Writing Activities as Stimuli for Integrating the Four Language Skills in EFL Grade-One Classes in Taiwan

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Abstract
Generally speaking, learning a foreign language follows the sequence of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, many scholars propose that well designed plans and activities facilitate the development of the four language skills simultaneously. To this date, little empirical research has been done to clearly demonstrate how an integrated curriculum can be designed and carried out, particularly in an elementary school EFL setting. The project reported in this paper serves as a pioneer study to provide ideas for developing and implementing a more balanced English program in first-grade classrooms with a particular focus on how writing activities can serve as a stimulus for reading, listening, and speaking over the course of a semester. It was found that such a practice changed students’ attitudes to writing in a foreign language and helped to consolidate their phonics knowledge, facilitate their writing ability, and foster their reading, listening and speaking skills. The participating teacher in this project also learned more about what students could do in writing and hence provided suitable instruction to enhance students’ learning.

Key words: EFL young learners, a balanced program, writing
INTRODUCTION

In early 2006 the two academics\(^1\) were approached by the authority of Siang-he Elementary School located in Chiayi County regarding a collaborative project of designing an English curriculum for their first graders. The two academics accepted the request and then started working with Ms. Hsu, one of the writers, who teaches English at Siang-he, on the English curriculum for the new grade one students, who would begin school in the summer of 2006. After some communication and discussion with the school faculty, the two academics came to a decision to design and carry out an ambitious six-year project to accompany Ms. Hsu and these coming grade one students through a long journey of teaching and learning of English.

The authors’ ultimate goal was to develop a six-year English curriculum, related materials and classroom activities for Ms. Hsu’s school. For these grade one students of year 2006, a new curriculum would be developed for them each year for six years. The above curriculum would always be revised and repeated with students in the following years. The cycle of developing, carrying out, revising, and repeating an English curriculum would take place for an extensive length of time before a set of a six-year English curriculum would be well developed. The result would be beneficial to Ms. Hsu’s school; it would also make contributions to the field of elementary EFL teaching and learning.

\(^1\) Besides these two academics, Dr. Tien-cheng Shen and Dr. Ching-fen Wu at National Chiayi University were involved in the first-year project. The authors would like to thank them for their involvement in the design and development of the plans and materials for the first semester.
Believing in the idea that the spoken and written language should not be taught separately (Paul, 2003; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990), even for EFL learners (Paul, 2003), the two academics decided to develop a more balanced program rather than emphasize the oral language, which is usually the focus for beginning foreign language learners. Therefore, the two academics made an attempt to incorporate reading and writing into the new curriculum. Teaching of reading, compared with teaching of writing, is more common and researched in elementary school EFL settings. Teaching writing to beginning EFL students, however, seemed relatively bold because no empirical studies were found to demonstrate if this was a sound practice with beginning learners. However, from a review of the literature it was evident that the incorporation of writing activities should be one good way to implement the practice of integrated-skill instruction (Davison & Dowson, 2003; Paul, 2003; Reimer, 2001; Samway, 1992). Because of the lack of empirical findings on the incorporation of writing in early English learning, the two academics were particularly interested in what contributions might be made by the English curriculum that was implemented at Siang-he Elementary School.

The project is now in its third year. Classes using the curriculum have been monitored, and as a result some practices have been reconsidered, and some changes have been made to the curriculum. Some of the results of the research have been reported previously (Hsu, Chang, Chang, Wu, & Shen, 2006; Chang, Chang, & Hsu, 2008; Chang, Chang, & Hsu, 2009). The present paper will discuss the plans, materials, and activities, particularly writing activities, carried out in three first-grade classes as well as some outcomes observed in the first semester of the program (August 2006 to February 2007).
LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning a new foreign language means to ultimately learn both the oral and written languages. Traditionally, the oral language is learned before the written language in classroom settings. Particularly for young English learners, the main focus is placed on the learning of the oral language first so the learners would develop sufficient oral ability to help later development of the written language. However, in the present study, the two academics tried to provide a more balanced English program whereby writing activities were incorporated to enhance the learning of the four language skills simultaneously. In the following sections, literature related to language learning will be focused on. Through the literature review, it will be clearer as to how a more balanced program will foster the learning of a foreign language.

Learning the Four Language Skills Sequentially or Simultaneously?

The development of the four language skills of a native language has traditionally been sequenced in the order of listening, speaking, reading, and then writing (Linse, 2005). However, should the four language skills be learned sequentially in an L2 context as they are usually learned this way in an L1 context?

Dulay and Burt (1974) began their research with the premise that L1 and L2 acquisition in children were the same processes and the types of errors made by L1 and L2 learners learning the same language would be the same. However, their results showed contradictions with the aforementioned premise, so they concluded,
“we can no longer hypothesize similarities between L2 and L1 acquisition as we did at the outset of our investigation” (p.51). This is mainly because L2 learners are usually older than L1 learners, according to Dulay and Burt, and therefore, L2 learners are generally more mature cognitively. In addition, L2 learners have had knowledge and experience with a language already. Hence, Dulay and Burt pointed out that “these factors should combine to make the specific strategies of the creative construction process in L2 acquisition somewhat different for those of the creative construction process in L1 acquisition” (p.51).

If the processes are different in L1 and L2 acquisition, the traditional sequence of learning language skills in L1 may not need to be applied to the L2 learning situation. In the following, the authors will argue that it is quite reasonable to adopt a different way to teach L2 learners the four language skills. Instead of following the traditional sequence of learning the language skills, L2 learners should be given opportunities to learn the four language skills simultaneously.

Most L2 learners undergo a conscious process of language learning through receiving instruction in formal settings (Fotos, 2001). L2 learners in a school setting are mentally and physically much more mature than young children learning their first language; therefore the L2 learning process can differ from the L1 learning process, as noted by Dulay and Burt (1974). In contrast to learning the L1, which is considered to be an unconscious process, L2 learning by receiving instruction on planned linguistic items and features involves a conscious process (Fotos, 2001), and possibly utilizes all senses simultaneously. It thus may be beneficial for teachers to consider an
appropriate integration of all four language skills instead of waiting for students to master one skill before the introduction of the next skill.

Though reading and writing are advanced skills that may seemingly be handled better after the mastery of oral English, well-designed plans and activities can facilitate the development of the four language skills simultaneously (e.g., Linse, 2005; Paul, 2003; Tompkins, 2008). For example, Linse has recommended that listening skills can facilitate the learning of reading, while Paul stated that reading and writing skills assist with the development of speaking skills.

Furthermore, in a class of students with different learning backgrounds, preferences and strengths in multiple intelligences, students should be offered different channels for learning. For instance, some students may enjoy listening silently; some may like to speak out loud; some may take pleasure in reading, while others may prefer drawing, copying or writing. Therefore, different channels of listening, speaking, reading, and writing should be arranged so that students are engaged in class activities that allow them to learn all language skills somewhat simultaneously.

In addition, students of different language abilities in the same class need comprehensible input at their present levels so that they can eventually produce comprehensible output. In Taiwan, for example, students come to primary classrooms with different levels of English proficiency. Beginning learners benefit from being exposed to sufficient language input through listening. However, advanced learners who are already able to read and write may be in an English
class where they listen to very basic English. This might hold them back or even discourage them from learning. Therefore, though learning a second/foreign language sequentially from listening, speaking, reading, to writing may still be supported by many, it should not be the only practice in classroom settings with learners from different backgrounds and with various levels of language proficiency. In other words, as Paul (2003), Scott & Ytreberg (1990), and Tompkins (2008) have suggested, the four language skills can be taught simultaneously.

**Integrating the Four Language Skills through Writing Activities**

Oxford (2001) has pointed out that segregated-skill instruction is contradictory to the current educational theory and practice. According to Peregoy and Boyle (1997), the four language skills have “complex relationships of mutual support. Practice in any one process contributes to the overall reservoir of second language knowledge” (p.102). That is to say, once one of the skills progresses, the other three will be enhanced as well. For example, Samway (1992) argued that learners’ writing growth is often reflected in their development in oral fluency. Paul (2003), an advocate of engaging children in writing from an early stage, also explained that when a learner learns to write the pattern in addition to its spoken form, “she will have internalized the pattern much more deeply than if she just knew it orally…[and] she is able to use it more flexibly and communicatively in novel situations” (p.100). Hence, it is the teachers’ responsibility to see that all four language skills are appropriately integrated in class and it only requires the teacher’s creativity to make such arrangement even if the teaching material seems to focus only on segregated skills.
Incorporating writing activities should be one good way to implement the practice of integrated-skill instruction (Davison & Dowson, 2003; Reimer, 2001). For example, a teacher can adopt either the Life Experience Approach (e.g., Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, & Moore, 2004; Tompkins, 2008) or the Interactive Writing Approach (e.g., McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000; Patterson, Schaller, & Clemens, 2008; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007), two well-known approaches for writing instruction to young beginning writers. When following either the above approaches in a writing activity, the teacher first leads the students to talk about experiences or ideas and either shares the pen with them or has them compose individually to record their ideas. Then, they read and examine the written text. Young writers soon realize that “what you say can be written down and then read back” (Cunningham et al., 2004, p.18). While the teacher and the students share the pen or read the text, the teacher serves as an assistant to scaffold the students’ participation in thinking, speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

Moreover, according to these above scholars, the teacher provides the instruction precisely at the point of student need. The instruction coming at an appropriate time might raise students’ awareness of linguistic items or features, such as letter features, letter sequences, phonics skills, etc. Furthermore, reading and examining the written text for oral discussions encourages authentic listening and speaking. Incorporating writing activities into an EFL beginning curriculum thus seems to be one good way to implement the practice of integrated-skill instruction.
Comprehensible Input and Output

In order to incorporate all language skills appropriately, it is essential to take into consideration Krashen’s theory of comprehensible input (1985) to provide input stimuli for listening and reading and Swain’s (2000) comprehensible output to elicit the output forms of speaking and writing. In the current project, the authors attempt to follow Krashen’s Input Hypothesis to provide comprehensible materials as input stimuli and guide students to produce comprehensible output as Swain suggested. Students’ comprehensible output (written work, for instance) can be used as authentic and comprehensible input for students to read and to discuss. By doing so, target language items will be recycled and revisited in various contexts and hence, the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing can be integrated meaningfully.

Based on the literature reviewed above, the project proposed is of a deliberate design to help beginning English learners in an elementary school develop their language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing simultaneously. The following section elaborates how the project has been conducted.

METHOD

This project with Ms. Hsu’s classes started in Fall 2006. It is now in the fifth semester, and the original group of students are third graders. Reported in this paper are the plans, materials, activities, and findings in the first-semester period, from September 2006 to February 2007. Since this was a first-time trial without a set model to
be followed, the practice in the current project was tried and revised based on the examination of the field notes, the classroom tapes, and discussions with the instructor.

Setting and Participants

Siang-he Elementary School, a public school located in Chiayi County, was established in 2003 with English teaching as one of its unique features. English is introduced in grade one rather than grade three as regulated by the Ministry of Education. Three periods of 40 minutes each per week were scheduled for English.

The subjects included 107 first grade students from three grade-one classes. Before entering Siang-he, most of them had taken about one to two years of English lessons in kindergarten. Other participants included the English teacher, Ms. Hsu, a native Mandarin speaker and qualified English teacher and four academics. These five participants worked together on designing the curriculum and the materials; two of the academics, the authors, collected and examined the data. The final participant was a native-English-speaking teacher who came to work at Siang-he in September 2006 under the auspices of a project organized by the Ministry of Education. As part of this project, native-English-speaking teachers were recruited and assigned to areas where qualified English teachers were scarce. At Siang-he, this native-English-speaking teacher co-taught with each Mandarin-speaking English teacher in one class period of each class per week. In our project, though this native-English-speaking teacher helped with video-taping the session of the integrated writing activities only, the language stimuli she provided in other class
sessions and during breaks definitely contributed to students’ learning the language.

Materials

The primary materials used were a song book *Music World for Children* (Jackson, Ralphs, & Clark, 2002), a textbook and a workbook developed by the four academics and Ms. Hsu (hereafter the self-developed textbook and the self-developed workbook). Each student had all the above materials. In addition, a big book *Rhyming around the Alphabet* (Cutting, 2003) was accessible to the students in class. The rhymes from the big book were displayed to the students through PowerPoint presentations as Ms. Hsu led the class in reading aloud the rhymes. Some animation and/or pictures were added to interpret the meaning of the rhymes. The students found the visual input interesting and it also facilitated their understanding of the rhymes.

*The song book and the rhymes.* The song book was used because the repetitive nature as well as the rhythm of songs made them an ideal vehicle for language learning (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002). The colorful pictures in the book added appealing visual stimuli to learning while the lyrics provided learners more exposure to print. The rhymes from *Rhyming around the Alphabet* provided similar language input to the learners.

*The self-developed textbook.* The self-developed textbook focuses on alphabet learning in context. The book is arranged alphabetically with letters and related pictures along with names of the pictures (Appendix 1). As the students learn the letters Aa (for letter names and letter shapes), they also learn the picture names of *apple, arm*, etc.
Exposed to picture names in print, the students might be able to identify some of these words as sight words in other contexts (for reading vocabulary) and “scribble out” some of the words in writing.

**The self-developed workbook.** This workbook consists of four kinds of worksheets for checking learning. Worksheets were developed based on the objectives of the lesson plans for the semester. The self-developed workbook is mainly for checking the learning of a) letter names and letter shapes (Appendix 2), b) letter-sound correspondences on initials (Appendix 3) and c) picture names and words in print (Appendix 4). The sheet in Appendix 4, requiring the students to pick the right word, tests their speaking vocabulary (they need to know the picture name, for example, *apple*; this is for speaking as well as for listening) and phonics knowledge on segmenting and letter-sound correspondences (they need to segment the speech sound of *apple* to get the initial sound and match the sound with the initial letter of the three given words in print, of course, they might identify *apple* as a sight word).

Appendix 5 presents a Group-Review Sheet to check the learning of the four skills. The pictures shown in the listening section are for the students to “listen to and understand” (to be able to point at the picture while listening to the picture name). The pictures and letters shown in the speaking section are for students to say out loud the names of the pictures and the letters when any entry is pointed at by the test-giver, the group leader who is usually an advanced learner. The reading section tests the students’ ability to read aloud the words either by decoding or sight-word recognition. Furthermore, they are
expected to write letters on a separate sheet when each letter in the writing section is given orally to them by the test-giver. All the items in the Group-Review Sheet are expected to be learned by the students and are therefore labeled as “Teacher’s Goal.”

The students, however, were allowed to set their own goals. Ms. Hsu first led the whole class through the sheet for review and the students put checks to mark their personal goals. For example, a student might check only some entries as his goals (for example, apple, book, cake, dog, and egg in the listening section in Appendix 5 by Student A). The idea is that during the review, the student could select what s/he was able to manage as her/his goal. The sheet was then kept in each student’s folder for future class use.

Before the group-review session held for 10 minutes at the end of the third class period each week, Ms. Hsu tested the group leaders on the sheet to ensure they were able to carry out the task. During the group-review session, the two group leaders in each group checked their group members on their personal goals (one leader on about three or four members). The group leaders were told to assist their members in learning those unmarked entries (simply by repeating after the leaders) if the groups completed the checking task early and were waiting for the other groups to complete theirs.

The following example elaborates on the practice described above. Leader A checks Student One on his goal (Appendix 5). Leader A says apple, and Student One should point at the picture of the apple on the listening section. If Student One makes the correct choice, on Student One’s sheet, Leader A puts O and writes the date to indicate a pass. If Student One fails on book, Leader A puts X followed by the date. In the next group-review session, Student One
will be tested again on book. To check on speaking, Leader A points at the picture of apple for Student One to say the picture name. Checking on the other two language skills, which are reading and writing, is done similarly.

**Semester Plan and Activity**

As mentioned, the students had three English classes each week. The majority of the class time was planned for classroom activities, not different from those in other elementary school English classes, and included activities such as singing, chanting, recitations, etc. Writing activities were incorporated into the last 10 minutes of the third period in each week to set the stage for implementing the practice of integrated-skill instruction.

*Learning objectives and must-learn language items.* Based on the materials, lists of learning objectives, “must learn words” and “must learn sentences” were made and weekly plans were developed. The objectives were not much different from those made by general teachers, for example, to be able to distinguish the 26 letters of the alphabet upon hearing letter names and letter sounds (listening), to recognize and say the 26 letters (reading and speaking), to sing along with CDs the taught songs (speaking), and to copy or scribble their names and/or letters (writing).

The must-learn words and sentence patterns were from the 2000-word list recommended by the Ministry of Education for primary and junior high school students. Thirty-two words in total, including 27 words from the 130 picture names in the self-developed textbook, four pronouns (I, you, she, he) and the indefinite article a,
were chosen to be the “must learn” words. All are high frequency words. Nine sentences or questions such as Good morning, Good bye, How are you, Fine, Stand up, etc., common greetings and classroom English, were on the must-learn list as well. The students were expected to understand them given orally (listening), say them (speaking), and identify them in print (reading). Besides, some frequently used sentence patterns, such as This is a/an _____ and I like _____ were said very often to introduce picture names (e.g., This is an apple. I like apples.). The students were expected to understand and say such frequently used patterns.

**Weekly plan and classroom activities.** The weekly plans were not much different from what other teachers would have for their classes. For example, for Weeks One and Two, Ms. Hsu planned to have a name game (to help students become familiar with their names), to orally practice Good morning, Good bye, What's your name, I am___, You are ____, to sing the ABC song. For Week Three, she planned to teach letters Aa and Bb, to orally practice Stand up, Sit down, Open your book, Close your book, to sing the song Row Row Row your boat and to show the first rhyme. However, three things the authors did were probably what other teachers might not do, that is, the authors had a pretest to examine the students’ English learning background and ability in Week One, a post-test (the pretest was repeated as the post-test) to investigate the learning achievement in the last week and a questionnaire to investigate the students’ attitudes towards this project in the last week as well.

The linguistic objectives focused mainly on listening and speaking, with instruction on the alphabetic principle for developing reading and writing. In the following sections, the activities for
listening, speaking, and reading will be introduced briefly. Writing practice was conducted for 10 minutes each week. The writing activity yielded some valuable findings which suggest the possibility and perhaps the necessity of incorporating writing into an EFL curriculum as early as possible. The writing component of this curriculum is thus described in greater detail.

**Listening and speaking.** In classes, except during the writing session, the students either listened to the teacher, repeated after the teacher or engaged in dialogue drills with the teachers in meaningful contexts without visual aids. This practice was for auditory input and oral output, which aimed to prepare them for later oral communication (speaking and listening).

**Reading.** The alphabetical principle, i.e., letter names, letter sounds, segmenting and blending of letter sounds, was taught to help the students with their reading and writing development. Exposed to the materials in print, the students had opportunities to develop the recognition of letter shapes and sight words of picture names (e.g., apple, arm, etc.) and the words in the song book.

**Writing.** The last 10 minutes of the third period in each week was scheduled for the drawing and/or writing activity starting in the fifth week. The students started out with free drawing and/or writing. The written products, in turn, became the reading materials to be discussed by the class in the following week. Showing the selected written products, Ms. Hsu was able to lead the students to revisit what had been learned and to give appropriate instruction. Each writing was thus carried out in a cycle of two weeks, with free drawing and/or writing in the first week and sharing with leveled instruction in the
following week. Nine writing tasks were completed in the first semester.

During the session for free drawing and/or writing, Ms. Hsu explained the writing task in Mandarin and distributed a piece of blank A4 paper to each student for free drawing and/or writing. While the students were drawing and/or writing, Ms. Hsu walked around in the room to observe and provide needed assistance to the students. The assistance the students required primarily involved repeating the instructions. Very frequently, Ms. Hsu verbally encouraged the students and provided word hints to help some students write. Copying from materials, classmates, or the classroom environmental prints was not allowed. Students were encouraged to write (draw, scribble, invent-write) anything they wanted.

The students’ written sheets were processed for sharing with leveled instruction scheduled in the following week. The students’ work was scanned and sorted into six categories: a) blank (containing only the writer’s name), b) drawing, c) letter writing, d) word writing, e) phrase writing, and f) sentence writing. Some examples were selected from each category to represent different language levels and these were shared in the following week on the TV monitor. When sharing, Ms. Hsu would compliment the students and offer suggestions to help the students develop their writing skills.

For example, the drawings presented in Figure 1 were among the sheets shown to the class. Besides praising the student on his/her accomplishment, Ms. Hsu, showing Figure 1-a, a) reviewed the picture names and b) encouraged the student to move a step forward to write some related letters (e.g., the initial letters of the picture names as shown in Figure 1-b produced by another student, which
would be shared later). Similarly, Figure 1-b and Figure 1-c were shown to facilitate the progress from producing “1-b” (writing initials) to producing “1-c” (spelling words). Showing Figure 1-c, Ms. Hsu also encouraged a step forward to put “cat” in the sentence of *This is a cat or I like the cat*. Showing Figure 1-d, Ms. Hsu a) pointed out the wrong direction of some letters (letters C and D) and b) encouraged a step forward, for example, spelling out a word or at the same time drawing something to show their learning. Showing Figure 1-e, Ms. Hsu pointed out the missing space between words.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

**Writings shared for i+1 instruction**

During the Sharing Session, the written products in turn became reading materials for revisiting what the students had learned. Moreover, the sheets provided models and stimuli for future writing as well as opportunities for instruction in a meaningful context that was useful to learners of different levels of language proficiency. Such leveled instruction was based on Krashen’s (1985) input...
hypothesis \((i + 1)\), which encourages the students to try to progress from where they are to a higher level, that is, to challenge themselves to produce more advanced comprehensible output (Swain, 2000). This type of practice also allowed students to practice all four language skills.

**Assignments and assessment.** The homework for every week was a) copy two capital letters and two lowercase letters five times, b) trace the picture names in the textbook twice, and c) practice blending (for example, seeing ‘ta’, they say aloud first the letter name and then the letter sound and then blend the letter sounds to say it aloud). The sheets in the worksheet book assessed the students’ learning on listening and reading (listen for picture names and read to recognize pictures, distinguish individual letters, identify initial letters of words and sight words), speaking (know the picture names for speaking vocabulary). As to the writing skill, they were tested on writing individual letters only.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Collected and analyzed were the recorded class tapes, the students’ writing work, the pretest and posttest results and the questionnaire responses. In addition, Ms. Hsu’s email responses to the two academics’ questions on the students’ writing work were filed, and Ms. Hsu’s reflections in the occasional informal chats were recorded and typed up for data analysis.

A test (Appendix 6) of phonics knowledge and skills was developed by the two academics and administered to the students in the first week of the semester to assess the students’ ability to listen for letter names, identify letter shapes and read picture names.
(decoding), etc. The same test was given as the posttest in the last week of the semester.

At the end of the semester a questionnaire (Appendix 7) investigating the students’ attitudes towards this project was read aloud by a research assistant, and these students were asked to answer on a response sheet (Appendix 8). The response sheet distributed to the students was written in Chinese. Phonetic symbols were also provided because the students were beginning readers. However, to ensure reading comprehension, the assistant had the students read aloud the choices on the response sheet with her and then waited for them to write the answers.

**OBSERVATIONS**

Some observations are to be described below, including consolidation of phonics knowledge, facilitation of writing skills, promotion of reading, listening and speaking development, motivation for learning, changes in attitudes, and verification of the input hypothesis.

**Consolidation of Phonics Knowledge**

The average score of the pretest assessing the students’ phonics knowledge was 32.76 points (out of 100 points) and that of the post-test, 88.70. In the pretest, only 14 students scored above 60 points but in the post-test, only seven students scored below 60 points. Since the instruction adopted in the project was phonics-oriented
through the practice of four language skills rather than test-oriented through doing phonics drills, the type of instruction along with the materials and classroom activities seemed to make contributions to a certain degree to help the students consolidate their phonics knowledge.

**Facilitation of Writing Skills**

As Clay (2001) pointed out, “When teachers do not expect children to be able to write, they do not give them opportunities to write, and therefore they will observe that children do not write” (p.14). The writing activities provided the students with the observable accomplishments in writing, spelling particularly. The students’ accomplishments were gradual and evident, from scribbling/drawing to initial letter writing, to phonics spelling and to invented spelling, which correspond to the developmental stages of spelling reported by Hill (1999). The products by the same writer presented in Figure 2 exemplify some gradual progress. Figure 3 presents examples of observable developmental stages in spelling.
The spelling-line strategy taught by Ms. Hsu was employed frequently by the students to compensate for their insufficient spelling knowledge. For example, “summer” is put as “sm__er” (Figure 3a) and “cat” as “c_t” (Figure 3d). The blank indicated that they were aware of some missing letters in a word. The strategy might speed up the development from Hill’s (1999) semiphonetic stage (i.e., representing a word with only one letter, usually the initial, or two letters, usually the initial and the final consonants, for example, BD for BED) to the phonetic stage (i.e., self-formulating spelling with a vowel letter, for example, BAD for BED). This spelling-line strategy
reduces the possible frustration students might feel when they try to express meanings in writing with words they cannot spell correctly at the moment. This strategy may also encourage students to gradually move from incomplete spelling to ultimate conventional spelling.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3**

**Observable stages of spelling**

**Promotion of Reading, Listening, and Speaking Development**

The students’ writing products displayed during the Sharing Session served as the reading materials. Reading their own writing products, the class revisited what they had learned. Besides, errors found in students’ work also provide a learning opportunity for students to identify errors and discuss how such errors could be avoided next time.

Many times, the students’ work contained incomplete spelling...
along with the drawings, which seemed to provide students with opportunities to read with clues. For instance, the drawing of a big shining “sun” accompanied by the writing of “s” provided students both pictorial and print clues, which also happens sometimes in real reading process. Such a writing sample could be used to activate “summer” or “sun” in the students’ listening and/or speaking vocabulary. The students could then be taught how to segment and transform the speech sounds into the correct spelling. These practices helped to activate listening/speaking vocabulary and consolidate phonics skills, which fostered reading development.

In addition, leading the students to revisit the written products, Ms. Hsu would conduct question and answer sessions. This activity helped the students to develop their listening and speaking skills. Two classroom conversation excerpts are presented below to demonstrate Ms. Hsu’s support to the students’ learning. The conversations took place when Ms. Hsu pointed at some written work displayed on the TV monitor:

Excerpt 1 (October, 25, 2006)

Ms. Hsu: What is this?

Students: Apple.

Ms. Hsu: Good. Apple. This is an apple. What is this?

Students: A.

Ms. Hsu: Good. A. What is the sound of A?

Students: [æ]

Ms. Hsu: What is this?

Students: Candy.

Ms. Hsu: Candy? How do you know? (The underlined sentence
was said in Mandarin.)

Students: Because there is a C under the drawing. (in Mandarin)

Ms. Hsu: Thank you for telling me. (in Mandarin)

Ms. Hsu: Okay, what is the sound of C?

(Figure 1-b was the drawing used in the above conversation.)

Excerpt 2 (December 13, 2006)

Ms. Hsu: What’s this?

Students: Orange.

Ms. Hsu: Good. Orange. What’s this?

Students: Apple.

Ms. Hsu: Probably.

Ms. Hsu: What’s this?

Students: Watch.

Ms. Hsu: Watch. Very good. What time is it [on the watch]?

Students: Three.

Ms. Hsu: Three, very good. It’s three o’clock.

At this stage though most explanations and questions by Ms. Hsu during the shared-reading sessions were in Mandarin with the topics on picture names, letter-sound correspondences, letter shapes, spaces between words, etc., some conversations using English did take place occasionally. Talks of this type in a meaningful context, though limited in English, offered opportunities to foster the development of reading, listening, and speaking.

Motivation for Learning

The questionnaire results showed these young learners’ positive
attitudes towards the writing activities. Of these 107 students, 89 percent liked the free drawing and/or writing activities, nine percent expressed “no special feeling” and two percent disliked the activities. As to the Sharing Sessions, 83 percent liked them, 12 percent, no special feeling and five percent disliked them. Fifteen percent said free drawing and/or writing was difficult while 85 percent had no difficulty drawing and/or writing freely. Most importantly, 84 percent thought these writing activities helped with their English learning and 86 percent said these writing activities made them like English learning more.

Changes in Attitudes

The project was started with the academics’ uncertainty and Ms. Hsu’s and the students’ anxiety and worries. The students, for instance, inquired about penalty for failing to write or not writing enough. They surreptitiously copied words onto their papers. However, through the Sharing Sessions, they soon realized that they were really allowed to enjoy drawing and/or writing freely. The changes in attitudes could be seen on tapes which showed the students’ fear at the beginning and later their excitement by shouting *Hurray! Writing Time!* with hands up in the air. Ms. Hsu and the academics were relieved when seeing the positive reactions from the students. In addition, Ms. Hsu’s reflection clearly demonstrated the additive value of the writing activities. The teacher’s hesitation and the students’ worries gradually turned into positive and welcoming attitudes toward the writing activities.
Verification of the Input Hypothesis

Krashen’s well known Input Hypothesis (comprehensible input) has been supported by other researchers. The observation from our project provided one more piece of evidence to verify such a proposal. It might be too early to conclude the effects of the leveled instruction (i+1) given during Sharing Sessions on the students’ language learning. However, the students’ performance in managing linguistic-related mechanics and employing strategies when they wrote did indicate the importance of the input being comprehensible and matching the learners’ levels and needs.

During the Sharing Sessions, some writing mechanics and spelling strategies were taught. Learning took place and the changed behaviors were obviously detected in the written production. For example, the spelling-line strategy was taught as the \( i+1 \) instruction. Replacing a punctuation mark used in Mandarin (Figure 4a, “、” functions as a comma) with the correct mark in English (Figure 4b) was taught as the \( i+1 \) instruction on mechanics in Writing 3. Figure 4b was collected in Writing 4. From then on through Writing 9, the Mandarin mark nearly disappeared in students’ writing.

![Figure 4a](image)

**Figure 4a**

A writing sample using Chinese punctuation
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This ongoing project in Ms. Hsu's grade one classes, instead of starting as a study with specific research questions, began simply as a project for curriculum development and activity design and therefore, this report cannot present any research findings. Since this paper presents the project-related matters in only the first four months of the project and these young learners had not been assessed formally on their four language skills, the students’ achievements of such a practice cannot be reported here. Though it is too early to conclude anything, the observations, test findings and questionnaire results are so significant that they shed light on the possibility, the methods and the benefits of incorporating writing into an EFL curriculum at the outset.

According to Gundlach, McLane, Stott, and McNamee (1985), there is no compelling reason to support that early playful writing experiences are absolutely crucial in learning to write. In our project, however, such playful writing activities seemed to provide opportunities for the simultaneous learning of the four language skills. The progress observed in these students’ writing products and the
responses from the students as well as the reflections from Ms. Hsu demonstrated the value of carrying out playful writing activities early on.

This present balanced program might be different from other beginning English curriculums only on this weekly 10-minute writing session. As explained earlier, other class time was filled with activities, such as singing, chanting, reciting, drilling, etc., which is similar to many other EFL classrooms. The writing activity provided opportunities for recalling and revisiting what had been learned in meaningful and playful contexts. However, the authors certainly cannot deny the value of the stimuli from the other activities, and recognize that they also contributed to the students’ English learning.

Leki (2005) argued that “writing instruction is better suited than any other kind of language instruction to operating at the students’ current level of proficiency without holding other students back” (p.87). Swain (1985) presented a similar notion, that is, students at lower levels of proficiency use writing to generate target language output that can reflect each individual’s best performance and they are not holding other students back in this writing practice. In speaking or reading classes, however, students of lower proficiency levels may have a difficult time catching up and thus would hold themselves and other students back. Moreover, Bardovi-Harlig’s (2000) and Weissberg’s (2000) studies show that more complex language forms in a learner’s developing language system first appear in text rather than in spoken interactions. Therefore, it seems that writing should not wait and should be incorporated into early learning, which would facilitate the development of the four language skills.

In the present study students of different proficiency levels did
work at their own pace, without holding any other students back. However, no extra in-class assistance or remedial programs were provided to help the slow learners to catch up, except for the checking and the assistance made by the group leaders while doing the group-review sheets. The size of the class and the tight schedule of the curriculum made it difficult to plan for any extra assistance. In the second semester of the program, considering the slow learners, the authors incorporated writing into a cooperative writing practice in heterogeneous groups. However, this arrangement did not function well in class. We therefore resumed the previous practice of individual writing.

Teachers in all settings may be curious about if there is a best way to incorporate writing into English curriculum. Hyland (2002) has argued that there is no best way and proposed that the best way is for teachers to be flexible and supportive. In the present project, being flexible, the authors, based on some theoretical framework, tried out the plan, examined the results, modified the practice, and tried it out in the following week. Being supportive, the authors, considering the appropriate $i+1$ instruction, complimented the products by the writers of different language levels and encouraged them to move a step forward.

In the project, writing activities, taking the least class time in the whole curriculum (10 minutes a week), provided the most valuable opportunities to integrate the four language skills. Moreover, the writing activities provided the most observable significant records revealing the learners’ learning process and achievement. This report intends to encourage practitioners to integrate the four language skills
as early as possible into the curriculum with proper materials and well planned activities. By allowing students to write, a teacher is fostering learning of the four language skills simultaneously in meaningful contexts.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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Hsiu-fen Hsu is Director of General Affairs and Coordinator of English Curriculum and Teaching at Siang-he Elementary School in Chiayi County, with enthusiasm and experiences of teaching English to young EFL learners. She uses multi-media and various materials in her teaching.
APPENDIX

Appendix 1
A page from the textbook

Appendix 2
Test letter names and letter shapes

Worksheet on Letters A-J

Instructions:
Listen to the teacher and circle the correct letter.

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<td>5.</td>
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Appendix 3
Test of beginning sound

Worksheet on Letters A-I:
(Instructions)
Listen to the teacher and pick the right word and picture.
Focus on the beginning sound of the word.

- apple
- book
- cook
- fox
- key
- cat
- car

Appendix 4
Test picture names and words in print

Worksheet on Letters A-I:
(Instructions)
Pick the right word for each picture.

- apple
- cat
- ball
- help
- dog
- book
- cat
- ball
Appendix 5
Group-Review Sheet

Appendix 6
Part of the pretest and the posttest on phonics knowledge

一、聽音圈選字母。把老師說的字母圈起來。
(Circle the letter read by the teacher.)
(1) z b M
(2) a h p

二、聽音寫字母。把老師說的字母的大寫和小寫寫出來。
(Write the paired uppercase letter and lowercase letter given by the teacher.)
1. 大寫________ 小寫________
2. 大寫________ 小寫________

三、連連看：大小寫配對。請畫一條直線把每一個字母的大小寫連起來。
(Match the paired uppercase letter and lowercase letter.)
H I A B F J
a f h i j b
Appendix 7
Part of the questionnaire on the writing activities (in Mandarin)

英語課寫作活動問卷

1. 你喜歡英文課的時候，許老師讓你們做的塗塗寫寫的活動嗎？
2. 你覺得許老師給你們做的「塗塗寫寫活動」的時間夠嗎？
3. 塗塗寫寫活動之後，許老師都會在電視上放出來一些小朋友寫的東西給大家看，你喜歡看別人寫的東西嗎？

Appendix 8
Part of the response sheet (in Mandarin)

英語課寫作活動問卷

1. ( ) 1.喜歡 2.不喜歡 3.沒有感覺
2. ( ) 1.夠 2.不夠
3. ( ) 1.喜歡 2.不喜歡 3.沒有感覺
以寫作活動串連英語聽說讀寫技能—
以台灣國小一年級教室為例

摘要
長期以來，第二語言的教學活動設計大都是依循著
聽、說、讀、寫循序漸進的設計原則。然而，越來越多
的學者認為設計合宜的教學活動可以促發聽、說、
讀、寫技能的同時發展，更進而提升學習效果。但是，
如何設計適當的學習活動以便達成此一目標，這方面
的相關文獻和實證報告卻不多見。2006年9月，本文
作者開始在南台灣的一個國小的一年級英語課室中推
動聽說讀寫並行的教學活動。作者希望透過書寫活動
的穿針引線將聽說讀寫串在一起，以便發展一個兼顧
四個語言技能的均衡課程。兩年多來，這一百多為以
國語或台語為母語的學童對英文書寫活動抱持著極正
面的態度，作品除了展現進步的跡象，也提供了許多
具有學術研究價值的資料。本文章將說明2006年9月
至2007年1月間，這些學童一年級的第一個學期時，
我們所使用的自編教材、所進行的教室活動，特別是
書寫活動的部分，以及我們所觀察到的相關發現。

關鍵詞：外語學習 低年級學童 書寫