



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens

ELT Methods and Practices

Unit 8: Developing writing skills in the EFL context

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The primacy of speech over writing in ELT (1/2)

- Traditionally FL courses have emphasized ‘the ability to understand and speak’ over the ability to write. Few programmes are based on the opposing view that written language should be the basis of FL language teaching.



The primacy of speech over writing in ELT (2/2)

- In most beginners' course-books even today written language is in the service of speech. As such essential components of beginner EFL course-books are:
 - written transcripts of spoken language form, so that scripts in course-books resemble plays and film scripts.
 - photo-stories with captions and speech-balloons (modeling techniques used in teen magazines).



Is speaking more important than writing?

- No. That is not the issue at all. It is simply that the written text provides a permanent form of the speech the students encounter that can be
 - referred to,
 - analyzed,
 - revised.
- But, is this really “writing”?
- A couple of example from the 4th grade primary school course-book follows.



Example 1

BACK TO SCHOOL

6 Write





Look at the pictures and say what subjects Andrew, Nick and Sophia have got today. Write your answers here:

☀ Today Andrew, Nick and Sophia have got _____

7 Let's play!

What day is it?

Work in pairs. Look at the timetable and think of a day, but don't tell your friend. He/she will ask you questions and try to find the day. But **be careful!** You can only ask **up to 4 questions!**



Name: Andrew Marinellis		Class: D			
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.10-8.55	Language	Language	Language	Language	Language
8.55-9.40	Language	Language	Language	Language	Maths
9.40-10.00	break				
10.00-10.45	Maths	History	Maths	Environmental Studies	Religious Education
10.45-11.30	Environmental Studies	Physical Education	English	Maths	English
11.30-11.45	break				
11.45-12.30	English	Music	History	Physical Education	Art
12.30-12.40	break				
12.40-13.15	Religious Education	Environmental Studies	Environmental Studies	Art	Music

Student A: Have you got History today?


Student B: Yes, I have/No, I haven't

.....

Example 2

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE HOBBY OR SPORT?

Lesson 1: My favourite sport




1 Warm - up

Do you like sports? Which is your favourite sport? Tell your classmates and then find the five most popular sports in class. Write words for sports on the board.

2 Listen, read and find

Now listen to the children. They are in the playground and they are talking to their Physical Education teacher, Mr Papadakis. Listen, read and find out: "Does Andrew like football?"



Thursday
Language
Language
break
Environmental Studies
Maths
break
Physical Education
break
Art

Mr Papadakis: OK kids! Today is free day for sports!
 Nick, Andrew, Omar: Wow!
 Nick: Come on, Andrew! Let's play football!
 Andrew: I don't like football very much.
 Nick: You don't like football? The English love it!
 Andrew: Well, I like basketball.
 Omar: Yes, let's play basketball! I like it, too.
 Mr Papadakis: Ready? So, what do you want to play?
 Omar: Basketball, sir.
 Mr Papadakis: OK, let me give you a basketball.
 Nick, Andrew, Omar: Yeahhh!!!!

You've got 1 minute to find the secret word. It's Mr Papadakis' favourite sport. Write the word:.....Then, count the letters and write down your score:.....

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LESSON 1 My favourite sport



What's wrong?

- Scripts are not teaching writing since the characteristics are all (supposedly) those of spoken language.
- They provide incidental exposure to the characteristics of written language but in an arbitrary and unplanned way.

Mr Papadakis: OK kids! Today is free day for sports!
Nick, Andrew, Omar: Wow!
Nick: Come on, Andrew! Let's play football!
Andrew: I don't like football very much.
Nick: You don't like football? The English love it!
Andrew: Well, I like basketball.
Omar: Yes, let's play basketball!! I like it, too.
Mr Papadakis: Ready? So, what do you want to play?
Omar: Basketball, sir.
Mr Papadakis: OK, let me give you a basketball.
Nick, Andrew, Omar: Yeahhh!!!!



Writing used to explain language structure (1/2)

- Written descriptions of pronunciation or grammar are given in course-books, so for example we often get:
 - Explanations such as: Regular verbs ending in -ed
 - Learning strategies in written form: Use music to help you learn English and to improve your pronunciation.
 - Displays of grammar in substitution tables and word-sorting: Write the words in the correct columns...
 - Displays of structures in columns as the main means of 'explaining' grammar, whether 'going to' future or 'have got'



Writing used to explain language structure (2/2)

- Written explanations in course-books exploit the permanency of written language and organizes its visual display.



Writing used to explain meaning

- Written language conveys the meaning of unknown words so that, for example, we get:
 - labeling or asking Ss to label pictures.
 - write the word the visual depicts, or match pictures with descriptions, activities, etc.
 - identify elements in a photo.
- Whereas outside course-books, diagrams and labelling are used to aid an activity, in course-books the point of the diagram is the link between the image and the new word.



Writing used for task instructions / rubrics

- Instructions such as ‘Interview a classmate and find out how they spent last weekend’ (which are more for the teacher’s convenience than for students since their language is often way above the students' level.
- Outside the classroom, instructions are a restricted genre of written language. Written instructions mostly tell individuals how to do tasks such as filling in their income tax return or baking a cake, not how to interact with a partner or a group of people in the manner of most classroom instructions.



Writing used for comprehension questions (1/2)

- The text of the spoken conversations is often followed by written questions checking comprehension, so that we get:
 - Answers that Ss may have to tick as for example “Who owns these things? Listen and tick the right name”.



Writing used for comprehension questions (2/2)

- Multiple choice questions matching complaints with the advice given by a doctor or filling in a chart such as: “Listen to four people talking about the food they eat on different days of the week. Complete the chart.”
- Written questions about what you have heard orally would rarely occur outside a classroom. However realistic the spoken language that students hear, subsequent comprehension questions are not a typical use of written language.



Writing used for exercise props (1/2)

- Many spoken exercises rely on fragments of written language as props, such as:
 - Lists of words as for example: Match the foods and drinks to the words in the chart.
 - Cues for ideas as for example: “Computers. Can they?”.
 - Cues for sentence making: “Make a sentence with each of these weather words ... rain dry sunny ...”.
 - Sorting word lists into columns or charts.



Writing used for exercise props (2/2)

- Outside the educational context we do not find a purpose for these isolated pieces of written language (other than perhaps in note-taking, which is a far more complex task).



Writing used for information around tasks (1/2)

- Information necessary for the exercise is often conveyed through realia and graphics, such as the labelling on charts, horoscopes, calendars, maps , or actual statistical charts.
- While these represent a normal use of written language for display and information, the purposes for which the students use them is less authentic, partly because they are learning, say, the names for the clothes rather than deciding what to buy, i.e. a code breaking rather than a decoding activity.



Writing used for information around tasks (2/2)

- In cases such as these, the written language consists of noun phrases, proper names, prices, etc., rather than being 'full' sentences or having textual coherence – block language.



Writing used to get Ss to fill in forms (1/2)

- Course-books contain tasks where students fill in copious amounts of information in invitations, diary planners, etc.
- Mostly their response is a single word or phrase rather than a complete sentence or paragraph (e.g., “Listen to four people talking about the food they eat on different days of the week. Complete the chart.”).



Writing used to get Ss to fill in forms (2/2)

- In everyday life we do of course have to fill in such forms from time to time, but sorting information into columns manually is rare. Most of the charts and forms have no outcome other than providing material for a teaching exercise, while they do not really provide writing exercise since the language used is fragments and isolated words.



Writing used for sentence completion and to create sentences

Course-books are full of exercises asking Ss to make purely pedagogical use of written language, inconceivable outside a classroom, relying similarly on reading aloud, as for example:

- fill in blanks in sentences before saying them aloud.
- construct sentences from jumbled words.
- rearrange the words in order to make questions and provide the answers.
- pair questions and answers in a jumbled order appropriately.
- make sentences with these words or write the opening sentence of this story .



Written texts used to present information (1/2)

- Most course-books contain short information texts with cultural information or information as a basis for exercises (typically about 50 words long), texts such as biographies, first person or factual accounts, amazing Animals (Did you know the kangaroo can't walk?), etc.



Written texts used to present information (2/2)

- Longer texts (around 400 words) in course-books for more advanced learners are common too, but they are texts resembling pieces of travel guides or children's textbooks.
- Little of our everyday reading consists of passages of this type (particularly when they are pretexts for arranging information in columns or completing sentences).



Lack of authentic continuous texts as models

- Continuous written texts other than scripts of speech or instructions for exercises are in fact sparse in many course-books. Among the most frequent type of writing are specimens of letters which occasionally form a basis for the students' own writing, for instance refusing an invitation or telling a friend about one's favourite pastimes.
- Virtually all the course-books use short texts that do not have the display or structure of newspapers, say, but are straight pieces of information to use for teaching exercises.



Conclusions about course-books (1/2)

- Written scripts are a way of teaching spoken language by providing a permanent record, not of teaching writing.
- Written language is often a device for explaining, giving instructions, etc., rather than a way-in to writing itself.



Conclusions about course-books (2/2)

- Written language within teaching activities is mostly a pretext for speaking exercises, involving uses of language not encountered outside textbooks.
- Texts are mostly restricted to short biographies, etc. With some longer texts about 'interesting facts' that are seldom recognisable as text types outside a teaching context.



The written word (1/2)

- The 'standard' model of reading relates letters to sounds via two mental routes:
 - the 'sound-based' route, which relies on rules for converting letters to sounds and vice versa.
 - the 'visual' route, which views direct links between written forms and meanings.



The written word (2/2)

- These two overall routes not only distinguish the writing systems used in different languages, but also operate within an individual user of a single language. So, for example, Frequent English words are accessed as visual instances; <the> for instance is perceived as a whole word rather than converted into sounds letter by letter.



The written word in course-books

- In reality, written language involves both the conversion of sounds into writing (and vice versa), and connections to meaning. (The assumption that sounds connect only to letters is a product of our own cultural bias).
- Yet, as course-books are based on the assumption that written language simply provides a transcription of speech, they do not deal overtly with the two routes. The implications of the two routes are that teaching needs to acknowledge them rather than ignore them.



Teaching the written word

This means that students from different overall L1 writing systems are unprepared for the new system they are encountering, leading to persistent problems for say Chinese students and leads to the wrong assumption that English writing lacks system. Advanced L2 students still write **phisical**, **neccessary** and **new** (instead of **knew**) because they have not been taught to treat some words as individual visual items, and **feever**, **persent** and **colledge** because they believe writing is the reflection of speech. Some attention to both routes can do nothing but help.



Linguistic characteristics of written language (1/4)

- Vocabulary Some words exist primarily in the written form, say notices on road verges No parking on the greensward or on train doors Alight other side.



Linguistic characteristics of written language (2/4)

- Grammar Written language has a proportion of about 1 grammatical word to 1.2 content words compared to the 1 to 0.6 of speech, leading to what Halliday (1985) calls the 'lexical density' of written language, which is more contextualised, making more explicit deictic connections to the situation than speech by naming people, times and places:
 - (written form) Miss Scarlett killed Professor Plum with the dagger in the library last Thursday.
 - (spoken form) She killed him with it over there yesterday.



Linguistic characteristics of written language (3/4)

- **Punctuation** The contrasts conveyed through punctuation in written language, <Joan!> versus <Joan?>, are similar but not identical to those conveyed with intonational pitch changes. Punctuation has own unique features, for instance the use of the semi-colon as a grammatical item in sentences such as She told him the truth; the others lied.



Linguistic characteristics of written language (4/4)

- **Spelling rules** Though we often hear complaints about ‘the inadequacies of English spelling,’ there are in fact rules and patterns to English spelling, such as the rule that only function words can have less than three letters (Carney, 1994), leading to pairs such as <l/eye>, <be/bee>, <in/inn> and many others.



Distinctive elements of writing (1/2)

- Written language uses **visual distinctions** not available in speech, for example capital letters <NO ENTRY> and word spaces <How do you do?>. The conventions of written English differ from those in other languages, and there are differences between dialects, such as capitals after colons in American English but not in British English.



Distinctive elements of writing (2/2)

- These linguistic characteristics of writing are generally ignored in FL teaching. The written language of course-books does not reflect the standard properties of lexical density nor a proper range of punctuation, nor is attention paid to the actual rules of writing such as spelling issues.



FL students' mistakes in spelling

- If students were taught basic rules of English, they would not make mistakes such as usefull, ocured and dissappointment (rules of consonant doubling) or studys, alwais or joyning
- If they had been warned about transferring elements of their own L1 pronunciation through sound-letter rules:
 - Japanese might not write grobal and literery (literally)
 - Greeks, Grade Britain and Gambridge
 - Arabic speakers punishement and subjects.



Functional characteristics of written texts (1/2)

The linguistic characteristics of writing are important but also important if not more so are its functional characteristics. Writing is characterised for its systematicity as discourse, genre and text.



Functional characteristics of written texts (2/2)

- Written discourse, such as political, advertising, religious and journalistic discourses, for example, all have their own characteristic features at the level of lexicon and lexical density,
- Genres of written discourse, such as an advertisement in a magazine and film blurb in the same magazine are characterized by different textual organisation, and a different lexicogrammar.



The status of writing (1/2)

- Writing often has higher status than speech because its permanent form allows it to record laws, contracts etc.
- In modern societies 'serious' literature is written down as highly-wrought novels, not improvised as oral epics; poetry is found in books, not folksongs. In many societies, holy writings capture the very words of God.



The status of writing (2/2)

- In most, perhaps all, literate societies, written language exerts influence over speech. With the exception of linguists, most people regard writing as more important than speech.



Social roles in writing (1/2)

- Listeners and speakers are typically present in the same situation at the same time, know each other's social roles, interact with each other and exchange listener/speaker roles.
- Readers and writers are typically separated by time and place. While a speaker is a visible, clearly identified individual, a writer is invisible, anonymous. The social relationship is indefinite. (What is our social role to T.S. Eliot when we read *Burnt Norton*?)



Social roles in writing (2/2)

- In writing, the speaker is not usually identified and the reader is not addressed directly. However, the reader must seriously be taken into account if the written text is to be meaningful and the writer has to address his/her readers from a particular subject position.



Why course-books emphasize speech over writing?

Reading


C Read the passage.

Fantasy Stories

Fantasy stories show us places that are **imaginary** and full of magic. Children and adults like fantasy stories because a lot of **exciting** things happen in them. *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* are two of the most **popular** fantasy stories. They have even been made into movies.


Harry Potter

J. K. Rowling's first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, came out in 1997. There are seven books and they tell the story of a young **wizard** named Harry Potter. Harry goes to a special school called Hogwarts to learn how to do magic. With help from his best friends Ron and Hermione, he fights the **evil** wizard Voldemort.



The Lord of the Rings

J. R. R. Tolkien's story came out in 1954. The story is divided into three books: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. The main **character**, Frodo, is a **hobbit** (a small **creature** the size of a child). He has to **destroy** an evil ring before the Dark Lord Sauron finds him and takes the ring.



D Answer the questions.

- 1 Why do people like fantasy stories?
- 2 Who wrote the Harry Potter books?
- 3 What is a hobbit?

Practice


E Circle the correct answer.

- 1 The main idea of paragraph 1 is
 - a making movies from fantasy stories.
 - b imaginary places and magic.
 - c how to write popular fantasy stories for children and adults.
 - d what fantasy stories are about and why we like them.
- 2 The main idea of paragraph 2 is
 - a J. K. Rowling's seven books.
 - b the story of Harry Potter.
 - c the school called Hogwarts.
 - d the wizard Voldemort.
- 3 The main idea of paragraph 3 is
 - a when J. R. R. Tolkien's story came out.
 - b The Lord of the Rings and Frodo the hobbit.
 - c the history of The Lord of the Rings.
 - d the differences between Harry Potter and Frodo.

F Match the word with its definition.

1 character	a an imaginary animal or person
2 creature	b a man who has magic powers
3 destroy	c a person in a book, play, movie, etc.
4 evil	d not fun and interesting
5 exciting	e not real
6 imaginary	f not liked by many people
7 popular	g not good, wicked
8 wizard	h to break something so it cannot be used again

TIP Pictures and headings can help you find the main idea.





The L1 acquisition argument (1/2)

- As children acquire L1 by speaking first, there is a natural misconception that a successful method for learning a new language involves recreating in the FL classroom the characteristics of first language acquisition, as closely as possible. Is this correct?
- It is wrong for teaching to depend on things which are unavailable to FL learners, whether the ability to write, to understand grammar or to use another language.



The L1 acquisition argument (2/2)

- Learning a second or a foreign language is intrinsically different from L1 acquisition because the learner of an additional language already knows how language works and how to impute mental intentions to other speakers.



Arguments from linguistics (1/5)

- Most linguists and philosophers from Aristotle to Rousseau and from de Saussure to Bloomfield, have indeed believed in the primacy of speech, typified by Lyons (1968, p.38) 'the spoken language is primary and ... writing is essentially a means of representing speech in another medium'.
- Even today, some linguistics argue in favour of the primacy of speech over writing. The arguments?



Arguments from linguistics (2/5)

- Speech comes before writing, historically. Indeed, in one sense 'history' is distinguished from 'pre-history' by the existence of written records. However, a diachronic argument does not provide a synchronic explanation and ignores the changes that written language makes to a society.



Arguments from linguistics (3/5)

- Many languages lack a written form. However, this fact does not oblige course-books to stress speech over writing (unless they are concerned with students from a non-literate society). Additional language teaching should no more take pre- or non-literate societies into account than physics teaching should cover medieval alchemy.



Arguments from linguistics (4/5)

- Many individuals cannot use written language. Indeed, many people in the world and in our own societies do not learn to read and write, for whatever reason. However, the fact that some individuals cannot write is irrelevant for the rest. It is more to the point to consider which writing system they possess in their first language.



Arguments from linguistics (5/5)

- Children automatically learn to speak but have to be taught how to read and write. This is not true of course in the FL class where learners need to be taught both speaking and writing – not always in that order!



Other considerations: the teaching of writing

- Students' needs. Some groups of people, especially adults who need EFL to get by at work, intend to use English orally and never to open a magazine or browse a web-site. The obvious solution for them is no written language at all, as in a strict audiovisual method. Using written language as a prop for spoken is not justified.
- Interference or transfer from speech forms and from L1.



Is L1 interference a real problem? (1/2)

- There is widespread belief that early writing forces learners into spelling pronunciations. Since the English writing system is only partly sound-based, this creates inaccuracies and misleads students.
- English does not have only the sounds route available but also the visual route, which could be exploited, specially during ELL (see for example Magic Book).



Is L1 interference a real problem? (2/2)

- It should also be pointed out that interference could go in the other direction: learners may misread things because of the spoken form. Without the L2 written language, they may well be pushed back on their L1 written forms.



Why teach writing?

- While some people believe that ‘Nowadays most people actually do very little writing in day-to-day life’, we witness people with whom we interact and we see ourselves spending much of our day at a computer keyboard.
- We spend a high proportion of our time receiving and composing letters, e-mails and text messages.



The language in course books significantly distorts the normal properties of writing (1/2)

Throughout the first part of this presentation, we focused on the fact that most course books we find pages consisting of layouts of sentence fragments, lists of words, fill-in charts, etc. (A typical page of X course-book has four exercises:

1. asks Ss to draw lines between questions and answers
2. to make up sentences from groups of words
3. to filling in the blanks
4. to write 'a lot of' or 'enough' in the blanks in sentences.



The language in course books significantly distorts the normal properties of writing (2/2)

- The language that learners have to write is fragmentary, as they are systematically asked to:
 - fill in bits of noun phrases on forms
 - complete sentences with words or phrases
 - make graphic marks on paper.
- They seldom write a complete sentence or a complete text
- The type of ‘writing exercises’ available in course-books has led to a misuse of writing.



Might we think about how 'convenient' this is, possibly, for those who would like to avoid the time-consuming task and the hustle of evaluating Ss' scripts and providing them with feedback?



What's the solution? (1/2)

- Teach the properties of the written language. One step in this direction is to use authentic written language, that is to say examples of writing produced for purposes other than language teaching (whether by native speakers or non-native speakers) and to have learners deal with real-life writing tasks (which are not one and the same).
- Think of authentic written language.
- Now think of authentic writing tasks.



What's the solution? (2/2)

Teach the properties of the written language also by making a point of providing materials and tasks aiming at making learners aware of how language is used differently in speech and writing, as for example:

- How to perform speech acts (such as apologizing, requesting information, explaining, asking for forgiveness) in the two media.
- What the language and textual features of, say, an oral and a written advertisement are.
- How people interact on the phone as opposed to fora and other social media.



Early writing? How early?

This question is not easily answered in a responsible manner, but here are a few suggestions for EFL in the Greek school context.



When do we start teaching writing? (1/2)

- Do not attempt to develop young learners' literacy skills (reading and writing) before they begin developing literacy skills in L1. This includes learners aged 3-7 years.
- Start developing literacy skills gradually, moving from reading (word and phrase recognition) on to shaping letters and words. Pre-literacy skills development should depend on learner motivation. Ss aged 7-8 often want and demand to write (especially if parents want to see evidence of their learning...)



When do we start teaching writing? (2/2)

- It might be best if literacy proper with young learners resorted to the 'visual' route (making direct links between written forms and meanings) because the sound based route requires direct teaching of spelling conventions that a child cannot understand.

See, for instance, the Magic Book, with a non-traditional introduction of the alphabet.



End of Unit

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