

Teaching Writing to Potentially English Proficient Students Using Whole Language Approaches

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Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to introduce teachers to current, innovative methods and strategies for teaching writing to potentially English proficient (PEP) students who may or may not be literate in their native language*. These methods and strategies stem, for the most part, from a holistic view that treats language as an integrated whole rather than a conglomerate of separate and independent skills ([Goodman, 1986](#)). These methods and strategies are also based on an approach to language learning and teaching which suggests that the most efficient way to become proficient in a second language is to learn it in a natural context and for a real purpose. This guide is the result of work that has been done at the Illinois Resource Center with teachers of PEP students throughout the state of Illinois, as well as through programs funded by the U.S. Department of State for Southeast Asian refugee students (Preparing Refugees for Elementary Programs (PREP) and Preparation for American Secondary Schools (PASS) programs).

The first section of this guide outlines the assumptions underlying the current and innovative approaches to teaching writing, and the second section describes holistic natural approaches. Finally, some considerations for implementing these approaches are discussed.

Assumptions Underlying Holistic Natural Approaches

The holistic natural approaches described in this guide are based on the premise that youngsters acquire language (speaking, reading, and writing) as naturally as they learn to walk and talk, when they are invited to engage in self-motivating activities that are stimulating, interesting, social, meaning-based, purposeful, interactive, and most of all, enjoyable" ([Heald-Taylor, 1989](#)). This premise has significant implications for the teaching of writing:

Writing for meaning rather than form. Writing activities must focus on the communication and expression of meaning rather than on the form of language. Linguists and calligraphers may be interested in the form of writing, but most students (in fact, most people) are interested in writing as a means rather than as an end in itself. You may want to routinely evaluate the extent to which writing activities in the classroom focus on form or content.

Writing as part of whole language. Writing activities must be part of the entire language experience in which the students are engaged. It is more meaningful, and therefore easier, for students to write about things that they have just listened to, spoken or read about, or experienced. For example, completing sentences after looking at pictures separates the act of writing from other language dimensions, whereas writing a story about a trip to the zoo that the students took and then discussed features writing as one dimension integrated among many others.

Writing as part of content area acquisition. The integration of writing, not only with other dimensions of language but with content area instruction, is another feature of holistic natural approaches. In addition to writing about personal experiences, students can write about content area topics. For example, they can keep a journal about an ongoing science experiment, or write a paragraph about a historical character they read about. By using academic content areas as a basis for writing activities, higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing, synthesizing, and predicting can be developed. Students can be provided with the appropriate language to facilitate class work in those content areas ([Crandall, et al, 1987](#)). For those students who are preliterate, oral language must accompany as much of the writing activity as possible.

Writing as a self-generated and self-actualizing activity. Writing can be a joyful, lively, and satisfying activity if it uses a person's creative power ([Ueland, 1987](#)). When given the chance to do so, PEP students begin to write more; and the more they write, the more likely they are to improve.

Holistic natural approaches to teaching writing to PEP students do not focus primarily on issues such as spelling and phonics. This does not mean that more traditional, grammar-based approaches cannot also be used effectively in the classroom. However, teachers who use more traditional approaches exclusively may wish to consider integrating whole language approaches and activities in their classes.

Using Holistic Natural Approaches to Teach Writing

This section provides examples of methods for using holistic natural approaches to teach writing. These methods include routine activities for writing purposes, the Language Experience Approach to writing, storybooks as a source for writing activities, journal writing, and creative writing.

Routine Writing: Taking Advantage of Everyday Opportunities

Every day, the class provides opportunities for students to write. In the beginning of the year, have students make their own name tags, and every time visitors come into the classroom, have the students find out their names and make their name tags, too. This is a real-life situation in which writing is used for a functional purpose. Also, for beginning-level students who need to be surrounded by literacy, have students make word labels for all the objects and furniture in the class and display them in the appropriate places. It is highly motivating for students to see their own labels on the walls, windows, and furniture in the classroom. One advantage of having students help in making visuals for the classroom is that you don't have to spend your spare time producing them. Students who have minimal or no proficiency in writing may have to copy the labels and the names of the visitors, or get assistance from you or their peers.

Another daily routine which helps orient the classroom environment toward literacy is to cover the tables with butcher paper. The tables then become large notebooks where drafts can be written. As soon as a table cover is filled, replace it with a clean sheet of paper. For young children and students who are unfamiliar with the social norms of writing, you may need to do a lesson entitled "Where Can I Write?" to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable surfaces for writing.

Another activity is to introduce key vocabulary for the daily lesson with a Total Physical Response (TPR) activity. A TPR lesson consists of a series of instructions given by the teacher followed by a series of actions performed by the students ([Asher, 1983](#)). For example, write the words on the board. As this is done, the students at each table make their own word cards. The cards are used immediately in this TPR activity, and later, they can be placed on the bulletin board in the "Words We Learned Today" section.

Writing that Emerges from Group Activities: Language Experience Stories

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is an excellent way to develop oral and reading proficiency ([Nessel & Jones, 1981](#)). With LEA, students participate in an activity such as making a small-scale bridge or

making ice cream, then talk about the activity, and finally develop a written account of the experience (see [Hamayan & Pflieger, 1987](#)). When enough oral language has been generated, a written account of the activity is composed. The actual writing can be done as a whole group, in small groups, pairs, or even individually. A small-group format encourages cooperation among students and a discovery approach to learning. Students can solve problems by themselves and experience their environment directly, under your guidance, rather than being taught about them indirectly. For beginning-level students, it is best to lead the whole group in the composition, acting as a scribe. Also, remember that for beginning-level students, generating even the simplest language can be a great challenge, and you can encourage them with nonverbal cues.

Writing an LEA Story

The following steps outline how to plan and coordinate an LEA story:

1. Choose a concept or topic. The topic of an LEA story can be related to specific content areas, such as science, social studies, or health, or it can be unrelated to an academic content area. The choice of topics is determined by the objectives in the lesson.
2. Identify an activity. The activity you choose must give students experiences that are sufficiently interesting and meaningful to engage their attention and generate discussion. Avoid activities that are too complicated or culturally inappropriate. Activities should also be geared to the age of the students.
3. Plan the activity. List all the materials needed for the activity, as well as the concepts and vocabulary to be emphasized. Also, consider who the participants in the activity will be. Although all students should be actively involved, some activities require a few students to participate while the others observe. To encourage as much participation as possible, plan roles for students as individuals or pairs. With activities that involve multiple steps, plan how long each step should take and prepare the appropriate transitions.
4. Conduct the activity. Begin the activity by introducing its components. This provides a good opportunity to introduce the core vocabulary for the activity. Oral language should accompany the activity as much as possible. For beginning-level students, be prepared to initiate more of the talk and keep it focused on the "here and now." When students acquire more oral language skills, shift from the role of generator of language to mediator of language production for the students.
5. Supervise clean-up. Clean-up activities provide valuable opportunities for continued language enrichment and responsibility building. The strategies for conducting the activities should also be applied to the clean-up process.
6. Debrief the students on the activity. Debriefing serves both to summarize the activity and to prepare for the story composition. Ask students to recount the steps of the activity and reemphasize the core vocabulary. Ten minutes of debriefing should be sufficient to prepare for the story composition.
7. Compose the story. Gather ideas from individual students and write them on the board or on a flip-chart. The writing should be clear and visible to all students in the classroom. Two types of written accounts of LEA may be produced. The first type is simply a summary of the events that took place during the activity. An example of this is the following excerpt from a "story" written by a seventh grade English as a Second Language (ESL) class in which the students and the teacher made ice cream:

Making Ice Cream

Crack the eggs and put into a bowl and Sam helped Marco with the eggs. Then take the cup of sugar and put whipping cream into the bowl. Shake the whipping cream. Then take measuring spoon and put vanilla and milk into a bowl. Put everything into the can into the freezer. Then we put the ice around the can and flatten the ice.

The second type of LEA story is more of a conventional story and goes beyond a simple summary of events that took place. For example, the following story was created by a group of third-graders after observing a hen with its chicks and feeding them bits of grain:

The Hen and the Chicks

One day the hen and her three chicks were in the mountain. The hen and the three chicks were very hungry. They go around, walk and walk, but have no food. The mother hen was very sad. She was scared that her three chicks would die. The hen has food! She gave it to the chicks. The chicks ate many grasses and flowers. They were very happy.

This LEA story was developed after the students in a third-grade class returned from a field trip to a neighboring farm, where they observed a mother hen with her chicks and fed the animals. Before they left on the field trip, the teacher wrote some key words on a piece of chart paper and introduced the words through a TPR activity. The class took the chart paper with them to the farm, and the teacher referred to the words as they were discussing their experiences. Some words were added that were not thought of earlier but which came up in the conversation. When the students returned to their classroom, the teacher put the sheet of paper with all the words on the wall, so that the children could refer to them. As the students settled down, the teacher put some chart paper on the board to prepare for writing the story. "What shall we call our story? What's the title of our story?" she prompted them, pointing to words on the chart. The students, finally, decided on *The Hen and the Chicks*. "Where should I write the title?" was the next question. The children, although quite limited in English, knew what a title is and where it should appear on the page because they had been exposed to many storybooks. They directed the teacher to write the title in the center, at the top of the page. "What is our story going to be about?" was the third question. After some discussion, directed by the teacher, the children agreed on the story line: the hen and the chicks are hungry, but they cannot find any food. The mother hen is afraid that the chicks will die, but they find some food and they are happy. "How shall we start our story?" is the next question. One student offers, "One day the hen and three chick in the mountain." "Good! One day the hen and her three chicks were in the mountain." The teacher sounded out every word as she wrote it. "Next?" "The hen very hungry," said another pupil. "Very good! The hen -- shall we say and the three chicks? -- and the three chicks were very hungry," the teacher sounded out each word.

This exchange continued until the whole story was written. The teacher then invited the children to read the story with her. Some children read with gusto, others simply sounded out those words they knew well, and others simply moved their lips silently. It may not have been an exciting story, but all eyes were riveted on it! Then, the teacher invited students to read the story to the class, and three students came to the front of the class and read the story. The following day, the students reread the story and completed follow-up activities. Almost everything the students produced was placed on the wall.

In the first sample, *Making Ice Cream*, the teacher wrote exactly what the students said, exactly the way they said it, thus the writing contains errors. On the other hand, the teacher may correct what students say to make it conform to acceptable English rules. The advantage of the first approach is that students feel free to contribute to the composition since they know that anything they say will be acceptable. The advantage of the second approach is that students will not see poorly written English. A compromise between these two approaches, as in the story, *The Hen and the Chicks*, is most effective because the students' suggestions are minimally changed to approximate correct English. The writing is still far from "good," but not too many language rules are violated.

Follow-up Activities

Once the story has been written and read, it is time for follow-up activities to reinforce parts of the lesson, vocabulary, or even specific skills used in reading and writing. Follow-up activities may be designed for whole groups, small groups, or individuals; they could be completed in class or given as homework. The following are examples of activities which could be modified to suit any proficiency level:

Alphabetization: Make a list of 10 to 20 words taken from the composition and have students alphabetize them.

Definitions of words: Put a list of words on one side of the page and definitions of those words, randomly ordered, on the other side. Have students match the words with their definitions.

Cloze: Make a cloze passage out of the composition and have students fill in the blanks. The blanks do not always have to be completed with the exact word; it may be more fun to try a new twist to the story.

Story extension: Have students write a new ending or a sequel to the story.

Writing that Emerges from Reading: Extensions of Storybooks

Storybooks are an excellent source of writing activities. In this type of activity, a strong link is made between reading and writing, with both skills reinforcing each other. The following is just a sample of writing activities that can be done in conjunction with storybook reading.

Cloze passages: Make cloze passages out of sections of the book and have students fill them in. The proficiency level of the students should determine the complexity of the task. Thus, for beginning-level students who are not literate in their native language, you may need to place the storybook in front of the students, so that they may copy the right words into the blank spaces. At this level, the task reinforces reading more than writing. Another option is to give the students a list of possible words to help them find the correct answers. Since in a cloze task, there is a "correct" answer, you must consider the issue of misspelled, incorrect, or inappropriate words. Keep in mind that students readily correct each other. Also, if students know something is wrong with an answer without knowing exactly what it is, they often can correct the problem themselves. As for using inexact but appropriate words (for example, replacing bird with animal), if it makes sense with the rest of the story, leave it. The only error that must be corrected is an inappropriate word that does not make sense.

To make the cloze task more fun and interesting, give each group of students a different page of the book, made into a cloze passage, with space left for an illustration. When all the pages have been completed, assemble them to create a class-made version of the book. Whenever the class makes a book, write the names of all the "authors" and provide the same type of information found on book covers. This gives students a sense of satisfaction and ownership and also gives them a sense of what books consist of and how they are made.

Rewriting the ending of a book: Have students make up a new ending for a book they have just read. This can be done as a group activity, and endings can be compared and discussed. The new endings can either be placed at the back of the book, or a new book can be made by students with the new ending. Some groups of students not only enjoy this type of activity but insist on doing it for books with endings they dislike. The activity can be simplified for beginning level students by discussing the new ending first and providing them with the key words they need or making up sentences for them to complete.

Writing a new version of a story: Students enjoy adapting plots of stories they have read. They can rename characters in a book, put themselves in the middle of the story, change a peripheral character into a central one, or change a central event in the story.

Figure 1 shows an adaptation of "Big Bear, Big Bear, What Do You See?" making it personally relevant to Uyen, the author.

Student-generated Writing: Journals

Journals are a personal account of daily activities, thoughts, and interpretations of classroom events, written on an ongoing basis, which students submit for periodic review. The main characteristic of journals is that in this teacher review, no feedback is given about the form of language unless the student explicitly requests such feedback. Rather, attention is focused on the content of the writing. Research has shown that when students write on a daily basis, their writing improves significantly ([Flores & Garcia, 1984](#)). Two types of

journals are described in the following section: dialogue journals and diaries.

Dialogue Journals

With dialogue journals, students regularly write entries in a notebook to the teacher about topics of their choice, and the teacher writes back to them, responding to the topic or issue discussed. This exchange, which continues throughout the school year, is confined to the two people involved: the teacher and the student. The writing in dialogue journals is student-generated and functional, and the context for the interaction is non-threatening. Students are invited to write at their proficiency level (even if it is minimal) about topics that interest them. The teacher responds individually to each student's entry, accommodating the responses to the student's language proficiency level. In response to Lathikone's entry (see Figure 2), all the teacher needed or could do was a simple greeting and a question; the student's response showed some modeling of appropriate writing rules.

Since daily exchange is not possible for more than four or five students at a time, stagger the journals so that one fifth of the class submits their journals on each day of the week. The focus of dialogue journal interaction is on communication rather than form. The teacher, as well as the student, writes as a participant in a conversation. While the teacher doesn't comment on a student's language, the teacher's writing serves as a language model ([Staton, Kreeft, and Gutstein, 1985](#)). This can be seen in the example in Figure 3. When Hien first started writing, she had not mastered any of the formalities of addressing a "letter" to another person. The response to Hien's first entry included no direct or explicit instruction on that aspect of writing; however, in her second entry, she simply models the teacher's entry and changes her salutation and closure to approximate the appropriate form in English.

Dialogue journals allow students to develop reading and writing skills together in a single functional experience: communicating thoughts and feelings to another person. The language input from the teacher should be slightly above the student's linguistic ability, but the motivation to read the teacher's response encourages students to read at a higher level. Hien's reaction when she received a response to her first entry (in Figure 3) was typical: as soon as she got her notebook back, she tried to decipher the response; when she discovered she couldn't understand it completely, she consulted her friend. Together, they tried to decipher it, and when they were still dissatisfied with the result, they consulted the teacher (the writer was the teacher's aide), and had her read it with them. This type of intense interaction with language is bound to improve students' language skills. The use of dialogue journals in many school districts indicates that students' entries expand significantly and improve in quality over time.

Figure 1: Story adaptation of "Big Bear, Big Bear, What Do You See?" Hanh, Hanh....What do you see?

I can see Linh. Looking at me.

Linh, Linh, What do you see?

I can see Tram looking at me.

Tram, then what do you see?

I can see Thanh looking at me.

Thanh, Thanh, what do you see?

Figure 2: Entries in Lathikone's Dialogue Journal. First Entry: Hello Ms. Hamayan.
Response to First Entry: January 23. Dear Lathikone, Hello! I am very happy you are in my class, and I am very happy you are writing to me. Tell me more about yourself. Ms. Hamayan.
Second Entry: January 24. Dear Ms. Hamayan, Hello Ms. Hamayan. Lathikone.

Figure 3: Entries in Hien's Dialogue Journal. First Entry: What your name? How are you today? How old are you? How long are your teacher? How many people do you have in your family? How many children do you have? What do you buy? Where you go? Where are your house? When you come back America? Where are you from?

Response to First Entry: Dear Hien, My name is Else. I am fine today, but a little tired. I have been a teacher for 20 years. There are four people in my family: my mother, father, my sister, and me. I have no children. I like to buy clothes. My house of PRPC is at WRC. My house in America is in Chicago. I will go back to America next Friday, January 27. You write very well. Will you tell me about yourself and your family? Else Hamayan.

Second Entry: Dear Else, My name is Hien. I am fine today. Next Friday, January 27, you go back to America. I am very sad, because I am to see you everyday. I hope you will write to me. I will your letter every week. Good luck to you.

Diaries

Another way to have students write daily is through diaries. With a diary, unlike a dialogue journal, the teacher does not play the role of an active participant in a conversation. Instead, the students essentially write to themselves. At the student's discretion, the teacher may read the diary entries and respond to them as they do with dialogue journal entries (or creative writing, as described in the next section). Thus, students have less opportunity for modeling in diaries than they do with dialogue journals. Nevertheless, the act of writing something that can be highly personal and meaningful, with only occasional feedback, is still effective for improving language proficiency.

Two types of diaries may be kept: personal and content area. In a personal diary, students write about anything in their lives that is of importance or interest. In a content area diary, the focus is on a specific academic topic; for example, students may keep track of progress in a science experiment or may write their personal views of events studied in a history class. Diaries are easier to use with older and more proficient students, since the entries must be proficient enough to be satisfying to the writer. Students who wish to share their diary with others can choose their favorite entry to read to the rest of the class or "publish" it in a collection of diary compositions.

For students who are preliterate, the teacher may encourage them to participate in dialogue and journal writing by asking simple questions such as "What is your favorite food?" and having students write or draw the answers in their journals. The teacher now has an entry to respond to and now can model appropriate journal writing.

Student-generated Writing: Creative Writing

Creative writing is the expression of ideas, thoughts, feelings, and stories. Students are encouraged to write about anything of interest to them, with few constraints, and much encouragement from the teacher. Through feedback from the teacher, students learn to organize their thoughts better, to write more, and to improve their writing. Initially, students may be very limited in their ability to follow the conventional rules of writing, but gradually they learn to do so. Younger children may start their creative writing by drawing and later on in scribbling. Older students, who are non-literate in their native language, may start their creative writing by scrawling one or two words at a time. The following steps outline the process for creative writing:

- Model the process of creative writing for your students. Tell them a story that you would like to write about. Then, sit down and write it.
- Encourage students to tell their stories to each other, then set aside a portion of each class period for writing.
- Feedback on writing is most effective when it is given immediately; thus, as students write, circulate and confer with them on their writing. Conferences need not take more than two or three minutes, and initially should focus only on the content of the writing. "Tell me more about your uncle," "Why was the lady crying?" are questions to be asked at first. Once the students begin to feel comfortable with the act of writing, it is appropriate to ask: "Don't you need a stop here? A period?" or "How about if we say 'he' instead of 'the boy'?" (For a detailed description of how to do creative writing with PEP students, see Hamayan & Pileger, 1987).

One of the most rewarding aspects of writing something is to have it published. This is as true for children as it is for adults. The culminating activity in a writing session (or sessions) should be the "publishing" of the students' books. Young children can simply write their books by hand and illustrate them; older students can produce their books using either computers or typewriters. To make the student-produced books as professional-looking as possible, include all the information that would normally be included in a published book, such as the date and place of publication, the name(s) of the author and illustrator, and information about the author (see the sample front and back cover in Figure 4).

Considerations For Implementing Holistic Language Approaches

The approaches and strategies in this guide are only a sampling of classroom activities that can help develop writing skills in students who are learning English as a second language. The most satisfying aspect of these holistic natural approaches is that they are fun for both students and teachers. However, despite all this encouragement to be creative and to let your students be creative, it is important to consider the following issues: the scheduling of writing, coordination between ESL teachers and content area teachers, meeting the curriculum requirements, and monitoring of student progress.

Some of the important features of a successful writing program are its intensity and constancy; students need to write every day. Homeroom teachers should devote time each day-- preferably about the same time-- for writing. ESL teachers need to make sure that all students have time set aside for writing every day, either in the ESL class or in the mainstream classroom (which requires coordination between the ESL teacher and the content area teacher). If there are not enough classroom periods dedicated to writing, teachers must integrate writing into other classes such as science, social studies, and language arts.

Teachers who have PEP students in their classroom must meet occasionally to coordinate the instruction that these students receive. This is true not only for the teaching of writing but also for the development of second language proficiency in general (see [Crandall, et al., 1987](#)).

Figure 4: Front and back covers of a student-made book.

"The Rabbit Very Happy". Written and illustrated by Nguyen Thanh Sen.

His name is Sen, he's 11 years old. He's from Vietnam, his cycle is 118. His address is 510-I.

There are 5 people in his family. He likes to eat chicken, he likes to drink orange. He likes red color, he's going to New York. He's sit down and study English in the classroom. He will study English in America.

Many teachers who try to create a holistic natural environment in their classrooms are faced with a dilemma: how to use holistic approaches within the confines of a non-holistic curriculum. The following two suggestions might be helpful. First, fit parts of the existing curriculum and its approaches into your holistic framework. If you wish to stress phonics, then by all means do so, after you have set up a meaningful context for it through an activity, experience, or personally relevant event. Phonics worksheets can make good follow-up activities. Second, see if you can convert the curriculum so that it fits into a holistic natural framework. This may be a long and involved process, but if it can be accomplished simply by reordering elements of the curriculum and showing that the same objectives are met, it is definitely worth the time and effort.

Monitoring student progress is important for two reasons: it allows teachers to measure students' writing on an on-going basis to determine how and what to teach, and it allows administrators to measure the effectiveness of a holistic natural approach to teaching writing. On-going assessment is a crucial element of good teaching, regardless of the approach taken. Assessment can be done through the traditional paper-and-pencil format. However, a holistic approach to assessment, which is more informal and easier to fit into a daily class

schedule, can yield valuable information. A holistic approach to assessment includes the use of observational rating scales (see [Hamayan and Pfleger, 1987](#)), holistic ratings of writing samples, and evaluations by the students themselves (see [Goodman, Goodman, and Hood, 1989](#)). It is important for students to take an active part in the assessment, both for determining in what areas they are to be evaluated and for being informed of their progress. Ask your students to choose their best piece of writing for you to evaluate. Rate their performance and behavior in the writing class as well as their product. Keep your own journal (what better way than to model the behavior you want your students to engage in) about the progress of your students. If you do this on a daily basis, you will have a wealth of information on which to base your teaching. Individual instruction becomes much easier. Even the most informal ratings can usually be represented by scores, which can be compared over time, for example, from the beginning to the end of the school year.

Conclusion

In this guide, innovative methods and strategies for teaching writing to PEP students using holistic natural approaches have been described. These approaches are based on the premise that students acquire language (speaking, reading, and writing) naturally when they engage in self-motivating activities that are stimulating, interesting, and meaningful to them.

When writing is a joy to learn, it also becomes a joy to teach. By giving yourself and your students the opportunity to enjoy writing, you will have accomplished an impressive feat: you will have led your students to respect and to love writing; you will have led them to become eager and impassioned readers; and in the process, if they become more proficient users of English (which they are bound to do), then all the better!

* The term "potentially English proficient" (PEP) is used in this guide in place of the more traditional "limited English proficient" (LEP) to emphasize the positive aspects of adding English proficiency, rather than stress any perceived limitations of students whose primary language is not English.

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