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Can AI Support the Teaching of Writing in EFL Classrooms? A Case Study of Primary School Learners and Teachers in Grades 4–8

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Abstract

This article seeks to demonstrate that writing, widely regarded by primary school learners as the most challenging and unpopular language skill, can be effectively reimagined through the integration of modern digital tools. Within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, the teaching of writing has often remained traditional, relying on methods that no longer resonate with today's learners. In an era increasingly defined by technological fluency, it is essential to align pedagogical strategies with the digital competencies of 21st-century students. These learners are not only proficient in navigating digital environments such as social media platforms and online content but also express a clear preference for engaging with educational material through technology-enhanced learning. This paper argues that Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly in the form of language-based tools such as chatbots and text generators, holds significant potential to reshape writing instruction in primary classrooms. By integrating AI in a structured and pedagogically sound manner, educators may enhance student motivation, reduce writing anxiety, and foster creativity and linguistic competence. The article draws upon data collected from both students and teachers to explore attitudes toward writing and evaluates how AI tools might support and transform traditional writing pedagogy in EFL settings.

Keywords: AI. Writing skill. EFL Classroom. Teaching methods.

Why writing is so hard to teach and learn - introduction

According to Deane (2018), writing is the most significant development in human history. However, it is also regarded as the most challenging language skill by both teachers and learners. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts particularly, elementary and primary students struggle to produce

grammatically accurate and coherent texts due to limited vocabulary, underdeveloped sentence structures, and writing anxiety. The process of writing is viewed as the combination of numerous interconnected language skills (e.g. spelling, vocabulary, grammar). Although oral language is a recognized contributor to writing quality, the precise nature of the relationship, between aspects of oral language and dimensions of writing, is uncertain. Researchers have nominated numerous component skills that are related to overall writing quality, including handwriting fluency, spelling, reading, and oral language (Kent & Wanzek 2016).

The real struggle student's face with writing skill is evident in the 8th-grade final examination, where the written task consistently proves to be the most challenging component. The 8th-grade final examination consists of 14 tasks, including both closed and open-ended tasks. Upon analysing the structure of the examination, it becomes evident that only five out of the fourteen tasks effectively assess students' true understanding of the material. The remaining tasks consist primarily of multiple-choice questions (a, b, c), which provide students with the opportunity to guess the correct answer, rather than demonstrating their grasp of the subject matter.

Among the five open-ended questions, the final task is a writing composition, which requires students to articulate their thoughts in a structured and coherent manner. This task serves as a key indicator of students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills in a more complex, open-ended context. Task 14, a written task, holds the highest value, awarding 10 points. Despite its significance, this task is often the most challenging for students. Although students are aware that the task will typically require them to write an email or a blog post, and are provided with the introductory sentence, many still fail to attempt it. As previously noted, writing, as a skill, encompasses various elements such as grammar, spelling, and vocabulary, which are typically drilled during lessons. Despite these efforts, however, many students continue to struggle with writing, and a significant number express a dislike for the task. This raises an important question: why does writing, despite being a composite of skills that are regularly practiced in the classroom, remain a challenge for students? Research suggests that writing is fundamentally a culmination of several underlying skills, including speaking, grammar understanding, and vocabulary acquisition. These components are usually well-covered in language instruction. Yet, it appears that the issue lies not in the individual elements, but rather in the foundational approach to developing these skills. Students may possess the necessary knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but often, the integration of these skills into coherent, structured writing is a hurdle.

Several factors contribute to this issue. The years of the pandemic and the shift to online learning severely impacted students' writing skills, as opportunities for practicing writing tasks were limited. While grammar exercises and speaking activities could be effectively conducted online,

writing tasks presented a greater challenge. Furthermore, the recent regulatory changes prohibiting homework have added another layer of difficulty. Writing assignments, which require careful feedback and individualized attention, are now harder to implement within the constraints of the classroom setting. Additionally, the diverse needs of students, particularly in inclusive education settings, make it even more difficult for teachers to provide the necessary support for developing writing skills. With a large class size, the varying abilities and learning styles demand individualized approaches, which are difficult to execute when resources and time are limited. This situation exacerbates the challenge of teaching effective writing skills to all students. However, while the aforementioned factors are undeniably important, there is one more significant factor that outweighs these in the development of writing skills. The teaching method. The structure of the average student's textbook often divides content into thematic chapters, such as food, the animal kingdom, or home. Within each topic, various skills are targeted, including grammar, vocabulary, speaking, reading, and, occasionally, cultural aspects. Writing tasks are typically integrated into each chapter, resulting in approximately eight writing assignments throughout the school year, assuming an average of eight chapters per book. However, the teaching of writing is often neglected or minimized due to several challenges. One major issue is the inclusive nature of contemporary classrooms, where a diverse range of student abilities requires individualized attention that is difficult to provide within the constraints of time and resources. Furthermore, with homework assignments being excluded, opportunities for students to practice writing outside of class have been significantly reduced. In many cases, writing tasks are omitted altogether or relegated to group activities. While the entire class may collaborate on writing a piece on the board, it is often the most proficient students who take control of the task, leaving others to merely copy the work into their notebooks. In some instances, even this basic task is not completed, as students' notebooks are no longer routinely checked or graded. Similarly, group work dynamics can result in unequal participation, with the most capable students doing the majority of the work, further limiting the opportunity for others to engage with writing tasks meaningfully.

In England, primary schools typically teach English through a block system rather than teaching all the skills simultaneously as in some other countries like Poland. The English curriculum for primary schools is structured to develop skills progressively over time, with particular focus on different aspects of language learning at various stages.

1. Phonics and Early Literacy (Key Stage 1, Ages 5-7)[1]
2. Progressive Writing Skills (Key Stage 2, Ages 7-11)[2]

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[1] Department for Education. (2007).
[2] Department for Education. (2014).

Writing is often taught in blocks, where specific types of writing are focused on for a certain period. These include: Narrative writing (stories, poems), Non-fiction writing (instructions, reports, letters, etc.), Persuasive writing (letters, arguments), Descriptive writing (detailed descriptions of characters, places, or events). Teachers often use texts as models to show children how to structure their writing. For example, they might read a book or a short story, then write their own version using similar techniques.

3. Essay Writing[3]

By ages 7-8 (around Year 3), students will start practicing shorter essays, especially if they are working on descriptive or creative writing. Essay writing is often part of the curriculum, but it will typically be focused on organizing thoughts in paragraphs, using connective words (first, then, because, however), and developing clear ideas. Children are also encouraged to edit their work, which helps develop their understanding of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Instead of teaching every writing skill at once, schools in England tend to teach writing in blocks. This allows children to focus on one specific writing skill or task at a time. For example, a couple of weeks might be dedicated to writing descriptive pieces, followed by a block on letter writing or writing instructions. This helps avoid overwhelming the students while allowing them to master one area before moving on to the next.

The approach to teaching English in England differs significantly from that in Poland, primarily due to the status of English as a first language in the former and a second language in the latter. In England, English instruction focuses on holistic language skills, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and writing in an integrated manner. However, in Poland, where English is taught as a foreign language, there is a greater emphasis on grammar and vocabulary development.

The majority of assessments in Poland are designed to evaluate grammar, often in isolation from context. These tests frequently involve the manipulation of decontextualized sentences, where students are required to apply specific grammatical rules, such as using the correct tense, without being asked to produce their own sentences. Similarly, vocabulary tests typically consist of exercises that focus on word translation, rather than asking students to use the words in context or devise complete sentences. This segmented approach to language learning, where skills are taught individually, can hinder students' ability to apply their knowledge in real-world, communicative contexts, thereby limiting their overall proficiency in the language. In primary schools, it is common practice for teachers to rely on pre-made tests provided by publishers. These tests are typically structured into exercises that assess vocabulary acquisition and the grammar learned in the corresponding chapter. The grammar exercises are often divided into sections focusing on affirmative

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[3] Department for Education. (2014).

sentences, negations, and questions, with students primarily being asked to manipulate verbs in isolation. This approach, while systematic, tends to narrow the focus of language instruction, limiting students' engagement with the broader linguistic context.

The fragmented nature of these exercises, where students concentrate solely on individual grammatical elements rather than on holistic language use, fails to encourage students to consider the "big picture" of communication. As a result, when students are later asked to compose more complex written tasks, such as an email or a blog post, they often struggle to know where to begin. The lack of integration between grammar, vocabulary, and practical writing skills leaves students underprepared for tasks that require them to draw on multiple language competencies simultaneously. Therefore, after years of engaging in grammar exercises that focus on isolated tasks such as completing blanks with the appropriate past tense forms (e.g., -ed for regular verbs in the Past Simple) or adding "will" at the beginning of questions in the Future tense, it is not surprising that students struggle to construct coherent sentences. The repetitive nature of these exercises, which focus primarily on grammatical rules, fails to encourage students to integrate these elements into more complex and meaningful language use, ultimately hindering their ability to produce well-structured sentences in communicative contexts.

Perceptions of English Writing and AI Tools in Primary Schools: Students' Views

A total of 177 pupils from four rural primary schools participated in the survey, which aimed to explore students' attitudes toward writing in English and their familiarity with AI tools. They were asked five questions in regards to their writing preferences and AI. The findings are as follows:

1. *Enjoyment of Writing in English*
   When asked whether they enjoy writing in English:
   - 45 pupils (25%) responded *Yes*
   - 132 pupils (75%) responded *No*
   This indicates that writing in English is not widely enjoyed, with a majority disliking the skill.
2. *Difficulties in Writing*
   Pupils were allowed to choose more than one option to describe what they find difficult in writing. The most common challenges included:
   - Grammar (66 responses; 37%)
   - Coming up with ideas (93 responses; 53%)
   - Getting started (112 responses; 63%)
   - Spelling (55 responses; 31%)
   Getting started and coming up with ideas were by far the most commonly cited problems. This points to the fact that vocabulary and grammar drilling is more frequent during the lessons, and therefore less problematic for the students.

3. *Familiarity with ChatGPT or Similar Tools*
   When asked if they had heard of ChatGPT or a similar tool:
   - 120 pupils (68%) answered *Yes*
   - 57 pupils (32%) answered *No*

   This suggests a relatively high awareness of AI-based tools among pupils, which is not surprising in the era when the internet, social medias are omnipresent.

4. *Willingness to Use ChatGPT for Writing Help*
   When asked whether they would like to use ChatGPT during the lessons to help with writing:
   - 137 pupils (77%) said *Yes*
   - 40 pupils (23%) said *No*

   Over half of the respondents expressed interest in using AI tools to support their writing. This is not unexpected since 21st century student should be taught using 21st century tools.

5. *In the final question of the survey, students were asked:*
   "What would help you write better texts in English?"

   The responses, though varied in detail and tone, revealed several clear themes. While some pupils left the question blank or responded with humorous remarks (e.g., "change the teacher"), the majority provided, somewhat, positive and constructive suggestions.

   Students requested help in the form of vocabulary banks, suggested phrases, thematic word groups, and tables with useful expressions. They also expressed a need for writing plans and examples to guide structure and content. Many students emphasised the importance of interesting and creative topics. Some suggested using prompts invented by others (teachers, peers, or AI) to make tasks more engaging. There was strong interest in writing activities involving cooperation, such as working in pairs or constructing stories sentence by sentence with classmates. Learners expressed a desire to do more writing during lessons and to use computers to make the process more enjoyable. A significant number of students mentioned the potential of using AI tools like ChatGPT to help with writing. They imagined lessons where AI could provide vocabulary, suggest content, or co-write stories with them. Overall, the responses reflect a clear awareness among students of the challenges they face in writing and a strong desire for modern, supportive, and interactive approaches to make the process more accessible and enjoyable.

   The pupils' comments reveal two converging truths. First, they are acutely aware of their own difficulties with extended writing and of the demotivation that arises from teacher-centred, paper-based routines. Second, they recognise that every classroom is already equipped, at least nominally, with computers and an internet connection; they therefore see little justification for persisting with "analogue" methods in a digital age.

Perceptions of English Writing and AI Tools in Primary Schools: Teachers' Views

A total of 34 English language teachers from various schools participated in the survey exploring the implementation of writing tasks and the potential use of AI tools in EFL classrooms (the survey allowed for more than one answer).

1. *Frequency of Writing Tasks*
   When asked how often they conducted writing-related activities during lessons, 10 teachers stated they assign such tasks *several times a week*, while the remaining majority (24) indicated they do so *less frequently*.

2. *Common Student Difficulties in Writing*
   The most frequently reported challenges among students included:
   - Difficulties with sentence structure and grammar (reported by 18 teachers);
   - A lack of vocabulary (reported by 22 teachers);
   - Uncertainty about how to begin writing tasks (reported by 25 teachers).

3. *Preferred Methods of Teaching Writing*
   The majority of teachers reported using:
   - Model texts as examples (reported by 29 teachers);
   - Step-by-step guidance (scaffolding), (reported by 25 teachers);
   - Some also mentioned pair or group work, but less frequently (12 responses).

4. *Use of AI Tools During Writing Lessons*
   Only 5 teachers admitted to having used AI tools (such as ChatGPT) in their writing lessons. The remaining 29 teachers said they had never used such tools.

5. *Reasons for Not Using AI*
   The most common reason given for not incorporating AI into lessons was a lack of knowledge and training about the possibilities and applications of AI in teaching writing.

6. *Purposes of AI Tools* (for those who used them)
   Those who had experimented with AI reported that they used it mainly for:
   - Designing worksheets;
   - Generating writing prompts or tasks.

7. *Perceptions of AI's Potential to Support Writing Instruction*
   When asked whether they believed AI could support students in developing writing skills:
   - Only 3 teachers answered yes;
   - The remaining 31 teachers responded "It's difficult to say", indicating hesitation, lack of experience, or uncertainty about the effectiveness of AI tools in this context.

The findings of the survey reveal a notable gap between the potential of AI tools such as ChatGPT and the awareness or willingness of teachers to adopt them in the EFL classroom. While only a handful of respondents (5 out of 34) had used AI during writing lessons primarily to create worksheets and model texts, the overwhelming majority admitted to lacking sufficient knowledge on how such tools could be implemented. Most teachers were hesitant or unsure whether AI could support students in developing writing skills, despite reporting persistent issues among learners such as difficulties with grammar, sentence structure, and idea generation. These results suggest that the problem does not lie in the technology's capabilities, but rather in the lack of training, time, and resources available to educators many of whom may be working in underfunded, rural schools, or come from older generations unfamiliar with modern tools. In this context, the underuse of AI appears less a matter of resistance and more one of missed opportunity. To address this, it is essential to consider integrating AI literacy and practical methodology into teacher education programmes at the university level. While it may be too late to expect systemic change from in-service teachers entrenched in traditional methods, there remains a real and urgent chance to prepare the next generation of educators for 21st-century classrooms.

How ChatGPT or other AI tools might help and inspire writing

Twenty-first-century learners possess both the technological fluency and the curiosity to benefit from AI-enhanced instruction, and they explicitly ask for it (as evident from the short survey above). Pedagogically, this opens an immediately new pathway to conduct the writing instruction. A lesson sequence might proceed as follows:
– Lexical support (an AI supplies a topic-specific word bank and an opening sentence).
– Alternating authorship (students compose the next sentence using a topic-specific word bank already provided, the AI writes the subsequent sentence, and so on).
– Gradual release of support (as learners gain confidence, they write multiple sentences before the AI intervenes, and eventually turn to the AI only when they stall).

This "conversational writing loop" functions as a scaffolding in the Vygotskian sense, positioning each learner firmly within their Zone of Proximal Development[4] while maintaining high engagement. It also models authentic drafting practices, brainstorm, draft, receive feedback, redraft, in real time, something traditional worksheets never achieve. The zone of proximal

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[4] The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a concept introduced by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, as part of his work on cognitive development. It refers to the range of tasks that a learner can perform with guidance or collaboration but cannot yet perform independently.

development (ZPD) has been defined as: "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). In 1978 when Vygotsky introduced this concept adult guidance and more capable peers were the only possible options, however the 21 century has brought us AI.

Moreover, the issue of motivation must be remark on. It has always been evident how important role the motivation played in a classroom, any classroom not only when it comes to a foreign language instruction. Primary school students due to their young age need constant reassurance. Since inclusive education is very much promoted in Polish schools it is difficult for a teacher to encourage, appraise and motivate all the students in a classroom during every task in during every unit lesson. Yet, as stated and considered in "The Motivation Breakthrough: 6 Secrets to Turning on the Tuned-Out Child" by Richard Lavoie (2007), the necessity for it is unquestionable. The manner in which ChatGPT delivers its responses is notably adaptable, tailoring its language to the level of complexity of the user's inquiry. The conversational style is intentionally clear and approachable, often mirroring the simplicity or complexity of the user's question. Moreover, ChatGPT maintains a tone of politeness and encouragement throughout its responses. Phrases such as 'Good job', 'Well done', and 'Certainly or 'You got it' serve not only to express affirmation but also to foster a positive, supportive atmosphere in the exchange, ensuring that users feel recognized and valued for their input not matter how good or bad it is. Such an approach would build confidence in a student each time he faces a writing task.

Integrating AI in this way capitalises on resources already present in schools, mitigates the monotony that students associate with writing, and aligns with contemporary calls for technology-enhanced, student-centred learning. In short, the very tools pupils use effortlessly outside school can and should be harnessed inside it to transform writing from a laborious chore into an interactive, motivating, and progressively independent act of communication. While the integration of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, into English language instruction offers significant educational benefits, it is not without its potential risks. The primary concern revolves around the access underage children have to the vast and often unregulated resources available on the internet. With the power of the internet at their fingertips, students may encounter content that is inappropriate, misleading, or harmful, which presents a significant challenge for educators and guardians. This issue underscores the need for careful oversight and appropriate safeguards when incorporating AI tools into educational contexts, particularly for younger learners. Fortunately, the number of students per classroom during foreign language instruction is regulated. According to the current regulation of the Minister of Education and Science, in grades IV-VIII of primary school, if the number of students in a class exceeds 24, the foreign

language lessons must be conducted in groups of no more than 24 students.[5] Since most classes compose of children slightly above that number automatically the group is split into two, therefore the average for a foreign language class is between 12 to 15 students, which allows the teacher for a greater control of the classroom environment. Moreover, since all the students work together on a given task (according to a lesson sequence presented above) on one computer it is easier for the teacher to supervise the task, and not so much dictating the pupil what to write, but keeping an watchful eye on the content provided by each of the young learner, and stepping in only if necessary. Of course there is a way of overcoming this particular obstacle, namely employing LLMs models[6], when once, the chosen model is downloaded, the link to the internet is not needed.[7]

Conclusions

Looking at the resources approved by the Ministry of Education for primary school students for their English lessons, it becomes apparent where the emphasis lies in the current educational approach. The structure of the lessons, along with the available materials, makes it relatively easy to predict the focus of instruction and its potential outcomes. Each student is typically equipped with a textbook, a workbook, and a notebook. While the first two are compulsory resources, the notebook has become less of a requirement[8], as teachers are no longer permitted to check its contents[9].

Upon examining the pages of the workbook, it is evident that the majority of exercises are grammar-focused. These exercises predominantly involve tasks where students are asked to fill in missing parts, such as letters, word endings, or complete words. A significant number of exercises are multiple-choice (a, b, or c), or true/false questions, particularly when they involve short, simple texts. These activities often lack a broader context or application, which may limit the development of writing skills. Moreover, similar situation is present when it comes to testing students' knowledge. Most teachers use premade tests (available on publishers' sites) which are constructed in accordance to set template. Testing mostly grammar and vocabulary acquired

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[5] Dziennik Ustaw, Warszawa, dnia 24 maja 2024 r., Poz. 781781; § 7. 1.

[6] Large language models (LLMs) are advanced AI systems trained on vast amounts of text data, enabling them to understand, generate, and manipulate human language.

[7] Coombs-Hoar, K. (2025). Integrating Artificial Intelligence into Foreign Language Instruction in Higher Education: Methodological Implications and Pedagogical Opportunities. LLMs (Gemma and LLaMA).

[8] The Post-Journal. *Poland's Kids Rejoice Over New Rules Against Homework, Teachers, Parents Aren't So Sure.* https://www.post-journal.com/news/top-stories/2024/04/polands-kids-rejoice-over-new-rules-against-homework-teachers-parents-arent-so-sure/?utm, [11.07.2025]

[9] Starting in April 2024, the Polish government enacted a decree that significantly alters the homework requirements for primary school students. Under this new regulation, teachers are no longer permitted to assign compulsory homework to students in grades 1 to 3. For students in grades 4 to 8, homework remains optional and does not contribute to their final grades.

at given unit. Therefore, the exercises include tasks such as: match the word from a table to a picture, fill in blank letters in a word, put the verb in a correct form, put the sentences in a correct order to form a dialog. Sometimes a short text is provided with true or false answers, and at the end a short writing task which, unfortunately, most students don't attempt to do since they have enough point from the close questions to get a positive mark.

Even though, the practice of checking students' notebooks has become less common, as teachers are no longer required to administer homework assignments in order to avoid rote learning[10] (in accordance to the new guidelines set forth by the Ministry of Education in Poland), rote learning continues to be a prevalent method of instruction in English language lessons in schools.

A significant challenge in language assessment arises from the reliance on visual memory in many students. Research indicates that students with a predominant visual memory often perform well when presented with multiple-choice questions, as they can visually identify the correct answer from a set of options (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012). This is because the answer is explicitly presented to them, which triggers recognition. However, when asked to produce a full sentence or engage in open-ended writing tasks, the cognitive demands shift. In this context, students are required to not only recall grammar and vocabulary but also to organize their thoughts, which often presents a much greater challenge[11]. According to Paivio's Dual Coding Theory (1971), the human brain processes information more effectively when it is presented both visually and verbally. This theory suggests that visual memory and auditory memory work together to create richer and more easily accessible cognitive representations. Bearing in mind Paivio's theory and drawing on *Studying: Recommendations from Experts* included in W. Scott Terry's Learning and Memory which states: "Effective learning requires an active mind and not passive exposure to the material. Learning has less to do with the intention to learn and more about how you think about the information […] Can you restate the idea in your own words? Can you think of an example? Can you connect it to something else you know? Does the idea make sense?" (2023:20), it is clear how much AI (namely ChatGPT) has to offer when it comes to teaching/learning writing skill.

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[10] In accordance to Stern, H. H. (1983), *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching,* where various language teaching methods and the limitations of rote learning, especially when it comes to applying language in real-world contexts are presented. And Ellis, R. (2006), *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, where insights into language acquisition theories, including the limitations of mechanical grammar exercises that focus on rote memorization are explored.

[11] While many learning models suggest that people have a dominant sensory memory type visual or auditory, research is mixed on how much this actually influences effective learning. Some studies suggest that a combination of both visual and auditory stimuli enhances learning, rather than relying just on one channel.

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