

# Teaching EFL Writing in Accordance with Stages of Learner Development

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This study examines the development of EFL students' writing skills through four stages: a) the Word Level, b) the Sentence Level, c) the Composition Level, and d) the Academic/Professional Level. These levels are organized around one major challenge each, and as a result, one or more methods of instruction relevant to that challenge. At the Word level, training in phonics is critical. At the Sentence Level, learning sentence grammar is important. At the Composition Level, the emphasis changes to expository organization. At the Academic/Professional Level, learning the rules of genre for different types of writing is the key challenge.

**Keywords:** orthography, sentence combining, organization, methods

One of the biggest challenges every writing teacher faces is deciding what to teach. Ask your peers and one might tell you to teach grammar, while another might say rhetoric, and another, academic writing skills. You might be advised to teach translation, summarizing, test practice, paragraph writing, diaries, or e-mail writing. So how does even an experienced teacher choose among this complex set of options?

From my own 30 years of teaching writing in Asia, writing composition textbooks, and after reading some of the key research, I have developed a simple framework for deciding what to teach in writing class. The kinds of classes and learners I am talking about range from those starting to write single words to those about to write a dissertation in English, a rather large span of learners. The framework puts learners in four developmental stages. In the first stage, the learners need to learn the system of changing stray symbols into words, in the second stage, learners must gain proficiency in sentence writing; in the third stage, composition writing; while in the fourth, academic or professional ESP writing. Each stage requires a different approach, which is the main topic of this article.

## **Stages of Learner Development**

- Word Level
- Sentence Level
- Composition Level
- Academic/Professional Level

### **1. The Word Level**

Children gain an interest in looking at books and videos from age 1. They begin showing signs of understanding the notion of letters from age 3 (Chow, 1986). At the beginning of this level, they are in a pre-phonetic stage. Some of their drawings might contain some proto-letters of circles and shapes with a linear direction and arrangement like the example in Figure 1. While most of the examples below come from native speakers, Early's research (1976) found the same stages in L2 children.

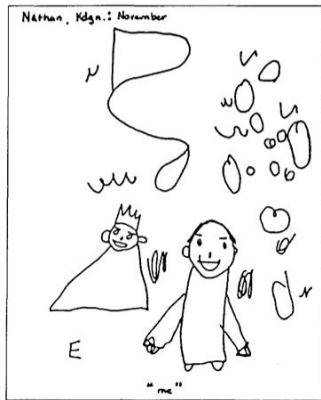


Figure 1: Noticing letters and directionality (Chow, 1986, p. 37)

Once children start noticing letters they try to mimic them and even write stories using them, although they have little sense of letter sounds yet.

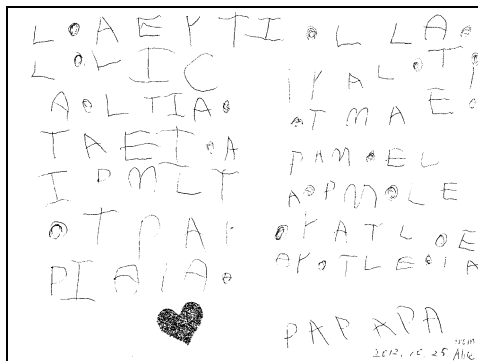


Figure 2: Writing non-phonetic proto-words. (my daughter Alice's writing, age 4, 2012)

A key shift then occurs when the children realize letters have phonetic qualities and begin mapping out the letter-sound correspondence. They start writing words by sounding them out. At this time, teaching phonics is important. It is still too early to focus on spelling, since they are spelling words the way they hear them.



Figure 3: Writing words based on phonetics. (Chow, 1986, p. 42)

In a final transitional period, the last part of this level, children move away from their sole reliance on phonology and use symbolic, visual, definition, and word pattern clues as well. Nonetheless, the phonetic orientation is still strong.

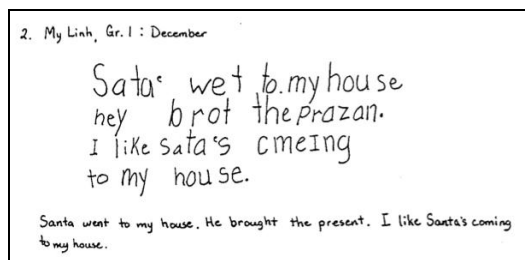


Figure 4. Learning to understand words as symbols (Chow, 1986 , p. 44)

Few children reach this stage by the end of grade 1 (Chow, 1986), and it is linked to the same brain development that is required in order to be able to read at ages 5 and 6.

## 2. The Sentence Level

What is most important for students to learn when trying to master sentence writing? Almost all the teachers I have asked, say grammar. While vocabulary is also important, most people in our profession see other vocabulary acquisition as part of the input skills, listening and reading, and not an output skill per se.

And yet, is teaching grammar really an effective way to increase sentence writing proficiency? The English Review Group at the University of York, UK, did research on this. Their research, however, was not their own experimental study. Instead, they examined an existing 4566 studies on teaching writing, and systematically reduced that number to 58 studies that were the most relevant and the most scientifically rigorous. Of these, ten were chosen for in-depth review. Their findings, published in June, 2004, can be summarized in one disturbing sentence:

"In terms of practice, the main implication of our findings is that there is no high quality evidence that the teaching of grammar, whether traditional or generative/transformational, is worth the time if the aim is the improvement of the quality and/or accuracy of written composition." (English Review Group, June, 2004)

Granted, they were looking at studies done primarily with native speakers under the age of 17, but the results of this review are still upsetting. If learning grammar is necessary to help students learn how to write sentences, and yet the good research shows grammar instruction is ineffective, we are caught in a bind. Are we doomed to teach our classes in an ineffective way? Fortunately, the same group that disappointed us with their first review came out with a second one six months later that provided an alternative. Using the same 4566 studies boiled down to a rigorous 18, they concluded:

"An overall synthesis of the results from the eighteen studies examined in the in-depth review comes to a clear conclusion: that sentence combining is an effective means of improving the syntactic maturity of students in English between the ages of 5 and 16." (English Review Group, December, 2004)

So, while direct grammar instruction may not work, sentence combining does. Here is a sample exercise to show how sentence combining works:

Instructions: Combine these three sentences into one and write it below:

I had a cat.    It was gray.    It was old.

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Sentence combining was an offspring of Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar theory in the sixties. Transformational Grammar looks at the deep and surface structure of sentences by deconstructing them into syntactic parts, making tree-like diagrams of the noun phrases, modifiers, etc. Sentence combining is based on the same approach, breaking a sentence into syntactic parts, but in the reverse order. Students are given the parts, called kernels, and told to put them together in a sentence. In doing so, they must generate the syntax.

Using the sample above, we can see a number of ways these kernels could be combined:

I had an *old, gray* cat.

I had a cat *that was* old and gray.

The cat, *old and gray*, was mine.

*Though old and gray*, the cat was mine.

Note how each rendition shows a different syntactic structure students might generate: simple ones, such as inserting modifiers or using relative clauses in the top two cases; or more complex ones, such as making appositive or adverbial clauses in the bottom two.

Three important features of this method that can be observed from the example: First, rather than filling in blanks or translating L1 into L2 where the learners are told what grammar form to use, in sentence combining, they must generate the syntax themselves. This is not only closer to what we do in real writing, it also causes a deeper level of processing and thus, learning. Second, sentence combining can be used to practice almost any grammar form, which means it is more versatile than most people realize. And third, there is usually more than one way the kernels can be combined.

This third point, that each sentence combining has multiple correct answers, may seem a troublesome quality at first glance. We tend to prefer language tasks that produce 'one right answer' since they are easier to teach. However, this flexibility is actually one of the most important features of sentence combining, especially if learners are given sets of sentences to combine that become a story or paragraph. Why? Because while teaching grammar is hard, it is not nearly as hard as teaching style – sentence simplicity, clarity, and transition – but sentence combining lets us do all of these. By telling the learners to come up with more than one answer for each set of kernels, we can then have them select the alternative that they think sounds the best. In this way we help them develop that all-important internal listening skill that moves them from just writing *correctly* to writing *well*.

Since listening-while-writing is a skill that even native speakers have trouble developing, it might seem absurd to presume beginning students can judge whether one sentence sounds better than another, but this is not the case. In my years of teaching sentence combining, I have found that even the most basic students, as long as they can read at the sentence level, have acquired this ability to some degree, an ability not as rudimentary as one might expect. I am not sure whether this aesthetic ear for writing is a skill that they have already developed in L1 that transfers to L2, as per the iceberg theory – different languages are only different on the surface, not at the basal level – or a skill developed independently in L2 as soon as they start listening and reading. It doesn't matter; it is a valuable skill that we should help them develop as soon as possible, although one usually neglected by writing teachers.

One thing about sentence combining, though, is a bit of a mystery: Why isn't it used more widely in ESL and EFL writing and grammar classes? Over 40 years of research has shown that it is effective for raising syntactic maturity; it is the closest simulation to what we do in real writing; and students generally like it, since it is like solving puzzles. And yet, it has never really caught on the way grammar boxes, fill-in-the-blank exercises, or dialogs have. Only a fraction of the writing books

(including my own) use sentence combining, but why are there so few? One of the reasons might be that we are under-informed on how effective sentence combining can be. After all, the research that uses "T-unit analysis" to measure "syntactic maturity" is not very transparent. Nor is the method, sentence combining, itself. It is not immediately clear how to use it in the classroom, a barrier made even higher by the first sentence combining books like William Strong's, which were rather dense. Or maybe people just shy away from sentence combining because of its connection to Chomsky's controversial and user-unfriendly Transformational Generative Grammar. Whatever the case, it is surprising that we, as writing teachers, never really caught on to how powerful this method can be for teaching sentence grammar.

### **3. Augmenting Sentence Writing with EWr**

While working on sentence level grammar, the learners will also need to do some writing of their own to consolidate their newly-gained grammar skills. Having students write short personal pieces, such as picture-based stories, email, descriptions of families, etc., is effective at this stage for a number of reasons: 1) the content is easy to generate, 2) the genre are familiar, 3) they tend to enjoy these kinds of writing exercises, and maybe most important, 4) they do not require additional linguistic knowledge to do this kind of writing. The types of writing I mentioned all use the easier descriptive and narrative modes of organization, rather than expository or argumentative modes.

Another effective technique that has risen and dropped in popularity over the years (but seems to be making a comeback now) is extensive writing, or "EWr" (Herder, 2009, p. 17). By having the learners write as much as possible, while paying little attention to form or accuracy is a proven way to build writing fluency. It works for many of the same reasons extensive reading builds reading fluency. EWr, like ER, leads learners to rely on better, more naturalistic, means of language processing.

Diaries and journals are a means to foster extensive writing. A diary requires a writer to just report personal experiences, rather than read about external events and report on them, so these are popular techniques for students at this level. Learners usually find writing the first few pages the hardest since they tend to translate from L1 and over-rely on dictionaries. However, by the 30<sup>th</sup> or so page, they seem to go through a transformation in which they start writing directly in the target language. This represents the change in language processing. Their writing becomes more fluent, more connected, and more interesting to the reader at this point.

Steve Herder in Japan (2009), has found that extensive writing raises writing fluency, but he has uncovered other benefits as well: EWr also inspires higher levels of motivation, self-confidence, and interest in English. Hopefully, work by researchers and proponents like Herder will give extensive writing the same level of prestige extensive reading has gained.

### **4. The Composition Level**

Once fluency is developed, we should move up the developmental scale and teach our students how to write compositions, the kind of writing they must do in school and at work (although not to the same degree of specificity as the writing discussed in the Academic/Professional Level section). This kind of writing requires students to use paragraphs and organize their compositions in expository or argumentative modes. Expository writing, in particular, explaining known information, is of importance, since this is the most common kind of writing in the professional world.

Writing paragraphs and using expository/argumentative styles of organization require special writing skills, which is evidenced by the fact that even native speakers must be taught how to do so. This leads us to two questions: Are these discourse styles common to all languages? And, if not, how can they be taught? The answers to both these questions came in two papers written by Robert Kaplan and Donald Murray, that drastically changed our view of writing instruction. Neither paper is recent, nor noted for its rigor, but both have had a major impact on EFL pedagogy.

The first was written by Robert Kaplan: “Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural Education” (1972). The sixties represents a time when large numbers of foreign students started coming to the US to study. Normal course teachers all over the country started to complain about the poor writing skills of these students, since their reports and essays were of such poor quality. Many universities set up special English programs for these students to improve their writing through intensive grammar and vocabulary study, but these efforts seemed to have little effect.

Then Kaplan noticed something interesting. He realized that what caused their writing to be poor was not a lack of grammar and vocabulary; there was something wrong about how they organized their writing. In addition, the patterns of error seemed to be related to where they came from. So he and his colleagues divided 598 student papers up into five groups, according to the general cultures the students came from, and analyzed their rhetorical styles. He found that each cultural group seemed to be using a different rhetorical style, which they had transferred in from L1. The diagrams below illustrate how these rhetorical styles looked from an English reader's perspective (Kaplan, 1972).

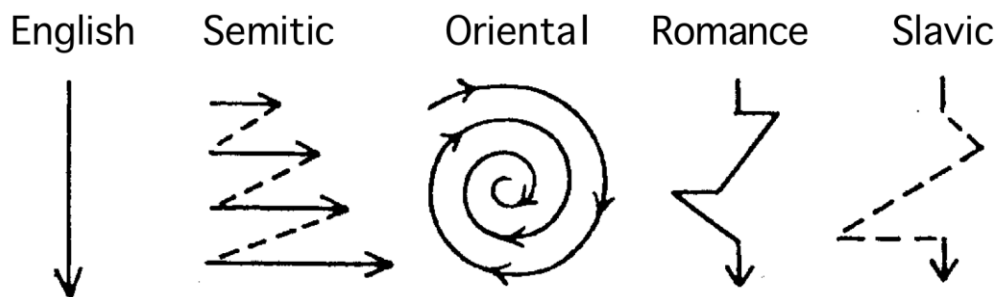


Figure 5. Kaplan’s drawing showing different expository styles.

"Oriental" students from East Asian countries, unlike native speakers of English, seemed to write around and around the main point of their essay, and not declare it until the end. This style is what we now call “delayed statement of purpose.”

Although some aspects of Kaplan’s article have been criticized, he indeed turned on a light for us, and the concepts he introduced led to a new field of research: contrastive rhetoric. Before Kaplan, teachers would beat their heads against the wall trying to get their students to write better by teaching more grammar and vocabulary. It was not until he pointed out that these students were transferring whole discourse structures from their own languages over to English that teachers could understand why their efforts had been so futile. And with that light, came the understanding that it is not grammar that writing teachers should be focusing on, but rather, organization.

So what are the main differences between the way discourse is organized in East Asian languages and in English? Well, first of all, research by people like John Hinds (1976) has found that Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Koreans, and Thais all share the same discourse styles in relation to expository writing. We have been able to identify three key differences:

<u>English</u>	<u>East Asian</u>
Topic based	Theme based
Assertive, direct	Suggestive, indirect
Top oriented	Bottom oriented

First, English is organized by having the content chunked into distinct topics. These topics, then, become paragraphs with one main topic each. East Asian languages, on the other hand, tend to use a theme-based approach in which anecdotes are used to develop certain points within the theme. Second, English tends to be assertive and direct, using a claim-support style of development, whereas East Asian languages favor a less direct, suggestive approach. Writers in these cultures try to gently draw their readers in before they declare their point of view. So, third, East Asian languages tend to be bottom oriented, not stating the main point until late in the article, usually about three quarters of the way through. Top-oriented English tends to state the main idea of the article early on, usually in the introduction.

So, the main teaching objective for students in the Composition Level is to teach them how to organize. This is best done by first, teaching them how to write paragraphs, since most of the rules of organization are the same at the paragraph level, and then, how to put paragraphs together in a composition. I have found that the following four techniques the most effective:

First, since English is topic oriented, have students write topic sentences for each paragraph. Although topic sentences only exist in one quarter of real world published paragraphs, they are still a powerful teaching tool. They force the students to focus on the topic.

Second, teaching transition words is effective, because these are the tools we use to sculpt a paragraph and show the hierarchical relationship between sentences. “In addition” shows information is being added to the previous sentence; “second” or “next” shows a new idea at the same level is being introduced; and “therefore” shows a conclusion is being made. To see the importance of these words at helping us discern order, remove the “First”, “Second,” “third,” “on the other hand,” and “whereas” from the paragraph above that starts with “First, English is organized by having the content chunked...”

Third, because English is top oriented, teach students how to write introductory paragraphs that: 1) catch the readers’ attention, 2) introduce the main topic, and 3) provide a guide to the rest of the discussion.

Fourth, and most important, in order to teach organization effectively, we have to be careful about when we teach it. This brings us to the second article: “Writing as a Process: How Writing Finds its Own Meaning” (Murray, 1980). Until Murray came along, compositions were assigned in one class, collected and corrected, and then in the next class, returned to the students. Murray criticized this product-oriented approach as being ineffective. The best time to learn about writing is *while* you are writing, so teachers should intervene in the process, not the product. He defined the process of writing as having three stages: the pre-writing stage, the writing stage, and the post-writing stage.

We now know that the pre-writing phase is where most of the organization occurs, not in the writing phase, and certainly not in the post-writing phase, so the pre-writing phase is the one we should be most concerned with. Rather than extensive revising, the best way to teach organization is to use prewriting activities that help students generate the content and figure out how to organize it.

Note that once expository writing is mastered, it is only a small step, although a paradoxically difficult one, to move on to teaching persuasive writing. The basic tools for organizing English are in place, it is merely a matter of learning how to set up an argument and deploy information in a convincing way. Persuasive writing, since it means learning special stylistic techniques limited to a specific genre, might actually fit better in the next level, the Academic/Professional Level.

## **5. The Academic/Professional Level**

Students, by this point, have mastered the basic requirements for writing the four basic modes of English: descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative. So in the Academic/Professional Writing Level, we must teach them the rules of genre required for writing in specialized formats to specific audiences. So, while we concentrate on teaching sentence syntax and organization in the previous two levels, in this one, we must focus on teaching genre-based stylistics.

There are many genre in this level, including journalistic writing, ad copy writing, research paper writing, scientific reporting, business letter writing, writing for the Web, essay and reaction paper writing, and so on. Each has its own specialized set of writing rules, system of organization, and often, specialized vocabulary. Rather than try to teach all the genre, a teacher might analyze the future writing needs of his or her learners and prepare a syllabus on that basis. Academic writing seems to be the most common. An academic writing syllabus might include: 1) how to format a research paper, 2) how to write an abstract, 3) when to use or not use first person, 4) how to cite a source, 5) how to lay out tables and charts, 6) how to write a procedures section, and so on.

In this stage, a greater emphasis might be put on the post-writing phase revision. Since most students at this level are already writing professional and academic papers for real world use, accuracy is more important than in the lower levels.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarize, we can best determine an appropriate approach for teaching writing by assessing our learners' level of development. As this chart shows, each of the levels has a different focus that calls for a different combination of methods.

level	focus	method
Word	single words	phonics, writing practice
Sentence	grammar	sentence combining; extensive writing
Composition	organization	paragraph writing; prewriting activities that teach how to organize
Academic/Professional	rules of genre	specialized syllabi to fit each genre; more emphasis on revision

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