

# **A Good Start on Writing --Teaching Methods of Basic Writing Applicable Both to English & Chinese**

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## **I. Preface**



I felt privileged to join the 2-week Visiting Teachers Training Program arranged for the English teachers by New Taipei City elementary schools. I think this trip to Cerritos, California, USA, well designed and prepared, made each

member of the group feel moved and satisfied. I admit that I did not expect too much before I took the trip; however, it turned out to be a great memory I would never forget, and I really enjoyed every minute of it. I reckon that every part of the whole program, including the first week's morning ESL classes, afternoon English Teaching Training, the second week's observation in an elementary school, the "after-school" activities (a concert, a movie, a musical, a tour to the library, etc.), deserved to be reported; but I have my reasons to pick the topic-- basic writing—as follows:

- A. The class I observed was 1<sup>st</sup> grade and the time they spent on reading and writing really amazed me—they don't know many words, do they?
  
- B. In Taiwan, few school teachers teach writing, either in English or Chinese, even if they ask students to write. I believe it's because it's hard to teach and most students seem to know how to write. Teachers would say, "No one taught us, and we know how to write, don't we?"
  
- C. Many people are afraid of writing. My co-worker told me the reason she did not want to sign up for this program was that she did not want to write the report. These few days while I was busy working on this report, she really had a good gloat over my "misfortune".

D. I recognize that I am afraid of speaking in front of people. And that's why I became a teacher to overcome that fear. I don't write well, and I don't want to be a writer, but I am not afraid of writing. If I am afraid of writing, how can I ask my students not to be? I believe writing is very important, and every student needs to learn it well no matter what jobs they are going to take when they grow up. After all, they will all one day become parents, won't they?

E. The teaching methods my host teacher, Ms. Kim Roberts, used drew my attention and made me believe they worked. They might have been used in many places in Taiwan and proved to be useful for many students as well, but they are still new to me. I would like to apply them to my class and see if I can really help my students.

## **II. Reading Is Always Ahead of Writing**

I had been a homeroom teacher for three years before I came back to teach English a year ago. During those days, many parents worried about their kids' writing. They asked me how to improve their writing. My answer to them was always, "They have to do a lot of reading first." Reading itself is fun, but if the teacher can keep writing in mind while he/she is teaching reading, the students will benefit from reading even more.



While I was observing Kim’s class, I noticed that among the 5 hours (8:30am to 2:33pm, excluding the 15-minute recess and 45-minute lunch break) per day that she had to teach, half of the time was for language class. During the reading time, the teacher spent some time on phonics and sight words, but most of the time they were just reading books—the teacher reads to them, the students read to each other, or the students read to themselves. I like the way they call their opening session: D.E.A.R. which stands for “drop everything and read.” They have a big classroom, so they can have a place especially for the students to sit around the teacher who is sitting by a small stand with the big book on it and listen to a story. The teacher turned the pages and students would read the pictures first. The second time, they would read the story with the teacher. Then, the third time, the teacher would draw the circle map (I will introduce later) on the white board and retell the story. While retelling, the teacher wrote down the title of the book in the center of the small circle. Outside the small circle the

teacher wrote down the details of the story. After the circle map was done, the teacher asked the students to retell the story. The teacher would ask them to answer in four sentences each of which begins with “First”, “Next”, “Then” and “Last” respectively. In this way students would learn to limit their time and still



retell the story clearly.

### III. Pre-writing Activities

Before I started to teach Chinese writing, I had read some books and asked other teachers about how to teach writing. I found that many teachers did not teach writing and only gave the students the topic and ask them to do it on their own. As for the English writing, same thing happened: in elementary schools, the teachers talk, the students do not know enough words, so they could not write; in

junior high, the teachers talk , English writing was not a part of the high school entrance exam, so they did not need to learn how to write, either; in high school, the teachers would ask the students to write compositions, but they just don't teach, because "the students have been studying English for a long time, they were supposed to have learned how to write many years ago." In my understanding, the students who want to learn writing have to go to a cram school.

As a Chinese teacher, I taught students how to work out an outline first. I would tell them how to begin, how to write the details, and how to write the ending. Normally, I asked them questions, and asked them to answer me in their writings. (However, I didn't have enough time, so I often asked them to do the writing at home. We would have a little discussion, and I would give them written instructions (an outline with questions on it) and ask them to turn in the assignments after the weekend. I spent a lot of time grading the writing assignments. Sometimes my comments were longer than students' writing. But as an English teacher myself, I didn't teach writing, either. I only asked the students to make sentences. (I only corrected "CUPS"—capitalization, usages, punctuation, and spelling.) I thought they were too young to write.

After my observation to Kim's teaching writing, I changed my mind. Kim's students, in first grade and also didn't know too many words, but still were scheduled to learn how to write for 30 minutes every day. If they can start to

write at a young age, so can our kids. Here are the pre-writing activities Kim used in her class.

### **A. Drawing.**

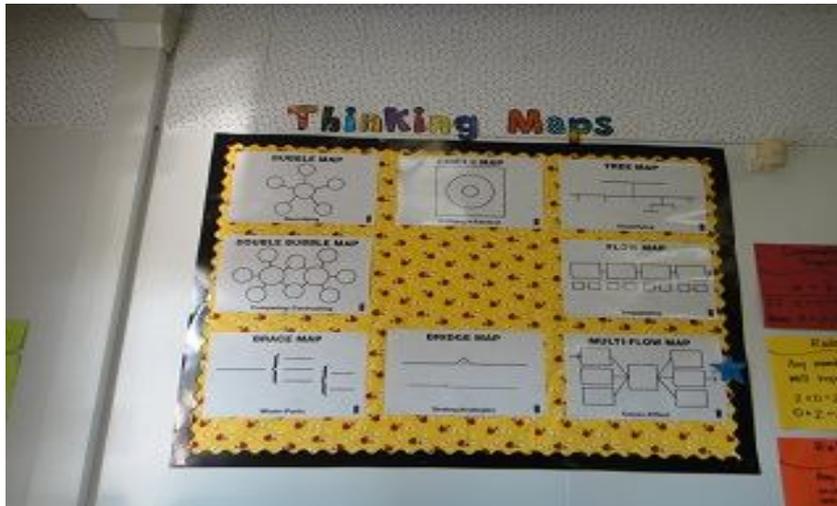
Give them a topic and ask them to draw according to the topic. For example, the topic is “Elephants”. They will draw a big elephant in gray, with tusks, and a trunk. Then they can describe the elephant in words. They don’t have to draw beautifully, but drawing well can be a bonus.



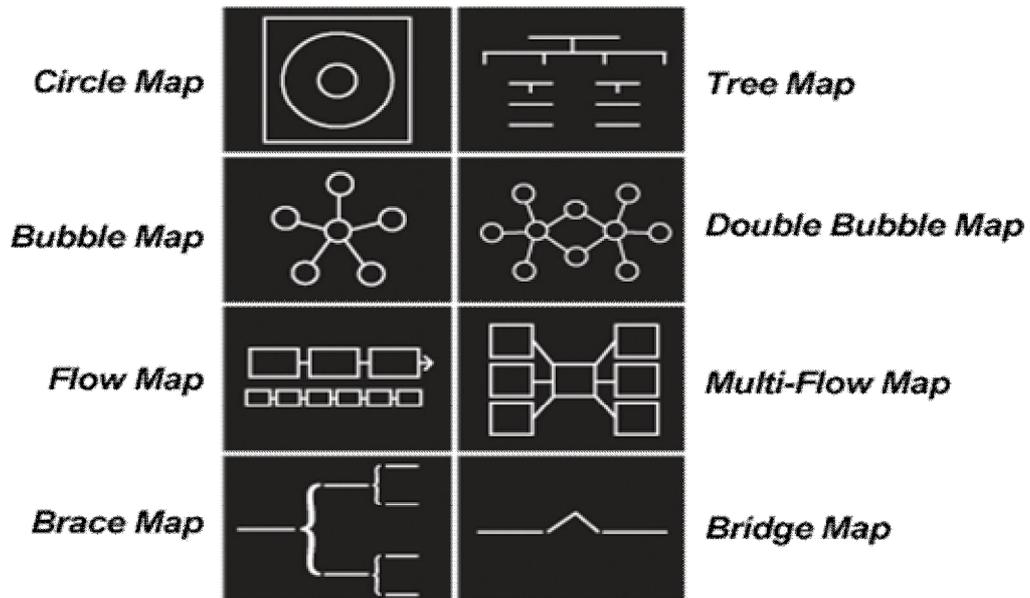
### **B. Thinking Maps.**

I noticed that the pictures of “Thinking Maps” can be seen in the bulletin board in every classroom of first grade. So I want to say something about “Thinking Maps” here. They were developed as a language for learning in 1988 by Dr.

David Hyerle. “There are eight maps in this language that are used by teachers and students (K-12; pre-K; adult



education, university and business) for reading comprehension, writing process problem solving, and thinking skills improvement. Through quality training, materials and support services, Designs for Thinking will support learning communities with the tools necessary to become successful thinkers, problem solvers, decision makers, and ultimately, lifelong learners. Thousands of whole schools from across the United States have received in-depth training and follow-up using Thinking Maps.”



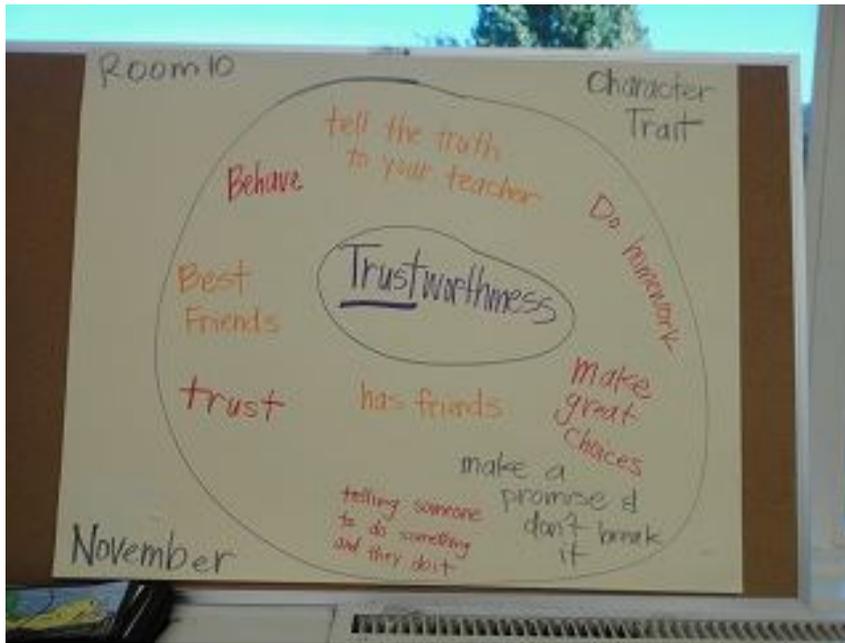
**Benefits:**

- Students learn more effectively and more efficiently
- Objectives are covered in less time with greater retention
- Thought processes are represented similarly throughout the curricula
- Schools also promote integrated thinking and interdisciplinary learning
- Teachers can easily gauge student knowledge prior to a specific lesson

- Student performance can be tracked accurately over time
- Students gain effective tools to use across their academic and working careers
- Lifelong thinking tools

(Hyerle, Ed.D., David (2007) Florance. Florance McEachern. *A Language for Learning*. North Carolina: Thinking Maps Inc.)

Among the 8 maps, the circle map is used frequently in the first grade. I mentioned that while we were talking about retelling the story. Drawing the circle map will be more fun and make the students understand better. And it is easier for them to draw the maps themselves compared to make an outline. Students just draw two circles—one small in the center, and a big one outside the small circle. Circle maps can be used in many ways like the one down here.



### C. Discussion and Brainstorming

After the circles are drawn, the teacher will add the discussion and brainstorming to give the students some ideas about how to write. The topic will be in the center circle, the teacher asks the students to provide what they can think of about the topic (e.g. vocabulary or phrases or details) and the teacher will write them down in the big circle. Then, the students can draw their own circle maps, and also write down the words (of their own or just copy the teacher's). While they are doing the real job of writing, they can use the words or phrases in the big circle; after they use the words or phrases, they just cross them out.

### IV. On Writing



With the drawing in the back and the circle map on the top, now the students are going to write. There are five lines and each of them has a small circle in the beginning. The teacher asks Ss to color the first and last circles green, because “the first sentence is the topic sentence which will show the main idea and the last sentence is the closing sentence which is as important as the topic sentence.” The other three lines/sentences are the details, and the circles are colored yellow. In the first few sessions of writing, the teacher will do a sample writing for Ss, and they only have to copy. Sometimes the teacher will start at the detail sentences and give the Ss the chance to find a topic sentence. The closing sentence concludes the whole writing, so the teacher should also offer the chance to Ss to say something they think about

the topic to end the writing.

Natasha <sup>10/31/11</sup> Date <sup>10/31/11</sup>

Our School Parades

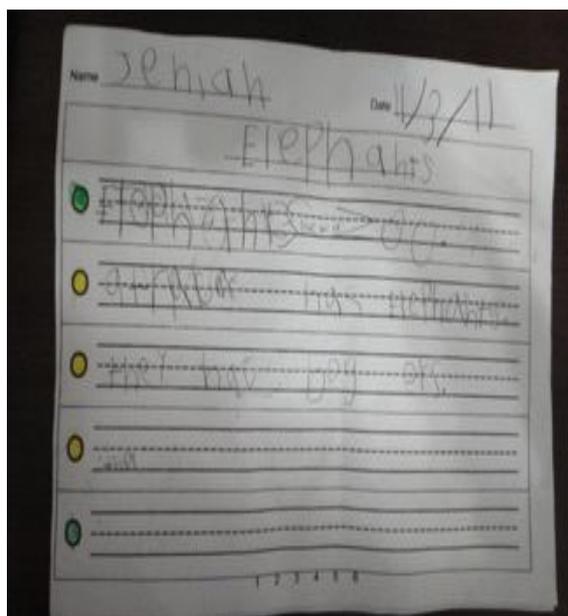
- Have you seen a parade?
- I walk in a parade at school.
- Parades were fun to celebrate.
- At the parade we wave.
- The parade is fun!

1 2 3 4 5 6



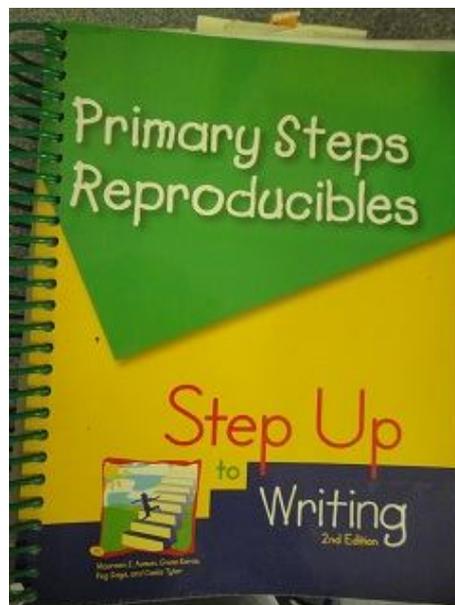
## V. Grading System

The teacher would correct their writing. She has a writing rubric that scores students from 1 to 4 in Writing Conventions, Writing Applications, and Penmanship. Students receiving a 1 are Not Proficient, 2 Partial Proficient, 3 Proficient (at grade level), and 4 Advanced Proficient. She would correct their grammar, punctuation, and spelling which are so-called Writing Conventions, because it is very important how students are taught and how they learn/master the skills of writing. At the point in 1st grade, students should be able to spell simple sight words (I, am, will, this, the, etc.), use inventive spelling, use periods, question marks, and exclamation marks appropriately. She also takes into consideration of Writing Applications, like if the student is staying on topic. This score also includes if they wrote a topic sentence, 3 details, and a closing sentence. I have two examples here with Jehiah would be a 1/1 and Vidushi's would have been 3/3.





The teacher would do a quick check on their spelling and punctuation and correct on their writing too. She told me she tried to correct weekly, but that doesn't always happen, so probably monthly. They would take a district writing test every trimester too with a given prompt. They just took it and some did better than others, and the prompt was to write about what they like to do when they are not at school. The teacher did introduce



me a book that she used for the writing class: Primary Steps Reproducibles Step Up to Writing (by Maureen E. Auman, Given Caras, 2006, Sopris West.) We can find a chart of “Rubric for Narrative/Story Writing-Primary” in the book which provides a more

**Rubric for Narrative/Story Writing - Primary**

	ADVANCED - 4	PROFICIENT - 3	BASIC - 2	BELOW BASIC - 1	SCORE
<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	well-developed plan	clear plan	attempts plan	no plan	
	interesting opening grabs the reader	common/simple opening begins story	attempts to write an opening	no opening	
	well developed beginning introduces setting, characters, & problem	clear beginning introduces setting, characters, & problem	simple beginning attempts to introduce setting, characters, & problem	writing starts without introducing setting, characters, or problem	
	events in middle clearly explained	events in middle simply listed	events in middle confusing	no events	
<b>CONTENT</b>	varied story connectors enhance flow of story	simple story connectors	attempts story connectors	no story connectors	
	ending resolves problem in a memorable way	ending clearly resolves problem	story ends abruptly	writing just stops	
	a variety of information given to understand story/characters	simple information given to understand story/characters	little information given to understand story/characters	not enough information	
	well-sequenced events show how characters solve problem/reach goal	simple sentences in correct sequence solve problem/reach goal	sequence of events unclear or disconnected	no sequence of events	
<b>STYLE</b>	detailed descriptions and actions develop character	simple descriptions of characters	incomplete character description	characters unclear or confusing	
	variety in way sentences begin	simple, complete sentences	short, simple sentences that begin the same way	fragments; sentences do not make sense	
	descriptive words used effectively	basic words and descriptions	repeated words or phrases	no descriptive words	
	story flows, entertains reader	story makes sense, easy to follow	story is confusing; some parts don't make sense	no sense of story	
<b>GRAMMAR MECHANICS</b>	very few errors in CUPS	some errors that don't interfere with reading or understanding the writing	several errors that slow down the reader	filled with errors that interfere with reading	
	INCLUDES CAPITALIZATION USAGE PUNCTUATION SPELLING				
	<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>				

logical and systematic way to grade the writing. According to the chart, there are four levels of students—Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced—while the Basic level students should have attempts plan, attempts to write an opening (in the category of organization), little information and unclear sequence of events (in content), short simple sentences to begin with the same way, repeated phrases or words (in style), and many errors that slow down the reader (in grammar mechanics—CUPS). The teacher of basic level students should allow the students to make mistakes since it is normal for them.

## VI. My Application

I am not a homeroom teacher now, but I think if some day I become a homeroom teacher again, I want to use the same teaching methods I learned this time to teach writing to my students. With the thinking maps and brainstorming and the format I give them, I believe they can learn better than my students did before. I used to give them a lot of comments, now I know it's not necessary, so I won't be doing it again and it will be a relief to me. As for English, now I am teaching first grade, I consider them too young to write anything. (They only know half of the alphabet). I think the students of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> who have learned enough English words are the right students to learn writing. Since they can make sentences, they can also learn how to write a short essay. Now I believe learning to write a short essay is better than just to make some sentences not related to each other. We should not wait until they have a big vocabulary. We should make them write and realize the words they learned are useful and meaningful. Writing is not hard, and they just have to start before it is too late. It's our responsibility, and I hope I can give them a good start on writing and a promising future on the path to learning English.

## **VII. Conclusion**

If I am still the same old teacher as I was before I took this 2-week program to California, , what is the point to take this trip? Just to learn I was good enough or this trip is not necessary? Of course I don't want to be the same old teacher. Teaching writing with the teaching methods I learned this time is the

first step for me to prove I made the right decision to join this group. I'm glad that I did.