

A Match Made in Heaven

Terry McLean

NOTICE: This is the final published version of the following article: McLean, T. (2025). A match made in heaven. EL Gazette, March 2025(493), 38. Published in final form at https://www.elgazette.com/elg_archive/ELG2503/mobile/

Permanent link to this version <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14078/3854>

License All Rights Reserved

A match made in heaven

Teacher Terry McLean explains how he teaches sentence structure through thought groups and writing.

Teacher: OK, let's get into groups and talk about wedding traditions around the world.

Class: Great! Well, in Morocco, we...
Really? In Colombia, the bride wears...

And so goes a consistently successful group discussion activity in my advanced EAL speaking classes, especially ones in which there are mature students from around the world. I am sure that most teachers find that students participate with more vigour when they can relate to or identify with certain personal topics, weddings being a great one.

Getting students to talk about cultural traditions has never been a problem for me; however, what has been tricky is getting students to think about their use of language as they talk.

Usually, when sharing a memory of attending a wedding or participating in a ritual, students focus more on the story and less on fluency. Indeed, it is not easy to spark interest in the use of meta-language during a group activity.

This is when I introduce the importance of remembering our writing lessons when we communicate in the speaking ones. Yes, learning about phrases, clauses, and punctuation can help students improve their speaking skills, which can also increase motivation to pay more attention in writing class.

The is not a novel idea for teachers; however, some students could benefit from a reminder of the connection.

For me, there is no more enjoyable lesson than one in which I am waxing poetic about sentence structure; for many students, however, this can be like watching paint dry or sitting through a root canal.

Nevertheless, I try to make writing classes interesting, and this can effectively be done by linking them to speaking activities. I attempt to show students how knowledge of the pieces of sentences can help them communicate more clearly and effectively. The most beneficial strategy for me has been emphasizing thought groups—or 'chunking'.

Thought groups are groups of words that have a single thought or idea. For example, in the following sentence, there are three thought groups:

'I ate breakfast in the kitchen with my cat.'

After studying sentence structure, my students are able to parse utterances like this, and when they learn how to use rhythm and pauses, then



they are able to tell more personal stories in groups in a more natural way.

So, as I teach about prepositional phrases (on the table), dependent clauses (after I ate dinner), and introductory phrases (ten years ago), I also emphasise how these are chunks of language that carry meaning and that the pauses around them help the listener follow the story. You can find a short lesson I use in relation to this [here](#).

One particularly successful activity involves having the students write a short paragraph about a wedding that they have attended (or a vacation taken).

I first teach about titles, topic sentences, supporting details, and concluding sentences. Hopefully, the students will then employ a variety of sentence types and include vivid descriptions of people, food, and atmosphere.

After giving feedback on their writing, I can then transition to a group speaking activity in which the students share their stories with the encouragement to adlib as they talk. That is, they should tell their stories with stress and intonation as they add more details and what they had written as a general guide.

In this way, the students can practice their speaking skills while paying attention to the phrases, clauses, and punctuation in their writing. Students who have difficulty speaking can start out by reading a paragraph with the goal of moving to relying

on notes rather than on complete sentences in the future.

In addition, if the students have an interest in music, this writing/speaking connection can be reinforced with songs and lyrics. This ['Voice of American – Learning English interview'](#) provides a good example of the Beatles' *Can't Buy Me Love*. Students generally enjoy the opportunity to have a bit of fun in class, and getting them to look at lyrics and poems can turn into an enjoyable experience that melds speaking and writing skills.

Indeed, for the musically inclined teacher (not me), karaoke in the classroom could be just what the doctor ordered.

Of course, I realize that speaking and writing are different animals; however, they cannot be entirely separated in the classroom. From my experience, students tend to be more eager to participate in stimulating activities, and by introducing writing skills in a communicative way, I can parlay that eagerness into a great consolidation of language skills, both written and spoken.

So, should anyone know of any reason that this couple should not be joined, speak now or forever hold your peace.

Terence (Terry) McLean teaches English as an Additional Language (EAL) at [MacEwan University](#) in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. A selection of his published writing can be found [here](#).