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Accelerate Beginner English Learner's Writing Skills From Day One

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Teachers face the challenge of teaching Beginner English Learners (BELs) who know little to no English literacy skills for academic success. However, too often teachers wait to provide engaging writing instruction for BELs that goes beyond simply copying words. Why wait? Cognitively most BELs in grades 3-12 and adults are able to express their thoughts verbally and non-verbally like their English-speaking peers, yet literacy lessons frequently seem disconnected from BELs' cognitive abilities. Logically, having learners just copy without comprehension does little to increase their new or additional language acquisition.

Because beginners are not encouraged to put their own funds of knowledge on paper, English Learners (ELs) in general lag behind near-peer writers even at more advanced levels of proficiency. Many English Language Development (ELD) book series include writing lessons that are above the level for beginners who may only recognize the English letters of their name at the beginning of their language learning journey. How are BELs expected to “run before they walk” when it comes to writing their thoughts in English? This author suggests putting the book series and meaningless handouts away for 10-15 minutes a day to allow BELs to express their thoughts visibly on paper or digitally. From this starting point, teachers accelerate BELs' literacy development and English language acquisition.

Writing, when seen as a set of shared symbols representing one's ideas in visual form, is both complex and essential in this age of information and technology. Most educators agree that writing is the most difficult skill and often called the last acquired skill for all students. Why then do teachers of new-to-English learners wait a year or more before teaching writing beyond copying? What are the barriers that cause teachers of BELs to delay specific English writing instruction? Some teachers reason that writing represents oral language; therefore, until they develop a broader vocabulary, BELs cannot produce English writing on their own. Other teachers claim the materials to teach basic writing skills like the alphabet and sight words are too childish for BELs in grades 3-12 and adults. Still other teachers of BELs say they do not know how to teach writing to those who speak so little English and/or know a different written script. These barriers center on ability, not equity. It can be argued that by not teaching BELs the foundational skills of writing earlier perpetuates a delay in their English language proficiency.

This article proposes a solution to this issue of inequity by introducing a new systematic approach to teaching BELs the literacy subskills of phonics, spelling, and writing from day one. Teachers are encouraged to allow visual communication to become the basis for BELs to build vocabulary and foundational writing skills one sound, one letter, one word, and one phrase at a time from the very first lesson. As teachers of BELs systematically approach teaching literacy skills using the All Beginner Learners of English (ABLE) Writing Method, they build confidence in their own instructional know-how while progressing through the method's four phases in a cycle. The techniques incorporated in each phase give teachers a sense of structure that leads to effective writing instruction.

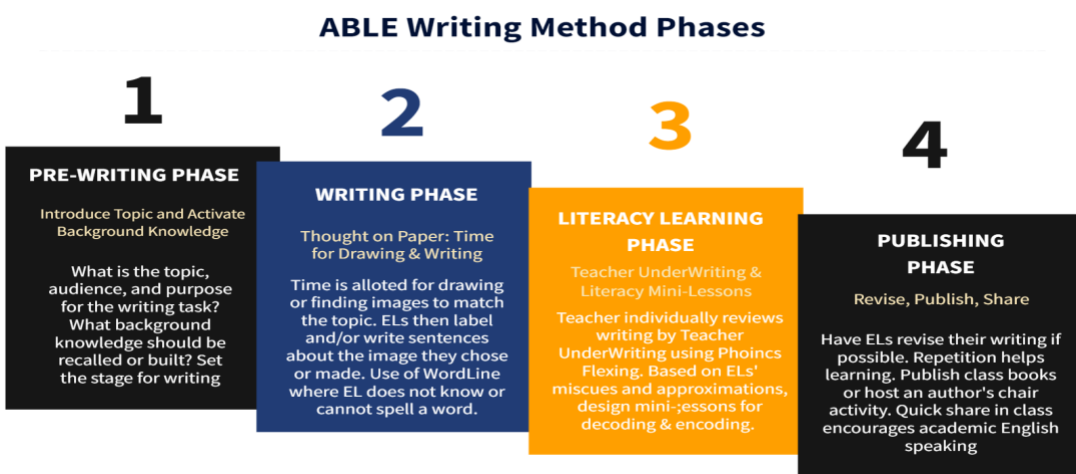
To overcome the perceived barriers, teachers seek a theoretically based method for teaching basic writing skills with appropriately leveled materials that encourage writing at the letter or word level. In other words, teachers simply want to know how to effectively teach BELs of any age writing skills using age-appropriate materials. To start, teachers must remember that

BELs are fluent in their first language, and “if they can think, they can write” as newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst once told a reporter.

The All Beginner Learners of English (ABLE) Writing Method is founded on the related premise that the majority of BELs are *able* to write. This method for teaching BELs writing skills encompasses decoding, spelling, and writing instruction on individual, small group, and whole class levels. Teachers follow four phases of the method (Figure 1) meant to lead teachers and BELs through planning, writing, targeted literacy learning, and revising to publish stages in order to development essential literacy skills in the English.

Figure 1

Phases of ABLE Writing Method



Some teachers do not fully engage BELs during writer's workshop time in which the writing process is used because they feel the BELs cannot produce written English as entering or emerging learners. BELs are otherwise given graphic organizers or coloring pages instead of what non-ELs or more proficient ELs are tasked to do. The ABLE Writing Method attempts to offer teachers ideas on how to incorporate assets-based techniques during their writing instruction of BELs at any age to impact the rate of literacy acquisition compared to BELs sitting in writer's workshops without these effective strategies.

ABLE Writing Method synthesizes four principles (Figure 2) into one methodology focused on assets, equity, and learning literacy. These principles are (a) employing the Language Experience Approach (LEA), (b) creating translanguaging opportunities, (c) embracing Scarborough's Reading Rope, and (d) incorporating Sedita's Writing Rope into the complete writing cycle (Sedita & Hasbrouck, 2022). Each of these principles weave into the four phases of ABLE Writing Method instruction in short mini lessons within daily literacy lessons.

Figure 2*Interwoven Principles of the ABLE Writing Method*

The Language Experience Approach and creating opportunities for translanguaging pull from the assets BELs bring to the learning journey. “In all forms of LEA, the central principle is to use the student’s own vocabulary, language patterns, and background of experiences to create reading texts, making reading [and writing] an especially meaningful and enjoyable process” (Nessel & Dixon, 2008, p. 1). LEA-type tasks include recounting field trips, recalling a memory, or telling stories for wordless picture books that elicit BEL’s own thoughts into letters, words, or phrases. BELs can write words in their native language if they are unfamiliar with or are not ready to try writing English words. A learner may write, “*mi hermana* sits in a *silla*” alongside a picture of a girl in a chair. This BEL is using all her linguistic assets to communicate her thoughts. During individual and/or small group instruction, the teacher will write under the child’s sentence, “My sister sits in a chair”. The BEL will now make the connection between her written thoughts and the way these are written in English. This process moves BELs one step closer to more fluent English writing. The aim of the ABLE Writing Method is to develop English readers, writers, and spellers.

Coupled with those key assets-based principles, ABLE Writing Method aims to develop all aspects of Scarborough’s Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001): decoding and language comprehension. As those subskills come together, BELs will move along the continuum from dependent to independent, confident English readers and writers. Sedita’s Writing Rope (2022) shows the complexities involved in writing in one’s first language. Multilingual writers must also grapple with all these aspects of recording their thoughts in another language’s pattern and norms. With the interplay of these four underpinning principles, the ABLE Writing Method is designed to give teachers a sound educational approach to accelerate BELs’ skills by starting literacy instruction from the very beginning of their language learning journey.

An ABLE Writing Method cycle follows the pattern of pre-writing, writing, literacy learning, and finally revising to publish phases. The Pre-Writing Phase opens the instructional

cycle with any number of strategies to introduce the writing topic or theme, activate and/or build background knowledge, and set the stage for writing. This first stage also establishes the audience and purpose of the writing task by modeling a teacher or previous student-made final version. The concept of a Word Line, drawing a blank line as a word placeholder, is introduced so that BELs can keep writing even if they do not know a word or how to spell it. These words will be reviewed in a later phase.

The second phase, Writing, centers on getting thoughts on paper through drawing or finding images to label that represent the BEL's thoughts. When they are ready, they will write according to the task modeled and described in phase one. Time to complete the writing task will vary among BELs, so teachers should have extra activities for those who finish early. At this stage the use of a Word Line is encouraged as well as simply writing whatever English letter they can of a word. This is also the opportunity for translanguaging or writing words in whatever language they know to express their thoughts. Translating into English will become part of the phase three process if BELs write non-English words.

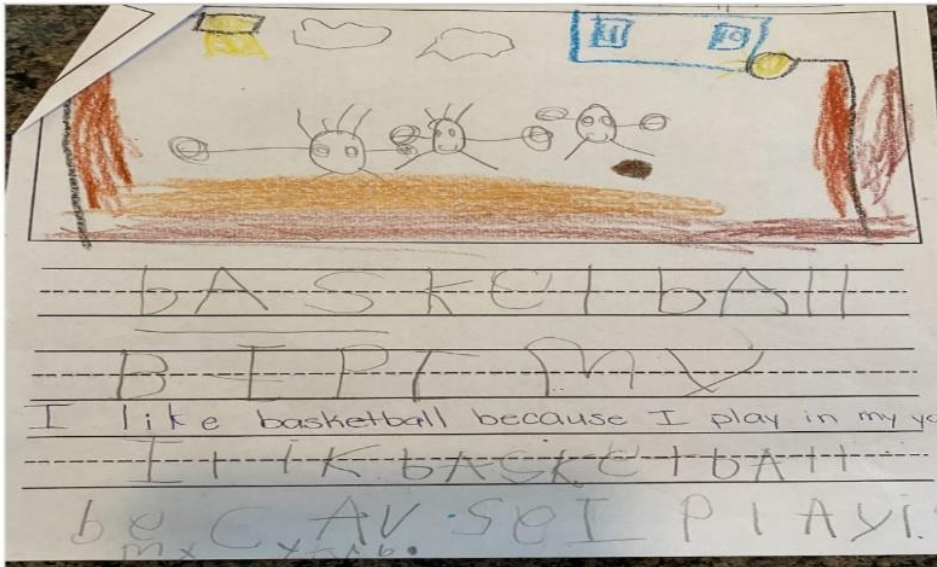
Now that planning and writing are completed, the Literacy Learning phase begins. The teacher individually reviews BELs' writing by using Teacher Underwriting with Phonics Flexing. As teachers read back a BEL's writing and asks clarification questions of the learner author, teachers write the words in correct English below the text tapping any letter correctly written by the learner and pronounce all the English words in parts then whole. During the Teacher Underwriting process, the Phonics Flexing technique highlights sound-letter correlation for BELs which in turn enhances decoding and encoding skill development.

The idea of Teacher Underwriting is not to cross out their original writing, but to model proper English writing of the words they used to express their own thoughts. Figure 3 below shows Teacher Underwriting. Phonics Flexing is done when teachers orally emphasize each phoneme in a word. For example, if you are Phonics Flexing the word "table," start with the sound /t/ and say the complete word "table." Continue to say each single phoneme while pointing to or writing the letter(s) and say the complete word. In this third phase, teachers also track BELs' errors looking for class wide trends to plan and deliver targeted mini lessons.

Figure 3

BEL's Writing Sample with Teacher Underwriting Modeled

Writing #2 – What sport do you like and why do you like it?



The Revising to Publish Phase completes the ABLE Writing Method cycle by having BELs rewrite then publishing their finalized writing pieces. First, allow time for BELs to revise and/or rewrite after Teacher UnderWriting. Although rewriting is simply copying corrections, this action has a benefit for beginner ELs. By rewriting the corrected Teacher Underwriting version of their own thoughts, BELs learn the spelling and basic grammatical patterns by committing these thoughts to paper or typing the words themselves.

Teacher Underwriting adds some omitted words or corrected letter/word order of the BELs' written text, but internalizing phonics and spelling does not lead to comprehension. ABLE Writing Method's technique of *copying with comprehension* combines spelling words BELs know from their own thoughts. Modeling correct patterns, also known as "recasting", is the one of the most effective research-based strategies for error correction at beginning stages of language acquisition (Dilans, 2010). For some brains, rewriting is effective for organizing thoughts and seeing patterns; however, not all minds work that way. Another research-based error correction strategy for higher beginners is giving simplified self-revision checklists (Lyster, 2004).

Publishing BELs' writing into class books or digital version on BookCreator.com or another sharing platform benefits all beginner language learners. Their short lists, poems, labeled pictures, and short stories are now materials teachers can use for mini-lessons. In addition, texts written by classmates become BELs' "leveled-reading materials." Remember that the brain loves repetition (Sousa, 2010) and BELs of all ages will be thrilled to be able to read back his or her own writing which can serve as their first independent reading text,

Teachers may choose to assess BELs' phonics, decoding, spelling, and writing skills during or after an ABLE Writing Method cycle. Teachers should track which phonemes do or do

not appear in a BEL's writing at the end of each unit to plan ways to increase letter recognition. Recording which phonemes are properly decoded when reading aloud revisions or during mini-lessons adds to a BELs' learning scenario. Spelling is easily tracked from their writing pieces and addressed in mini lessons. Lastly, teachers should track sentence-level syntax and grammar to a rubric for academic English writing appropriate for BELs' cognitive age. There are public-domain assessment tools or school-required measures for keeping track of BELs' progress. Keep in mind that unless designed for second language acquisition, literacy assessments are normed to English speakers and may show BELs' progressing more slowly; therefore, using an EL-based assessment is preferable.

Using tools, rubrics, and/or checklists to record BELs' incremental growth can be valuable for showing BELs, their families, and fellow teachers the positive gains they make over time. ABLE Writing Method cycles are meant to be *part* of literacy instruction, therefore, plan for daily 10 to 15-minute sessions. Some sessions like drawing and writing may go a bit longer if BELs' sustained attention and effortful thinking are happening!

This newly designed systematic approach to teaching BELs literacy skills through focused beginner-level writing techniques and productive practice requires more study to gauge its effectiveness, however, BELs' academic success cannot wait a year or two. The ABLE Writing Method offers solutions to the barriers of teaching BELs productive writing, phonics, and spelling by giving teachers planned steps, appropriate materials, and techniques to accelerate new-to-English learners' proficiency level.

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