

---

**A Writing Workshop for Elementary School CFL Classes****小学中文写作工作坊****Ruihua Liu<sup>1</sup> YunFang Liu**

Legacy Preparatory Charter School, Dallas, Texas

**Abstract:** We adapted the writing workshop approach to teaching writing in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) to the elementary school children at a charter school since the 2016-2017 school year. In order to prove its effect on improving students' writing in Chinese, we conducted action research in one 1st Grade class and one 4th Grade class by first teaching them to write in the traditional way and then in a writing workshop. We found that as individual participants, the majority of the students performed had all correct responses in both writing tasks or performed better after introducing the writing workshop, although they did not seem to improve as a whole group. This article also includes further actions and possible teaching implications.

**Keywords:** elementary school, writing workshop, teaching writing as a process, CFL

**摘要:** 我们 2016-2017 学年开始借用工作坊教学法在美国一所特许小学教中文写作。为了验证其教学效果，我们抽取了一个一年级班级和一个四年级班级，进行行动研究。先用传统方法教他们，再用写作工作坊教。我们目前的研究结果表明：作为个人，大多数学生两次写作都全对或比上一次好，虽然作为整体他们好像没有进步。本文最后包括进一步的研究计划及可能的教学启发。

**关键词：** 小学、写作工作坊、以过程教写作、中文

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ruihua Liu at Legacy Preparatory Charter School, Dallas, Texas.

### Introduction

Teaching writing in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) has been challenging in all grade levels, especially elementary school. Ruihua had taught college writing—writing in English for English speakers—with a workshop approach for a couple of years and found it effective. She had adapted it to teach writing to her elementary school CFL classes a couple of years ago and found it effective, too, but she had not done any research to prove it yet. Yunfang had taught elementary school Chinese for a few years in UK before she started the Chinese program at her current school in the US in 2016. In order to prove the effect of the workshop approach for elementary school writing in CFL, we adapted it for her K-5<sup>th</sup> classes and conducted action research in 2016-2017.

The workshop approach was first adopted in creative writing programs in UK and US in the 1970s. The philosophy behind a writing workshop is to “teach writing as a process not product” as Murray’s 1972 manifesto shows (p. 3). He advocates that instead of teaching “finished writing,” we teach “unfinished writing” and “glory of its unfinishedness” (p. 4). Teaching “finished writing” refers to the traditional way of teaching writing as a product, in which a teacher simply assigns a topic for students to write by themselves and then grades their finished writings. Teaching “unfinished writing” and “glory of its unfinishedness,” however, embraces the writing process and engages students in a writing workshop through the stages of prewriting, writing, and rewriting (p. 4).

In a typical writing workshop, the teacher reads a student’s draft aloud, then asks other students to comment on it (i.e. peer reviewing), and finally comments on it herself (i.e. teacher conferencing) before moving on to next student’s draft. Here, the teacher

organizes peer reviewing and teacher conferencing as a whole class, but peer reviewing can be in small groups led by group leaders and teacher conferencing can be individual as well. In an elementary school writing workshop, peer reviewing can be more informal with capable students helping their classmates and teacher conferencing can be more flexible with the teacher walking around the classroom checking students' writing and helping them as needed.

Like an English writing workshop, a CFL writing workshop teaches writing as a process, too, but Chinese learners, need to fulfill several prerequisites for a writing workshop. First of all, they must be able to speak target structures and phrases in sentences. Secondly, they must be able to read them in sentences first in pinyin, but eventually in Chinese characters. Finally, they must be able to write them in sentences in pinyin in the beginning, but eventually in Chinese characters. With sufficient facilitation, elementary school Chinese learners are able to write in Chinese characters, but mainly in simple ones, and they may have to write in pinyin for complicated Chinese characters they have not learned to write yet.

Accordingly, to conduct a successful CFL writing workshop, we need to design each unit as a cycle of listening/speaking, reading, Chinese character writing, and text writing sessions. Before writing, we must provide sufficient oral input of target structures and phrases so oral Chinese sticks in students' heads. Then we must provide sufficient written input of target structures and phrases in pinyin, or Chinese characters, or both, so oral Chinese and its written form are linked together in students' heads. After reading, we also need a session on Chinese character writing.

Since Chinese is not alphabetic like English, there is no direct co-relation between oral and written Chinese: simple oral Chinese may correspond to complicated Chinese characters. We need to start teaching oral Chinese and written Chinese in two separate tracks before students learn to write 50-100 frequently used simple Chinese characters, most of which are radicals, too. Then students learn to dissect the compound Chinese characters of target structures and phrases and write them before text writing. Writing in Chinese is challenging even to elementary school children in China, but with sufficient preparation, it is achievable for elementary school Chinese learners, too.

### **Research Design**

Yunfang's school is a charter school with two campuses where Chinese is the required foreign language for K-5<sup>th</sup> grades. Each class has Chinese for a period of thirty minutes every other day, or in other words, five class meetings every two weeks. There are six six-week academic cycles each school year: three in the fall semester and three in the spring. In each academic cycle, students learn one Chinese unit on a given topic with the focus on oral Chinese. In the 2016-2017 school year, the topics included name, age, date, time, family, and school. Since most of the topics had numbers in them, students also learned to count 1-99 in Chinese through out the units. In each unit they also learned to sing a Chinese children's song related to the topic.

For our action research, we first selected our participants. Of the two campuses at Yunfang's school, we chose the one where there was more diversity in students' economic background, culture, and ethnicity. Then we selected the medium grade respectively from the lower and upper grades groups K-2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>, that is, the 1<sup>st</sup> Grade and the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade, to avoid cognitive extremes. There were two classes in the 1<sup>st</sup>

Grade and two in the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade at the campus and we randomly picked one 1<sup>st</sup> Grade class and one 4<sup>th</sup> Grade class.

Yunfang would teach them writing in the traditional way in Cycle 3 and in a writing workshop in Cycle 4 and then we would compare the two approaches to see whether the writing workshop would be more effective or not. Yunfang would teach her own way focusing on oral Chinese before teaching writing traditionally in Cycle 3 and would add a reading session, a Chinese character writing session, and an oral warming up activity before teaching a writing workshop in Cycle 4. While Yunfang was teaching the two units, Ruihua would be observing and helping students as needed. They would reflect together at the end of each day.

When designing each writing task, we would make sure that students be able to complete it in a period of 30 minutes. Since students had not learned enough simple Chinese characters and radicals yet, we would design each writing task in pinyin. As pinyin is Romanized, they would not have to specifically learn it except for a few sounds, which are pronounced differently from English, such as “q” and “x.”

To further scaffold the writing process for the young children in the beginning, we would design each writing task in the blank-filling format with a list of vocabulary they might need. However, the blank filling was not a vocabulary exercise; it was live writing instead, since students would fill in information relevant to their own lives. They might fill in pinyin, invented pinyin, or even English if they had not learned it in Chinese yet, since meaning was their priority now.

Students would be required to copy the questions before filling in their information. It might be surprising, but it is quite a challenge for elementary school

children, especially those from the lower grades, to copy information from the board onto paper. We would need to teach them, with patience, how to copy the questions (including punctuation markers) correctly. For example, we would remind them that the Chinese period mark was a tiny circle instead of a dark dot as the English one.

Since Yunfang did not have her own classroom and she had 8-10 other classes to teach a day in addition to the two classes for our study, she would write each writing task with marker on a poster in advance and take it with her to each homeroom where she would be teaching. Each homeroom was set up differently, but students usually sat facing one another at tables, which made it convenient for peer reviewing and teacher conferencing. Homeroom teachers would usually stay in the room monitoring students' behaviors while she was teaching, which made it less challenging to conduct our action research.

### **Conduction of Research**

The topic in Cycle 3 was “Where Are You?” and the Chinese children’s song “Where Are My Friends?” The target structures were “在 zài (at) 哪里 nǎlǐ (where)? ” and “在 zài (at) \_\_\_\_ (a place). ” As we planned earlier, Yunfang taught this unit in her usual way focusing on oral Chinese: interacting with students using the target structures of this unit and last unit “What’s Your Name?”, letting students counting in Chinese, and singing the Chinese song.

Near the end of the Cycle, she was supposed to teach writing in the traditional way, but she had to take a trip to China. Thus, Ruihua taught the writing session and designed a writing task for this unit:

1. nǐ jiào shén me? (What’s your name?)

wǒ jiào \_\_\_\_\_. (My name is \_\_\_\_\_.)

2. nǐ zài nǎ lǐ? (Where are you?)

wǒ zài \_\_\_\_\_. (I'm in/at \_\_\_\_\_.)

3. \*nǐ mā ma jiào shén me? (What's your mom's name?)

wǒ mā ma jiào \_\_\_\_\_. (My mom's name is \_\_\_\_\_.)

4. \*liú lǎo shī zài nǎ lǐ? (Where is Ms. Liu?)

tā zài \_\_\_\_\_. (She is in/at \_\_\_\_\_.)

Vocabulary:

xué xiào (school), dé zhōu (Texas), měi guó (America), zhōng guó (China)

\*: Bonus questions

Please note: English is added here for readers who may not read Chinese; it did not appear in the original writing task. The writing task includes not only the topic of Cycle 3 “Where Are You?” but also the topic from a previous unit “What’s your name?”

Ruihua first led students to write date, name, and class code on the top of their paper and left enough time for them to do so. She then read the sentence stems out loud slowly while checking their understanding before instructing them to copy each sentence stem on to their paper and fill in pinyin or English if the information of their choices did not appear in the vocabulary list. She also reminded them that they might do the two bonus questions after they finished the first two.

As planned, this writing session was to be taught in the traditional way: only giving students writing instructions at the beginning and collecting their writings at the end without specifically attending to their writing in between. In fact, it was not traditional at all to leave students class time to write, but like a writing workshop in

which students could be engaged in writing. It was nearly impossible, however, to require elementary school Chinese learners to write independently at home at this stage.

While students were writing, Ruihua walked around the room observing. Having been an elementary school teacher for a few years, however, it was hard for her just to observe like a distanced researcher. She thus went ahead conferencing with students as needed, which was part of a writing workshop instead. As a result of conferencing and leaving class time for students to write, this writing session was more like a flexible writing workshop than the traditional way of teaching writing as a product.

The topic in Cycle 4 was “How Old Are You?” and the Chinese children’s song “Happy New Year.” The target structures were “多 duō 大 dà 了 le (how old)?” and “\_\_\_ (a number) 岁 (years old).” As we planned earlier, Yunfang continued teaching this unit focusing on oral Chinese, but after the oral input sessions, she added a reading session to expose the students to the written form first in pinyin, and then in Chinese characters:

Reading 1:

A: nǐ duō dà le ? (How old are you?)

B: wǒ bā suì le 。 (I’m eight years old.)

A: nǐ mā ma duō dà le ? (How old is your mom?)

B: wǒ mā ma sān shí èr suì le 。 (My mom is thirty-two years old.)

A: nǐ mā ma zài nǎ li ? (Where is your mom?)

B: wǒ mā ma zài jiā 。 (My mom is at home.)

A: nǐ bà ba duō dà le ? (How old is your dad?)

B: wǒ bà ba sān shí liù suì le 。 (My dad is thirty-six.)

## Reading 2:

A: 你多大了? (How old are you?)

B: 我八岁了。(I'm eight years old.)

A: 你妈妈多大了? (How old is your mom?)

B: 我妈妈三十二岁了。(My mom is thirty-two years old.)

一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十 (1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10)

English and Arabic numbers in the texts are added for readers who may not read Chinese; they did not appear in the original reading texts. The readings included not only the topic of this unit “How Old Are You?” and numbers in Chinese relevant for this unit, but also the topic of the previous unit “Where Are You?” Yunfang read each reading out loud slowly before letting students read it out loud in pairs as the readings were dialogues, Reading aloud would help the students make connections between oral Chinese and written Chinese in their heads and prepare them for writing.

After the reading session, Yunfang was supposed to add a Chinese character writing session to prepare the students for text writing at the end of this unit. However, since she had taught them to skywrite (write with a forefinger in the air) 1-10 in Chinese characters, which are all simple and correspondent to the topic of this unit—age, she just let them skywrite the numbers right after reading them in Reading 2.

After preparing students with oral Chinese, reading, and Chinese character writing, Yunfang was ready to teach a writing workshop as we planned earlier. On the day of writing, Yunfang started with a brief oral warming up activity (i.e. prewriting) to activate students' oral Chinese necessary for writing. She asked individual students their

age and their parents' age, but to her surprise, many of the first graders did not know their parents' age. She therefore decided to let them make up their parents' ages.

Then she posted the writing task she designed:

1. wǒ \_\_\_\_\_ suì le 。 (I'm \_\_\_\_\_ years old.)
2. wǒ mama \_\_\_\_\_ suì le 。 (My mom is \_\_\_\_\_ years old.)
3. wǒ bàba \_\_\_\_\_ suì le 。 (My dad is \_\_\_\_\_ years old.)

Vocabulary:

1 yī 一    2 èr 二    3 sān 三    4 sì 四    5 wǔ 五

6 liù 六    7 qī 七    8 bā 八    9 jiǔ 九    10 shí 十

Again: English is added for readers who may not read Chinese; it did not appear in the original writing task. Yunfang first led the students to write their names, date, and class code, then read the sentence stems out loud slowly before instructing them to copy those sentence stems onto their paper. Ruihua noticed that Yunfang did not emphasize on punctuations markers here as much as Ruihua did in the Cycle 3 writing session. The students might fill in the blanks either in pinyin or Chinese characters or both, since they had learned to count 1-99 in Chinese and had also learned to skywrite the Chinese characters for them. However, we noticed that some students would write 48 as 四八 (four eight) not 四十八 (forty-eight), which indicated that they would need to read more two-digit numbers in Chinese characters as they did for 1-10.

While the students were writing, Yunfang walked around checking students' work, answering their questions, and correcting their mistakes in their writings (i.e. conferencing). After some students had completed their work correctly, Yunfang let them

help other students with their writings (i.e. peer reviewing). However, very quickly, several helpers started chatting instead of helping their peers' writings. Yunfang had to stop her conferencing and redirect them back to their own tables. We realized that we would need to limit the number of helpers (peer reviewers) and create a system to train and regulate them. Since peer reviewing did not seem to work very well as expected, this writing workshop was similar to the Cycle 3 writing session which did not have peer reviewing at all.

So far, we completed teaching the two units in both Cycle 3 and Cycle 4 including the two writing sessions in both the 1<sup>st</sup> Grade class and the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade class and collected all their writings. There were 14 students in each class who participated both Cycle 3 and Cycle 4 writing sessions.

#### Analysis of Students' Performances

In order to compare the students' performances, we set criteria for correct responses for contents and punctuations. A correct response for content must make sense in the sentence. It might be in pinyin, which must be spelled correctly if it appeared in the vocabulary list. Otherwise, it might be in invented pinyin. It might also be in Chinese characters, but it did not have to be written correctly. It might even be in English for a name or place that students had not learned in Chinese yet. A correct response for punctuation was simple: it must be copied correctly. For example, a Chinese period marker is a tiny circle, not a dot.

After carefully reviewing all the participants' writings in Cycle 3 and Cycle 4, we analyzed the data and found several results. First of all, age did not seem to make a significant difference in the students' performances: the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade group performed 10%

better in contents than the 1<sup>st</sup> Grade group, but they performed 28% worse in punctuations than the 1<sup>st</sup> Grade group, as shown in Table 1:

Writings	Correct Resp.	Cycle 3	Cycle 4	Progresses	Total (28)
1 <sup>st</sup> Grade. (14)	Contents	12	9	-25%	21
	Punctuations	13	11	-15%	25
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade. (14)	Contents	11	12	9%	23
	Punctuations	10	8	-20%	18
Total (28)	Contents	23	21	-9%	10%
	Punctuations	23	19	-17%	-28%

Table 1: Group Performances

More importantly, Table 1 also shows that as a whole group including both grade groups, the students' performances did not improve after introducing the writing workshop in Cycle 4, but regressed 9% in contents and 17% in punctuations instead. As mentioned earlier, Ruihua conferenced with students in Cycle 3 when she was not supposed to, which might directly improve the students' performances in Cycle 3. More importantly, the writing task in Cycle 4 was more difficult than that in Cycle 3, which might unfavorably affect the students' performances in Cycle 4. The Cycle 4 task required them to fill in age for themselves and their parents in pinyin or Chinese characters, but the Cycle 3 task only required the students to fill in their names in English, their places in English as well if they were not in the vocabulary list.

As a group, the students did not seem to improve their performances from Cycle 3 to Cycle 4. Yet, as individual participants, the majority of them either had all correct responses in both writings or performed better for both contents and punctuations in

Cycle 4 than Cycle 3 as shown in Table 3, although it was much more challenging to fill in pinyin or English for names and place in Cycle 3 than to fill in pinyin or in Chinese characters.

	Indiv.	Pro.	Same (All Co. /All In.)	Pro. & Same		Regresses	
1 <sup>st</sup> G. (14)	Cont.	2	10 (10/0)	12	86%	2	14%
	Punc.	3	7 (4/3)	10	71%	4	29%
4 <sup>th</sup> G. (14)	Cont.	1	12 (12/0)	13	93%	1	7%
	Punc.	1	9 (7/2)	10	71%	4	29%
Total (28)	Cont.	3	22 (22/0)	25	89%	3	11%
	Punc.	4	16 (11/5)	20	71%	8	28%

Table 2: Individual Performances

And of those who stayed same in both cycles, none of them had all incorrect responses for contents, and only 5 of them had all incorrect responses in punctuations, who actually missed all punctuation markers when they copied the questions onto paper. Only about 10% of all participants regressed for contents and less than 30% of all participants regressed for punctuations from Cycle 3 to Cycle 4. This result indicated that, in general, both writing sessions were successfully conducted.

One thing both teachers did in common in the two writing sessions was teacher conferencing, which might account for the high performances of majority of the students. As teacher conferencing is an essential part of a writing workshop, the students' writing successes indicate that the writing workshop approach was effective for elementary school CFL classes. Another factor that both writing sessions had in common was that

Yunfang provided sufficient oral input and prepared students well for the writing sessions, which was the first important prerequisite for CFL writing.

Another interesting finding was that almost 70% of the participants used Chinese characters to fill in their information in their Cycle 4 writings as shown in Table 3, although it was only an option, not a requirement.

Cycle 4	Pinyin	Charac.	Both	Mixed	Total		Arabic
	Only	Only	Pin. & Ch.	Pin. & Ch.	Characters		Numbers
1 <sup>st</sup> G. (14)	2	1	1	9	11	79%	1
4 <sup>th</sup> G. (14)	6	4	1	3	8	57%	0
Total (28)	8	5	2	12	19	68%	1

Table 3: Written Forms in Cycle 4 Writings

Evidently, the students were interested in writing in Chinese characters. The Chinese characters for numbers for the Cycle 4 writing task were all simple characters. It was therefore practical and achievable for elementary school children to write a text mixed with pinyin and simple Chinese characters that they have learned in their written Chinese track.

#### Further Directions and Pedagogical Implications

Based on our analysis on students' writing performances, we need to take further actions in our next round of research, which probably have some teaching implications as well. First of all, since age did not seem to make a significant difference in the students' writing performances, we may design same writing tasks for all K-5<sup>th</sup> Grades, but we still need to differentiate the contents within each writing task to accommodate students'

individual differences. For example, we may design bonus questions as Ruihua did in the Cycle 3 writing task.

Secondly, we need to design our next two writing tasks at the same or similar difficulty level so they are comparable and controllable. For example, if one requires students to use pinyin in their writings, the other one should require the same, not in English or Chinese characters.

Thirdly, as Yunfang added a reading session before the writing session in Cycle 4, we may need to add another reading session and to expose students with more readings on target structures and phrases so that students get familiar with the written form and get ready for writing. For example, we need to expose students with more two-digit numbers in Chinese that they have already been able to speak so they will get familiar with 四十八 for 48 and will write 四十八 accordingly instead of 四八 as they would do before.

Fourthly, as we noticed that peer reviewing did not seem to work well as we had expected in the Cycle 4 writing session, we need to select a limited number of peer reviewers, say, one for each table, and train them to be good readers so that they can help their classmates and leave us time to help those with behavior or cognitive challenges. Peer reviewing, if conducted well, will be as effective as teacher conferencing in improving students' writing.

Finally, we need to separate the role of researcher from that of teacher especially when the teacher is a researcher. When Ruihua conducted the writing session in Cycle 3, she conferenced with students as an involving teacher when she was supposed to be a distanced researcher and teach writing in the traditional way as we had planned.

### Conclusion

Since Murray published his manifesto of teaching writing as a process in 1972, this writing workshop approach has been proved to be effective in teaching writing in English. It might not appear to be as effective in teaching writing to our elementary school CFL classes yet when considering students' performances as a whole group. Yet when considering individual performances, the writing workshop approach, especially teacher conferencing, seemed to work well in improving students' writing. We included prewriting, writing, and rewriting in the writing workshop. In the future, we will introduce presenting/publishing at the end of a writing workshop and give students opportunities to celebrate their writing processes.

As Murray advises, the writing process can be introduced to your classroom "as soon as you have a simple understanding of that process" and "as soon as you accept the full implications of teaching process not product" (p. 4). You do not need a special training, a reduced teaching load, or even a classroom of your own. You only need to respect your students for their "search for truth" through language and to "be patient, and wait, and wait, and wait" (p.5), which is especially true for elementary school children.

As we have noticed, many students need step-by-step help and encouragement when writing, but with proper help, they can do equally good jobs as others. It takes us "a lot of patience, love, and right mind-set" to help them (Liu, 2017). In the Cycle 3 writing session, for example, Ruihua noticed a 4<sup>th</sup> Grade boy staring at his blank paper writing nothing. One of his classmates said that he never wrote anything at all. Ruihua found out that he did not know how to start it, so she patiently instructed him to copy the sentences

onto his paper line by line and helped him to fill in his information. And he made it before the period was over!

Teaching a CFL writing workshop takes a lot of patience, but you can make it. After all, *teaching* writing as a process is a *learning* process, too. Through our action research on teaching a writing workshop, we have been learning to be better teachers and researchers.

### **Acknowledgements**

Ruihua's foremost gratitude goes to Dr. Nan Jiang and the CLTA Action Research Award Committee for kindly granting her the prestigious 2016 award to support our current project. We are especially grateful to Dr. Yueming Yu for her encouragement and for being our role model. Our sincere thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers for spending their valuable time on our manuscript and giving us detailed advice for revision.

Ruihua's deepest gratitude goes to Mom for her everlasting love through this poem 《念母》：堂前燕子教雏飞，后园海棠落春泥。尤伤红梅香盈雪，蜂现黄花伴儿啼。 Thank you, Ma. You are always missed and loved.

### References

- Liu, R. "Summary of First Step of TWP." *A Chinese Workshop*. 2017. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/achineseworkshop/home/incubation/summaryoffirststepoftwp>
- Murray, D. M. "Teaching Writing as a Process, Not Product." V. Villanueva and K. L. Arola (Eds.) *Cross-talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. The National Council of Teachers of English, 2011. Retrieved from [http://www.csun.edu/~krowlands/Content/Academic\\_Resources/Composition/Processes/Murray-process.pdf](http://www.csun.edu/~krowlands/Content/Academic_Resources/Composition/Processes/Murray-process.pdf)