses many strokes to blot out the mistake may feel compelled to do this in order to reduce the visual stimulus to correct during the revision process. (No references in the secondary literature were found for this crossing-out behaviour.) The student with most strokes (20 strokes) claims to put down what looks right often and was later found to be most successful at finding the mistakes in the game by visually determining and locating what looks wrong. The writers with the fewest strokes were consistently unable to find mistakes in the game, as if their awareness of their writing existed only as they themselves were writing, but they could not transfer this awareness to other situations.

Another interesting behaviour led to the hypothesis that these learners were using two main correction procedures during their writing. Corrections could effect single changes, e.g., the ending

of a verb such as *Ich vergesst* is changed to *Ich vergesse* 'I forget'; a pronoun form such as *mit mich* is changed to *mit mir* 'with me'; or the adding of a missing umlaut. The second behaviour was to change whole words or parts of the sentence, e.g. *möchets du es*, where the student did not just cross out *möchets* but rewrote the phrase correctly as *magst du es* 'do you like it', or *es ist drei Junge in mein Gruppe* was changed to *wir sind 4* 'there are four of us'. The first behaviour I have called KEY-HOLE SENTENCE SURGERY (KHSS) and the other method PART OF SENTENCE REPLACEMENT (PSR). Results from the game where learners were observed using these behaviours showed that 67% chose PSR as opposed to 22% using KHSS. This suggests that PSR is the preferred method to correct a perceived mistake. My suggestion is that learners use PSR because their level of vocabulary automation, as well as their understanding and application of the grammatical structures, is not solid enough to let them visually find, analyse, and diagnose mistakes and then carry out corrective steps to rectify their mistakes.

Bartlett (1982) (quoted in Pogner 2000: 675) had stated that identification of something that requires revision 'need not involve an ability to name or define'. Bartlett's view is that identification goes beyond mere awareness of the need for revision but does not encompass a description or characterization of the error or malfunction in the text. Bartlett distinguishes three component processes at this stage of the writing process: detection, identification, and correction. Detection is claimed to entail a comparison between the passage in question and a writer's communicative knowledge in the widest sense, i.e. about writing in general or about specific goals and intentions. Ability and use of KHSS would require only a rudimentary knowledge of grammar and some automatization of spellings and meaning of vocabulary. This knowledge does not seem to be readily available to this group of learners.

Observation 3: Teachers teach writing by using sentences, which results in learners feeling alienated from their writing and having negative attitudes towards their finished product.

Results obtained from the first questionnaire showed that 83% of German writing does not take place during German class time but is done for homework. Only half of the pupils write on the board during class time with the teacher. Pair or group work is never

used. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not include a comparable question for group work with writing in the English class: this could be another factor that affected learners' attitudes to both.

It is a well-known fact that teaching students to write in the FL is a slow process which requires close guidance from the teacher. However, research carried out during the heyday of the Communicative Approach found that many teachers did not view the teaching of writing in the FL classroom favourably. Börner (1987: 1345) found that when FL teachers were asked what value they placed during their class time on the development of writing, 'antworteten von 324 Deutschlehrern aus 24 Ländern 117 mit "einen geringen", 53 mit "einen sehr geringen" und 22 mit "keinen" ' ['of 324 German teachers from 24 countries, 117 answered 'low', 53 answered 'very low', and 22 answered 'none' – *ed.*]. Various reasons were given for this negative attitude (Börner 1987: 1346): (1) the Communicative Approach requires emphasis on the skills of speaking and listening, (2) writing is only for specialists, (3) suitable exercises for the development of writing are lacking, (4) writing is a waste of time, and (5) writing can be learnt to a great extent alone and independently from class. Obviously many FL teachers are of the opinion that writing can indeed be learnt by students to a great extent on their own and independently from class.

Another interesting point arose from a comparison of writing activities carried out in English and German classes. Activities differ greatly in the two subjects. During English classes, pupils mostly write stories or essays. In German class, according to the students, most time is spent writing single sentences. Learners found describing, analysing, and making up material 'easy' in English class; the latter was also most 'interesting'. For German a different picture emerges. Learners feel that they never make up German material for their written work in class. Sixty-six percent of students said that they could write 'what they want' in English classes while 80% of learners felt they write 'what the teacher wants' during their German class work. Learners feel an astounding lack of ownership of their German writing, which can only have a negative impact on students' motivation: as Simon (1999: 250) has observed, 'research has ... shown that, unless learners are committed to the learning effort, either through intrinsic interest or through internalisation of extrinsic goals, tasks are likely to be

perceived as externally forced upon them, commonly resulting in a decrease in willingness to engage with the subject matter'.

The reason why German-language teachers have chosen to teach predetermined L2 sentences becomes clearer when the institutional factors are taken into consideration. Teaching FL in a school setting is a very artificial environment characterized by low levels of language input due to the low number of class contact hours, overemphasis on form, lack of authenticity, and a great deal of *so tun als ob* [literally, 'do as if'] (Wolff 1990: 611). Preparing pupils for examinations can put added pressure on the teacher and the learner. In order to bring pupils successfully into the range of examination proficiency, many teachers have to assess accuracy rather than function and content. The teachers experience the 'hidden agenda of the classroom' and become 'pulled by test pressure into equipping pupils to pass the test rather than to achieve proficiency in the language' (Lennon 1998: 35). More recently it has been stated that there is 'much anecdotal evidence that MFL teachers ' "play things safe" and invest time and effort in intensive rehearsals of the relatively limited core of language needed for test success' (Mitchell 2000: 283).

From a teacher's perspective, the most time-effective way to achieve for students what is being required in the examinations is to teach chunks or sentences in German that are then memorized and slotted into the appropriate spot of writing when required. This technique has been acknowledged by the Association of Secondary School Teachers of Ireland (ASTI 1992: 26):

> Having a controlled response from students to one teacher
> is a necessary coping strategy for the teacher. ... It is also
> a system which has built around it teachers' sense of timing for covering a course and teachers' knowledge of the
> amount and depth of coverage required for subject areas
> for the national examinations.

This means that teachers consider the time they need to get through the coursework to be the 'teaching time', rather than the 'learning time' that their students would need in order to develop proficiency in the required area of the target language (Little 2000: 5). In addition to these factors, the syllabus for the Junior Certificate is fairly broad and demanding, not unlike the learning targets for the senior cycle. As Simon (1999: 372) remarks:

The senior cycle syllabi have been shown to be ambitious and demanding in view of the limited allocation of time secondary teachers are given in order to train learners in a considerable range of skills. ... Little in-depth treatment of any skill [is possible] and strictly speaking, skimming the surface is all secondary level teachers can humanly be expected to manage.

Skimming the surface has increasingly forced teachers to teach preset sentences and use homework for written practice. This situation must be unsatisfactory for the learner. Writing at home only leaves the dictionary, course work, and course books as reference points. The course books which this group were using were ascertained from the questionnaire. All six learners had *Zur Sache! 2* (Hayes 1993). This book claims to 'provide an interesting range of exercises in all sections of the Junior Certificate examination' and states that 'pupils who have covered all the work will face the examination with confidence' (Hayes 1993: 1). However, all the written exercises in *Zur Sache! 2* are short notes, postcards, or letter-type tasks where the format is as in the exam. The book provides sample sentences that can be used, and it encourages the manipulation of complete sentences without grouping them into a common context or grading them according to difficulty, style, or frequency of use. The written section does not incorporate grammar explanations. A grammar section at the back of the book uses examples, but these only relate loosely to the sentences in the written section and would not help learners who are battling with the revision of their German writing.

A grim picture emerges and is compounded when learners were asked what their overall feeling was on completing their written task. Sixty percent of the learners felt that 'I did my best' or that it was good enough to 'pass'. None of them felt that the recipient (e.g. pen pal or owner of a youth hostel) would 'like it'. In fact only one of the students rated his German to be 'good', with half of the group rating it 'could be better' or in the category 'terrible', specially invented by two students. It is not surprising that German is not their favourite subject.

Summary and recommendations

During English classes learners use their imagination and give their opinions often, which suggests that their L1 writing is quite skilled. Drawing upon Bereiter's (1980) L1 Model, quoted in Eßer (1997: 102), they are skilled in *Regel-gemäßes Schreiben*, since writing essays and stories does not presuppose a reader in mind. The learners are developing the ability to handle complexities of prose composition suggested in the Bereiter and Scardamalia (1985) L1 model.

The writing carried out in German classes is radically different from L1. Learners are not required to express themselves, but write what their teachers want them to write. As stated by Krings (1992), L1 writing skills cannot be transferred into L2 since the skill in L1 and the type of writing used are so very different. This is confirmed in this study. These learners are developing the *Kommunikatives Schreiben* skills only in their L1; yet due to the communicative and intercultural teaching methods, learners are asked to perform an FL writing task for which they have no fully developed strategies in their L2.

Difficulties are increased still more by the written task being formulated in English, which leads to many problems of expression. Mistakes that are caused due to the differences between the target and mother tongue (interference mistakes) lead to learners using familiar L1 patterns in grammar and morphosyntax, which lead to incorrect L2 forms. The most important conclusion from this study, therefore, is that the task design used for the Junior Certificate German Higher Paper Written Expression B and C does not allow learners to access the creative writing strategies that they have acquired for their L1 writing work. Krumm (1989: 22), for instance, suggests written exercises that use prompts such as:

Sonntags mag ich am liebsten..
Die Deutschen sind...
Ich habe noch nie... [2]

This would enable learners to engage with the topic more, be creative, and develop their commitment to writing in the FL.

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[2] On Sundays my favourite [thing to do] is ....; The Germans are ....; I have never .... [– *ed.*]

Teachers have taken methodological decisions regarding the course book, types of exercises, and the way teaching materials are used; this has affected their learners. Teachers tend to teach complete sentences and learners adapt them by using PSR as a writing tool. Whether this is exclusively used in L2 is doubtful. Being able to revise using KHSS by applying grammar rules should, however, also be one of the teaching aims. Interviews with teachers have revealed that they do in fact allocate 40-60% of the total class time to grammar teaching, with non-native teachers prescribing a more important role to grammar than their colleagues who are native speakers of the target language (Zimmermann 1990, quoted in Rall 2001: 881). However, 'Aneignen bedeutet ... nicht, zu einem Wissen ... zu gelangen, sondern zum praktischen Können' ['Acquisition does not mean attaining knowledge, but a practical ability' – ed.] (Huneke and Steinig 1997: 90). One way to help learners could be to encourage them to include stylistic devices such as questions. The learners would then have more opportunity to practise features such as the use of dative or accusative personal pronouns and the position and ending of the verb. This approach would have the important effect of making the reader seem to be more life-like and to have real interests and a real rapport with the writers. The concept of reader and audience could then be further developed to include fellow classmates or teachers who become an audience, creating the important information-gap situation that makes communication so meaningful. The written work can be read out to peers or published in monthly magazines (Power 1993). It could also be sent to other people by post or by e-mail: cf. the website <digischool.bart.nl/du/lehrer/praxis/schreiben/start. htm>

Research on writing in German as a foreign language has only really become prominent since the 1990s: Pogner (2000: 675) observes that given 'a narrow data base and lack of comprehension theory of the L2 writing process, the results of individual studies can only be generalised with significant restrictions'. I hope to have contributed to this database and to have encouraged other teachers to bring creative, free writing into the beginners' German classrooms. Let's hear what our learners have to write!

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