14 Practical Tasks for Mastering the Mechanics of Writing and Going Just Beyond

ELITE OLSHTAIN

KEY QUESTIONS

- How can initial writing activities connect phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, on the one hand, with pronunciation, reading, and writing, on the other, in a beginner's course in English as a second or foreign language?
- How can we create a graded program that leads learners from the initial mechanical steps in writing to authentic communication via writing for real-life purposes?
- How can we take advantage of the world around us and of the latest technological developments to create interesting writing activities for beginners?

EXPERIENCE

We are visiting a class of 12-year-old children learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Each student is sitting in front of a laptop and doing individual practice using sentences in the present progressive to describe a picture. The summary of the activities requires the students to write their own description of the picture, and one of the students is surprised to find that she did not double the verb's final letter before adding *–ing* in *sitting* and *beginning*. The teacher, using the students' first language, draws their attention to some rules they studied earlier by using the interactive white board:

> The pronunciation patterns that we learned when we had words like *sit, hit, slip*, etc., helped us in pronouncing the vowel letter *i* correctly as /ɪ/.
>
> Verbs that have such short syllables ending in one consonant double the final consonant before adding *–ing* (*sitting*).
>
> The same is true for longer verbs that end in a stressed syllable that looks like the short syllables, such as in words like *begin* (*beginning*).

The teacher continues to practice various verbs that students already know, showing them where there is doubling and where there is no need for doubling, as in examples with a verb ending in a silent *e* (*write* → *writing*).

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN MASTERING THE MECHANICS OF WRITING?

Within a discourse-based approach to language teaching, where the goal of interaction is meaningful communication, the skill of writing enjoys special status. It is via writing that a person can communicate a variety of messages to a close or distant, known or unknown reader. (See Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, this volume, regarding discourse-based approaches to language teaching.) Such communication is extremely important in the modern world, whether the interaction takes the form of traditional paper-and-pencil writing or an up-to-date digital message on a computer, a cell phone, or any other technological device. Writing as a communicative activity needs to be encouraged and nurtured during the language learner's course of study. This chapter focuses on the early stages of English as a second language (ESL) and EFL writing, which are a critical prerequisite to the later development of writing for communication.

What are the important components when learning to write in a new language?

Viewing writing as an act of communication suggests an interactive process that takes place between the writer and the reader via the text. Such an approach places value on the goal of writing as well as on the perceived (or intended) reader audience. These two aspects of the act of writing need to be stressed even at the very beginning level, as soon as students can create the smallest meaningful messages. Teachers need to encourage students to define for themselves the messages they want to send and the audiences who will receive them.

The writing process, in comparison to spoken interaction, imposes greater demands on the text, since most of the time written interaction lacks immediate feedback. The writer should try to anticipate the reader's reactions and produce a text that will adhere to Grice's (1975) *cooperative principle*. According to this principle, the writer is obligated (by mutual cooperation) to try to write a clear, relevant, truthful, and preferably interesting and memorable text. The reader, on the other hand, will interpret the text with due regard for the writer's presumed intention if the necessary clues are available in the text. This is true even for the shortest and most reduced digital text message: All the clues needed by the reader to understand the writer's intention should be included in the text.

In academic or official exchanges in writing, it is important that the linguistic accuracy, clarity of presentation, and organization of ideas support the efficacy of the communicative act, since they supply the clues for interpretation. Accordingly, while the global perspectives of content and organization must be focused on and given appropriate attention, it is also important to present a product that does not suffer from illegible handwriting, numerous spelling errors, faulty punctuation, or inaccurate sentence structure, any of which may render the message unintelligible.

The present chapter focuses on the gradual development of the mechanics of writing, a necessary instrumental skill without which meaningful writing cannot take place. At this early stage of learning, the primary goal is to recognize and reproduce the elements of the target language writing system (the letters or other graphic shapes). There is, however, another important objective to the writing of graphic shapes—it provides students with support in the acquisition of the mechanics of reading. They gain a sound basis for letter and word recognition when reading.

It is important to remember that in the ESL/EFL context, writing, like the other language skills, needs to be dealt with at the particular level of linguistic and discourse proficiency that the intended students have reached (Raimes, 1985). The proposed sequence of activities will start with primary focus on the mechanical aspects of the writing skill and move on to a more communicative goal.

Writing systems

EFL learners usually acquire the mechanics of writing in English as an extension of their ability to read and write in their first language (L1). It is therefore important to first understand what writing system the students already know to design an efficient program that suits their particular needs.

Our first global consideration is whether the student's L1 has a writing system based on meaning, such as Chinese (the graphic sign is a unit of meaning) or a system based on sounds. In writing systems based on meaning, the graphic sign is linked to a meaning in the real world; in the writing systems based on sounds, the graphic sign is linked to a spoken sound (usually a phoneme as in English) or a syllable (as in the Japanese *katakana* writing system). Many languages in the sound-based writing group use an alphabetic system in which a graphic sign stands, in principle, for a phoneme. In such writing systems, we talk about phoneme-grapheme (or sound-to-letter) correspondences. Korean has basically an alphabetic writing system consisting of consonant and vowel symbols, but when they are put together they form syllables. Some of these alphabetic writing systems are more transparent and consistent in representing these correspondences than others. Italian and Finnish are good examples of transparent and highly consistent alphabetic writing systems (V. Cook, 2008). English, on the other hand, is much less transparent and has complicated rules for linking graphemes with phonemes. We often talk about sound-spelling correspondences in English to capture the complexity of the writing system.

The direction of the writing system can be up and down and in columns (as it is for traditional

Chinese and Japanese) or in lines (as it is for European and Middle Eastern languages). The direction on each line can be left to right for languages with Roman or Cyrillic alphabets or right to left for languages like Arabic, Urdu, and Hebrew. Suitable practice activities need to be developed according to the needs of students who may come from language backgrounds with scripts that have an orientation other than the left-to-right, horizontal writing used for English.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

Early writing in a new language

Children learning to read and write in their L1 have had prior experience with the language by listening to stories, being read to, interacting with adults and others in their environment, and observing people writing. In fact, many children have developed an understanding of writing before they actually need to learn how to write in school. Most important, they have acquired a large vocabulary in their own language. The EFL learner, on the other hand, usually knows how to read and write in his or her own language but often has to adjust to a new writing system while acquiring the first words in that new language. The acquisition of the new writing system has to be carried out within the linguistic framework of the knowledge newly acquired in the target language. This is an important consideration that will come up at various points along the way.

Learners whose first language employs the Roman alphabet already possess the appropriate direction of reading and writing, they recognize and use letters with the same shapes as those in English, and they are aware of the phonological processing route (V. Cook, 2008). Sometimes the L1 writing system uses a different alphabet such as Cyrillic, used for many Slavic languages, or for Greek, which has its own alphabet. In these cases, learners may have to adjust to a few new phoneme-grapheme correspondences, but mainly they need to focus on the orthographic regularities and irregularities in English, which probably has a less transparent writing system than their L1.

Learners whose L1 employs an alphabetic system that is different from the Roman alphabet need to focus on the appropriate direction of reading and writing, on learning to recognize and produce the actual graphic characters, and on learning both the regularities and irregularities of the English writing system. These early steps will be significant for developing efficient reading and writing strategies at later stages.

Learners whose L1 employs a meaning-based writing system (e.g., Chinese) will have a more difficult task acquiring the English writing system, especially if this is their first encounter with a Roman alphabet. They need careful training in associating a graphic sign with a vocal sound and then recognizing sequences of such graphic signs as words. The phonological process route, which is only partially familiar to them, will need to be enhanced and practiced in the new writing system. Phonemic awareness might require some practice as well. At the same time, these learners must get used to the appropriate direction of reading and writing. Eventually, they too, will need to learn both the regularities and irregularities of the English writing system.

All learners, irrespective of their language background, will need to learn the English punctuation system and the English spelling rules. These will develop along with the acquisition of the language in the first years of studying English, since many of the spelling rules are related to morphological rules and can be learned as part of the morphology. For example, doubling the final consonant of certain verbs can be taught along with regular past tense formation (e.g., *fit, fitted*).

The mechanics of reading and writing

When using the term *mechanics of writing*, we usually refer to the very early stage of letter recognition, letter discrimination, sound-to-letter correspondence, word recognition, and basic rules of spelling. Just beyond this early stage, we continue to expand the spelling rules, focus on punctuation and capitalization, and cover the comprehension and production of sentences and short paragraphs. The time devoted to developing the mechanics of writing serves the acquisition of both reading and writing skills.

The interaction between reading and writing has often been stressed in language teaching, yet it deserves even stronger emphasis at this early stage. To learn how to discriminate one letter from another while reading, learners need to practice writing these letters; to facilitate their perception of words and sentences during the reading process, they might need to practice writing them first. It is therefore the case that writing plays an important role in early reading by facilitating the development of both the reading and writing skills. The importance of this early stage of reading and writing is emphasized in a study by Ke (1996) on the relationship between Chinese character recognition and production at the early stages of learning. With the English alphabet, this stage is much simpler, yet it deserves appropriate attention, especially for learners accustomed to other writing systems and for adult preliterate learners.

Sound-spelling correspondences

English presents the learner with a number of unique difficulties related to its orthographic rules, even in cases in which the learners come from a first language writing system based on the Roman alphabet. Students and teachers alike often throw their hands up in despair, ready to give up on finding reliable rules for English orthography; yet the English writing system is much more rule governed than many realize. In fact, English has a very systematic set of sound-spelling correspondences (Chomsky & Halle, 1968; Schane, 1970; Venezky, 1970). These sound-spelling correspondences enable the ESL/EFL teacher to combine the teaching of phonetic units with graphic units and to give students practice in pronunciation along with practice in spelling (see Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010).

The English consonants

The first rule to remember about English orthography is that students may tend to look for a one-to-to correspondence and then discover that they get into a lot of trouble by doing this. For most of the 21 consonant letters, this type of rule works fairly well if we disregard allophonic[1] differences in pronunciation, such as *t* (/t/) being pronounced as an aspirated initial [t^h] (as in *ten*) as opposed to a nonaspirated, unreleased final [t˺] (as in *net*) for monosyllabic words in English. Yet there are also consonant letters whose sounds depend on the environment in which they occur: Thus, the letter *c* can have the sound /k/ when followed by the vowel letters *a, o,* or *u* (e.g., *call, cook, cup*) or by the consonant letters *l, r,* or *k* (e.g., *click, crew, rocker*). However, it has the sound /s/ when followed by the vowel letters *e, i,* or *y* (e.g., *cell, cinch, cyst*). Although these rules may appear confusing to a learner coming from an L1 with a transparent phoneme-grapheme correspondence system, they work quite consistently in English and need to be introduced and practiced from the very start. The story of the letter *c* is not finished, however, and now we come to the part that is less consistent. This occurs when *c* is followed by the letter *h* and can have the sound of /ʧ/ (*chocolate*) or /k/ (*chorus*). There is no help we can give our students in this respect but to tell them to pay special attention to such words and to try to remember their initial sound according to the meaning of the word. The letter *c* also occurs in quite a number of common words followed by the letter *k* (not initially, but in the middle or at the end of words, e.g., *chicken* and *lock*). The sound in this case is /k/, and the correspondence should create no difficulty.

The letter *g* in English demonstrates a similar pattern. When followed by the vowel letters *a, o,* and *u* or the consonant letters *r* and *l,* it is pronounced /g/ as in *gas, go, gun, grass,* and *glow.* However, before the vowel letters *i, e,* and *y,* the letter *g* is pronounced /ʤ/ as in *gin, gem, and gym.* We thus need to alert students to the fact that the correspondence in English is not always between letter and sound but between the letter and its immediate environment and the relevant sound. In many such cases, the correspondences are quite predictable, while in others, the rules do not always work as well. Another helpful generalization for English consonants is related to the letter *h,* which is very powerful in changing the sound of the consonant that it follows. Thus, the letter combinations *ch, sh,* and *th* represent distinct consonant sounds (/ʧ/, /ʃ/, and /θ/ or /ð/, respectively) in words such as *chin, shut,* and *thin* or *then.* Learners need to recognize these graphic clusters as such. Our discussion of the letters *c, g,* and *h* highlights the types of difficulties that learners can encounter with consonant letters in English. There must also be an awareness of common and frequent exceptions. For example, despite the rules, the letter *g* in *get* or *give* is pronounced /g/; the letter *c* in *cello* is pronounced /ʧ/.

Teachers also need to be aware that there are many silent consonants in English, such as these common cases that beginners might encounter:

- *k* or *g* before *n*: *knock, knee, gnaw, gnome*
- *l* after vowels and before final consonants in several contexts: *could, would; walk, talk; calf, half*
- *gh* after vowels: *through, sigh, light, caught*
- word-final *b* and *n* after *m*: *comb, thumb, autumn, column*
- *t* after *s* and before *–en* or *–le*: *whistle, listen*

To summarize, when teaching consonant letters and their sound correspondences to students whose own alphabet is similar to that of English, we need to focus only on the unique features of the English writing system and its irregularities. On the other hand, when teaching students coming from a different alphabetic writing system (e.g., Arabic, Russian, or Korean), a syllable-based system (e.g., Japanese *katakana*), or a meaning-based system (e.g., Chinese), teachers need to emphasize the recognition of every consonant letter. Here learners might have difficulties similar to the ones encountered by young children when they first learn to read and write in English as their mother tongue (such as the distinction between *b* and *d*). Intensive writing practice will help learners with both the reading and the writing skills.

The English vowels

The vowel letters in English present more complex sound-spelling correspondences, but again there is much more consistency and predictability than many learners realize. First, learners need to be made aware of two basic types of syllable environments that are very productive in English orthography: CVC (often the environment for short vowels) and CV or CVCe (the latter ending in a silent *e*; these are the environments for long vowels).[2] The terms *short vowels* and *long vowels* as used in English spelling are rather unfortunate, since they conceal the difference in quality by placing too much emphasis on length. The difference between the vowel sounds in the words *pin* and *pine* is not necessarily one of length (or production time) but one of phonetic quality. A true difference in vowel length can be observed in the words *bit* versus *bid*, where the quality of the two vowel sounds is similar but the one preceding the voiceless consonant /t/ is shorter than the one preceding the voiced consonant /d/.[3]

Although we often say that the five vowel letters of the English alphabet[4] result in at least 11 or more vowel sounds (depending on the particular English dialect), these sound-spelling correspondences are, at least in part, consistent and predictable. What teachers and learners need to take into account is the fact that in English we must consider both the vowel letter and the environment in which it occurs. Thus, CVC syllables present a rather consistent environment for all five vowel letters *a, e, i/y, o,* and *u* in which they stand for simple, lax (produced with relatively relaxed muscles), nondiphthongized[5] vowel sounds, as in the words *pan, pen, pin, pot,* and *but*. However, the same five vowel letters occurring in the CVCe environment stand for tense (produced with relatively tensed muscles) and diphthongized vowels, as in the words *pane, pine, Pete, rope,* and *cute*. Similarly, most vowels that can occur in the CV or V environment are also tense and usually diphthongized: *go, be, I/my, Lu* (as in *Lulu*). In a CV-type syllable, long *a* needs a following *y*, as in *pay*, or it is pronounced /ɑ/ as in *ma*. Not all these patterns are equally frequent in English orthography. The letter *e*, for instance, does not often occur as the vowel sound in the CVCe environment, and learners have to study its more common spellings as in *meet* and *meat* for the sound /iy/. In other words, there are some basic sound-spelling correspondences in English, the knowledge of which can greatly facilitate the acquisition of reading and writing. But there are also quite a number of exceptions or expansions that need to be learned individually.

In teaching the basic sound-spelling correspondences in English, it is important to emphasize the rules that provide learners with useful generalizations and that therefore help them become effective readers. Once students have assimilated and internalized the basic features of such correspondences—namely, the distinction between CVC and CV or CVCe syllables—they will be able to apply these patterns not only to monosyllabic words but also to polysyllabic ones; in such words, the stressed syllable can act as a monosyllabic environment for letter-sound vowel correspondences (e.g., *open, dispose, reset*).

Furthermore, some of the more advanced spelling rules related to English morphology can be facilitated by this knowledge. In polysyllabic verbs in which the final syllable is stressed, the spelling rules for adding the inflection *–ing* work in the same manner as in monosyllabic verbs. Thus, learners who know the rule for consonant letter doubling when changing *sit* to *sitting* will be able to apply the same rule to any polysyllabic verb that ends with a stressed syllable having the form CVC. Therefore, the verb *begin*, since its final syllable is stressed, will undergo doubling of the last letter in *beginning*, as opposed to the verb *open*, where the final syllable is not stressed and the *–ing* form is *opening*.

However, in spite of all that has been said so far, English orthography has a notorious reputation because, in addition to all these helpful and relatively reliable rules, we must take into account some less productive rules that have a lot of exceptions. These exceptions are often found in some very common words that defy the most basic rules, such as *give, have,* and *love*, where the silent-*e* rule does not work.

There are some additional rules that are quite predictable, such as the occurrence of the letter *a* in front of *l* or *ll*, which (in some dialects) is quite consistently realized as /ɔ/ as in *call*, or the letter *a* in front of the letter *r*, which has the sound of /ɑ/ as in *car*. In general, the letters/sounds *l* and *r* affect the way the preceding vowel letter is pronounced, causing it to represent a more centralized (i.e., pronounced in the center of the mouth) vowel as in the words *world, bird,* and *curd*. Furthermore, the vowel diphthongs have a variety of spellings, such as the following letter combinations, all of which correspond to the same vowel diphthong /iy/: *meal, beet,* and *cede*. So, while it is true that there are quite a few cases in English that need to be learned as individual correspondences, there are far fewer than people imagine (for good sources of rules on sound-spelling correspondences, see Schane, 1970; Venezky, 1970).

In summing up this section dealing with the teaching points relevant to the mechanics of reading and writing, we emphasize that it is important for learners of ESL/EFL to realize from the start that English orthography is by no means a one-to-one letter-sound correspondence system; it has its own consistency embedded in the combinations of letters in their environments, resulting in what we call sound-spelling correspondences. By introducing the proper pronunciation of sounds in relation to the given spelling patterns, we can provide learners with a good basis for pronunciation as well as for the skills of reading and writing. The three areas of pronunciation, reading, and writing go hand in hand in the very early stages of acquiring another language.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

How do we teach mechanics?

The teaching of the mechanics of reading and writing has three goals: (1) to enhance letter recognition, especially when learners come from a different writing system; (2) to practice sound-spelling correspondences via all four language skills; and (3) to help the learner move from letters and words to meaningful sentences and larger units of discourse.

Recognition and writing drills constitute the first steps in the development of effective reading and writing habits. However, to acquire active mastery of the sound-spelling correspondences, it is necessary for the learners to arrive at relevant generalizations concerning these correspondences. Such generalizations lead to a better understanding of the systematic representation of sounds in English orthography and require learners to master some basic phonological rules in English and develop an ability to recognize the distinctive features of each letter within a spelling pattern.

Three major types of recognition tasks are used at this early stage of reading and writing, each type incorporating an adequate variety of drills: (1) matching tasks; (2) writing tasks; and (3) meaningful sound-spelling correspondence practice. These drills can be carried out using paper and pencil or via computerized/digitalized lessons.

Matching tasks. The major objective of matching tasks is to practice the quick and effective recognition of the English letters. This is particularly important for learners who know a writing system that does not use the Roman alphabet. Many of the drills used here are similar to the drills used for beginning readers of English who are native speakers. Learners need to distinguish a particular letter from other similar letters, they need to match words beginning or ending with the same small or capital letter, and

1. Letter recognition activities:

a. Find the ODD MAN OUT.

h h (k) n h n f j j
p b b d b d

b. Find the same letter.

b: n d (b) c k
k: j f k h i
d: b p l d h

c. Find all the *d*'s.

f k s n (d) j
s j d d b p
h f k s z m
f d k j n m

Find all the *h*'s.

s k j h n d
z k n b s d
m h n h s s
f g h k h b

d. Underline the words that have *n*.

net
ben
bed
ten

e. Underline the words ending in *ed*.

ned
bed
dip
net

2. Match capital letters with lower case. Connect the words beginning with the same letter.

Pin — pin
bib — Bin
Tin — tin
net — Net

Figure 1. Sample matching tasks (adapted from Olshtain, Crumlish, Goell, & Kneller, 1970).

they need to search for a certain letter within a group of different letters. All these exercises are focused on recognition and do not require either writing or pronouncing the letters or words. When the drills are done digitally, students drag similar letters and words to matching positions or relevant groups or simply click on them. At a slightly more advanced stage, the drill requires students to match words with pictures and even short sentences with pictures. This can be used when students can work with meaning as well as accurate recognition. Figure 1 provides some sample matching tasks.

Writing tasks. The major objective of writing tasks is to allow students to produce the shapes of the letters both as a recognition and a production task. Usually these activities begin with tracing letters that are printed on the page. In this way, students can focus on the detailed characteristics of the letters. This stage is needed only for learners who come from a different writing system; students familiar with the Roman alphabet can move right to writing meaningful words. In computerized activities, students can type out the letters on the keyboard and thus practice using the keyboard as well as the alphabet. Figure 2 provides a sample writing task involving tracing letters, words, and sentences; Figure 3 provides a sample task involving meaningful copying activities.

Sound-spelling correspondence tasks. The major objective of sound-spelling correspondence tasks is for the learner to match individual sounds or sequences of sounds and words with their written form. The teacher may read the words, or students may listen to a recorded drill. In either case, the focus here is on listening and recognizing the sound corresponding to the relevant written form. The spelling environments are important in these kinds of tasks. The distinction between CVC and CVCe can be practiced in many different ways. In the computerized version, there is a voice accompanying the activities and students choose the written forms according to the sounds they hear. Students can also be asked to pronounce the written forms and thus practice pronunciation. These activities provide learners with a solid basis for all four languages skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Figure 4 provides a sample task that focuses on sound-spelling correspondences.

An important feature of this early stage of writing is the need to accustom learners to using the appropriate capitalization rules in English and some basic rules of punctuation. While practicing sound-spelling correspondences, students can be writing meaningful sentences, or typing them on the keyboard, with proper capitalization and punctuation such as the following simple sentences, which focus on some of the important environments that need practice:

There is a cat on the mat and a cake on the plate.
The ball is near the tall boy next to the wall.

I. Writing Practice: Tracing Letters, Words, and Sentences

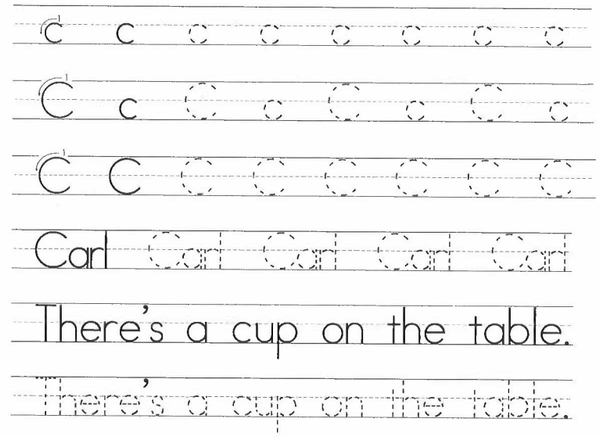


Figure 2. Tracing letters, words, and sentences (adapted from Olshtain, Crumlish, Goell, & Kneller, 1970).

These sentences contain words that exemplify sound-spelling correspondences and that, at the same time, have probably already been learned by the students. Such sentences should be accompanied by pictures to ensure that learners understand the meaning. We may not be able to write a whole story this way, but since our focus is first and foremost on the sound-spelling correspondences, it is an important step toward more meaningful personal writing. Eventually, the discourse units that students write will grow and incorporate more meaningful and interesting texts. The language knowledge the students gain can be the

II. Meaningful Copying Activities

(Adapted from Olshtain et al. 1998, pp. 76, 85, and 157)

1. **Read and decide.**

Dan wants to win at tennis. He doesn't practice a lot, but when he goes to play he takes a lucky ring with him. He thinks it can help him win. What do you think?

☐ It can help Dan. ☐ It can't help Dan.

2. **Read about Lucky the Rock Star in Exercise 3 below. Then answer these questions.**

What is he wearing?

_____
_____
_____

What is he doing?

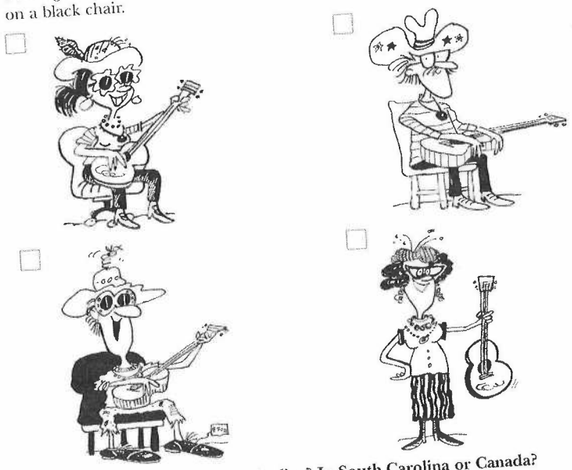
_____
_____
_____

(*continued*)

Figure 3. Meaningful copying activities (adapted from Olshtain, Feuerstein, Schcolnik, & Zerach, 1998).

3. Who is Lucky the Rock Star? Read and check (✔).

He is wearing 2 necklaces. He is wearing a funny hat. He is wearing huge sunglasses. He is wearing new black shoes. He is wearing old ugly jeans. He is holding a guitar. He is sitting on a black chair.



4. Read and decide. Where does he live? In South Carolina or Canada?

He lives in _____.
He doesn't live in _____.

5. Write about today's weather. These sentences may help you.
It's very nice. It's cloudy. It's hot. It's warm.
It's cold. It's windy. It's rainy.

Figure 3. Meaningful copying activities (adapted from Olshtain, Feuerstein, Schcolnik, & Zerach, 1998). (*Continued*)

Practicing Sound-Spelling Correspondences

1. The letter *a* in *all* and *al*
   a. Read the following words out loud.

all	also
ball	always
call	almost
fall	although
wall	
tall	
hall	
small	

   but the sound is different in the word—*shall*

   b. Use the above words to write the missing letters and then read the sentence.

   __ l l t h e s m__ __ __
   __ __ l l s f__ __ __.

2. Underline the word your teacher says.

a. tin tine tan	**b.** tam tame time	**c.** mit mite mat
d. bad bade bid	**e.** hide hid had	**f.** can cane cap

Figure 4. Practicing sound-spelling correspondences (adapted from Olshtain, Feuerstein, Schcolnik, & Zerach, 1998).

basis for developing more sophisticated and personally relevant texts.

At this early stage of writing, we need to give learners "plenty of opportunities for copying" (Byrne, 1988, p. 130), either in handwriting or in keyboarding. Such copying activities can be made more challenging by asking students to create sentences for new contexts. One such activity is to provide a bank of sentences and pictures; students copy the proper sentence below the matching picture. Although copying may seem terribly mechanical, it allows students to practice words and sentences while gaining fluency in writing.

More advanced writing tasks

More advanced writing activities that start shifting from a focus on the mechanics of writing to basic process-oriented tasks need to incorporate some language work at the morphological and discourse levels. The activities suggested for this part of the program focus on both accuracy and content, with a clear communicative goal. At this stage, we are still concerned with the beginning level of ESL/EFL, yet the focus shifts toward communication. Three types of writing tasks serve as the framework for communicative writing activities: practical writing tasks, emotive writing tasks, and school-oriented tasks. These activities can all be carried out in handwriting for traditional writing exchanges as well as using email messages, social network postings, or any other digital interaction.

To develop and use these more demanding writing activities in the ESL/EFL classroom, we need to develop a detailed set of specifications that will enable both teachers and students to cope successfully with these tasks. Such a set of specifications should include:

The task description: This description presents students with the goal of the task and its importance. Such a task description will initially be provided by the teacher, and eventually students will provide their own task and define it.

The content description: This description presents students with possible content areas that are relevant to the task. Here again, the teacher will first suggest these areas, but gradually students will become more involved via discussion and brainstorming in suggesting relevant content.

The audience description: This description guides students in developing an understanding of the intended audience, its background, needs, and expectations. Gradually students will be guided to write authentic messages to friends and others.

Format cues: These cues help students in planning the overall organizational structures of the written product. Even for short messages or emails, students should learn to plan the format to ensure effective communication.

Linguistic cues: These cues help students make use of certain grammatical structures and vocabulary choices that are appropriate for the intended message.

Spelling and punctuation cues: These cues help students focus their attention on the spelling rules they have learned and eventually on the need to use a dictionary or a computerized spell check (to check the accuracy of spelling); they also guide students to use acceptable punctuation and capitalization conventions.

Practical writing tasks. These are writing tasks that are procedural in nature and have a predictable format. This makes them particularly suitable for writing activities that focus primarily on spelling and morphology. Writing lists of various types, writing notes, categorizing, labeling, writing short messages, writing simple instructions, and other tasks are particularly useful in reinforcing classroom work.

There are many types of lists: things to do, things completed, things to share with others, and shopping lists. Each of these list types provides teachers with an opportunity to combine some spelling rules with morphological rules and with the logical creation of a meaningful message. Things-to-do lists are useful for practicing verb base forms and reinforcing various sound-spelling correspondences. When assigning an activity, the teacher should indicate whether the list is personal or intended for a group project. The content specification will indicate whether this is a list of things to do in preparation for some event or just a plan for someone's daily routine. For example, a list for a group of students who are preparing a surprise birthday party might look like this:

Things to Do

1. Buy a present for Donna (Sharon).
2. Call Donna's friends (Gail).
3. Write invitations (Dan).

Today it is most likely that a list like this would be sent around to the group members via email or text messages on cell phones. These types of digital activities should become part of classroom work so that students feel that they are learning to function successfully in the new language in relevant and familiar situations.

Following a things-to-do list, we can easily move on to the things-completed list, which specifies which things have already been taken care of; it is therefore useful for practicing the past tense forms of verbs. As part of this activity, students will need to review the regular past tense formation of verbs (in which *–ed* is added) and its spelling patterns, such as the deletion of a final *e* before adding *–ed* (as in *live, lived*); the doubling of the last consonant in monosyllabic bases of the form CVC (as in *pat, patted*) and the same doubling rule when the final CVC syllable of a polysyllabic verb is stressed (as in *occur, occurred*; but not when a nonfinal syllable is stressed, as in *open, opened*); and the replacement of *y* with *i* when the base ends in C*y* (as in *try, tried*). Such an activity also enables students to practice the spelling of irregular past tense formations. For example, a list of things completed for the surprise birthday party might look like this:

Things Completed

1. Planned the games for the party
2. Wrote the invitations
3. Bought the present
4. Called Donna's friends
5. Tried to call Donna's mother

Shopping lists provide us with a very good opportunity to practice the spelling of the plural ending of count nouns and the use of quantifiers. The sound-spelling correspondences here consist of the two orthographic forms of the plural inflection with its three phonetic variants:

–s, which is pronounced [s] in *nuts, grapes,* and *soft drinks* and is pronounced [z] in *eggs, apples,* and *onions*

–es, which is pronounced [əz] or [ɪz] in *peaches, oranges,* and *toothbrushes*

Another type of practical writing task is notes and messages that are left for another person or are sent via cell phone text messages. These allow students to practice brief and simple sentences with proper punctuation and a meaningful message. To make the activities more interesting and personal, students can design their own message headings and then fill them in. Here is an example:

Messages for My Little Sister

1. Wash the dishes in the sink.
2. Feed the dog.
3. Watch your favorite program on TV and have a good time.

Such messages can also be done as "sticky notes" on the computer.

Other types of practical writing activities might include the completion of forms on paper or on the computer and the preparation of invitations, greetings, and thank you notes on paper or on the computer. All these activities, when carried out in class, require the set of specifications already mentioned, with the appropriate focus on orthographic, mechanical, and linguistic accuracy.

Emotive writing tasks. Emotive writing tasks are concerned with personal writing. Such personal writing primarily includes letters to friends and narratives describing personal experiences, messages on social networks, and personal journals and diaries. When teaching letter writing, teachers should emphasize format, punctuation, and spelling of appropriate phrases and expressions. When students write about personal experiences—usually in a narrative format—they can review and practice the spelling of past tense forms. Entries in diaries and journals, both on paper and on the computer, can take the form of personal letters and serve as a review of letter writing in general.

To serve the personal needs of the learners, emotive writing has to be quite fluent. To make these activities real and authentic, teachers should allow students to decide on their own written messages. How can they carry out such tasks in the early stages of acquiring English when their knowledge of the language is limited and their vocabulary does not include all the words they may want to use? It is important at this stage to guide students to use the language that they know. It is always amazing to realize that, even with limited knowledge of a new language, learners can express most of their thoughts if they plan the message carefully. Personal letters and messages can be designed in simple language, reflecting the language that the students know. Teachers can provide sample pieces of writing and encourage students to design their own messages based on the models. Brainstorming activities preceding such writing activities can help develop the task specifications that should guide all students in their work.

School-oriented tasks. One of the most important functions of writing in students' lives is its use in school. Much individual learning goes on while students are writing assignments, summaries, answers to questions, and essay-type passages. In most cases, the audience for these writing tasks is the teacher, but gradually students must learn to write for an unknown reader who needs to receive the information being imparted exclusively via writing. This is true, of course, both in written messages or digital messages. In some schools, students can correspond with their teachers via email or social networks, and they can hand in homework assignments in a digital form.

At the early stages of writing, the assignments and written tasks might be very short and simple. Answers might be single phrases or sentences, summaries (a listing of main ideas, and descriptions), or a sequence of related sentences. All these writing activities should be given attention, both at the linguistic-accuracy level and at the message-transmission level. Students should be guided to take responsibility for developing their writing abilities. Combining content and organization with accepted formal features of writing conventions will help students develop the writing skill needed in their future use of English. This is particularly true of school-oriented tasks.

Dialogue journal writing at the early stages. Dialogue journals enable students and teachers to interact on a one-to-one basis at any level and in any learning context. They are, therefore, also very useful communicative tasks at the early stages of learning to write in a new language. The dialogue journal enables the beginner in English to generate some personal input and receive the teacher's direct feedback on it.

According to Peyton and Reed (1990), both young children who are beginning writers in a second language and nonliterate adults can start a dialogue journal as soon as they are comfortable writing in the classroom. The journal can start as an interactive picture book in which, first, the teacher and, later, the learners label the pictures and provide brief descriptions. Gradually the texts become more detailed as the communication process is enhanced.

The dialogue journal, like any other writing activity, but even more so, can be done via email or on social networks, expanding the communication between teachers and students and also among the students themselves. Students should be encouraged to use the second language as their special code for interacting with classmates. There can be a special discussion forum in which they interact with the teacher as well as with other students. The keyboard, rather than the pen or pencil, can become their most significant writing tool.

All learners in a classroom, school, or any other group can take part in a discussion forum. In this case, the writers will be addressing a wider and more varied audience. They can discuss a topic, share some ideas or experiences, and react to the writing of others. The messages on the forum should be read and judged for content rather than quality of writing (Lahav, 2005), and therefore more students may feel comfortable participating, even if their mastery of language is not perfect. Such a forum provides an authentic setting and an authentic purpose for writing.

FUTURE TRENDS

Taking into account the writing needs of learners in general, more emphasis will be placed on written interaction via digital tools. Yet the ability to produce clear, well-understood messages is important for all students. Students' experiences will expand to include more and more varied types of writing activities. The present chapter sets up the basic framework for beginning students who will eventually become proficient writers in English as an additional language.

While the constantly changing environment will certainly affect the learning and teaching of language in all areas of use, it will also affect research, providing new questions that need to be investigated. The impact of technology on writing needs to be investigated further, with a clear focus on the acquisition of the L2 writing system in its various realizations. Such issues include how many repetitions of computerized recognition activities should be included in a lesson, what mediation is needed for students to work on their own in early-learning writing activities supported by technology, and how certain writing activities affect reading fluency.

CONCLUSION

Teachers should be encouraged to use a variety of writing tasks at all learning levels and particularly at the beginning level. Writing, in addition to being a communicative skill of vital importance, is a skill that enables the learner to plan and rethink the communication process. It therefore provides the learner with the opportunity to focus on both linguistic accuracy and content organization. That the mechanics of writing are particularly important in the initial stage of learning English as an additional language must be emphasized; they help students establish a good basis in and useful mastery of the sound-spelling correspondences that are crucial for reading in English. As I. S. P. Nation (2009) points out: "An essential part of the reading skill is the skill of being able to recognize written forms and to connect them with their spoken forms and their meaning" (p. 9).

The focus on sound-spelling patterns also leads to improved pronunciation and, as such, plays a central role in students' acquiring listening and speaking skills. The importance of carefully planned interaction among these different subskills in the initial stages of learning the language cannot be overemphasized.

When teachers focus on writing, in particular, they should emphasize the importance of a carefully planned presentation, which combines the mechanics of writing with the composing process. Teachers might advise students to prepare a list of guiding questions that they should try to answer in their writing activity. Such questions raise the writers' awareness about the communicative perspective of a written text.

The early stages of an ESL/EFL course of study must provide learners with a good foundation for furthering their knowledge in all language areas and language skills beyond the beginners' course. The present chapter shows how important these early stages are. Yet another perspective of the beginning level, not discussed here, relates to the students' interests and motivation to learn. The use of the target language and writing, in particular, should reflect the learners' real-world and real communicative needs. Since we live in an innovative, high-technology world, it is important to take full advantage of what students need and want to do with their second or foreign language, right from the start.

SUMMARY

- By learning how to write letters and words in the new language, students also become better readers.
- The sound-spelling correspondences in English provide learners with the basis for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and spelling.
- Even in the early stages of learning a new language, once students have acquired the mechanics of writing they should begin writing for communication.
- Early writing activities can take digital forms and can be used by students in authentic exchanges with their peers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you plan the early writing stage differently for students whose first language uses a Roman alphabet compared to students whose first language has a writing system based on meaning?
2. How should we sequence the teaching of the various sound-spelling correspondences to be most effective? Would using a computer for practice make a difference?
3. Give an example of how the teacher of either beginning-level ESL or EFL students can combine elements of the composing process with elements of the mechanics of writing.
4. How would you use Twitter or any other typical social networking system to have students interact meaningfully at their level?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. At the early stages of learning a new language, we focus on some basic grammatical structures and vocabulary items. Design some interesting writing tasks for beginners, such as creating a wanted poster (i.e., a poster of a criminal the police are searching for) with questions that students need to answer using a person's description or creating a lost-pet poster, which requires the description of an animal. Suggest a variety of such activities, and evaluate their usefulness.
2. Prepare a game or a set of cards to practice the difference between the vowels sounds in the environments CVC and CVCe (e.g., *hat, kit* versus *hate, kite*). Incorporate as many words as will be meaningful for the intended student population. You may have to use some words that exemplify this sound-spelling correspondence that are not yet known to your students. How will you present the new words to your students before you practice the spelling patterns?
3. Find pictures that can be used to produce simple descriptions. Develop a number of activities that will enable pairs or small groups to answer a set of questions about each picture. The questions should lead to a concise description of what is in the picture.

FURTHER READING

Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J. S. (2004). *Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice.* London, UK: Routledge.

This book provides teachers with a detailed description of how syllabi for ESL writing programs are developed. A major chapter in the book is devoted to material and task construction that is helpful for expansion activities beyond textbooks that are used. The book also focuses on writing assessment and on developing a community of writers.

Gelb, I. J. (1963) *A study of writing.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

A reference for those interested in the history and evolution of human writing systems.

Ivanic, R. (2004). Discourses of writing and learning to write. *Language and Education, 18*(3), 220–245.

This article presents research on writing and writing pedagogy focusing on six types of discourse: a skills discourse, a creativity discourse, a process discourse, a genre discourse, a social practices discourse, and a sociopolitical discourse. Thus the article links the writing course to discourse research and provides approaches to the teaching of writing.

ENDNOTES

[1] The term *allophonic* contrasts with the term *phonemic.* A phoneme is a difference in sound that makes a difference in meaning, such as initial /p/ in *pull* versus initial /b/ in *bull.* An allophone is a difference in sound that is typically environmentally conditioned and does not make a difference in meaning, such as the initial aspirated (breath-releasing) [t^h] in *tip* versus the unaspirated, unreleased final [$t^\neg$] in *pit,* which are both allophones of the phoneme /t/ in English. Languages differ in that an allophonic difference in one language can be a phonemic difference in another. This can complicate the learning process.

[2] In these formulas C stands for "consonant," V stands for "vowel," and e stands for silent *e.* Thus, the formula for a word like *take* is CVCe.

[3] When consonants are voiced, the vocal cords are vibrating; when they are voiceless, the vocal cords do not move. This can be felt by touching the throat and is perhaps most obvious with the difference between a sustained /z/ sound (which is voiced) versus a sustained /s/ sound (which is voiceless). All vowels in English are voiced.

[4] Sometimes *y* serves as a sixth vowel letter, replacing *i.* This is not very frequent in CVC contexts (e.g., *gym*), but it does occur frequently in CV or CCV position (e.g., *my, sky, try*).

[5] English vowels are diphthongized if there is tongue and lip movement during the production of the sound toward /y/ or /w/. For example, /ey/ as in *bait,* /ay/ as in *bite,* /ow/ as in *boat,* or /aw/ as in *shout* are all diphthongized vowels in North American English. Vowels are simple, or nondiphthongized, if there is no tongue or lip movement during vowel production, as in the vowels in the words *bit* /bɪt/, *bat* /bæt/, or *but* /bʌt/.