

# Principles for Teaching Writing in English to Beginner EFL Students

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**Abstract:** This paper draws together two key educational frameworks, Otemae University's C-PLATS: A Problem-Solving Ability Development System (Ashihara, 2008, 2011) and The Four Strands of a Language Course (Nation, 2001, 2013), in order to create a guide for teaching practical writing skills to beginners. After describing these frameworks, the authors present a number of fundamental principles to facilitate this process.

**Keywords:** EFL/ESL writing course design, development of beginners' writing skills, C-PLATS

## 要約

本論文は、「問題解決開発メソッド・C-PLATS」(蘆原, 2008, 2011)と The Four Strands of a Language Center (Nation, 2001, 2013)の二つの教育的システムについて考察し、初心者を対象とした実践的英作文入門書を作成することを最終的な目的としている。

キーワード: EFL・ESLにおける英作文授業のありかた、初心者の英作文技術を向上させること、C-PLATS

## The key frameworks

This paper builds upon two educational models to present effective and engaging ways to teach writing skills to beginning English learners. The first model, C-PLATS, was originally created in 2008 at Otemae University, a private university in western Japan, to develop students' problem-solving skills by utilizing six key competencies: Creativity, Presentation, Logical Thinking, Artistic Sense, Teamwork and Self-control. Ashihara (2011) considers these core competencies to be essential in preparing students to successfully function as members in society. In 2011, this framework was updated to include 10 sub-competencies (see Figure 1) classified into three groups related to Thinking, Action, and Social Responsibility.



Figure 1: Competency Platforms at Otemae University (Ashihara, 2011)

The second model, and a well-known framework in EFL course design, is the The Four Strands of a Language Course by Nation (2001, 2013). As described by Nation (Laufer, Meara, & Nation, 2005) and further examined by Sheridan's piece in this volume, it provides learners with optimal opportunities for learning. It proposes that any successful language course must consist of four balanced strands: meaningful input, meaningful output, language-focused learning and fluency development. According to Nation (2013), when applying this theory to teaching writing, students should be given the opportunity to:

- perform writing activities that match their level of current knowledge (meaning-focused output),
- integrate reading and listening activities (meaning-focused input) with writing activities (meaning-focused output),
- practice writing that explicitly focuses on aspects of the writing skill (language-focused learning),
- use language they are already familiar with to freely convey their message without being marked for errors (fluency development).

A well-balanced language course should place an equal amount of emphasis on each of these strands.

The authors will now examine the ways in which the aforementioned frameworks contribute to the overall success of a writing program for beginners and establish six key principles that contribute to accomplishing this.

### **Principle 1: Teach writing at the word and sentence levels**

Laufer (1989) and Nation (2001) have shown that a second language learner's vocabulary size is strongly correlated with their overall L2 competence. Browne, Culligan, and Phillips (2013) reveal that knowledge of just the first 2801 lexical items found on their New General Service List (NGSL) gives learners over 90% coverage of the running words in general written texts (see Table 1). Laufer (1989) defines a functional lexicon as 3,000 word families and posits that knowledge of these 3,000 high-frequency word families is essential for L2 learners at the university level (Laufer, 1992). From this research, it is evident that considerable time and focus on this small group of high-frequency vocabulary is recommended.

Table 1: Coverage provided by the NGSL

Vocabulary List	Number of "Word Families"	Number of "Lemmas"	Coverage in CEC Corpus
GSL	1964	3623	84.24%
NGSL	2368	2818	90.34%

*Browne, Culligan, and Phillips (2013)*

Nation (2001) also advocates that direct instruction (language-focused learning) is particularly effective in teaching high-frequency lexicon to beginners and learners who lack functional vocabulary knowledge. Two popular explicit techniques that the authors have tested in their classrooms to teach writing at both the word and sentence level are traditional vocabulary cards and user-generated flash cards created on Quizlet (2005), and the collaborative learning strategies that accompany them.

When creating traditional (see Figure 2) or electronic vocabulary cards, learners are instructed to follow the guidelines below (from Sheridan and Markslag, 2014), adapted from Nation (2001, 2005, 2013) to help maximize their vocabulary gains:

- choose 10–15 unknown high-frequency vocabulary items per week;
- be sure to select items that are not related in meaning and start with different letters of the alphabet to avoid interference;
- promote retrieval by putting the English word and example sentence on the front of the card and the L1 translation on the back;
- use pictures when possible;
- include the vocabulary item’s part of speech and pronunciation;
- provide collocates when possible to help understand different ways in which the item is used.

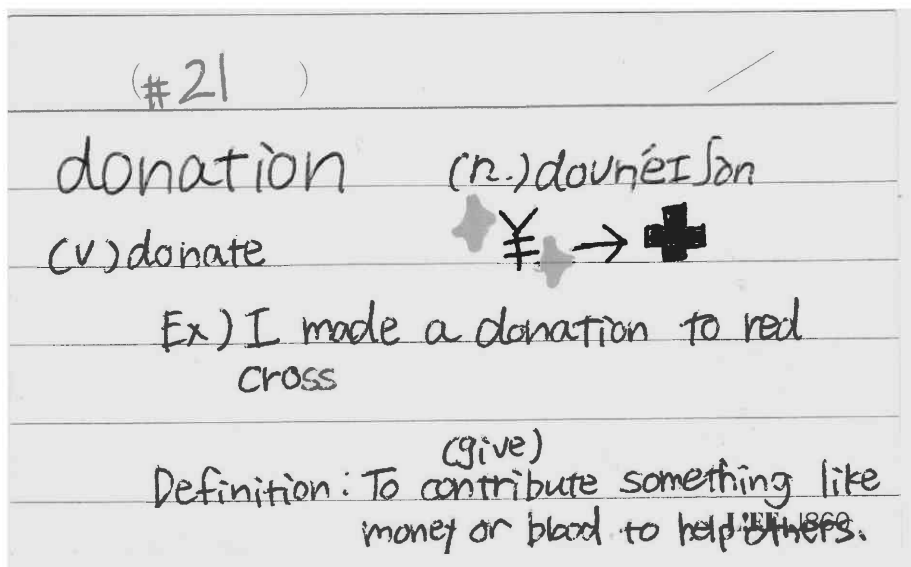


Figure 2 : A Sample of a traditional vocabulary card.

By allowing learners to assess themselves, analyze and plan in accordance with the C-PLATS planning and analysis sub-competencies, they are given the opportunity to autonomously choose their own vocabulary items and authentic example sentences, thus, taking control of their own learning. Tseng and Schmitt have shown that in order to help learners “become *self-motivated experts* in vocabulary learning” (2008, p. 388), they need to be taught which strategies to use, and how to appropriately use those strategies. Vocabulary cards are an effective method to assist learners in

identifying gaps in their L2 knowledge and working towards bridging these gaps.

Moreover, the use of collaborative vocabulary games, such as *Connections +* and *(Re)telling a Story* as discussed in Sheridan and Markslag (2014), promotes teamwork through active learning, while providing the repetition necessary to help students learn high-frequency vocabulary and develop deeper connections with the words by focusing on form, usage and meaning. These activities also encourage and motivate students through collaborative learning.

## **Principle 2: Pre-writing planning and heuristic techniques**

Prior to any composition task it is essential that writers, and in particular, beginner writers, are aware of what they fundamentally want to express. Through thorough planning, students are better positioned to produce an effective draft and express themselves more meaningfully as described in Nation's (2005) meaning-focused output strand.

“Pre-writing” refers to the initial stage of the writing process, which is followed in turn by drafting, revision, editing, and completion. Cotton (1997) has shown that encouraging learners to engage in a variety of pre-writing procedures results in much greater writing achievement than writing done without this kind of preparation.

The authors have found that allowing students to find or discover and, ultimately, clarify ideas through exploratory or elimination processes – that is, adopting a heuristic approach to the pre-writing stage – produces excellent results. Heuristic techniques involve experiences that aid problem-solving competencies: writers continually gather, experiment with, discard and modify information.

Brainstorming is a highly effective and collaborative method of eliciting topics and formulating ideas. All class members should participate and the process should not involve criticism – it is purely an information-gathering exercise.

Additionally, there are other methods that students can adopt to successfully gather content and apply it to meaningful writing. They should consider looking at ways to improve and ask themselves a number of heuristic questions that address and aid this gathering process. Key questions the student should consider are:

- *Am I able to effectively incorporate key vocabulary into my project?*
- *Have I selected the most precise, effective and appropriate words to express my message?*
- *Is the level of my writing relevant to the context in which it is being used?*
- *Am I being repetitious in the use of key vocabulary and phrases?*
- *Is my work interesting to the reader?*

In most cases, self-assessment and self-editing strategies such as reading texts aloud to peers for feedback greatly assists in the pre-writing stage. Additionally, knowledge of basic grammatical rules, structures, and their application to sentence formation, contributes greatly to offering and appreciating

feedback from both teachers and peers. This grammatical understanding plays an important role in the pre-writing stage.

As exemplified throughout this stage of the writing process, activities such as brainstorming, verbally and non-verbally presenting texts for feedback along with other heuristic pre-writing techniques promote planning, teamwork, logical thinking, and analysis, as well as presentation, which the C-PLATS framework advocates as integral factors in the problem solving process. Moreover, this stage helps to draw learners attention to the form of the language while providing opportunities for meaningful input and output as described as essential components in Nation's (2005) four strands. With this in mind, let us now examine the relevance of grammar instruction as part of a successful writing program for beginners.

### **Principle 3: The inclusion of a grammatical component.**

One key factor of grammar-based-teaching (GBT) in writing is that it assists students in the discovery of the nature and nuance of a given language – that is; how a particular language uses regular patterns that are consistent and, more importantly, predictable in application and practicality. Another important benefit of GBT in beginner writing is that it helps students gain an understanding of grammatical structures and concepts and teaches the expression of tenses and time relationships through parts of speech. Without this grammar component, learners have only individual vocabulary output and thus, are unable to express themselves in any meaningful way. A focus on grammar also represents a focus on form (FonF), as meaning and form generally cannot be separated. FonF and GBT combine both communicative teaching and grammatical concepts which Nation (2005) identifies as two fundamental components of any successful EFL course.

Research in this field strongly suggests the most effective method in helping learners improve their understanding of grammatical rules is to utilize the student's written work as the model for discussion of grammatical components (Calkins, 1980; DiStefano and Killion, 1984). These researchers agree that it is substantially more effective to teach sentence structure, punctuation and usage in the context of the student's individual written work than by teaching these skills independently.

As the beginner writers begin to revise and edit their own compositions, teachers can then provide more practical grammar instruction to guide them towards identifying problems and correcting errors in sentence structures. This can be achieved through introducing grammar teaching into this process of revising and editing. It helps students apply these changes immediately and allows them to observe the relevance and importance of grammar in their own written work.

Because writing is a challenging, and in many cases, complex activity for beginners, teachers need to focus specifically on the grammatical concepts that illustrate and promote clear

communication and meaningful output. Weaver (1998, p.16) maintains “what all students need is guidance in understanding and applying those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing.” She proposes five grammatical concepts that greatly assist beginner writers to demonstrate improvement in the revision, style and editing of sentence forms.

1. Teaching concepts on subject, verb, sentence, clause and phrase, and their related parts of speech.
2. Teaching style through generating and combining sentences.
3. Teaching sentence through the administration of syntactic elements.
4. Teaching both the dialects of power and the power of dialects.
5. Teaching punctuation and the mechanics for convention, style and clarity.

As revealed in this stage of the writing process, learners are required to critically assess their content grammatically. This form of comprehensive analysis is critical as shown in the analysis and planning stages of C-PLATS.

#### **Principle 4: Teaching paragraph and discourse structure**

GBT in writing also seeks to involve and engage students in activities that present opportunities to use target structures creatively and meaningfully. This also provides the learner with structure awareness, that is, an awareness of form and meaning and how to appropriately and correctly formulate ideas that provide the building blocks for discourse and aid in the progression from sentence to paragraph construction. In GBT, errors become opportunities for further learning. Corrective feedback is a highly important aspect of grammar-based instruction. Learners should always be encouraged to self-correct and offer corrective feedback to classmates or peers. Furthermore, students naturally make use of their cognitive skills in the pursuit of second language acquisition (SLA). In fact, many second language learners find it highly advantageous to comprehend and appreciate how the English language essentially “works.”

These inductive and deductive approaches work in combination, as learners are encouraged to deduce grammatical patterns but are also given specific details or information regarding grammar. However, new or unknown vocabulary should not be introduced simultaneously with a new structure. Unfamiliar vocabulary can conflict with the students’ existing understanding of the meaning of a particular grammar form. Only after there is genuine comprehension of a structure should new vocabulary be introduced, particularly in contextualized exercises.

One of the most difficult tasks for beginner writers is learning the process of combining sentences to form meaningful and structured paragraphs. Hillocks (1986) states that “sentence combining practice provides writers with systematic knowledge of syntactic possibilities, the access to which allows them to sort through alternatives in their heads as well as on paper and to choose those which

are most apt” (150). While structured sentence-combining procedures provide students with guidance for creating new sentences, unstructured exercises allow more variation but still require students to create logical and meaningful sentences. Through oral and written sentence combination activities, learners better perceive the ways in which structure, punctuation and usage combine in sentences to express, relate and affect meaning.

The authors strongly recommend the integration of GBT into beginner paragraph writing at university. By incorporating grammar naturally into the writing process and the subsequent revision, proofreading and editing stages, we can greatly assist beginner writers in gaining confidence and markedly improving the quality and quantity of their work.

### **Principle 5: The integration of reading and writing**

There has been extensive research concerning the value of the integration of reading and writing skills in learning capacities. Graham and Hebert state in the 2010 *Writing to Read* report “we believe that reading and writing instruction will be even more effective when they are designed to work together to achieve common goals and reinforce the reciprocal acquisition of central literacy knowledge skills, and strategies” (p.76).

As university teachers, how do we assist our students in establishing main ideas and additional supporting details and applying them to the organization of logical paragraphs? Structures in texts contain signal words associated with them that help students to successfully address this (Neufeld, 2005). Sequence paragraphs frequently include the signal words first, next, and finally to indicate the progression of events, while words such as because, since and consequently constitute cause-and-effect paragraphs. Students who are competent readers are usually aware of the different styles and roles of paragraph formatting and the corresponding and relevant signal words contained. Through this recognition they are able to locate main ideas and enhance their understanding of a given text.

Once students have successfully been taught expository text structures, they can then apply them to generating paragraphs of their own. For example, during class time in the first semester of a writing class, students work on context-seeking exercises, allowing them more precise definitions of new vocabulary through the use of dictionaries. They are then encouraged to create original sentences from these words. As the students progress, the teacher introduces Guided Writing, that is, guiding the students in composing longer sentences or phrases via controlled or restricted activities such as providing authentic models as examples.

The assimilation of reading into beginner writing classrooms can involve getting students to read an article, poster, or text containing illustrations. This reading can be followed by a discussion on how the wording was organized and paragraphed. In further reading a strong emphasis should be placed on the grammatical, lexical and phrasal structure of a given text.

From the introduction of reading tasks, beginner writers can gain invaluable knowledge concerning the layout, organization, grammatical features, tone, style and overall message, which in turn, promotes logical thinking and fosters task-based-learning (TBL) through multiple and varied approaches to exercises and tasks.

Additionally and conversely, writing aids comprehension of a given reading, thus providing teachers with more opportunities to gauge or measure students' progress and ability, and further observe any misconceptions or areas that are unclear or confusing (Reid, 1993). "Students become better readers, writers and thinkers when they learn reading and writing together" (Carson, 1993, Spack, 1998, p. 84).

### **Principle 6: Developing writing through fluency**

According to Nation's (2005) four strands, learners should be given the opportunity to develop their fluency skills through writing freely using language they are already familiar with. They should do this without any correction from themselves, their peers, or the teacher, in order to develop proficiency and positive attitudes towards writing. The focus should be on the flow of language and the number of words produced within a specific period, regardless of spelling, grammar and content (Fellner & Apple, 2006, Brown, 1994).

Writing fluency can be achieved through a variety of well-established activities such as journals, diaries, stories, letters, 10-minute writings, and more. However, using the Internet and computer-mediated communication, asynchronous writing platforms such as blogging, social networking and emailing are becoming increasingly important tools for teachers to develop and improve learning (Fellner et al., 2006), collaborative skills (Beldarrain, 2006), online engagement (Lin & Yuan, 2006), and community building in the classroom (Arena, 2008).

Blogging has been shown to increase the amount of output, the quality of output, and the use of high-frequency vocabulary (Fellner et al., 2006). It is easy for teachers to track students' work and progress, including the number of entries and comments as well as the length of their work. Teachers can also easily edit or delete any inappropriate material and create new posts or material to help further stimulate discussion and input. Blogging integrates reading with writing as it provides learners with authentic learning opportunities. One student's output becomes another student's comprehensible input, helping them to develop both their reading and writing skills (Zamel, 1992, Nation, 2001).

The authors have adopted [kidblog.org](http://kidblog.org) as an effective platform for their students to improve their writing fluency and allow them the freedom to express and openly communicate with their peers in a private and completely secure environment. Students are asked to write one personal 20-minute blog on a topic related to the in-class lesson and make 3 comments on other classmates' blogs weekly as a tool to promote writing fluency, interest and self-expression. Learners should be able to progressively



produce an increasing amount of written language within this 20-minute time frame throughout the semester.

In line with the research results mentioned above, the authors have found this to be an extremely effective method for developing students' writing fluency. Moreover, blogging, in accordance to C-PLATS provides students with valuable opportunities to express creativity through writing as found in the communication, presentation and creativity sub-competencies.

## Conclusion

This paper presented and discussed the importance of two major educational frameworks instrumental in the implementation of a successful and practical teaching guide for beginner writers using Otemae University's C-PLATS and Paul Nation's *The Four Strands of a Language Course*. It also examined how these frameworks include, compliment and support principles that are fundamental to the success of teaching writing skills to learners at beginning levels. The principles listed and elaborated on in this paper promote the acquisition of sound vocabulary and grammar skills, encourage pre-planning and heuristic approaches and assist students in improving sentence, paragraph and discourse structure. The relevance of collaborative activities and exercises requiring inductive and deductive skills is also stressed by the authors – as is the importance of teamwork and peer feedback in the classroom.

These six elements are very much an integral part of the philosophy of the frameworks highlighted. Rather than acting independently from these frameworks, they in fact, function cohesively with them. The authors of this paper also firmly believe that the integration of the key problem-solving competencies outlined in C-PLATS, blend harmoniously with Nation's strands consisting of meaning focused output, meaning-focused input language-focused learning and the development of fluency.

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