
Chapter 15

Teaching Early Writing

by
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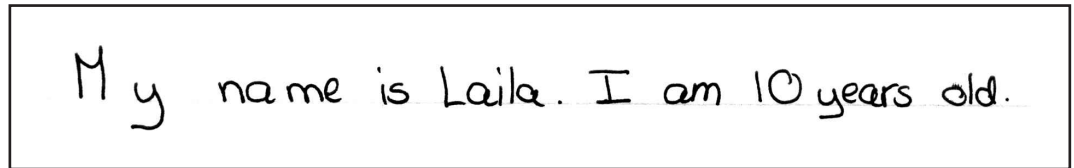
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Introduction

"Writing and more writing and then
more writing teaches writing"
Lewitt, 1990, p.

Writing can be a very important part of learning a foreign language for children. In this chapter, we will look at early writing as a means to create meaning and compose ideas. (See Chapter 14: Teaching Handwriting, for a look at teaching writing from the mechanical side.) Writing is a skill that takes some time to develop, so students need guidance in early stages. At the same time, they need frequent practice with writing for meaning (McCloskey & Davidson, 1989, p. 1.21). Writing in this way can help young learners with many aspects of their English language development and enrich their means of communicating in English. They will be able to write letters, invitations, label pictures, write their family names, or create other kinds of writing of their own. The examples below illustrate the kinds of writing students using the Hello! series might produce.



Children's writing work also includes assignments on grammar or vocabulary, answers to comprehension questions and tests. Here, teachers should concentrate on helping children write sentences correctly with good sentence form and mechanics of punctuation. (Paulston & Bruder, 1976, p. 205).

Rationale and Significance

Why Early Writing?

Writing for communication helps children's language development and helps teachers to see that development. Writing gives good evidence of students' progress in learning a language and shows that students can use the language correctly (Vale with Feunteun 1995).

Writing is also a way of reinforcing and therefore strengthening children's learning. Students at an early stage should be given writing tasks and activities that aim at helping them to put the language they have learned to purposeful use (Emslie & Dallas, 1997; Raimes, 1987).

A Description of Beginning Egyptian Writers

Egyptian government school students begin to write in English at the age of nine years, with *Hello! 1*. When your students begin to write, you should take into account the following points:

1. Students, at first, do make errors in grammar and vocabulary because they have not yet developed a good sense of English. That is why you should give them time and practice in both oral and written form as well as feedback on the accuracy of their language and the effectiveness of their composition.
2. To develop writing, students should know the mechanics of handwriting (see Chapter 14: *Teaching Early Handwriting*) and they will also need to learn conventions of print such as using paragraphs and punctuation. (Emslie & Dallas, 1995).
3. Students will also benefit from watching you write words they dictate. (See Chapter 13: *The Language Experience Approach*, for more information on this teaching strategy.)
4. Students are energetic and enthusiastic when they begin to write a different language. If you allow them to write about themselves, their hobbies, their lives and their own ideas, these topics will excite them (Lewitt, 1990). Try to make the writing tasks as interesting as possible.
5. Students sometimes feel that they write only in order to pass exams. Let them see that writing is useful in other ways, too, and can be fun as well.

Our Role as Teachers

As teachers, we should do our best to observe the following guidelines.

1. Show patience, give sufficient guidance and clear instructions so that students know exactly what is expected of them.
2. Correct errors when necessary, at the same time ensuring that students' work is not returned covered completely in red ink. Be selective in correction.
3. Lead an oral discussion before asking students to write so that students are prepared to create a good piece of writing and have the language and ideas necessary to carry out the task.
4. Create an energetic atmosphere. Encourage and support students, stimulate their interest, and give resources as needed.
5. Create a free and secure environment.
6. Assure students that no one is going to make fun of their writing.

Procedures and Techniques

Writing is learned rather than taught.
Lewitt, 1990, p. 2

Prewriting Activities

"If a student has nothing to say, writing will not occur. Prewriting activities provide students with something to say and how to say it" (Oluwadiya, 1992, p. 3). In other words, pre-writing activities give students ideas for writing, provide a structure for the writing and identify the vocabulary they will need. The main goals of prewriting activities are to motivate students, to generate topics and to acquire content for writing. Prewriting is the stage that provides students with vocabulary, syntax and language structure as well as ideas for their writing (McCloskey & Davidson, 1989). The prewriting stage is very important for achieving success in writing.

Pre-writing activities could include:

Oral Group or Individual Brainstorming and Dictation

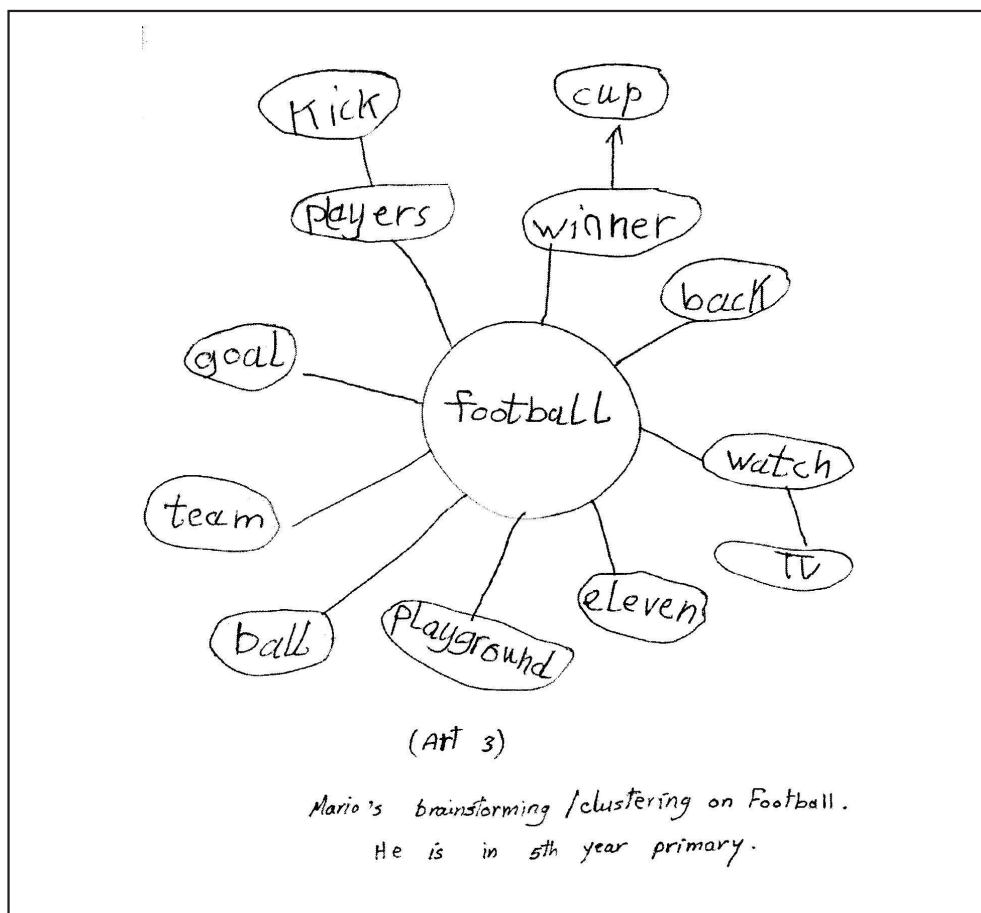
1. Write questions on the blackboard.
2. Give students some time to think about the questions.
3. Ask students to answer the questions.

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4. Write the students' answers on the blackboard, arranging them in a "spidergram" or "brainstorming web."

Following is a sample activity:

1. Ask pupils the question, What do you know about football?
2. Give students time to think about the question.
3. As students answer the question, write their words on the spidergram. If the students cannot think of the words in English, they can give them in Arabic and you can tell them the English words as you write them on the board.
4. After you complete the Spidergram, help the pupils create sentences about the graphic by asking specific questions, e.g., *Where do you play/watch football?*, or by pointing to specific words on the grid to help the pupils construct sentences. For example, pointing to watch, football, TV helps pupils create the sentence "I watch football on TV."

Eventually, students can begin to create their own spidergrams. Below is a spidergram by Mario, a student in 5th year primary.



Cubing

In cubing, you have students think of a topic from six points of view, like the six sides of a cube (Oluwadiya, 1992, p. 14). They:

- Describe it (tell what it looks, smells, feels, sounds like...)
- Compare it (compare/contrast it to something else that is similar/different)
- Associate it (think of things that are like the topic - metaphors)
- Analyze it (classify the topic - what groups does it fit in? What groups are included within it?)
- Apply it (show the topic in action)
- Argue for or against it (children take each of the two sides and discuss)

"Animals" (Hello! 2, Unit 3) is a good topic for this activity. Students can generate many ideas and then write their paragraphs.

Note: Students can discuss the topic in Arabic and/or English, depending on their language level.

Interviewing

Ask students to interview friends sitting near them about their lives, their families or current events that have happened in their community.

Note: students can conduct interviews in English or Arabic, depending upon the level of the class.

- Have students take notes about the events.
- Help them with English words they will need for their writing. Make a list on the blackboard for them to refer to.
- Teach/revise the use of quotation marks in writing speech.
- Have students write short parts of their interviews that include direct quotes from their partners.

Reading

Reading offers many opportunities for preparing students to write. Tell your pupils stories and read them stories aloud. Have students visit the school library to choose their own books to read.

Activities for Practicing Writing in *Hello!*

The Hello! series is rich in writing activities that range from filling in words on blanks to writing complete sentences to guided composition (Dallas, 1994, p. 3). These activities are not the same as those students did 20 years ago.

Controlled and Free Writing

The activities that will be practiced in early stages develop correct language form for sentences and correct mechanics of punctuation. Correct language forms can be practiced through both controlled and free writing. Controlled writing enables students to focus on the language form/pattern. It makes grading easy and possible and gives students much practice in writing; consequently, correction becomes easy.

Types of controlled writing

Copying. This introduces students to writing. Choose simple sentences for students to copy. Make sure that students understand the meaning of these sentences. After students copy the sentences, correct their mistakes of punctuation, spelling and capitalization. This will help make students aware of important features and be more careful in the next writing. There are a number of ways you can make copying more meaningful and ensure that the children understand what they are writing. When asking students to copy sentences, you can offer them choices so that they have to think about what they are writing. For example, ask children to brainstorm the names of all the foods they know. Write these on the board. Then tell them to copy only the names of the foods they like or the foods they ate yesterday.

Gap-Filling. To save students' time and effort in recopying sentences, have them use the same passages they copied in gap-filling activities. Here, you can focus on grammatical points and make sure that students fill in the gaps with words in the correct form. (See *Hello!, 2*, Unit 18 for examples). With your help, students can correct their own work.

Tables Composition. This is a mechanical exercise in which students copy and write correct sentences from a frame. Make sure to check that students understand the content. For example, in the exercise shown below (*Hello!, 1*, Second Term, Unit 17, p. 12), after students talk about the foods and children pictured, they can choose words from the frames and write sentences about the foods and the children in the pictures.



D What about you?

What do you like to eat and drink?
What don't you like to eat and drink?



E Finish the sentences

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 I like ice cream. | Heba likes ice cream. |
| 2 I like meat. | Heba likes meat. |
| 3 I fish. | Heba fish. |
| 4 I sandwiches. | Ali sandwiches. |
| 5 I coffee. | Ali coffee. |
| 6 I oranges. | Ali oranges. |

Using Pictures. Use pictures as a stimulus for students' writing. Pictures can help you teach language forms. Draw students' attention to the use of a certain verb form as they write to reinforce grammatical points. Below are two examples in which students have written from pictures.



Samia

Samia likes to
Play with her bike.



Samy

Samy wants to
ride the car.

Free Writing

Free writing (sometimes called a "quickwrite") is used for early drafts of writing. Students choose their own topics and are free to express whatever ideas they have about the certain topics "without concern for form, coherence or correctness" (Peregoy & Boyle, 1992, p. 211). They first write quickly to get their ideas out on paper. After they have their initial ideas on paper, they can return to their papers later to revise them for correctness and form.

Mechanics and Punctuation

Although writing mechanics may seem trivial to the technique of writing, they are not. Mechanics and punctuation are important "road signs" that writers provide for readers. Students need to know how to use them to be able to write correctly and clearly. Punctuation exercises can be taught as a game like the following:

.	,	?	!	¶	A
period (full stop)	comma	question mark	exclamation point	new paragraph	capital letter

- Pass out cards like those above with punctuation marks, paragraph mark, and the words "capital letter." (You might have students make their own sets, so many learners can participate at once.)
- Write a sentence on the board. (You might choose sentences from the text, students' writings or sentences about the class.)
- Have the child holding the card come up and show where the change should be made by putting the card in that place.
- Have the rest of the class tell whether the answer is right or wrong by using the "thumbs up" signal for right and the "thumbs down" signal for wrong.
- Have the children pass the cards on to another group.

In every activity, the basic method remains as Emslie and Dallas (1997, p. 3) describe:

1. Introduce the situation, the task, and the language and make sure the class knows what to do.
2. Model the activity with a few examples.
3. Have the children do the activity.
4. Give the children feedback on their performance.

Post-Writing Activities

After your pupils have completed their writing, provide ways for them to share their writing with an audience and show what they have done well. Also provide ways for them to self-assess their own writing and give them your feedback on their writing.

Sharing writing. Students can read what they have written to a partner, read it aloud to the class, take it home and read it to a family member, or post their writing on the walls of the classroom or the school.

Self-assessing writing. Pupils can use a writer's checklist (see below) to check how they have done on their piece.

Writer's Checklist	(circle the answer)
1. I wrote my name, date and the title of my writing on my paper in English.	Yes No
2. I wrote _____ sentences.	1 2 3 4
3. I used capital letters at the beginning of sentences and with names of people and places.	Yes No
4. I used the right marks at the end of sentences (. ? !)	Yes No
5. All my sentences are about my topic.	Yes No

(Note: *The questions on the checklist can be written in Arabic at first if needed. Quickly teach your pupils the words of the questions in English.*)

Peer Response to Writing. Teach your pupils to give one another encouragement and support in their writing. Try the EQS strategy (McCloskey, 1999):

E - Encourage. Have the children work in pairs. Teach them to listen carefully as their partners read to them. Teach them ways to offer specific encouragement to one another's writing, e.g. *That's a good beginning. You used the right mark at the end. This is an interesting story.* Practice encouragement for a week or two before going on to the next step.

Q - Question. Again in pairs, teach your pupils to ask questions about the writing after partners have read to them, e.g., *What will happen next? Who is that? Why does he like camels?* Practice questioning for a few weeks before going on to the next step.

S - Suggest. Teach pupils to use the writing checklist or another tool to check the writing and make suggestions for improvement, e.g., *Do you need a full*

stop here? What is her name? Can you tell what the house looked like? Such an EQS strategy can be carried out in English or Arabic depending on the level of the class. After peers respond to their writing, pupils can make corrections and write a new draft.

Marking Writing. Before the class writes, describe exactly what you will be looking for while reading the children's work. Select one or two aspects of writing that you have taught recently and one or two aspects that you have reviewed recently as your focus. Mark only those aspects, leaving others for another day.

Difficulties in Teaching Writing

It seems that there are fewer difficulties in teaching writing to beginners. This is because students tend to write one or two sentences and to use simple tenses. The sentences are so short that organization presents no problem. If they are having difficulties, students can ask their teachers for translation or they can use a limited number of new vocabulary terms. With a little guidance, they can choose words to suit their purposes.

But mistakes will appear. When they do, consider them as a natural part of the learning process (McCloskey & Davidson, 1989). When giving students feedback on their writing, don't tell them about every error. Rather, concentrate each time on one or two areas that they have been taught recently and one or two review areas. Know that some errors are signs of students' progress and evidence that they are working toward learning new forms. Just like you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, you can't learn to write without making a few errors!

Conclusion

In summary, beginning-level English learners can participate successfully in classroom writing events from day one, if you provide support. These activities, shared in pairs and groups, are meaningful activities. Through these activities, English language learners grow from beginning writers to intermediate writers, from writers learning to generate ideas to writers who shape ideas. This will move students on from developing fluency to developing form in their writing. (Peregoy & Boyle, 1992, p. 211).

These writing activities will not be enough if they are introduced in isolation from other activities and from actual experiences practicing composing

sentences and paragraphs and stories. Activities should be taught, reviewed, and linked to one another throughout the whole school year (Raimes, 1987). You are the only one who knows your students well from daily contact. So you are able to choose the activity that best suits the time and matches your students' levels. You are the one to decide which activity is the most helpful (Peregoy & Boyle, 1992).

We often look at writing as one of the four skills. In fact, it is at the root of every skill. Writing practice, for example, can improve students' speech and pronunciation by making them aware of patterns, sounds, spelling, and grammatical forms. Writing is also clearly linked to reading- students cannot write well without reading and re-reading what they have written.

Writing is a tool for learning. We cannot delay it until students achieve a high level of proficiency. Rather, it should be a part of teaching at every level. So do not waste time in criticizing poor writing. Give writing your careful attention from the very beginning of the academic year, and you will see wonders and improvements in the pupils' writing ability as well as in their attitudes towards writing.

voices from the field

By Mona Saleh Fawzy/FoE, Benha
4th Grade Primary

When I was asked to choose a technique from the "Teaching Early Writing Chapter," I chose the "Discussion" technique. In class, I presented a picture of a farm and asked the students to write sentences describing it. Then I collected their papers. After that, I presented the picture again, but this time I discussed it with them, what they could see and what was happening. They understood and formed correct sentences orally. They were able to generate more ideas and mention details. Then I asked them to write another short paragraph about the same topic, but this time making use of what had been discussed. I collected their papers again and compared both papers. I observed that their writing had improved greatly. The ideas were richer and the sentences were complete and more organized. So the technique has proved a success.

Key Terminology

Composition

Choosing and arranging the language - words, phrases, sentences, organization - of a piece of writing.

Writing process

The steps a writer uses to create a piece - often the steps are described as:

1. Prewriting - gathering ideas, making notes and getting ready to write.
2. Drafting - initial writing, focusing on content.
3. Sharing and discussing the writing - discussing the writing with peers and teacher and exchanging encouragement, questions, and suggestions.
4. Revising the writing - rewriting, focusing on improving the content.
5. Editing - polishing the writing, focusing on language and form.
6. Publishing - sharing the writing in some way with others. This might include reading it aloud, putting it on the classroom wall, publishing it in a school journal, etc.

Mechanics of writing

The details of correct writing: punctuation, spelling, format, grammar, etc.

Errors

Mistakes students make in their mechanics or composition. Beginning writers are expected to make many errors. Focus on a few types of errors at a time with beginning writers. When they have mastered these aspects of language, move on to other types of errors.

Gap-filling exercises

In these writing exercises, students complete phrases or sentences in a language pattern, e.g.,

- I like to ride in a car .
- I like to _____ .
- I like to _____ .

Understanding Check

1. Why should language teachers encourage their students to write?
 2. What does early writing look like? What kinds of errors should the teacher expect?
 3. Should the teacher correct all errors?
 4. What are some useful prewriting activities?
 5. How can teachers teach controlled writing?
 6. What are ways to make learning the mechanics of writing fun?
 7. What are some of the difficulties you expect to encounter in teaching your young learners to write? How might you overcome them?
 8. Plan writing activities for a unit of your text. Include a pre-writing activity, an activity for during the writing activity, and a way to do sharing and assessment after the activity.
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Summary Handout for Chapter 15: Teaching Early Writing:

Writing Checklist

Use the Writing Checklist to self-assess your planning and teaching of early writing.

PLANNING:

- Have I prepared a good pre-writing activity?
- Have I chosen a topic that is suitable for my students?
- Have I given clear instructions and modeled the task clearly?
- Have I thought about what equipment or materials I will need?
- Have I thought about how to attract my students' attention?

TIME:

- Have I considered how long the activity will take?
- Do my students know when to stop writing?

CORRECTION:

- Have I worked on only a few errors at a time? (*Ask: What kinds of errors should I work on first?*)
- Have I written the student's error correctly or used symbols that tell students what kind of error they made?
- Have I remembered to point out what students did right?
- Are my students alert to their errors?
- Have I set goals (or helped my pupils set goals) for improving writing?
- Do I help my students overcome their fears when I correct their writing?