
Topic related: famous film and series lines
Level: intermediate
Time: two sessions of 50 minutes or an hour.
Skills Focus: writing a dialogue, use of direct/reported speech, correct of punctuation

JUSTIFICATION

In the last two years, the examinators of the Catalan University Entry Exam have been asking to write a dialogue which is something completely new and it has never been asked before. Not even the second Batxillerat (6th form) English Book or any First Certificate Exam (FCE) books have a chapter devoted to this kind of task. Even though, we can find in the latest edition of the Advanced Contrast For Batxillerat 2 by Burlington Books, a writing guide about interviewing. However, I personally think that writing a dialogue should be an assignment where the examinator can assess the good command of the direct / reported speech as well as the narrative. So, it’s quite evident that a lesson about the matter is needed.

I’ve chosen the topic of detective stories because of the high popularity of the series Sherlock produced by the BBC. Sherlock is a British television crime drama that presents a contemporary update of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes detective stories. It stars Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as Doctor John Watson. The show was conceived by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss who aspired to produce a modern-day version of Conan Doyle’s stories in which Sherlock uses the technologies that are available to him today in order to find things out and solve crime. Sherlock depicts "consulting detective" Holmes, assisting the Metropolitan Police Service, primarily DI Greg Lestrade, in solving various crimes. Holmes is assisted by his flatmate, Dr. John Watson, who has returned from military service in Afghanistan.

WARM UP

Ask your students if they know any popular lines seen in films, books or series. For example, what Tom Hanks actually says in Forrest Gump, "My momma always said, 'Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get."’ Now, invite them to introduce it in a dialogue with someone else and continue with this conversation. Then define what a dialogue is about. In fact, a dialogue is a verbal exchange between two or more characters and it represents a scene that happened in a real or fictional context.

For example: “This breakfast is delicious,” George said. “Said” is the identifier, the verb that describes precisely how the sentences have been said in the direct interaction. “Said” is also the verb most writers use but the variety of verbs are more than welcome: “ask”, “reply”, “shout”, “suggest”, “recommend”, etc. But highlight that they must use them in Past Simple: “asked”, “replied”, “shouted”, “suggested”, “ recommended”, etc. Remind also the lesson about Direct/Reported Speech done previously. Direct Speech as drama when a speaking event is reported via direct speech forms, it is possible to include many features that dramatize the way in which an utterance was produced. The quotative frame can also include verbs which indicate the
speaker’s manner of expression (e.g. cry, exclaim, gasp), voice quality (e.g. mutter, scream, whisper), and type of emotion (e.g. giggle, laugh, sob). It can also include adverbs (e.g. angrily, brightly, cautiously, hoarsely, quickly, slowly) and descriptions of the reported speaker’s style and tone of voice.

PROCEDURE

1. First write on the board the following example:

   A normal example would go like this:

   “Hi Julian,” said Ellen.
   “Hey,” Julian answered.
   “What’s wrong?” Ellen asked.
   “Nothing,” Julian stammered.
   “Really? You don’t act like nothing’s wrong,” replied Ellen.

2. Ask them to observe the punctuation. Then explain the following rules:

   A. place quotation marks around the words that actually come out of the person’s mouth. Tell students if the words go in a comic strip bubble, then quotation marks go around those words. Ask them if they ever see the words he said or she said in a comic strip bubble.

   B. place ending periods and commas inside the end quotation mark: “Hi Julian,” said Ellen.

   C. place proper punctuation at the end of the sentence. “Hi Julian,” said Ellen.

   D. each time a person speaks, begin a new paragraph: “What’s wrong?” Ellen asked.

   “Nothing,” Julian stammered.

   E. capitalize the first word of what the person says, even if it occurs in the middle of a larger sentence.

   Ellen’s mother asked Julian, “What’s wrong?”

   Common mistakes I see in student writing as well as adult writing include placing the commas or periods outside the quotation marks and forgetting to place punctuation at the complete end of the sentence. These are easy to correct when you know these five rules for punctuating dialogue.

3. Observe the dialogue written before and pinpoint how boring it can be to read this for an examiner. Show them how to improve the exchange.

4. Ask two students to come at the front of the class (pick the most outgoing ones to avoid shame issues), bring them out of the class, tell them how to act the scene and it, ask the rest of the class to describe the scene, their faces, how do they feel, etc.
5. Start a collaborative writing with someone to help you out on the board. For instance, one of the result I got in class was the following:

“Hi Julian,” said Ellen with a big smile.

Julian looked down at his shoe and pushed around a pile of dust.

“What's wrong?” Katy wanted to know.

However, he wasn’t in the mood to tell her anything.

“Nothing,” Julian stammered.

“Really? You don’t act like nothing’s wrong,” insisted Ellen. She felt suddenly worried about her friend: something really serious was going on, she knew him very well.

6. Observe this improved dialogue and compare it to the previous one. Underline the changes and clarify any doubts before going any further.

7. Then, introduce the serie of Sherlock and for those who know it, ask them to describe the character of Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes.

8. Copy the following dialogue taken from the first scene of the serie.

Therapist: How's your blog going?

Dr. Watson: Yeah, good. Very good.

Therapist: You haven’t written a word, have you?

John Watson: You just wrote ‘still has trust issues’.

Therapist: And you read my writing upside down. You see what I mean? John, you're a soldier. It's gonna take you a while to adjust to civilian life. And writing a blog about everything that happens to you will honestly help you.

John Watson: Nothing happens to me

9. Explain that this is a script format and they are about to watch this scene projected on the board, encourage them to take notes describing the characters, the place, etc.

10. Finally they must rewrite the quotes and turn them into an appropriate dialogue as in the second example.
CONCLUSION

To sum up, it’s fundamental to set relevant writing tasks. Rather too many classrooms writing tasks are directionless and audienceless. If students are only writing to please the teacher, there is very low motivation and the quality of the writing would be compromised, as learners will have no clear perception why the work is being done. Writing verbal conversations or dialogue is often one of the most difficult parts of creative writing. Students often go into a story thinking it should be easy; after all, we all hold conversations many times a day! What they quickly realize is that crafting a relevant dialogue within the context of a story requires much more work than carrying out natural conversation. Dialogue isn’t just about creating direct quotations from different characters. Sometimes dialogue is best when it’s put into a summarized form, rather than the drawn-out form of an actual conversation. Anyway, short story assignments are fun, but they can also be tricky when it comes to writing the dialogue, or conversations that take place between characters. But, by dividing the problem you’ll divide the difficulty.

Bibliography

http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00t4pgh
Moffat, S. Sherlock DVD. BBC1
Lightbown, P. 2006. How Languages are Learned, Oxford: OUP