Young Learner Writing Performance in Swiss Elementary Schools – Which Teacher Variables Matter?

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Abstract
Elementary school English language teachers in Swiss public schools often question the role of writing in early years language instruction because there is a significant disparity in messages they receive from Board of Education members, from fellow teachers and from teacher trainers. This study describes the issues concerning writing in the first years of English language instruction in Switzerland and presents data that suggest that teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking in every lesson is associated with better learner performance in writing (and the other skills) than teaching with a different balance of skills. A general writing rubric and some recommendations for writing with young learners in the Swiss setting are provided and the argument is made that teachers should indeed start with writing in the first year of English language instruction.

Keywords
Writing, foreign language teacher education, teaching effectiveness, young learners, early foreign language instruction

Issues in Teaching English Writing in the Early Grades in Switzerland
For several decades, the general trend in Europe has been towards an increase in the number of years during which the teaching of at least one foreign language is compulsory, and a lowering of the age at which this begins (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2008). The Swiss situation is no different than the situation in the rest of Europe. By 2013, all Swiss regions had adapted their curricula to integrate two foreign languages...
– a first language in the third grade (9–10 year olds) and the second foreign language in the fifth grade (11–12 year olds). In all of the German speaking regions of Switzerland excluding the regions bordering on the French part of Switzerland, English is not just an elective, but rather a compulsory subject, and is taught to second or third graders.

In order to teach English in elementary schools in eastern Switzerland, teachers must be fully qualified teachers and for English this means showing proof of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) B2/C1 level language skills, taking two courses in teaching English and participating in a three-week stay abroad. The teaching of writing is addressed in in-service and pre-service coursework in multiple ways through compulsory course book readings (Spratt et al., 2011 or Ellis et al., 2002) and in class. First, activities to teach writing from various closed, controlled activities to more open, modeled tasks are covered. Second, writing assessment is covered with a study of various rubrics and assessment models. Finally, a communicative approach to writing is promoted with a focus on developing pen pal relationships, digital storytelling and other meaningful writing contexts.

However, though writing is certainly addressed in teacher training, there are numerous conflicts in its implementation in the classrooms in Switzerland, and many of these are also discussed in Moon (2008) as being typical in the rest of the world. First of all, teachers in Switzerland have a limited selection of textbooks from which to choose. These official textbooks attempt to combine a content-based approach with a task-based approach. Therefore teachers are generally not using a grammar-based curriculum which has been shown to promote writing skills (Kreis et al., 2014). Furthermore, depending on which series is selected, writing is only minimally included and many of the activities are linked to labelling science and social studies-related materials such as parts of plants or bikes.

Secondly, perhaps due to the combination of top-down political approaches where boards of education mandate materials, teachers’ own feelings of what might (or might not) be necessary or the pressure they face from secondary teachers who expect writing to be introduced to young learners, there is much confusion as to how to deal with writing in the early years. With the argument that learners in this part of Switzerland are not yet proficient in writing standard German (Swiss German being quite different from written standard German), teachers are hesitant about teaching writing in English as well. So whilst Pinter (2011: 65–66) mentions that literacy has to be established in the local language before learning a second language, one could argue that second and third grade children have developed literacy in the local language, certainly not to perfection. Nevertheless, they have mastered basic literacy skills in their local language.

Moreover, there is the view amongst teachers that one has to master the sounds of the language orally first, before being encouraged see and write the written word, which may have been supported by earlier oral approaches (Palmer, 1923) but it could also be said that ‘reading and writing can help to reinforce what they are learning orally’ (Pinter, 2011: 66, also mentioned in Curtain and Dahlberg, 2010). Furthermore, as Harklau (2002) pleads, writing supports today’s multimodal interactions and is needed for such literacy.

Many regional boards of education have created guidelines about teaching writing. For example, in Schaffhausen in northern Switzerland, Ettlin et al (2009: 1) developed a document for teachers which states that writing in the third grade means:
1. Copying words or phrases
2. Copying of basic vocabulary has to be correct
3. Near correctness for basic vocabulary
4. Writing always in combination with reading or listening
5. Writing in combination with a picture
6. Writing in context
7. Writing in a creative and experimental way
8. Writing as a help to memorize basic vocabulary
9. Writing to become familiar with the relationship between sound and spelling in English.
10. All four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) have to be taught in useful combination

Such documents provide more confusion for teachers than support; for example what do points two, three and seven actually imply – do words have to be written correctly or not? Does the reference to the word ‘creative’ in point seven refer to invented spelling or is it more related to learners attempting to produce poems and songs? There are other points to question, but the point here is that various boards of education are spitting out guidelines which are not well conceived or based on data showing what is possible or what is necessary for young learners.

A further source of conflict for teachers is the current curriculum (Erziehungsdirektoren-Konferenz Ostschweiz, 2010) where language aims are set for the end of the third grade (after one year of English) and the end of the sixth grade (after four years of English). According to the curriculum, after one year of English there are no minimal aims in what concerns writing, though by the end of the sixth grade learners should be at a CEFR level of A1.2 or A2.1 (2010: 14). Lower primary teachers (first through third grades) often interpret this to mean that they do not have to teach writing. Yet even though Cameron states that ‘in general, the level of the language that pupils write will lag slightly behind the level that they are comfortable with in speaking and listening’ (2001: 155), no one is saying learners should not be taught to write.

This leads to yet another source of conflict – report cards. Third grade teachers in the eastern part of Switzerland are expected to provide report card grades for the subject of English based on the subcategories of listening, speaking, and in some regions reading. Writing is not a subskill that is reported in report cards in the first year of instruction. However, starting in the fourth grade it is a reported subskill in the school report cards. This puts third grade teachers in a conflict of deciding whether or not teaching writing in the third grade will help learners in the fourth grade or if it is better to have a good oral understanding before teaching of writing should start.

Finally, teachers in the third grade are not yet under pressure to have children begin to write in English. However, this pressure starts in the fourth grade when these teachers have to start teaching writing due to pressure from secondary teachers who often criticize elementary school teachers for not focusing enough on accuracy-oriented productive skills. Thus, there are third grade teachers who think it is acceptable to leave writing to the higher grades.
Teacher Variables Associated with Learner Writing Performance

Teacher Variables

The aim of this study was to find out what combination of teacher variables related to the Swiss model of teacher training are associated with learner writing performance in the young learner English language classroom (through variables indicating the teacher’s English language level, contact with the English language outside of the classroom, and instructional design). These variables represent different levels of knowledge: content or subject knowledge, or pedagogical content knowledge (Richards, 2010; Shulman, 1987; Freeman et al., 2009; or Andrews, 2001). For an elaborate discussion of the Swiss model of teacher training in relationship to these models, see Loder Buechel (2015).

Teachers are required to show proof of a B2/C1 level of English language skills for certification. This certification is supposed to give language teachers confidence to teach and provide young learners a good language model. However, the discussions on advantages of non-native teachers or the importance of the model put into question the necessity of such a high level of language competency (see Farrell, 2015; Davies, 2003; Llurda, 2006; or Andrews, 2003).

Second, teachers are required to go abroad for a three week teacher assistantship in an English-speaking country. Some remain in contact with the schools they taught in upon return to Switzerland and use the English language in this and other contexts in their free time. Thus contact outside of the classroom may also represent a certain motivation to maintain skills in the language and share experiences in the classroom, and it was hypothesized that the longer a teacher had been abroad or the more contact s/he had with English outside of the classroom, the better the learners would perform. Discussions on motivation and on effects of stays abroad are found in Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) and Wang (2014).

Finally, teaching profile was determined by gathering data related to instructional practices. This is information related to specific areas taught in teacher training courses and directly related to teaching reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The decision to focus on these variables was guided by the criteria used for elementary school English language teacher certification in Swiss German institutes of teacher education. The main question aims to find out which combinations of teacher variables (controlling for learner grade level) are associated with learner writing performance. In other words, do teachers with higher levels of English, with more exposure to English outside of the classroom, and with a certain estimated experience of instructional design have learners whose competence in writing are also higher than those learners in classrooms with teachers having lower levels of language competence, with less contact with English outside the classroom and who use another instructional design?

Participants

In order to be able to make any inferences about the interaction between teacher variables and to be able to collect the necessary information with the least amount of work for
The survey and a test were developed to provide this information and were administered at the end of the 2011 and 2012 school years. A total of 18 classes (15 different teachers) participated in this study. Learners were in their first or second year of English language instruction and those in their second year had had the same teacher for both years. One hundred and eighteen learners were in their first year of learning English; 157 in their second year of learning English and four in their third year of learning English (repeating the fourth grade). A total of 279 learners (9–11 year-olds) took the learner performance test at the end of the school year.

**Teacher Survey Preliminary Results and Development**

The teacher survey was used to gather information on teachers’ language skills, their exposure to English outside of the classroom and their ranking of time spent on specific skill-based activities in their teaching. In the first part of the survey, teachers were asked to provide their official test results on their qualifying examination as well as an estimation of whether their ability in each subskill (reading, writing, speaking, listening and grammar) had improved, stayed the same, or worsened since having taken the respective test. All teachers speak German as a mother tongue and one teacher grew up bilingually with English as well. Though only 50% of the teachers consider themselves bilingual, numerous other languages were listed as other foreign languages spoken (including French, Japanese, Finnish, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian). Table 1 shows the percentages of learners having teachers with a certain measured ability in the given subskill.

Teacher scores on the qualifying examinations ranged from a B2 to a C2 level and there is a good distribution of scores with teachers slightly below the minimal level necessary for qualification and a few above. Although the majority felt their skills had stayed the same since having taken their qualifying examination, many felt that their ‘Use of English’ (grammar) skills had gotten worse and the majority noted that their reading and listening skills had improved since then.

The second part of the survey asked teachers to provide an overview of their contact with English outside the classroom and their longest stay abroad. The lengths of stay abroad ranged from the minimum of three weeks to 19 years. The teachers also ranged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtest</th>
<th>Percentage of learners with a teacher obtaining this score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>7.90% 13.30% 14.70% 38.40% – 7.90% 14.30% 3.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>14.00% 7.50% 20.80% 24.40% 7.50% – 7.90% 14.30% 3.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of English</strong></td>
<td>8.60% 5.40% 19.40% 31.50% 6.50% 0.40% 0.70% 23.30% 4.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listening</strong></td>
<td>7.90% 6.10% 15.40% 44.80% – 7.90% – 14.30% 3.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking</strong></td>
<td>7.90% 7.50% 14.30% 30.80% 13.60% – – 22.20% 3.60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columbia English: First Certificate / **Cambridge English: Proficiency.

Table 1. Teacher Subtest Scores.
quite drastically in the number of weeks they spend using their English on holidays – from nothing at all to a full five weeks a year (almost their entire vacation). Regular contact with English outside the classroom is fairly common for all skills, but especially in terms of reading and listening; most have contact with English through reading for fun, through searching on the internet and interacting with friends and neighbours. The largest variation was for writing, where many teachers indicated very few opportunities for writing in English. It cannot be judged as to whether this is representative of the average teacher in the region, though contact with teachers in in-service workshops in the field would support this contention.

The final part of the survey gathered information on instructional practices used in a 45 minute English lesson. Instructional practices in this context are defined as priorities in teaching based on a general estimation of occurrences of certain activities in the classroom as well as knowing the frequency of these activities in the sense that the activity occurred in every lesson. Teachers were asked if an explicit focus on the activities listed in Table 2 occurred in every lesson and to rank the frequency of occurrence. The choice of activities reflects common elements of teaching such as a focus on strategies, group work and individual work, and whole class teaching.

Table 2 indicates that teachers tend to prefer rather controlled activities – listening to the teacher, speaking in chorus, reading and writing words. Furthermore, the results of this simple tally clearly show that the teachers involved do not place an explicit focus on strategy building and much class time is devoted to the word level in a fairly controlled fashion. Presenting to the class and more open activities that require more learner output were not favoured.

Teachers were also instructed to rank the activities mentioned in Table 2 according to their order of importance in their teaching and to provide the same rank number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity done with the class</th>
<th>Number of classes (out of 18) where it occurs in every lesson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>speaking / singing in chorus</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking / listening to English in pairs/groups</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking in pairs / to the teacher individually</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developing speaking strategies (practice in front of a mirror, etc…)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presenting to the whole class</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening to the teacher</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening to a CD or other media</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developing listening strategies</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading words</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading short texts / stories</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developing reading strategies</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing words</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing short texts (e.g. sentence completion)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developing writing strategies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
if activities had more or less equal occurrence. Unfortunately, the ranking data were ambiguous because there were too many different variables per teacher which were said to be of the same importance. Thus, the information about whether a type of activity occurred in every lesson was the main source of information for the proceeding step. An independent expert was asked to see if any main categories (clusters) of teacher types or styles of teaching could be made from these data and thus three main categories became apparent. These categories were then cross-checked with the rankings to ensure if a teacher said ‘reading, writing, speaking and listening’ occurred in every lesson, then the frequency of these activities was also high. The following categories were suggested and thus used:

- teachers who had a relatively balanced focus on teaching all the four skills;
- teachers who were very literacy oriented (children spent most of the time in class reading and writing); and
- teachers who did not focus on writing.

**Learner Writing Test Development and Preliminary Results**

For the learner writing test, a simple open prompt in the form of an informal letter was used: ‘Imagine that you have a new pen pal in the USA. In your first letter, you want to tell him about your life. What would you write?’ This prompt corresponds to the CEFR level of A1.2: ‘I can write down some personal information concerning myself (age, address or hobbies) on a list or a letter in which I introduce myself’. Table 3 provides the rubric created to score the writing samples. This rubric is based on a combination of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages writing proficiency guidelines, on elements of writing that are described in the Swiss elementary school English Explorers series textbooks (Achermann and Sprague, 2006) and from Lingualevel (Lenz, 2007).

As the subcategories of ‘readability’, ‘range’ and ‘focus on form’ are more subjective measures than ‘spelling’, ‘total words’ and ‘sentence length’, two independent raters were asked to score three writing subskills. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient was used as a measure of reliability, with ICC (3,1)=.84 for the total scores. Thus the final total scores for the writing test was the average of the raters’ scores for the three variables of readability, range and focus on form and the score based total words, sentence length and spelling. Figures 1 and 2 provide examples of high and low scoring learners.

In the top example (Learner A), the child’s communicative ability was clearly highly rated due to the fact that questions were asked. Both children showed usage of different sentence starters, not just repeating the same ones all the time, with ample content. Awareness of capitalization rules in English is demonstrated, though not always consistently applied. Understanding German is not necessary to understand these extracts.

Figure 2 provides an example of a sample from two low scoring learners. It is quite obvious in Figure 2 that one would have to be a German speaker to know what the learners were trying to express. Learner C’s text was short, with only one structure used, ‘I have’. Although with Learner D, quite a number of topics were covered and the text was rather long, there was no awareness of capitalization rules, of letter forms, and of spelling.
The question was ‘Which combinations of variables on the side of the teacher, controlling for the years of English the learner has had, contribute the most to learner writing performance’? Random intercept linear mixed models were used in order to investigate the associations between the learner writing scores and the many teacher factors. The full model included factors from the teacher survey at each level (teacher language skills, contact with English and teaching profile). From here, the teacher variables and the one learner variable (third or fourth grade) were thrown into the model where a backward selection was performed in order to remove variables which did not contribute anything to the model. In this way, only those variables which contributed to learners’ writing scores were left in what will be called the reduced model. These variables make the best

### Table 3. Writing Test Scoring Rubric.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Communicative aspect/ (readability)</th>
<th>Range and fulfillment (range)</th>
<th>Focus on form (form)</th>
<th>Total words (length)</th>
<th>Sentence length (complexity)</th>
<th>Spelling (correct up to A2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 3      | • At least one question asked of pal.  
• Thoughts connected and exemplified (I have one sister. Her name is Sarah).  
• Appropriate letter ending (bye, love, etc). | • Wide range of relevant structures and vocabulary within the task set (4 or more topics and 3+ starters). E.g. family; hobbies; school; house with ‘I have’; ‘My favourite’; ‘It is’… | • Awareness of capitalization in English.  
• Minor slips in accuracy (word order/tense/choice of preposition). | 66+ 6.5+ words / sentence | 1–3 mistakes |
| 2      | • Thoughts connected but not always exemplified.  
• Inappropriate letter ending but attempted. | • More than adequate range of relevant structures and vocabulary within the task set (at least 3 topics and 2 starters). | • Slips in awareness of capitalization in English.  
• Some constructions incorrect. | 37–65 5–6.5 words / sentence | 4–6 mistakes |
| 1      | • Requires some effort by the reader to follow thoughts (disconnected) and the fact that this should be a letter.  
• Thoughts listed, not connected.  
• No ending. | • Not very wide range of relevant structures and vocabulary (2 topics, 1–2 starters). Same structure repeated. | • Erratic / No awareness of capitalization in English.  
• No awareness of English grammar. | 37 or fewer 4.8 or fewer words / sentence | 7–10 mistakes |
| 0      | • Too little to evaluate, not a letter | • Too little to evaluate; irrelevant contribution | • Unreadable without knowledge of German.  
• Words on paper show presence | Words on paper show presence | More than 10 mistakes |

### Results and Discussion – Linear Mixed Models

The question was ‘Which combinations of variables on the side of the teacher, controlling for the years of English the learner has had, contribute the most to learner writing performance’? Random intercept linear mixed models were used in order to investigate the associations between the learner writing scores and the many teacher factors. The full model included factors from the teacher survey at each level (teacher language skills, contact with English and teaching profile). From here, the teacher variables and the one learner variable (third or fourth grade) were thrown into the model where a backward selection was performed in order to remove variables which did not contribute anything to the model. In this way, only those variables which contributed to learners’ writing scores were left in what will be called the reduced model. These variables make the best
predictor variables of learner writing performance, see Burham and Anderson (2002) for an in-depth discussion or Noble (2014) for a more concise overview.

Table 5 shows calculated regression coefficients with the corresponding standard errors in parentheses below for each of the mixed models. Significant coefficients are

![Figure 1. Writing Sample from High Scoring Learners.](image)
Both the full and the reduced models are shown, or before and after the backward selection. Both the sign (positive or negative) and the significance can be evaluated and the variables which remain in the model after backward selection can also be scrutinized, even if they are not significant as they were strong enough to remain. These results provide an idea of which combinations of variables are linked to learner scores.

The AIC (Akaike Information Criterion) totals at the bottom of Table 4 indicate the difference between the full model and the reduced model. What is presented in the reduced model is the combination of predictor variables that contribute the most. Any further variables would not add anything to the model.

**Figure 2.** Writing Sample from Low Scoring Learners.
Non-significant Variables

Some variables were not significantly associated with learner writing scores and were not strong enough to contribute to the reduced model. The first one was the teacher’s score on the qualifying language exam. Perhaps Goldhaber and Brewer (2000), Aloe and Becker (2009) and Wayne and Youngs (2003) were perspicacious in their findings which indicate that the language skills (in a monolingual setting) of the teacher were negatively or not associated with the performance of the learners in English, although some researchers tended (inconclusively) in the other direction (Andrew et al., 2005). Other variables which did not play a role were the teacher’s feeling of improvement from the time of the qualifying examination, the number of years teaching and the number of languages spoken. So in the study, it seems that other factors played a greater role in learner writing performance than these factors. Though a lot of money is invested in the teacher’s subject knowledge (in this English language), it seems not to be the variable that contributes the most to learner writing performance.

Table 4. Full and Reduced Multivariable Mixed Models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner Writing Scores</th>
<th>Full</th>
<th>Reduced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>14.10 (1.61)</td>
<td>12.31 (.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learner factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fourth grade</td>
<td>1.56 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.10** (0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher indicators of (life) experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total years teaching</td>
<td>−0.05 (0.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number languages spoken = 4 vs. 3</td>
<td>−0.42 (0.96)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number languages spoken = 5 vs. 3</td>
<td>0.77 (1.02)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning technique = implicit (vs. explicit)</td>
<td>2.18 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.65* (0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher indicators of teaching characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minutes German per lesson</td>
<td>−0.07 (0.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach: no writing (vs. bal. skills)</td>
<td>−3.34* (0.89)</td>
<td>−2.40** (0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach: traditional (vs. bal. skills)</td>
<td>−2.85* (1.01)</td>
<td>−2.19* (0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher scores on official qualifying exam</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher total scores</td>
<td>0.06 (0.28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher indicator of level change since exam</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking = gotten worse</td>
<td>.00 (1.55)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking = gotten better</td>
<td>−.52 (0.97)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher contact with English outside of school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years abroad</td>
<td>−0.13 (0.06)</td>
<td>−0.11* (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly contact/year</td>
<td>0.39 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.31 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD of random intercept</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC (ML-based)</td>
<td>1402.34</td>
<td>1397.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05; **p<.01.
As to be expected, one positive association with the learner writing scores in both models was grade level – in this test, fourth graders performed significantly better than third graders. This provokes the question of whether this has anything to do with English language teaching or rather general progression of writing skills in the local language which might subsequently transfer to second language tasks.

In analysing the data more closely, it appears that there was no significant difference between the third and fourth graders in terms of the readability of their texts, their awareness of form, and their sentence complexity and their spelling scores. However, the fourth graders performed significantly better than the third graders in the range of English words they used, the number of sentences they wrote, the level of the words they selected as well as their total number of words used (see Table 5).

### Table 5. Third and fourth Graders’ Writing Subscores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>third graders</th>
<th>fourth graders</th>
<th>T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Range of words</td>
<td>3.61 1.38</td>
<td>4.79 1.08</td>
<td>−7.65*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sentences</td>
<td>6.64 2.96</td>
<td>10.64 3.76</td>
<td>−9.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level words (A2 plus (yes or no))</td>
<td>0.22 0.41</td>
<td>0.46 0.50</td>
<td>−4.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of words</td>
<td>35.60 17.24</td>
<td>66.11 29.05</td>
<td>−10.1*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05.

### Grade Level

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In analysing the data more closely, it appears that there was no significant difference between the third and fourth graders in terms of the readability of their texts, their awareness of form, and their sentence complexity and their spelling scores. However, the fourth graders performed significantly better than the third graders in the range of English words they used, the number of sentences they wrote, the level of the words they selected as well as their total number of words used (see Table 5).

### Teacher Methodology

the findings of this study would support teaching methodology being a strong indicator of learner writing performance as it does seem to interact strongly with learner performance when other factors are involved. In both the Moradkhani, Akbari, Ghafar Samar and Kiany (2013) and Richards (1998) analyses of pedagogical content knowledge, methodology is mentioned in terms of understandings of general theories of teaching, decision-making skills, knowledge of language-teaching specific theories and management skills – all of which are elements of a decision to apply a specific methodology. In this study, clearly the balanced-skills approach to teaching English to third and fourth graders was shown to be advantageous, and this is only a small indication of methodology.

In scrutinizing the data here, however, one can see that the teachers who had a balanced-skills approach to teaching also had a more controlled approach to teaching. Though each of the four skills was present in each of their lessons, rather teacher-centered activities represented each of the four skills (writing individual words as compared to writing short texts). Thus ‘time on task’ is also supported here – teachers who included writing (balanced-skills teachers) also had learners who performed well in
writing. Teachers who included writing but had a more traditional approach to teaching (neglecting speaking) did not have learners whose scores were as high.

Moreover, due to the fact that references to strategy-building were almost never checked in the teacher survey, these points were omitted from the analyses and this is telling in its own way. This means that only those class activities which are pure time engaged in practicing the skill itself (listening to CDs, reading words, writing short sentences) were included in the grouping of teachers. Though one would expect that teachers teach learning (not necessarily English), the fact that the statements related to the teaching of strategies were not ticked was surprising.

**Time Abroad**

Unexpectedly, the number of years a teacher lived abroad was negatively associated with learners’ writing scores. Higher levels of regular weekly contact were also negatively associated with the learners’ writing scores, though it was hypothesized that this would represent a certain motivation and enjoyment in using the language outside the classroom that perhaps transmits itself inside the classroom (such as setting up pen pals). It could be that in this case, the same teachers who lived the longest abroad were also the highest scorers, a similar construct of language proficiency being ‘over the heads of the learners’. Teachers in this study who had lived extensively abroad or who have regular exposure tended to be better in English. Regular contact, especially through extensive time abroad, strengthens language skills. Teachers with such extensive exposure may have even picked up oddities and idiosyncrasies of the language which may make them more authentic but less understandable to their class, and also increase their expectations of class performance. Perhaps this exposure also encourages them to focus more on speaking and oral communication than writing.

**Teachers Learning Implicitly?**

Teachers who learned English rather implicitly had learners who performed significantly better than those with teachers who mentioned learning English explicitly through language courses. Perhaps they see writing not as a struggle but rather as a part of learning which is to be expected, whilst those having participated in more language courses saw perhaps the difficulty involved in learning how to write. This can also indicate that these teachers had a more ‘holistic’ or even ‘natural’ approach to their own learning which impacted their classroom behaviours in teaching writing. It could also mean that they learned spelling a bit more subconsciously and were, for whatever reasons related to this, better able to present meaningful writing situations to their learners or simply were not afraid of teaching writing.

Though difficult to determine how much having English in school is the reason for this complexity, it would appear that being in the fourth grade, in combination with having a teacher who focuses on all four skills (not neglecting one), having learned English rather implicitly and having a teacher who has not been abroad for a lengthy period of time, is associated to learner writing skills, and also hopefully conducive to writing.
Implications

Implications of this research might play out on the levels of pre-service teacher education, in teaching and in teacher observations. First of all, it would appear that a teacher’s level of English is not a determining factor in learner writing performance in this context. This would support our local teacher training colleges encouraging pre-service teacher candidates to not worry so much about their level of language proficiency, but rather to take more time to learn about teaching writing and balancing all four skills in the young learner classroom. The pressure on pre-service teachers to improve their own language skills might be downplayed and discussions based on Richards and Farrell (2011: 4) would do well to be analysed in teacher training so teacher candidates of high levels learn to break down their speech and those with less advanced language skills focus on what categories of proficiency are conducive to good teaching. Furthermore, as many pre-service teacher candidates go abroad with the aim of improving their language skills, trainers could suggest that students take a teacher training course somewhere with the focus on teaching, volunteer somewhere, or simply have a lot of pen pals with the indirect aim of implicit language learning.

Secondly, it is also important that teachers and student teachers become aware of the effects certain skills or classroom decisions could possibly have on learner performance. In this study, teaching all four skills in the classroom was conducive to writing and this message should be emphasized – teachers who neglect writing are perhaps not allowing certain types of learners to make connections that may be valuable to their learning (Pinter, 2011). Convincing teachers to interpret the curriculum in favour of teaching writing is of utmost importance. It also appears that certain writing subskills might well merit more training in class – practicing genres and attributes of genres (here informal letters), some grammar training, and sentence complexity are points where there was no significant difference between third and fourth graders thus it might be worth focusing on these so that progress can be seen.

Finally, though slightly political, in some Swiss schools teachers have been criticized for focusing on writing with young learners (because writing is not a skill that is assessed for school report cards). The results of this study indicate that teachers being observed should no longer be questioned about their decision to teach writing to young learners, but rather encouraged to do so. This message needs to be conveyed to school board of education members and school inspectors who regularly observe and assess teachers and base their feedback, at times, on the misconception that young German-speaking learners not be taught to write in English. Teaching writing in the first years of English language instruction is not only possible, but is worthwhile and even third graders can be taught to write in English.

Limitations

Of course there are some changes which could have been made to this study. It would have been important to have had information on the individual learner’s language aptitude. Knowing more about the learners’ exposure to English outside of the classroom may have really put it all into perspective despite teacher attributes. On the level of the
teachers and the teacher survey, in asking teachers about their instructional practices, a survey of the frequency of certain behaviours is simpler to use and data can be collected efficiently though teacher observations might have been a better measure. Finally, there are certainly not enough data to generalize these results and they are also perhaps not generalizable outside central Europe and to other languages because Switzerland is not a low income area of the world, teacher training is different here, children have a lot of exposure to English and the teacher is, in many cases, not the exclusive source of input.

**Conclusion**

There is a definite lack of research in the field of teacher effectiveness in foreign language education, especially with young learners and it is difficult to find one model which projects combinations of elements of teaching styles and teacher attributes onto learner performance. This research may thus contribute to refining the existing conditions in Switzerland. The one key finding, that the language skills of the teacher are not the most important part of effective teaching shows that at least at the beginning of language instruction with younger learners, this should not be a deciding factor for certification and hiring and we should be looking more closely to what happens in the classroom. This piece of work could well contribute some insights on teacher knowledge to profiles being developed for future language teachers. Teacher trainers and those in charge of hiring might as well be able to reexamine their foci and encourage teachers to teach writing.

This research is also a stepping stone for many other questions that could be followed up upon, mainly:

- If teachers are taught to use more holistic rubrics (as the one presented in Table 3), would they approach writing differently than the common assumption that writing equates spelling the word correctly on a translation test?
- What is the interplay between a teacher’s writing skills and daily usage and his or her choices of teaching methods?
- At the end of their compulsory schooling examinations, do learners whose teachers continue with a balanced-skills approach outperform those learners in classes with teachers employing other approaches?
- Which aspects of writing development in English as a foreign language context are actually related to general writing skills development in the local language and which are unique to English?

This study essentially provides data that shows clearly that writing skills of learners are associated with some teacher factors and if we want young learners to get a good start in writing, then writing needs to start in the third grade. Thus copying activities, short letters and stories should be encouraged and that a balanced-skills approach is beneficial to young learners – possibly providing them with a start in their English language learning path that will help with transitions to the upper grades, where writing is much more of a focus. If we want teachers to teach writing to young learners, then it needs to become more of a focus in teacher training, and teachers need the confidence in their approaches
to deem it as worthwhile despite the mixed messages they may be receiving. As Rymarczyk (2013) states: ‘an early contact with the written form of English is of advantage for all young learners’.

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