

# EFL Writing Instruction: How Theory and Practice is Evolving

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## Abstract

*The process of writing instruction, both to native and non-native speakers, has gone through a significant amount of change over the centuries. Beginning with rote dictation, memorization and copying, the teaching process has changed and has come to involve more free-thinking and attempts at lessening the pressure of accuracy. Especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the shift from a focus on accuracy to one of fluency is noted. More recently technology is playing an ever-increasing role in writing instruction, with a focus on the visual aspects in addition to written content. This paper will survey the literature related to writing instruction in EFL. It will also discuss which approaches have taken hold and have shown promise. In addition, there will be a discussion of how technology is changing writing itself, and where writing instruction may be headed in the future.*

## 概要

ネイティブスピーカーと非ネイティブスピーカーへのライティングインストラクションは、何世紀にもわたってかなりの変化を遂げてきた。多くの書き取り、暗記、コピーから始めて、教育プロセスは変化し、より自由な思考と正確さを軽減する試みを伴うようになった。特に外国語としての英語（EFL）の学習者にとって、正確さへの焦点から流暢さへのシフトが注目される。最近では、テクノロジーが、ライティングインストラクションにますます重要な役割を果たしている。この論文では、EFLでのライティング指導に関連する文献を調査する。また、どのアプローチが定着し、有望であるかについても説明する。さらに、テクノロジーがライティング自体をどのように変化させているか、そして将来的にライティング指導がどこに向かう可能性があるかについて議論する。

**Keywords:** Writing Instruction, EFL, Language Acquisition

## Introduction

Writing originated with pictograms, but it was the cuneiform of the Sumarians some 6,000 years ago that first recorded organized documents (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011). Little is known about how writing in the ancient languages was taught, however modern day methods for teaching English writing are another story. As writing theory for second language learners (L2) tends to mirror that of native speakers (L1) (Reid, 2001), this paper for the most part will look at the various approaches and methods used to teach writing in English in general, but will note where English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research has been reported.

### The history of writing instruction

Teaching writing in a foreign language context has a lot in common with the methods used for native speakers. So much so that much of the literature refers to writing instruction methods without making a clear distinction between the needs of L1 writers and L2 writers. Ironically, much of the earliest writings in the Christian world were in a foreign language, Latin, which held a prestige position in society, as did French (Harmer, 2007). Most of the older writings of the past still in existence are religious and were created by male scholars taught in such institutions (Nevalainen, 2002). As there was no printing press in Europe until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, all writing was done by hand, much of it simply copying line by line. This method was successful in producing elegant publications, however did not lead to literacy among the common folk. As English solidified its dominance in what is now the United Kingdom, authors such as Shakespeare began to make names for themselves. Despite this, most of society was illiterate, and what little writing was taught was done by private tutors, so-called 'writing masters' (Fisher, 1996). Such a state continued until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when primary education became the norm, at least in the developed world. Even so, twentieth century linguists still emphasized the importance of spoken language, and as a result the science of speech became better understood than the science of writing (Crystal, 2010).

An important distinction between the four skills usually taught in the ESL/EFL classroom is that while listening to the L1 begins in the womb and speaking shortly after birth, reading and writing are learned skills that must be taught, usually in a formal setting. It is possible to read (in either L1 or L2) without learning to write, or at least write well, however the re-

verse is not true (Williams, 2004). Given this, writing is generally the last skill taught to students, be they L1 or L2 speakers of a language. Writing is an important part of language as it can transfer information beyond the immediate audience, however, it is not as important as spoken language for day-to-day communication (Pinker, 1994). Two well-known authors, Jeremy Harmer and Penny Ur, have written about teaching writing in the foreign language context, and both note that writing is generally a much more formal type of discourse than speaking (Harmer, 2007; Ur, 1996). Ur also lists nine more differences between speaking and writing, including permanence, slowness of production and standard language (1996, pp. 160–161). However, much of what Ur and Harmer recommend in regard to writing is identical with methods used in the L1 classroom, at least in secondary school. It has been recognized that spoken and written texts are on a continuum, and that depending on the situation one may be more formal than the other depending on the situation (D. Nunan, 1991; Ur, 1996).

In regards to the teaching of professional writers, Crawford notes that to be a good writing takes significant practice, and distractions in university such as the requirement to take unrelated subjects is unhelpful. He also suggests that serious writers be segregated into classes for people who want to be in the field by “select[ing] those who have the combination of real literary ability and real interest in writing” (1921, p. 573). He recommends studying the “principles of writing” as it will be beneficial to students, whether they actually become professionals or not. In addition, he recommends having intensive training, from teachers who have a “flair” for writing (Crawford, 1921, p. 575).

In the 1960s, Lado, using a scientific approach, suggested to teach writing in a fashion similar to the audio-lingual methods, and to consider “writing as manipulation[s] of graphic representation of language units and patterns that the student already knows” (Lado, 1964, p. 52). On the other hand, George Elliot, a published writer as well as a teacher, complained about teaching “bone-head” freshman English at the University of California to those who failed writing exams. He believed that enforcing grammar and spelling drills harmed creativity, and learners at all levels improved most by writing and rewriting and by studying the work of professionals. He also thought it was best to be most strict with the best students, and to take it easy on weaker students, and in any case avoid “overcorrection” (1969, p. 130). Elliot also believed in creating a classroom community in order to build class cohesion (Elliot, 1969).

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the audio-lingual method held sway in regards to ESL, and this influenced how writing was taught. The controlled-to-free approach, described by Raimes (1983), required students to copy sentences in order to first master grammar, and later move on to whole paragraphs but with only minor substitution in order to minimize errors. Only after reaching a high level of proficiency would students be free to write creatively. Other approaches popular in the 1970s ranged from the less structured free-writing approach (with no error correction), to the more controlled paragraph-pattern approach (where students study models and substitute), and the grammar-syntax-organization approach (Raimes, 1983). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was also making a name for itself by the early 1980s and had an influence on writing instruction. Using a CLT approach meant assigning a student a “real” writing task that was designed to communicate information to someone. Also in the 1980s, the process approach began to take hold, which required learners to consider the steps required in order to create a piece of writing (Harmer, 2007; Raimes, 1983; Tsui, 1996).

Unlike the large swings in approaches to teaching oral skills to L2 speakers from the 1950s onward, much of the writing literature in the end revolves around just two main areas, process and product. The goal of writing is generally to create a document with some type of purpose, and most professionals (be they professors or business people) will only consider the final product when evaluating a piece of work. Nevertheless, in a writing ESL class such reliance on product alone would be uncommon and most teachers include some kind of recursive process (Harmer, 2007).

### **Developments from the 1990s onward**

Up until the end of the 1970s, grammar was the focus of L2 ‘writing’ classes, and writing itself was not usually taught as a main skill to L2 learners. However, in the 1980s researchers and teachers began to become aware of the changes occurring in the native speaker realm, where the ‘expressive approach’ was in vogue, and by the 1990s L2 writing instruction moved away from a highly controlled method to an emphasis on process (Reid, 2001). Despite this, Reid (2001) critiqued the approach and referred to it as a “false dichotomy” between process and product (p. 29).

Jane Stanley (1992), using a Community Learning Language Method (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), found that amongst Japanese students those who received coaching on how best to

give peer feedback felt more comfortable, and the resultant work improved over the control group. This was relevant, as it showed the instructor could help to counter the tendency for ESL students to focus on grammar errors while avoiding comments on the content itself. Ellis (2003), as cited in Kumaravadivelu (2006) notes that tasks could include written work, and Kumaravadivelu (2006) also suggests that the CLT approach does include writing.

Graham and Sandmel (2011) find the process writing approach (also known as Writer's Workshop) most appropriate for most native speaker learners, however, it does not appear to increase motivation or help those learners who are having difficulty mastering writing skills. In 2007 approximately 76% of American twelfth grade students were below proficiency level, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, suggesting much work needs to be done. While there is not comprehensive agreement on a definition of process writing, it generally is student-centered with one-on-one instruction, "minilessons[sic], writing workshops, conferences and teachable moments" (Graham & Sandmel, 2011, p. 397). In the 1980s Hillocks (1986) performed a meta-analysis and looked at the natural process mode and its effectiveness, finding an intervention did more for younger aged children than for college-aged learners. The natural process mode is similar to the process approach, although it allows for more free writing and involves the instructor in a more facilitator role (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). More recent studies have shown teachers still use a wide variety of approaches. Writer's Workshop, traditional skills, genre-based instruction and hybrid eclectic approaches were all found to be implemented in a study of 29 American grade school teachers by McCarthy and Ro (2011). In addition, they discovered that those instructors who had additional professional training used more modern techniques such as graphic organizers. (McCarthy & Ro, 2011).

One school of thought is that students are inhibited by their filters and need to have them lowered in order to be productive (Krashen, 1982; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Writing fluency exercises, where no corrections are made by the teacher, are thought to be a way students can improve without the apprehension tied to normal writing where avoiding errors is the goal (Tsui, 1996). One question that has arisen however is whether or not a topic should be provided by the instructor, or whether the students do better choosing their own. Bonzo (2008) performed such a study, and found that for intermediate level students the free topic choice led to higher word counts, but for lower level students the teacher-chosen topics were more successful. Whether or not higher word counts in themselves lead to objectively better

writing is not a given, and it is necessary to understand that writing fluency is part of becoming a better writer.

The 1980s boom of computer-based writing software such as WordPerfect and WordStar (later MS Word) led to a revolution in the teaching of writing (at least in places where computers were available). No longer were drafts written in longhand and then typed. While this simplified the process in many ways, it led to pedagogical challenges. In 1992 Pennington recognized that such programs promised grammar correction, but did not help students enough to deliver a product that met instructors' expectations (1992). In addition, Haas (1989) found that writers who used word processors were less likely to use pre-planning strategies than those using pen and paper. She cautioned educators who saw word processing as a way to improve writing.

Teachers of writing have been utilizing technology in many forms in order to improve the efficiency, accuracy and objectivity of teacher feedback on student writing. Programs such as Writer's Workbench have been shown to help instructors reduce the volume of work through an analysis of errors, however, users have reported some deficiencies (Harris & Cook, 1984). They also reported students appreciated the feedback, although they warned that the novelty of it might not last (Harris & Cook, 1984). In 1984, instructors such as Jobst went as far as to develop their own programs, however there was still a need for students to hand in a hard copy and the instructor would return the paper with a coded sheet of comments related to the numbered lines in the text (Jobst, 1984). Newer tools such as Coh-Metrix have been used to compare L1 and L2 writers' cohesion (Crossley, 2009), and once results have been thoroughly discussed in the field, it may lead to having some influence on the actual practice of teaching writing.

In the mid-1990s, computer-assisted writing became more mainstream, however Takayoshi (1996) noted that teacher assessment of student work had not yet adjusted to the new environment. With more control over format, multiple drafts, and ease of sharing work possible, expectations for student production needed to change. Students, and instructors, in the past had little control over layout and design, however, an entire new area of composition needed to be addressed. Colors, font types, graph and chart layouts are just some of the new elements of visual rhetoric with which the modern writer needs to be concerned. She further remarked that even though the stress might be on a process-related pedagogy, the desire for a printed product may lead to anxiety on the part of the student. If submission is

electronic, than the final draft may not have the same feeling to it as a hard copy, printed submission (Takayoshi, 1996, p. 249). In a more recent article, Perez-Sabater (2012) surveyed students and teachers in order to study the perceived effectiveness of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) systems and Web 2.0 educational technology using wikis and social networking. Although he did not deal with writing in particular, some of the conclusions he drew based on teacher and student feedback showed that they appreciated the opportunity to give feedback.

Philosophy-based language teaching (PBLT) is one of the newer methodologies to have been introduced into the ELT classroom that includes a writing component. Shahini and Riazi have shown that in a small study, students taught using this method outperformed the control groups using ordinary or non-philosophical questions (Shahini & Riazi, 2011). The key to PBLT relies on the teacher to present the stimulus (an open-ended question) and have students work in groups to create questions based on what was presented.

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has received a fair share of attention in the past thirty years. Although most of the context for its application has been the teaching of oral English, the method itself does not exclude writing. Given that goal setting is an important part of the process according to Nunan (1993), there are good reasons why tasks may be set up as written exercises, given the norm in society and business these days is to communicate electronically in written form.

While the internet has made it easy to instantly acquire material on any topic in seconds, getting students to selectively arrange the best support for an argument, and do it in an 'acceptable' format, is a major challenge for instructors. This is further challenging in ESL/EFL contexts, where L1 cultural norms may not recognize the borrowing of words as an unsound method of writing. For Pennycook (1996), a big part of teaching writing includes instructing students on issues of borrowing and plagiarism. Pennycook (1996) recognizes the need to have cultural sensitivity, and that teachers need to look beyond their own boundaries and understand that they may be teaching a writing system based exclusively on Western culture. Instructors telling students to rewrite something in their own words may be unrealistic if they consider English words not truly their own, and some type of negotiation will need to take place if the learners are to be successful (Pennycook, 1996).

Jeff Grabill, a writing researcher, is critical of the way writing is taught, saying it has not changed in over a century and too much is focused on writing about literature, rather than

meeting the needs of students. He wrote there is a need to change the teaching of writing in order to fit present day technology (“Highlighted & underlined: Time to change writing instruction,” 2010). In today’s world, with written communication being exchanged instantly, it is important to integrate the teaching of writing with other skills (Harmer, 2007).

Of course, no method suits every learner, as relativists such as Holliday will attest (Holliday, 1994). Experienced teachers tend to choose what is most appropriate for their students based on their needs. Such teachers who use different methods may be called pluralists, and those mixing methods to create their own techniques would be ‘principled eclectics’ according to Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 183).

As the world’s education-industrial complex continues to grow, testing (and the resulting backwash) has become a large force in L2 writing instruction. Tests are used to make critical decisions on overseas education opportunities, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century writing components in standardized testing such as the TOEFL and IELTS are now the norm. This has prodded the EFL/ESL industry to create a number of coursebooks aimed at improving writing, not just for advanced Academic or Business English, but also at the high beginner and intermediate levels as well. These books often have a learner-centered approach, and combine cooperative learning (pair and groupwork) with teacher-as-facilitator roles.

Terminology in linguistics is forever changing, and more recently ‘framework’ has been commonly used (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). For academic writing, a multi-skill framework called PROCESS (Planning, Referencing, Organization, Composition, Engineering, Spelling and Structure) has been suggested as a way to improve learners’ writing, at least in the field of nursing (Chenery-Morris, 2008). Another instructional model, Self-Regulated Strategies Development (SRSD), has been recently introduced as a way to give teachers a system which covers both genre and general writing, and moves learners along a continuum from dependent to independent writers according to their abilities.

Recently much has been written about complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) in regards to how these factors affect language proficiency. Marlowe and Asaba (2022) exploratory study determined that a timed-writing exercise could lead to significant gains in volume, but being a small study there is much to learn from further research.

### **Conclusions and possible new directions**

Writing over the centuries has evolved from a skill for the religious elite to the cornerstone



of modern education system. The methodologies have followed the shifts in popular beliefs; from rote copying to scientific to socially-oriented, and from a product focus to one based on process. Despite the changes, there is still a feeling of desperation on the part of many teachers that the basic skills needed are lacking. Writing still must be taught, and for now it appears that human instructors will be required to fulfill that role. Students can utilize software such as Writecheck and Grammarly, and instructors confirm originality via Turnitin, but there will still be a fair bit of time-consuming work to be done even with these tools. In the future speech recognition software will most likely be able to transcribe most speech without mistakes, and perhaps there will be genre programs and templates that put the spoken word into an acceptable written form. There will surely be more written online, and most likely in styles and genres we have not yet seen.

Until these milestones are achieved, students will need to put in the hours writing and re-writing in order to hone their skills, be they L1 or L2 writers. With modern (or post-modern) methodologies, the likelihood is the learner will have more flexibility than in the past, and more support from their classmates. Researchers and instructors will be able to apply CAF standards in order to boost specific areas of writing proficiency and evaluate learners' work. Still, at the end of the day it will be up to the writer to master the basic forms before embarking on the creation of successful documents for public consumption.

#### 注

- 1) It is worth noting that even today, large sectors of society remain functionally illiterate, and as a result suffer the effects of limited opportunity. In the United States approximately 10% of adults struggle with basic literacy tasks (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 2002).

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