



# **Supporting teachers teach writing in challenging contexts**

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**Country: Mali**



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We chose to explore the difficulty of supporting teachers during Covid-19, as well as many other teachers who need support in rural schools so far.

In our context, as pedagogical advisers, our main job is to observe teachers in their classroom practice and then give them feedback on their practice at secondary school. The number of teachers we need to observe is large, over one hundred English teachers. Also, we are involved in observing other subjects' teachers (primary school teachers and French teachers, among others). The workplaces of these teachers are far from each other. Some of these teachers work downtown and others work in rural areas. In rural areas, the schools are a minimum of 5km from each other. Riding from school to school is very expensive. Consequently, the state cannot afford the expenses and cannot offer a regular mentoring and observation programme to all the teachers. Therefore, many teachers do not profit from the mentoring and observation programme as much as they could.

In addition to the factors above, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted the mentoring and observation programme. The schools were closed for some time and restricted measures were put in place. As a result, face-to-face mentoring was practically impossible in some schools.

To address these challenges, we decided to carry out the project of WhatsApp mentoring to support teachers to teach writing skills in their classrooms. This project is an experimental one, as it has never been tried in the Malian education context. It was not quantitative research but qualitative.

## **The exploration and methodology**

The teachers we observed taught at secondary school. They taught students aged from 14 to 17, who were learning English as a foreign language. They had just three hours a week of English classes.

When observing the teachers in their classes, we were surprised by what we observed. First, teachers' lessons focused mainly on teaching reading and grammar. When it came to writing, they just gave students an essay-writing topic. They gave some questions to guide and stimulate ideas, and the tasks were given as homework. That was a very challenging situation for students as well as for their teachers. Most of the time students reproduced similar essays, or asked for help from friends and parents, to get good marks.

Second, teachers gave writing tasks for marks because that is what they thought they should do. They were upset at the fact that most of their students cheated to get good marks. Their students' writing skills were very poor since they could not structure their writing in a paragraph to express a clear idea.

From the situation described above, we came up with the following questions to guide our research:

1. **How do teachers teach writing?**
2. **How can we support our teachers remotely to teach writing skills?**
3. **What ICT tools do teachers have access to?**
4. **How do their students respond to a writing task?**

To explore this issue in more detail, we conducted a focus group and applied a questionnaire. We asked ten teachers from two different regions of Mali – Koulikoro and Sikasso – and the district of Bamako to provide a video and photos of their classroom practice when teaching writing skills. The purpose of that was to understand the problem in different teaching contexts.



We used WhatsApp to gather our data as many teachers had a strong knowledge of it and they had easy access to the internet, despite connection issues in some areas. We used WhatsApp to send participants a questionnaire.

We also had a group chat with some of them, and through the app teachers sent us their answers and their videos over the course of one month.

## **Findings**

The data we collected showed the following.

First, teachers were not interested and motivated to teach writing skills (writing essays, writing stories or writing articles). The reason for this was that their students could not work on their own to produce good writing. Students had poor marks and teachers were disappointed about that.

Second, teachers did not have a specific approach and activities to teach writing. To the question 'How do you teach writing (essay, article, ...)?', these were the two most frequent answers: 'I give the topic to do as homework with some explanation' and 'I give a topic with some questions to stimulate ideas and students answer as homework.'

These are the findings for the questions asked:

Questions	Answers
1. Which writing tasks do you give your students? (Essay, email/SMS, letter, poem, problem page, description)	<b>I give essay-writing tasks. (60%)</b> <b>I give letter-writing tasks. (40%)</b>
2. Where do your students work on their writing tasks?	<b>They do them as homework. (100%)</b>
3. How often do you teach writing? (Once a week, once a month, other)	<b>I teach writing once a month. (90%)</b> <b>I teach writing once a week. (10%)</b>
4. How often do you mark your students' writing tasks? (Always, often, sometimes, never)	<b>I always mark them. (90%)</b> <b>I often mark them. (10%)</b>
5. How successful are your writing lessons? (Always, often, sometimes, never)	<b>They are sometimes successful. (90%)</b> <b>They are often successful. (10%)</b>
6. How do your students feel when it comes to writing? (Nervous, fearful, engaged, demotivated)	<b>They feel demotivated. (60%)</b> <b>They feel fearful. (20%)</b> <b>They feel nervous. (10%)</b> <b>They feel engaged. (10%)</b>
7. What difficulties do you have when teaching writing skills?	<b>I have a problem to engage students in writing. (90%)</b> <b>I know few engaging activities. (10%)</b>

The findings showed that most of the teachers assign essay and letter-writing tasks to their learners. Most of the time their learners do not apply letter writing in their daily routine. The crucial problem was that teachers did not teach writing lessons in the classroom but asked students to do the tasks as homework. From the findings, 90 per cent of the participant teachers do not know writing approaches and writing activities to engage their learners. Moreover, 90 per cent of them believed that they should always mark learners' writing tasks. That led them to teach writing once a month.

## **The intervention**

To answer the teachers' problems, we suggested they use the product approach and the process approach to writing and include in their lessons two writing activities which we will describe later in this section.

We suggested they use the product approach with low-level learners or beginners, and we recommended this approach as it is more creative. It also requires students' critical thinking.

## The product approach

### Procedure:

1. Give a model text and ask your students to read the text silently.
2. Students first read quickly to answer the gist questions you will ask.
3. You give another text type, not in order.
4. You focus on the organisation of the text (ask your students to match paragraphs to headings or put scrambled paragraphs in order).
5. You focus on some useful language features (linking words, formal language or grammar). You will ask your students to order the paragraphs to get a meaningful text.
6. Ask your students to brainstorm ideas and plan their own texts.
7. Ask your students to write the first draft.
8. Ask your students to compare with a different group/partner to edit the text for accuracy.
9. Ask them to write the final version.

## The process approach

### Procedure:

1. Ask your students to brainstorm ideas in groups/pairs.
2. Ask your students to write a first draft.
3. Ask your students to compare their draft with another group/partner. You monitor. Students can do this by focusing on the organisation of the text, use of paragraphs, organisation of paragraphs with topic sentences, e.g. This picture is talking about ..., supporting sentences and appropriate style (formal, semi-formal, informal). You also ask them to check word count (how many words you want them to achieve).
4. Ask your students to write a second draft.
5. Ask your students to compare with a different group/partner to edit the text for accuracy. Accuracy elements are grammar and conventional expression for text type – e.g. I'm writing to ..., Dear ..., if a letter, spelling and punctuation. You monitor to help as they do this and can highlight common areas on the board.
6. Ask your students to write the final version.

The writing activities we suggested as games were:

**Problem page:** This game consists of putting students in two groups. Group 1 writes a problem and group 2 replies by giving the solutions.

**Letter/email-writing game:** In this game, there are two groups. Group 1 writes the letter or the email, group 2 replies.

## **The results**

When we observed the videos showing the teachers in action, we noticed a great change in the way teachers conducted a writing lesson, as well as in students' attitudes. We believed there were positive changes.

First, teachers were motivated and engaged to teach writing skills. They could effectively manage the product and process approaches, as well as the game activities. Since then, they have started to teach writing skills in their classroom, instead of leaving the development of writing as homework.

Second, we conducted a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the approaches. Teachers reported that they were comfortable when teaching writing. Eighty per cent of them said they taught writing more frequently (once a week or twice a week). Moreover, they reported that their learners could write a well-structured paragraph. That is a significant improvement in the development of writing skills. According to the survey, 70 per cent of teachers said their writing lessons were successful and they were happy to have learned the process and product approaches. A participant said: 'I'm happy to have learned the process approach as my students developed their writing skills. Honestly, I had not been trained in this at teachers' training school.'

Lastly, from the video observations and photos, we could notice that learners were motivated and engaged. Teachers reported that their students liked the problem page and the letter game.

## **Lesson learned**

From this exploratory action research, I learned that many teachers found writing skills very challenging, and their learners were not well trained in this area of language learning. We understood that when you provide good teaching methods to teachers, they can overcome most of the problems they encounter in the classroom. This makes them more comfortable and helps students to learn much more.

## **Conclusions**

The research we carried out had a positive impact on both the teachers and their learners. The product and process approaches and the game activities helped teachers to address problems with teaching writing skills. We are convinced that exploratory action research is a powerful tool to enhance teachers' continuing professional development. It is also important to note that this research was very challenging for both the researchers and the participants, as it happened in the context of Covid-19. It was carried out remotely. Therefore, some teachers were not familiar with this, and other participants withdrew from the research project before the end of the term.

Although it was difficult, this research was innovative as nothing similar has been carried out at secondary schools in Mali before.