

Teaching writing to school children

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Writing has a bad reputation in many schools, for both teachers and students. For the teacher, it means marking a pile of compositions and they are almost always worse than expected. For many students, writing is a boring chore and an “opportunity” to make a lot of mistakes. However, we believe that writing can be a very interesting and involving activity for students of English. In this article, we suggest ways of making it so. We will ask and answer three questions about writing in the EFL classroom:

- What is writing?
- Why teach writing?
- How do you teach writing to young EFL learners?

What is writing?

Writing is a **process**, from gathering ideas through to checking what has been written. It is also a **product**, a text.

Writing as a process

The writing process consists of the steps we take when we produce a piece of writing. The process may include some or all of the following:

- brainstorming (making a note of ideas, words and phrases related to the topic, in the order they come to mind)
- planning (categorising and ordering the ideas according to the task)
- drafting (a first attempt to write the ideas as a continuous text)
- revising (deciding how to improve the first draft, in terms of both content and accuracy)
- rewriting (writing the text again including the improvements)

Writing as a product

The writing product in “real life” is a text with a purpose. The purpose may be for example to inform, to thank, to request, or to simply entertain. The success of the text depends on the accuracy of the writing and the appropriacy of the content.

Accuracy:

- grammar
- vocabulary
- punctuation
- spelling
- capitalisation
- legibility
- appropriate text conventions (e.g. letter format or headings for a report)

Content:

- communicatively effective (the writer successfully conveys information to the reader)
- sufficiently detailed
- logically organised (the reader finds it easy to follow the writer’s ideas)
- original/interesting (not just copied or part-copied)
- believable (the ideas expressed make sense in terms of the real world)
- stylistically appropriate (it conveys the tone required e.g. formal for a job application)

Why teach writing?

There are two good sets of reasons for teaching writing to EFL school children. The first set of reasons relates to the **writing skill** itself. The second set relates to **foreign language learning** in general.

The writing skill:

- We can’t expect young learners to develop their writing skill without teaching them how to write and giving them opportunities to practise.
- Learners do not necessarily transfer their skill in writing from what they can do in their own language. In the case of young learners, they may not have developed their writing skill, even in their own language.
- Writing is probably the most personalised, creative activity in the language class.
- By developing their writing skills early, young learners are making a valuable investment for their future studies.

Foreign language learning:

- Writing gives learners the opportunity to find ways of expressing their ideas in a foreign language.
- Writing gives learners the opportunity to try out the language with plenty of thinking time.

- A learner's writing gives the teacher a good opportunity to diagnose grammar and vocabulary problems and to identify progress.
- Writing allows learners to practice new structures in an extended context.
- Writing can provide more variety in classwork.

How do you teach writing to young EFL learners?

In many classes, attention to writing is very limited. The teacher gives the learner a title or a topic. The learner produces a text, and the teacher marks the grammar, vocabulary and spelling mistakes in it. Writing is then merely a testing tool. This is perhaps the reason for writing's "bad reputation" which we mentioned earlier. Here are some tips for improving this reputation!:

- Pay attention to the writing process by providing opportunities for learners to brainstorm, plan, draft and revise. Remember that young learners will perhaps not use these strategies yet even in their own language. Many of these may be class or group activities, which can help make writing a less lonely process.
- Give learners something to write about. Pictures are a particularly good way to provide content: "a picture is a text for which the learner provides the words".
- Choose topics which the children can relate to in their own experience, for example *in the playground*, rather than *in the bank*.
- Stimulate young learner's creativity by putting familiar things together in an unfamiliar way. For example, "animals" and "hotel": ask students to describe a scene at a hotel for animals.
- Make sure the learners will be able to do the task with the language level they have (pay attention to vocabulary, useful expressions and structures at the pre-writing stage).
- Set the writing task itself as homework if time is short, but at least try to find time for some preparation work in class.
- Give the children the opportunity to become involved with their writing. For example, let them choose to be a character in their narrative.
- Be prepared for mixed ability. For example, have extension tasks for students who finish early like adding a *ps* to their letter.
- Encourage young learners to take pride in the presentation of their work, for example by

decorating it with pictures. Ask them to write on alternate lines so there is space for comments.

- Encourage learners to consider their audience. For instance, if they are writing a postcard, get them to imagine clearly who they are writing to; a parent or a friend for example.
- Be an interested audience by responding to the ideas in the learner's work, not just the language. Take on the role of intended audience as you mark.
- Don't just mark work for accuracy; mark for content as well. Select some appropriate aspects of content to consider as you assess and comment on them when giving feedback.
- Be success-oriented: don't only mark mistakes. For example, mark positively for good and ambitious use of language too. Learners need to be told what they are doing right as well as where their own particular problems are. It is good for learners to develop a positive attitude to writing from an early age.
- Involve the learners in their development. Encourage students to reread their work and to make necessary corrections. Let your students know in advance what you will be assessing when you mark. This will give them manageable criteria to evaluate their own work and improve it before handing it in. Also, encourage students to record their marks and their feelings about each piece of writing. For example, they could draw a happy face if they are pleased with their writing. This helps them to chart their progress, motivating them to become more involved in it. It may also provide a basis for teacher - student discussion.
- Look out for ways of using the learners' completed texts after writing. For example, students could work in pairs, asking and answering questions about content, or give each other clues about a character or plot for their partner to guess who or what was written about. They could also be encouraged to assess each other's work.
- Consider different ways to "publish" learner's writing. Display it on the wall, or get them to make a magazine, on paper or the internet.

First published in IATEFL young learners sig journal CATS, Spring 2000