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THE PEDAGOGY OF HANDWRITING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF RESOURCES AND CHALLENGES IN SERBIA'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

Abstract

Establishing good handwriting habits in the earliest grades is very important for the entire schooling. It affects school performance and promotes learning. In Serbia, pupils start learning Cyrillic letters in Grade 1, while the Serbian Latin alphabet is taught in the second term in Grade 2. When it comes to ELT, there is no official introduction to the English Roman alphabet and children are expected to acquire the new script from Grade 3 and use it efficiently. In this paper, we analysed the learning resources for English (student's books and workbooks) used in Grades 1 and 2 to determine the type of writing activities given, whether they provide sufficient support to develop writing skills, and how they can be improved. Based on the results, recommendations are given to improve the teaching instruction.

Key words: ELT, handwriting method, handwriting, cursive writing, writing strokes, English alphabet, letter formation, legibility, primary grades, Grade 1, Grade 2

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is usually regarded as a process of developing four essential language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Nonetheless, in regular foreign language programmes in Serbia, this process does not start with all of them: children in primary grades establish first contact with a foreign language only through listening and speaking, and later through reading and writing. Although foreign languages are taught from age 7 (Grade 1), it is only at the age of 9 (Grade 3 of primary schooling) that children are introduced to reading and writing. The reason for this lies in the fact that there are different scripts: the Cyrillic script is used to write the Serbian language while all foreign languages in the Serbian educational system, apart from Russian, use the Roman / Latin script. However, the Serbian Latin script is also used, but is to be taught from the second term in Grade 2.

Learning two different scripts in such a short time can be a challenging task for young learners. If the third script is introduced, it can become really demanding. That is one of the reasons why the National Curriculum on Foreign Languages in Serbia explicitly stipulates that there is no writing in Grades 1 and 2. Language instruction is based on communicative (the approach to language where communicating a message and interaction is important) and aural-oral approach (the approach to language learning through hearing and speaking). This process should resemble the process of language acquisition where children acquire or pick up a language in classroom conditions like the ones in the natural environment. Having this in mind, English language teachers in Serbia do not teach pupils writing in Grades 1 and 2.

On the other hand, more and more teachers feel the urge to change this because they find it problematic to jump to Grade 3 and start with reading and writing as if the students were completely literate when it comes to the Latin script. This research complements a recent study which aimed to determine the attitudes of foreign language teachers in Serbia teaching in younger grades of elementary school towards the teaching of writing. Although almost half of the teachers explicitly stated that they are against writing in the first grade, the research results show that the current teaching practice does not neglect writing in the first two grades; furthermore, writing is present even though it is not set out in the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages. One of the findings is that teachers

believe it is important to apply different techniques in the classroom so that their pupils become introduced to reading and writing in the early stages of schooling. It was interesting to see that half of the teachers see themselves as competent to deal with writing techniques from the first grade (Ljubojević, *in press*). The present study set out to explore the most effective techniques for the teaching process. Having in mind these results, it provides the first extensive examination of course material used in Grades 1 and 2 to fill a gap in the literature on how to tackle the problem of writing properly.

This paper examines the situation of current handwriting pedagogy in Serbia in English language teaching (ELT) learning resources (student's books and workbooks) and considers some specific aspects of teaching initial writing in English in the early grades of elementary school with the challenges that this teaching poses. This research is, in a way, a language program evaluation which is defined as "the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum and assess its effectiveness and efficacy as well as the participants' attitudes within the context of the particular institutions involved" (Brown, 1989). The basic reason for this type of research is to improve the effectiveness of course materials, classroom activities, teaching, and students' learning process, i.e., handwriting tasks in Grade 1 and Grade 2.

It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by 'writing' as it is a broad term. In the field of language teaching, various definitions of 'writing' are found. Throughout this paper, the term 'writing' refers to writing as a set of knowledge, habits, skills, and abilities of correct graphic formation of cursive and printed letters in English. It will not be used to describe writing activities and tasks, such as paragraph or essay writing, but activities that support the development of writing skills.

The term 'script' will be used in this paper to refer to "a set of letters in which a language is written" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary) but not with the meaning of "(English) alphabet". Throughout the paper, 'script' will be used for both Cyrillic script and Latin script. The term 'alphabet' will refer to "a set of letters or other characters with which one or more languages are written especially if arranged in a customary order" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), i.e., the English alphabet, Latin alphabet, or Roman alphabet.

The first section of this paper will give a brief overview of recent research in the field of cognitive psychology and the importance of handwriting

for the learning process. It also lays out the theoretical dimensions of the research and looks at how handwriting is set out through the legal requirements of both the National Curriculum in England for pupils aged five to 11 and the National Curriculum in Serbia for Foreign Languages. The second section is concerned with the methodology employed for this research. Section 3 analyses the data gathered and addresses each of the research questions in turn. The purpose of the final section is to reflect on the extent to which this study has contributed to the changes in ELT. In the end, the activities, and techniques for developing writing techniques in foreign language classes are listed, by means of which this approach would be implemented into teaching practice, all in accordance with the developmental possibilities of students and didactic recommendations in our educational system. The recommendations are important not only for English language teachers, but also for all other foreign language teachers who teach languages based on the Latin alphabet.

2. Literature Review

The absence of a consensus on the appropriate start for children to embark on their reading and writing journey is a thought-provoking issue. Those in favour of postponing the introduction of reading and writing in the early grades offer various rationales. They argue that young learners may not be sufficiently psychophysically prepared for such tasks, emphasising the need for children to first acquire a foundation of concepts and ideas before diving into reading and writing. Furthermore, they are concerned about imposing additional cognitive burdens, especially in the context of learning a foreign language, as unrealistic expectations can potentially diminish children's motivation.

On the other hand, some authors believe there is no need to postpone writing in the first grade because contemporary living conditions and educational standards diminish all the previously stated arguments. One of the key messages from a 2006 EC report in respect of the teaching and learning of modern languages in the case of very young children across Europe emphasises the value of introducing reading and writing at an early stage rather than exclusively concentrating on oral communication (Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006: 9). It underscores the importance of a balanced approach to language learning. Research findings are also

cited in support of early writing instruction. Studies by Mertens and Vickov suggest that introducing writing skills in the first grade, even for foreign languages, can be advantageous and children benefit from being introduced to written foreign language immediately (as cited in Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006: 59). Vickov outlines essential principles for curriculum planning, emphasising the need for a holistic approach to writing instruction. It underscores the importance of linking writing with reading, promoting a gradual introduction, and ensuring that writing activities are relevant to pupils' lives. This aligns with the belief that, when executed thoughtfully, early writing instruction can enrich the learning experience without negatively impacting the acquisition of the native language (Vickov, 2005).

Along the same lines, Popović (2010) subsequently argued that children should start reading and writing from Grade 1 and presents several basic principles to follow in lesson planning:

- Writing needs to be closely linked to the development of reading skills.
- Writing in a foreign language should be closely linked to literacy development techniques in the native language.
- Writing should be introduced earlier and gradually and should be continuously used in class. Writing assessment should begin later.
- Students should practice both aspects of writing: orthography and the writing process.
- Writing must be connected to reality and must be relevant to children (Popović, 2010: 43).

Popović also provided examples of activities for integration into the curriculum and called on language policy creators to include writing and reading in the English language curriculum from the first grade.

Data from several studies in cognitive psychology suggest that there is a strong relationship between handwriting and learning. Many schools nowadays rely on technology and neglect writing. More and more course books are becoming increasingly digitised, offering only online materials. However, there is a growing number of researchers who argue it is vital that children are taught handwriting at school to help the brain learn and remember better. Ose Askvik et al. (2020) have determined that the involvement of the intricate hand movements and shaping of each letter makes the brain open for learning: “children, from an early age, must be exposed to handwriting and drawing activities in school to establish the

neuronal oscillation patterns that are beneficial for learning” (Ose Askvik, van der Weel, & van der Meer, 2020: 1). Their study aimed to explore if drawing and cursive writing are activating similar or different processes within the brain when compared to typewriting. The findings suggest that the delicate and precisely controlled movements involved in handwriting contribute to the brain’s activation patterns related to learning, while there was no evidence of such activation patterns when using a keyboard. (Ose Askvik, van der Weel, & van der Meer, 2020: 13). Van der Meer and van der Weel (2017) had previously determined that drawing stimulates such neuronal activity that it provides the brain with optimal conditions for learning. Along the same lines, a study carried out by Longcamp and Velay (2005) showed that children aged three to five were better at recognizing letters when they learned to write the letters by hand as opposed to writing them on the keyboard.

Moreover, research in this area has shown that poor handwriting skills affect school performance, particularly when it comes to written assessments. Several studies conducted in both the United States and the United Kingdom emphasise the significance of cursive handwriting in enhancing students’ cognitive capabilities (Van Galen & Meulenbroek, 1986). Research has identified a connection between students’ writing quality and their cognitive ability to process and recall information (Cripps & Cox, 1989). Proficient handwriting skills can contribute to academic achievement, particularly in spelling and vocabulary development.

In a study conducted by Fears and Lockman (2018), it was shown that there is a difference when children copy familiar (English letters) and unfamiliar (Cyrillic symbols) letter-like forms in real time. The results showed that younger children took longer to process letters and begin writing compared to older children, even though the writing time was similar for all age groups. Children were also more efficient at copying familiar English letters than unfamiliar Cyrillic symbols, as they spent more time and made more visual fixations on the Cyrillic symbols during the copying task. Additionally, children focused more on less common English letters compared to more frequently occurring ones. These findings are discussed in the context of how letter recognition impacts the development of automaticity in early handwriting.

Handwriting is more than just a motor skill and may make a very important contribution to children’s composition of a text. Handwriting difficulties are likely to impact pupils’ abilities to compose written language:

“There is evidence that intervention to teach handwriting can improve not only the handwriting of these children, but also their written composition.” (Medwell & Wray, 2008: 43) The importance of efficient handwriting in developing children’s writing skills is often overlooked in mainstream education. While there’s an emphasis on well-formed handwriting for spelling, the need for speed and automaticity in handwriting is neglected. Educators have prioritized the composing process, possibly as a response to past trends. Conversely, this approach may have led to the neglect of a valuable skill that contributes to the quality of writing.

To date, several studies have investigated the relationship between correct spelling and the use of fluent, joined up handwriting. Cripps and Cox (1989) suggested that by learning the movements of common spelling patterns by hand (kinaesthetically) as well as by eye, children would improve their chances of producing correct spelling and improve their vocabulary. The central point in this theory is that children should learn a clear, simple, and efficient handwriting script including exit strokes right from the beginning of writing teaching and joining of letters as early as possible. In a longitudinal study on the relationships of language in writing and between writing and reading, Abbott, Berninger, and Fayol (2010) argued that spelling (contrary to the common belief that spelling is a mechanical, memorisable skill) is a foundational skill for nurturing competent writers and composers, facilitating the expression of ideas and the interpretation of others’ texts it is.

Some other authors, although they support this theory, disagree on the degree of joining that should be taught. The study by Sassoon et al. (1986) offers probably the most moderate approach applicable to our teaching instruction. They concluded that encouraging children to use joining in their handwriting, as long as it felt comfortable, improved their ability to write smoothly and quickly. However, they advised against requiring joins that resulted in challenging hand movements (Sassoon, Nimmo-Smith, & Wing, 1986).

Significant research has been done to understand the role of working memory in writing. According to the results of some studies, it appears that working memory plays a significant role in the literacy scores of younger children. Specifically, when young learners need to allocate a substantial portion of their working memory to managing basic tasks like handwriting, it leaves them with limited capacity for more advanced cognitive processes. This heavy demand on working memory from handwriting can potentially hinder a child’s capacity to generate ideas, choose appropriate vocabulary,

oversee their writing progress, and make revisions to their text (Gathercole & Baddeley, 1993) To alleviate the issue of limited working memory capacity, automating tasks like handwriting can help. Automaticity means executing tasks quickly and accurately without conscious effort. This minimizes the load on working memory, allowing more cognitive resources for higher-level processes. Considering the evidence presented regarding the influence of handwriting skills on children's capacity to produce advanced text, it is crucial for them to develop smooth and efficient handwriting abilities.

Regulations and National Curriculum

One way to gauge the current status of handwriting in mainstream schools in Serbia is to examine its inclusion in the English language curriculum and to analyse its presence in the coursebooks accredited by the Ministry of Education. The National Curriculum for Foreign Languages in Serbia (including English) barely treats handwriting:

Reading and writing are optional activities in the second grade. Considering that the Latin alphabet is introduced in the teaching of the Serbian language in the second semester of the second grade, initial writing and reading can be offered as an option only for pupils who want and know it, at the elementary level (reading single words and simple sentences, completing words with a letter and the like, and by no means independent writing and dictations). This activity is not graded and has a minor role in the class. (Rulebook on the syllabus for the first grade of primary education, "Official Gazette of RS – Educational Gazette", number 10/17)

On the other hand, the National Curriculum for Serbian (as L1) deals with the techniques and outcomes when teaching a second script in more depth:

Students learn to write individual printed and cursive letters, words, and sentences; digits. The space between printed letters in words must be regular. When learning cursive letters, special attention should be paid to the joining of letters in words. Letters should be of the same size and shape, and the space between words should be uniform. Practice writing through copying, completing sentences, composing sentences based on pictures, composing sentences based on a series of pictures, dictation,

and independent writing of sentences and shorter text units. In addition to adopting the shape of the letter, and the direction of writing the letter itself, special attention should be paid to the spatial orientation in the notebook. Individual writing of letters is limited to one or two lines in the notebook. (Rulebook on the syllabus for the second grade of primary education, „Official Gazette of RS – Educational Gazette“, number 16/18)

The National Curriculum for England sets out the following teaching requirements for Key stages 1 and 2 (pupils aged 5-11) when it comes to writing:

In order to develop a legible style, pupils should be taught:

English key stage 1

Handwriting

a how to hold a pencil/pen

b to write from left to right and top to bottom of a page

c to start and finish letters correctly

d to form letters of regular size and shape

e to put regular spaces between letters and words

f how to form lower- and upper-case letters

g how to join letters

Presentation

h the importance of clear and neat presentation in order to communicate their meaning effectively.

English key stage 2

Handwriting and presentation

5 Pupils should be taught to:

a write legibly in both joined and printed styles with increasing fluency and speed

b use different forms of handwriting for different purposes [for example, print for labelling maps or diagrams, a clear, neat hand for finished presented work, a faster script for notes].

Attainment target 3: writing

Level 1 Letters are usually clearly shaped and correctly orientated.

Level 2 In handwriting, letters are accurately formed and consistent in size.

Level 3 Handwriting is joined and legible.

Level 4 Handwriting style is fluent, joined and legible.

Level 5 Handwriting is joined, clear and fluent and, where appropriate, is adapted to a range of tasks.

Level 6 Handwriting is neat and legible. A range of punctuation is usually used correctly to clarify meaning, and ideas are organised into paragraphs.

At age 7 demands that, 'In handwriting, letters are accurately formed and consistent in size'.

11 yrs Handwriting style is fluent, joined and legible the criteria include letter formation, orientation, relative size and fluency, fluency must be taken to mean evidence of the effective joining of letters an assumption that handwriting should be automatic and unproblematic.

(DfEE/QCA, 2000)

This summary of the regulations dealing with handwriting in mainstream primary schools underlines the minimal attention given to its teaching. Even the prescribed curricular instructions for the teaching of Serbian Latin are under scrutiny and some authors argue that there is a growing need for a different curricular framework for the improvement of the prescribed method of learning the Latin alphabet (Cvetanović, Negru, & Kelemen Milojević, 2017).

The study presented here is one of the first investigations to focus specifically on the importance of implementing the right techniques for developing (hand)writing skills with young language learners. There are several important areas where this study makes an original contribution: implementing proper techniques and tasks at such an early level of formal language learning, improving the effectiveness of course materials, and establishing handwriting courses for teachers, either as professional development courses or as a part of the formal syllabus at the philological faculties.

3. Methodology

Aims of the study

In light of the above discussion, this study aimed to examine writing activities provided in general EFL coursebooks used in Grades 1 and 2 in Serbia. Writing activities in the EFL coursebooks were analysed and evaluated in relation to the following study questions:

1. Are children exposed to written language throughout the course books?
2. What kind of language instructions prevail?
3. Are writing activities a regular or add-on component?
4. What kind of writing activity for developing fine motor skills is present throughout the course books?
5. Are these activities related to learning an English script in terms of the correct conventions so that the children will later:
 - a. Write letters using the correct sequence of movements?
 - b. Form lower case letters correctly in a script that will be easy to join later?
 - c. Use the four basic handwriting joins with confidence in independent writing?

The findings in this study draw our attention to the importance of considering teaching writing in the primary grades and might help us to find the most effective techniques for developing pupils' handwriting skills in Grades 1 and 2 when it comes to teaching a foreign script.

These five study questions allowed a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between writing activities and developing writing skills in English by using the selected coursebooks.

Procedure

The data used for this study were collected by analysing the content of 24 international general EFL coursebooks available for teaching English to learners aged 7–9 (Table 1). The titles were selected from the list of 40 accredited coursebooks, and their frequency of use in state primary schools was a significant criterion. Being widely adopted, these coursebooks were considered by the author of this paper to have been evaluated as quality materials by EFL teachers.

Grade	Title	Author(s)	Publisher(s)
1, 2	English Journey	Tatjana Mitrović	Nova škola
1, 2	Family and Friends	Susan Iannuzzi	Novi logos
1, 2	Happy House	Stella Maidment, Lorena Roberts	Oxford University Press
1, 2	My Disney Stars and Heroes	Tessa Lochowski	Akronolo
1, 2	Next Move	Mary Charrington	New Age Publishing
1, 2	New English Adventure – Starter A and B	Regina Raczynska, Cristiana Bruni	Akronolo
1, 2	Our Discovery Island Starter A and B	Tessa Lochowski	Akronolo

1, 2	Rainbow Bridge	Sarah M. Howell, Lisa Kester Dogdson	The English Book
1, 2	Rise and Shine Starter	Helen Dineen	Akronolo
1, 2	Smart Junior	H. Q. Mitchell	Data Status
1, 2	Smiles	Jenny Dooley	Freska
1, 2	Tam	Nataša Brown, Aleksandra Begović, Vesna Marković, Divna Kastratović, Kristina Crnojević	New Age Publishing

Table 1: The list of coursebooks surveyed in the study

This study focused on the content analysis of writing tasks given in the above coursebooks.

4. Results

The first set of questions aimed to determine whether pupils are exposed to written language at all throughout the course books and what kind of language instructions prevail. In order to answer these two questions, we analysed if there are unit/lesson titles, task instructions and key vocabulary. Additionally, we paid attention to the typeface, i.e., font family used.

As can be seen from Table 2, only one course book for Grade 1 (out of 12) does not include written lexis at all.

Course Book	Unit/ Lesson Title	Task instructions	Key vocabulary
English Journey 1	yes	yes	yes
Family and Friends Foundation	yes	yes	yes
Happy House 1	yes	yes	yes

Looking at the word cloud generated from the list of task instructions throughout the coursebooks (Figure 1), the most frequent verbs are “listen” and “say”, while the verbs denoting some kind of handwriting activity are only “colour” and “draw”.

When it comes to the key vocabulary in the written form, it is present in just over half of the coursebooks 58.33%. This percentage was higher when we analysed the coursebooks for Grade 2 – 91.66%. When a part of the lesson, the key vocabulary is usually written at the bottom of the page (Figure 2).

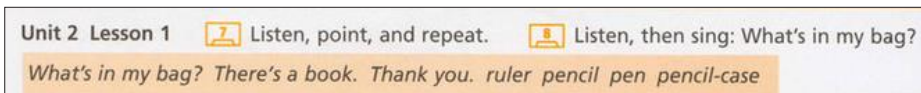
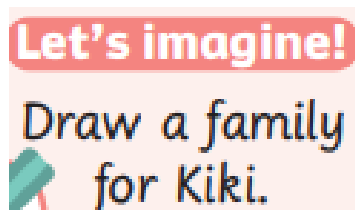


Figure 2: Representation of key vocabulary in coursebook
(Taken from a course book for Grade 1)

There is only one course book that offers word cards and includes games such as bingo with word cards and matching flashcards with word cards as a part of the teaching plan (e. g. *Show me the word [tiger]*). There are picture dictionaries at the end of the other course books, or some publishers offer a version of the picture dictionary with traceable words online.

When it comes to the font used in the course books, we identified several possible challenges which could interfere with the writing process:

1. Using only capital letters: **SAY, FIND AND TRACE THE WORDS. THEN MATCH.**
2. Using fonts with different letterforms (a vs α): **Come and play!**
3. Using a combination of both cursive and regular fonts (block letter f vs. cursive *f*):



The second set of questions aimed to analyse the types of (hand)writing activities. We tried to determine if the writing activities are a regular or add-on component and what kind of writing activity for developing fine motor skills is present. The final question was in direct connection to teaching writing and learning an English script:

Are these activities related to learning an English script in terms of the correct conventions so that the children will later:

- a. Write letters using the correct sequence of movements?
- b. Form lower case letters correctly in a script that will be easy to join later?
- c. Use the four basic handwriting joins with confidence in independent writing?

What is striking about the results is the 100% presence of handwriting activities for developing fine motor skills. The pupils are asked in every unit to colour, match, draw, join the dots, cut out, draw linking lines and draw along wiggly and zigzag lines, tick, manipulate stickers. All these activities are integrated as a regular component of the lessons. An interesting example for colouring activities can be found in one of the pupil's books for Grade 2: children are introduced to the letters of the alphabet by colouring them (Figure 3):

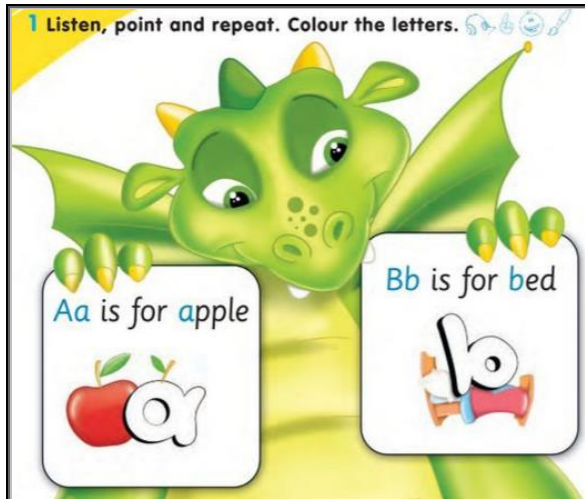


Figure 3: Colouring activity – colour the letters of the alphabet

This activity is a part of the section called *My first ABS* and is an integral component of every unit.

On the other hand, there are only two course books that provide activities which support learning an English script properly (Figure 4, note the beginnings where to start the letters correctly):

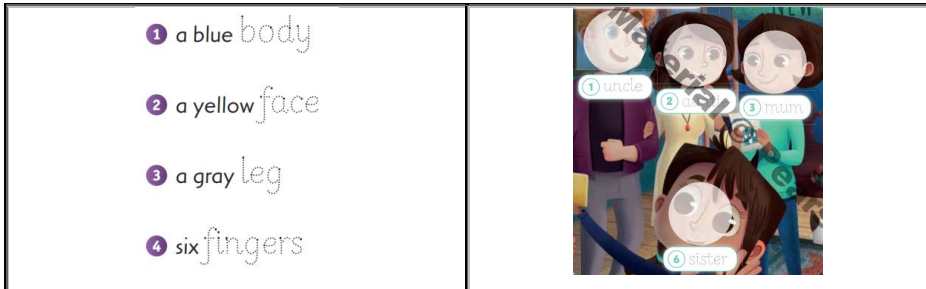


Figure 4: Tracing activities – writing
(Examples taken from two coursebooks for Grade 1)

There are tracing¹ activities present in the coursebooks for Grades 1 and 2; however, they do not provide anything more than a written form of a word (Figure 5):

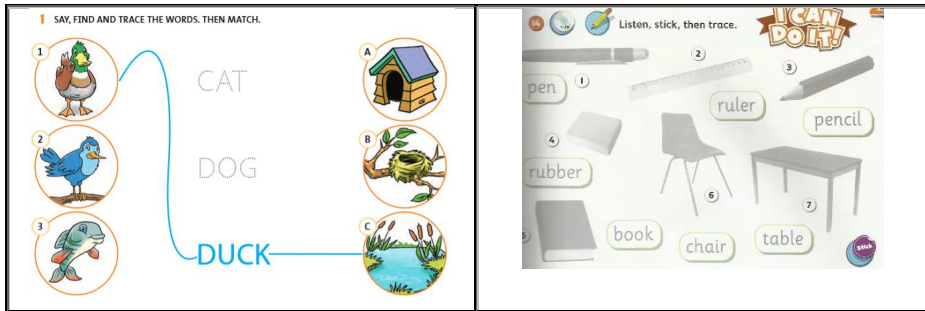


Figure 5: Examples taken from two coursebooks for Grade 1

¹ Tracing activities are activities that strengthen handwriting by helping children recognize the shape a letter takes while also practicing appropriate size of the letter and correct formation of the letter (see „Let’s practice writing: alphabet tracing“ by Winstrom, 2011)

Taken together, these results suggest that there is a significant presence of written lexis in the course books in Serbia for Grades 1 and 2. They indicate that pupils are introduced to written forms from the beginning of formal schooling, which is a good basis for starting reading and letter recognition. On the other hand, the typeface, i.e., font family can be challenging.

When it comes to writing in English, the results in this section indicate that there are insufficient activities provided to support developing writing skills from Grade 3. The next section, therefore, moves on to discuss the pedagogical implications for writing activities in the primary grades.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study clearly show that there is an abundance of written lexis in the coursebooks, but an insufficient number of activities that would develop writing skills with children. Young learners are exposed to the written lexis through unit titles, instructions, and key vocabulary, which is a good starting point for developing reading skills and letter recognition. The lack of writing activities is no surprise since this is in line with regulations of the National Curriculum, which stipulates that pupils should not write in English in Grades 1 and 2.

On the other hand, the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages does not prohibit writing completely. It is still possible for English language teachers to introduce letters even in the second grade: “initial writing and reading can be offered as an option only to students who want and know it, at an elementary level (reading single words and simple sentences, completing words with a letter and the like, by no means independent writing and dictation)” (Rule Book on the Second Grade Curriculum, 2018). This provides enough room for a wide range of pre-writing activities that will make the shift to Grade 3 smooth.

If pupils start with writing activities in Grade 3, this shift is very abrupt and sudden. The general presumption is that pupils have already learned the Serbian Latin script with their class teachers in Grade 2. However, this cannot be true for several reasons:

1. It takes time to master a second script and one term of learning is not enough. This particularly means that pupils start Grade 3 with very poor writing skills when it comes to using the Latin Alphabet even in their mother tongue.

2. Serbian Latin script, although similar to the English alphabet, does differ from it and these differences need to be taught and learned.

Having all this in mind, the focus of this paper is on choosing the best practices from the existing course books, recommending some additional activities, and suggesting a redefinition of the teaching instruction in Grades 1 and 2 through the incorporation of **the (hand)writing method**.

6. Implications

The study findings suggest several implications for writing activities in the primary grades. The findings will be of interest to language teachers, authors, and publishers, and can influence the content of writing activities in learning materials, teaching practices, professional development, initial training, and early writing and reading methods and techniques.

As we have seen from the results, there is a lack of supportive activities for writing in course books. Some publishers have already detected these limitations and incorporated tracing activities and even practice writing key words. However, most of them avoided these activities. Since letter writing is not foreseen by the National Curriculum, the solution is somewhere in between: to provide enough exercises that will gradually introduce pupils to the English script in Grades 1 and 2. The research has shown that a majority of teachers introduce Latin script writing in the second grade, even as early as the first grade, despite it being contrary to the official curriculum (Ljubojević, *in press*). This widespread practice calls for a re-evaluation of the existing regulations or taking a different approach. Instead of attempting to control this practice through regulations, it is advisable to focus on training foreign language teachers to effectively and professionally manage this aspect of the curriculum. Teachers should then be granted the freedom, within the bounds of regulations, to employ this approach. Furthermore, the fact that a significant portion of respondents had no strong opinions on the introduction of writing indicates the necessity for additional professional development for teachers concerning early writing methods and techniques. This awareness should also be raised during their initial education.

While primary school teachers are trained to instruct students in writing during their college education, it is suggested that language

teachers should also have the opportunity to attend relevant courses, even if they are optional. These courses would equip them with effective methods and techniques for early writing, which have proven to be successful. This could gradually lead to the phasing out of the traditional dictation technique for assessing writing. The substantial number of responses in the recent research by Ljubojević (*in press*) indicating the use of dictation for assessing writing, as opposed to other techniques, underscores the importance of raising awareness among teachers about alternative techniques (Ljubojević, 2010).

The abundance of lexis is significant and must not be underestimated because pupils are unconsciously exposed to the written language and letterforms. Similarly, research by Ljubojević (*in press*) has shown that teachers believe that children today already have a more substantial grasp of the Latin alphabet than previous generations, largely due to the influence of mobile phones and electronic devices, which expose them to the Latin script and even the English language. One noteworthy recommendation arising from this research is that first-grade students should be exposed to written words for visual memorization, without the immediate requirement of writing or copying words into notebooks. This underscores the need to change our teaching approach starting from the first grade. Although first-grade students with graphomotor skills may not be fully prepared to write in a foreign language, they can be introduced to words visually through various means, such as posters with inscriptions, flashcards in combination with word cards, word searches, hangman games, and more. From the beginning of the second grade, the introduction of writing can be facilitated through effective cooperation and coordination among teachers. To make these feasible, foreign language teachers should also undergo training on how to introduce a second script in a foreign language: it should be taught and practised directly and systematically, so that children learn the correct conventions and the correct sequence of movements in due time (Popović, 2010).

Differences in letterforms and scripts can be puzzling for young learners if not explained properly. Furthermore, they can interfere with the process of L1 writing literacy. The issue arises especially when it comes to writing cursive in Latin (L1) while writing letters in English is using a simplified form of printing, which is designed to lead easily into cursive writing at a later stage (Figure 6):

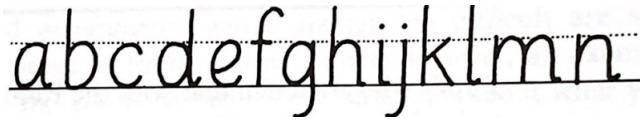


Figure 6: English letters

Simply having students replicate these letter forms isn't sufficient; they also need to develop the practice of moving the pen in the correct directions simultaneously (Figure 7):



Figure 7: Correct sequence of movements

Achieving this will enable them to easily transition to cursive writing in the future. Without this skill, they might likely adopt a personal, inefficient, and idiosyncratic approach to semi-joined printing that they will continue using throughout their lives.

The results of the analysis have shown that there are not enough writing activities that will prepare pupils for the English script in Grade 3. Many teachers believe that the first stage is to give pupils practice in forming the letters by copying them. However, this study suggests that there should be several phases prior to the straightforward copying of letters. Recent research by Cabahug and Mendez (2022) identified eight key elements that are essential to a child's ability to learn handwriting: knowledge of the alphabet, knowledge of the formation of letters, development of hand motor skills, proper hand grip and posture, tracing ability, visual perceptive skills, acknowledging mistakes and differences of forms, and repetition as a corrective action. Since this framework does not refer specifically to EFL, we would like to identify the key elements in the same vein:

1. Development of fine motor skills through activities such as drawing, colouring, matching, tracing, joining the dots, cutting out, drawing linking lines and drawing along wiggly and zigzag lines, ticking, manipulating stickers, etc.

Special attention should be paid to drawing activities. Instead of looking at Picture Dictionaries, pupils should draw pictures of their own words and create their own dictionaries as we have seen

the beneficial influence it has on learning as reported in the study by van der Meer & van der Weel (2017). Pupils should illustrate songs, chants, and vocabulary, not from time to time, but as an integral part of the language instruction.

2. Providing children with different activities that are preparatory for writing: get them to draw horizontal lines across the page in the right direction or rhythmic patterns corresponding to movements in Roman script (Figure 8):

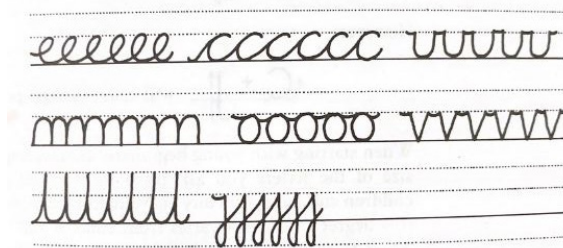


Figure 8: Preparatory activities for writing

3. Introducing tracing letters activities. Research by Smith, McLaughlin, Neyman, & Rinaldi (2013) has shown that providing students (even the ones with disabilities) with starting dots and the opportunity to trace letters to learn size, slant, and formation, and then fading those prompts was effective and applicable when teaching (Figure 9):

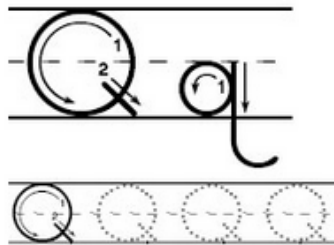


Figure 9: Alphabet tracing activities

4. Introducing “shape families”: the letters of the alphabet can be sorted into four main movement groups: **long letters** (l, t, i,

- u, j,), **curly letters** (c, a, g, q, o, e, f, s. Then **'bouncing ball' letters** (r, n, m, p, h, b, d), **'zig zag' letters** (v, w, x, k, y, z).
5. Preventing confusion between similar letters in their L1 (Cc, B, Pp, Xx, Yy).
 6. Teaching pupils how to join the letters. There are 4 main groups of letter joins: bottom joins, bottom to "c" shape joins, "e" joins (top and bottom join strokes), and top joins.

With such handwriting activities, pupils will become better prepared to start writing words, phrases, and sentences in Grade 3 and will not feel confused between three different scripts they are expected to master at the age of 8–9.

Teaching handwriting in the early grades is an important issue for future research. Further research should be undertaken to investigate whether these proposed writing activities for Grades 1 and 2 lead to better results in reading and writing in Grade 3.

7. Conclusions

The present study was designed to determine the extent of handwriting activities in the coursebooks for Grades 1 and 2, and whether they are supportive enough for children to develop good handwriting skills in English starting from Grade 3 when they are officially expected to write. The aim of these activities should be to teach children to write in a way that is legible, fluent, and fast enough to enable the letters to be joined easily later when children start writing cursive letters. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that handwriting activities that support letter formation and legible handwriting are not present enough. They are randomly used instead being a part of the teaching method. The underlying principle of teaching presented in this paper is that children should have better results if the proposed handwriting method is applied alongside the communicative approach.

This is based on recent research, which has revealed that handwriting activates a specific part of the brain, which researchers believe is important for learning and memory. While analysing the coursebooks, we identified the following good examples for developing fine motor skills essential for good handwriting: colouring, matching, drawing, joining the dots, cutting out, drawing linking lines and drawing along wiggly and zigzag lines,

ticking, and manipulating stickers. What we determined as missing were more tracing activities and writing activities that would lead to the correct sequence of movements (writing strokes) and better joining of letters later when children start writing cursive letters.

The findings will be of interest to language teachers, course book authors, and publishers. They do not have to introduce letters and words from Grade 1, but meticulously chosen activities will suffice.

Future research should focus on determining the effects of introducing early writing. It would be interesting to assess the effects of its introduction when compared to the group of pupils who were only learning English from Grade 1 through communicative and aural-oral approaches. Overall, the findings of this study provide important insights into the relationship between handwriting and learning a foreign language in early grades and highlight the need for further research in this area.

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