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# Putting pen TO PAPER

Although many MFL teachers are reluctant to introduce writing early on, primary language learners love it – so here’s how to harness their enthusiasm

CLARE SECCOMBE

Writing is often the skill that is left alone by the teachers of MFL beginners: “They’ll get mixed up with English... we have to focus on speaking... it’s too hard.” However, learners will start to write in the new language whether we want them to or not, on any scrap of paper they can find, while we’re teaching. They like to note down words to help them with speaking activities, for example. Primary language learners enjoy writing – it’s seen as “proper work” – and being able to write successfully in another language gives them a great sense of achievement.

What is writing all about in language learning? We want learners to:

- make intelligible marks on a piece of paper or other surface, and have the confidence to form those marks correctly;
- put the marks together in a way that forms words, sentences and texts, according to the rules and conventions of the languages they’re studying;
- give meaning to the words and use them to communicate.

*“It’s interesting to note that children are often better spellers in the new language than in English”*

So, when children write in the foreign language, we want them to form the individual shapes and letters correctly, to be attentive to accuracy and spell correctly, and to understand structure and grammar in order to create sentences that communicate ideas clearly.

## Individual marks and letters

The writing systems of the most commonly taught languages have marks and letters that English doesn’t have:

French	â à ç é è ê î ô û ù
Spanish	á é í ó ú ñ ñ ç ñ
German	ß ä ö ü

It would be naïve of us to expect children to replicate these correctly from the beginning. I like to draw explicit attention to these marks and letters as early as possible, and to practise them. This practice builds confidence and fosters curiosity about the language.

We also need to tell learners why these extra marks are important, and what effect they will have on the writing if they aren’t there. The absence of

written accents will often affect the sound of a word when it is read aloud, so practice like this will go hand in hand with phonics. For some children, apostrophes and accents are interchangeable in name, function and appearance, so we need to make sure that learners know the reasons why both are there.

### Ideas for the classroom:

- Children trace the shapes of the new marks and letters with their finger using a resource like the one at [tinyurl.com/tplb1](http://tinyurl.com/tplb1)
- Children practise writing the marks and letters individually and then as part of words, using a resource like the one at [tinyurl.com/tplb2](http://tinyurl.com/tplb2)
- Children write some words in the foreign language as part of their handwriting practice.

## Spelling

It’s interesting to note that children are often better spellers in the new language than in English, perhaps because they are dealing with a much smaller pot of words that they use in a very focused and repetitive way.

By the time children start to learn a new language in Y3, they have undergone several years of rigorous training in English phonics and spelling. The new language, though, has different letter clusters and sequences, and children, often unconsciously replace these with more familiar English spelling patterns. The formative years of learning English spelling is enough to build muscle memory so that it feels more

natural, for example, for a child to write “rough” than “rouge”, as the -ough letter cluster occurs in some frequently used English words and the -ouge cluster is unfamiliar to English native speakers.

Therefore, when learners make spelling errors, we can often blame the interference of English. We need to point out to learners those words which we know they will probably misspell because of a similarity to an English word.

Phonics play a significant role in confident spelling. Oracy supports and reinforces reading and writing, and our learners need to be aware of the links between sound and spelling.

### Ideas for the classroom:

- When introducing new vocabulary, show the written word alongside the image to ensure that the first “stored image” of the word is the correct one.
- Practise writing words in the air.
- Show words with some missing letters. The children have to tell you which letters are missing.
- Using PowerPoint animation, display a word and set it to fade slowly. Children are not allowed to write the word until it has completely disappeared.
- Use cut out letters to write words without a pen.
- Give the children some sentences with no finger spaces or punctuation. They have to use their knowledge of spelling and structure to rewrite the sentences correctly.

# 12 THINGS

*you'll notice when coming back to school in September*

IAN GOLDSWORTHY

 @ian\_goldsworthy



1

Tears, screaming, holding on with a vice-like grip – some parents really find it hard to let their little ones go on the first day

The sinking feeling in an NQT's stomach when they realise on the 1st September no summer fairies have set up their classroom for them



2



3

History has great heroes, but the person who remembered to restock the staff room with tea and biscuits in advance of the first day back may be the greatest of them all

7

Ah, I see you've all returned in new uniform and none of you thought to label it over the summer...



6

Books labelled? Check! Seating plan set? Check! Everything finely calibrated and ready to go? Che- Wait! Three new kids!



8

So many songs about the joys of long, hot summers with no school; no songs about trudging back in on a grey and blustery autumn morning



4

Mentally dividing the class into those children who had a better holiday than the teacher and those that didn't



5

If the days are supposed to get shorter in the autumn, why does every day in September feel so long?

9

That book corner you spent all summer organising, cataloguing, and curating – not gonna last the first day back



11

Without fail, a rain-drenched August will be followed by a sun-soaked September as soon as the first child returns to school



10

There's nothing as awkward as when you can't remember the name of the child who is giddy with excitement to see you again



12

Fresh paint or sweaty child – which smell will have won by the end of the first day back?

