

The Writing Skill in the Contemporary Society: The Kenyan Perspective

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Abstract

This paper is an overview of the writing skill in the lower levels of learning in the contemporary society. The following areas of writing are highlighted: the writing programme and its goals, the basic methodology for writing tasks, broad groups of writing skills, the teaching of the writing skills in pre-primary and primary schools where controlled and guided composition writing are seen as the main types of composition and lastly the punctuation, testing and marking of written tasks.

Keywords: writing skills, basic skills, writing programme

1.0 Introduction

When we write, unlike when we talk, we are engaged in an activity which is usually at the same time both private and public. It is private because the act of composition is by its nature solitary, but it is public in that most writing is intended for an audience, often one which is extremely difficult to define. The act of writing differs from that of talking in that it is less spontaneous and more permanent, and the resources which are available for communication are fewer because we cannot - as we do in conversation - interact with the listeners and adapt as we go along (Ahn, 2012). The conversations of writing tend to be less flexible than those of conversation, and the language which is used tends to be standardized.

A great deal of the writing that occurs in the foreign language classroom is not primarily concerned so much with developing writing skills as with reinforcing the teaching of particular structures. This very often consists of copying down sentences in order to establish patterns which have just been orally presented. For development of writing skills, there should be a writing programme.

1.1 Writing programme and its goals

Ideally, a programme to develop writing skills which works all the way through the educational system should be there. Such a programme would list the main type of writing which it felt learners should be able to master by the end of their education, and would offer guidelines to teachers on ways of achieving success with each of these. In Kenya, for example, such a programme is the English language syllabus.

Writing is - to the practice user - an extremely fluent and easy activity for atleast part of the time, but very often foreign learners can only be fluent at the expense of accuracy. At the same time, as the conventions of writing are more restricting than those of speech - we are less tolerant of deviation - the need for the writer to be accurate is very great (Yunus *et. al.*, 2013). Teachers of English need to appreciate the need for some kind of controlled or guided writing, atleast at the early stages, (Satariyan et al 2015). It seems convenient, then, to structure a writing course through three main stages namely: i) controlled writing, ii) guided writing, and iii) free writing.

1.2 Basic Methodology for writing skill tasks

Before the teacher starts the actual teaching of the writing skill, she/he should ask herself or himself questions like;

- Is the task appropriate for the needs of the learners?
- Is the task within the reach of the learners?
- Will the learners find the task enjoyable?

Hyland (2015), observes that there are numbers of ways in which the teacher can bring the task to the level of her/ his class. The teacher can grade the task in the following ways:

- limit the length of the written material to be produced.
- increase the amount of class preparation for the task
- provide guidance on the final form of the written work
- encourage learners to collaborate in the actual process of writing
- allow cross-checking between the draft stage and the writing of the final product.
- limit the complexity of the writing task itself
- demand that the task be completed either slowly or quickly.

Any combination of the above methods can be used to bring the task to the level of the class. These strategies as (Yunus *et. al.*, 2013) says, provide the teacher ways of organizing her/his work in the class.

1.3 Broad groups of writing skills

According to Langan (2013), writing skills can be categorized into two broad groups:

- a) basic skills
- b) advanced skills

Good handwriting, proper spelling and right punctuation constitute the primary skills that are needed to write well. There are more advanced skill that relate to visual presentation, grammar, style, and organization. Whiteman, (2013) observes that in the development of writing skills, learners' interest is central. It has been realized that learners lack confidence and motivation, especially where the type of content chosen does not motivate nor give opportunities for some elements of personal communication. Unless they are properly motivated they might not see the need to write. For example, if they feel that the person they write to might have interest in what they write, then they will be motivated to write. Learners also feel motivated when the communication is purposeful as when the writing is for informing, inviting, applying for a vocation, or giving a report.

A teacher of English language ought to be aware of the stimuli to be used to arouse learners' interest which include:

- *Visual stimuli:* this involves the use of pictures, maps, charts and diagrams from various sources.
- *Oral stimuli:* use of anecdotes, discussions, debates, speeches, stories, songs, poems.
- *Reading:* use of interesting and well selected types of writing which may be used in class.
- *Different forms and viewpoints:* looking at events from a different angle. For example, asking students to write about an event in or near their school. The teacher asks different groups to write about the same event in different forms such as:
 - i) a letter home
 - ii) a report to the police
 - iii) a dialogue between a journalist and an eye witness.
- *Selection of audience:* when learners are given a chance to select their audience, it acts as a good stimulus for the students to write well.
- *To maintain the motivation:* the best learners written work could be displayed on the wall, presented to the rest of the class, included in a school magazine, or displayed on the school notice board.

1.4 Teaching writing skills at pre-primary and primary schools

Effective writing is a vital life -skill that is important in almost every subject in school as well as in the work world (Koross *et. al.*, 2015). Many parents think that learning to write is primarily a question of grammar. While grammar is an important part of writing, effecting writing requires much more. Mureithi, (2015) argues that when a writing process is used to teach writing, students begin to understand writing as a form of communication. Furthermore, writing helps students recognize that they have opinions, ideas, and thoughts that are worth sharing with the world, and writing is an effecting way of getting them out there! Young students sometimes find it difficult to make the transition from speaking to writing. Speaking is so immediate, so detailed, so easy. Graham and MacArthur (2013), observes that when writing becomes a part of a child's world, there are conventions that suddenly come into play; proper way of holding a pencil, punctuation, spelling and grammar. It can be a struggle to explain things without hand gestures or intonation. They must find a way for their voice to come across on a piece of paper or a computer screen. The easiest part of teaching writing to young children is by continually reading to them. Have discussions about what you are reading together. Let them try to figure out what it is the author does to make his or her story compelling, (Cannella-Malone *et al.*, 2015).

1.4.1 Teaching strategies

Teaching writing is done actively and explicitly in a developmental sequence. We can use multi-sensory teaching to incorporate all the senses in a fun and engaging way, ensuring that all children learn regardless of learning style or background (Smith, 2015). The following are some of the strategies that can be used to teach writing skills at lower levels of learning:

Developmental sequence: We teach the easiest skills first, and then build on prior knowledge. Our teaching sequence takes advantage of child development and brain research to promote effective learning and good habits. Children learn in stages; **imitation** (The child watches as the teacher writes and then imitates the teacher), **copying** (The child looks at the completed model of a letter, word, or sentence and copies it to match the model) and **Independent writing** (The child writes unassisted, without a demonstration or a model).

Developmental order: Teaching letters in a developmental order helps children master and boost confidence. We teach capitals first, and then lowercase letters. All letters are better taught in small groups of similar formation. Children master the easier letter groups, and then move to more difficult letter groups.

Multi-sensory teaching: Njiru *et. al.*, (2014), suggest that children should be helped to develop their writing skills through explicit, multi-sensory, play based instruction. Children move, touch, feel and manipulate real

objects as they learn the habits and skills essential for writing. We use music to speak to children and promote movement and memory. Other multi-sensory lessons use voices, letter stories, door tracing, air writing and mystery letter games to teach letter formation and placement on lines. In other levels like primary class four and above, teachers of the writing skill should maintain careful and continuous preparation at every stage, so that the pupils know what they are going to write before they put pen to paper.

1.4.2 Controlled composition

Controlled composition is simply the writing of a continuous passage which is very closely controlled by the teacher. The teacher should remember that, there needs to be a great deal of oral preparation before the children come to write anything. Obondo (2007), suggest examples of controlled composition that include: completing a sentence using a picture, filling in blanks, using substitution tables, conversion exercises, rewriting paragraph, retelling stories among others.

1.4.3 Free Composition

One of the difficulties faced by the English teacher in the primary school as regards writing is that on the whole the child finds it difficult to see what the writing is for. It is very easy for the child to think that the only objective of writing something for the teacher to read it and mark it. Children sometimes fail to see that there can be other uses apart from writing something for the teacher to read. The children need to realize that the whole point of writing something is because you want to tell someone something. It may be a letter. It may be directions to someone. It may be an article for a magazine. Controlled composition is, inevitable, very artificial. Therefore it seems to me that one of the main objectives of free writing, apart from letting the pupil have the opportunity to express himself, is to show him that there is a purpose in writing.

1.4.4 Letter writing

By the time a child leaves primary school, he should be able, at the very least, to write letters in the correct form. In particular, he should be able to write letters of application for jobs, or entry into places of further education.

The teacher should concentrate his attention particularly on the form of the letter, as the content of the letter, apart from the necessity for correct English, is not very important, unless it is a business letter of some kind. The two main kinds of letters that should be taught, as far as form is concerned, are the normal letter to a friend, and the more formal, business-type letter.

2.0 Punctuation, Marking and Testing

2.1 Teaching punctuation

The punctuation that needs to be taught in the primary school is very basic and simple, and for the most part the teaching should come incidentally. Richards & Rodgers (2014), identify three basic ideas that must be taught.

- 1 There must be a full stop at the end of each sentence.
- 2 There must be a question mark after a question.
- 3 A comma should be placed where you pause for a moment when you are saying a sentence. This is a rough and ready rule, and it will help, if the teacher bears in mind that it will not always work.

A useful method is to dictate short sentences, and the children then put in the full stops and question marks. The best thing, of course, is to be really careful to mark the punctuation of everything that is written, and to get the pupils to be careful also, whether it is in English or any other subject (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

2.2 Marking

We must first of all discuss briefly the purpose of the teacher marking a piece of written work. We may look at it from two angles the child's and the teacher's. The child needs help and encouragement in his work, so that he may progress in learning the language. But that does not mean that the teacher should not be fair and honest. There are two kinds of bad markers. The first kind writes good and excellent over everything, when it is not, and the second marks too severely and strictly, and completely discourages the pupil (Gathumbi & Masembe, 2005). We must be fair and objective in our marking. Give praise and encouragement wherever possible, but do not hesitate to show where something is wrong, and, if you are sure of your ground, do not hesitate to tell a pupil if he is lazy or careless. (The teacher should not forget, however, that very often a child's background and home conditions will affect his work a great deal.

What the teacher expects from the marks

First, the actual marking should help him to diagnose faults, either of the individual child, or of the class generally. There is normally no need to make a complete analysis of the work done. A general impression is usually all the teacher needs. An analysis is, however, very helpful from time to time once a term, perhaps. To do this the teacher needs to make a list, as he goes along, of all the mistakes that are made, and then put a tick against one each time the mistake is made in the class. This will give him a very accurate picture of the kinds of mistakes the class is making.

Dhillon & Wanjiru, (2013), argue that the teacher should look at his job of marking as an opportunity to help the child, and not as an opportunity to sit in judgement on him. Also, looking at a child's book enables one to

see something of his progress. The teacher should not forget that his actual marks are not as important as the degree of attainment which they may signify.

The teacher should use some kind of a system for marking. Many teachers have found this useful, and the new teacher will no doubt develop his own. It simply means that when he is marking, he underlines the mistakes neatly, and puts a sign at the side which the child will understand. If that does not help the child to find out his mistake, he can then come and see the teacher. Here are a few ideas about the kind of signs a teacher can use in the margin of a pupil's work, according to (Gathumbi & Masembe, 2005).

Sp = Spelling	P = Punctuation
T = Tense	W = Wrong word
? = Meaning unclear	= Start new paragraph
k - Word missing	/ = Leave out this word

2.3 Testing

In teaching writing skills most written work must be thought of as practice, and not as testing. Nevertheless there is a time when the children must be tested.

Aim of testing

The aim of testing seems to me to be threefold:

1. The teacher wants to find out what the child has learnt. In terms of language learning, this will normally mean finding out what structural items and vocabulary a child can not only understand but also use.
2. The opposite of this is equally necessary. The teacher should find out what the pupils have failed to learn. By finding this out, and keeping a careful note, the keen teacher will be able to correct himself in his techniques, and do better next time.
3. The teacher will also need to know what progress has been made by his class since the last test, whether it is a month, a term or a year ago.

What kind of test?

For most cases, probably the best form of test in the primary school is the objective test the multiple choice 'filling in the blanks' language exercise. There are several advantages of this type of test:

Giving the test

As it is a test, there should, of course, be no preparation. It should be conducted in silence, and children should not work together. The papers should be marked, and as detailed results as possible kept by the teacher to refer to, in order to help the class with some items they might have done badly on (Nel *et. al.*, 2016). In a skill subject like English, however, the teacher must avoid giving the children the impression that now they have been tested, they can forget everything they have been tested in. For what they are going to learn next will undoubtedly be based on what has gone before. For that reason it is good for the next area of work to grow out of the result of the test. In this way the test leads into the next topic.

3.0 Conclusion

The acquisition of writing skill among young learners in school should be seen and practised as a process. Learners are taught to write on the ground, in the air, using their fingers and later are taught how to hold a pencil and make marks on a piece of paper. As learners mature, they are taught various types and purposes of writing. The sub-skills like punctuation, lettering and handwriting among others, facilitate a clear, neat and understandable written message. The teaching of handwriting sub-skills faces a threat in the contemporary society since many learners have started using computer to type their work.

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