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Comparative Evaluation of Writing Assignments in English Coursebooks for Young Learners

Marija Stevkovska

Abstract: EFL coursebooks for young learners published in the last decades aim to develop both students' language skills, as well as their 21st-century skills. They incorporate the latest technology in the materials provided in the teacher's and student's packs. Contrary to this, the design of the writing assignments fails to reflect the real world of young learners from Generation Z and Alpha. As a result, writing assignments lack authenticity and clear assessment criteria that would facilitate the writing process and make it more appealing to students. This article aims to compare and contrast the writing assignments in two EFL coursebooks for young learners using the critical comparative evaluation method. The analysis indicates that the assignments in both coursebooks are well-structured in terms of clarity of instructions, the writing model provided, task variety, and age-appropriateness. There is a lack of authenticity and flexibility concerning the use of AI and other digital tools. Furthermore, self and peer assessment are not incorporated into the writing instructions. This can be supplemented by modifying the format of the writing assignments, providing assessment rubrics, and adding real-life types of written communication that include texting and messaging through social media.

Keywords: *EFL coursebooks, young learners, writing assignments, authenticity, assessment, AI tools.*

Introduction

General coursebooks for English as a foreign language include activities that promote the development of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Since the beginning of the 21st century, coursebook authors have started implementing the new skills necessary for the third millennium, also known as the four C's (collaboration, communication, creative thinking, and critical thinking). Over the last two decades, digital skills have also found their place amongst the vital competencies of students belonging to Generation Z and Alpha. EFL coursebooks are following this trend by incorporating digital tools such as e-books, interactive whiteboard software, and other applications to connect learning to the real world. Most recent developments in Artificial Intelligence have also urged publishing houses to design language coursebooks that contain AI-powered tools.

In regard to writing skills, the design of writing assignments has not changed significantly in the last twenty years. Although the tasks are relevant to the learners, with clear instructions and models, they often lack authenticity and clear assessment rubrics. Some series of EFL coursebooks[1] have a language portfolio that includes a writing portfolio section. However, the coursebooks themselves do not provide learners with sufficient information about assessment criteria. Furthermore, the writing assignments do not always reflect the new reality of young learners and the use of digital and AI tools.

This article investigates the design of writing assignments in EFL coursebooks for young learners, with particular emphasis on the role of authenticity and the use of digital and AI tools. The study aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How are writing assignments in EFL coursebooks for young learners designed?

2. How can writing assignments be modified to become more authentic?

3. What kind of assessment can facilitate the writing process for young learners?

By focusing on task authenticity and implementation of the latest digital tools for education, the study will support textbook authors and EFL educators in enhancing the writing skills of young learners.

Literature Review

In a world of ever-evolving global literacy, it is of paramount importance that writing assignments in EFL coursebooks match students' real needs for writing, thus motivating learners to do writing tasks. This means that most assignments should reflect the kind of written discourse in which young learners engage in everyday life. Concerning reading passages in English textbooks, Tomlinson (2012) points out that "an authentic text is one that is produced in order to communicate rather than to teach (Tomlinson, 2012: 163). Similarly, written assignments for young learners should be purposeful and allow students to communicate their message, instead of asking them to demonstrate the vocabulary and grammatical structures they have learned.

Over the last twenty years, little progress has been made in the materials design for language learning. Cosmetic changes such as updating texts and using more attractive book designs, as well as innovation in developing digital tools as supporting materials to coursebooks seem to be more in line with the demands of the market than with the latest research in second language acquisition. Tomlinson (2020) lists several possible reasons why there is no significant progress in materials development: 1) publishing houses are driven by profit and therefore have short deadlines, which leaves authors with little time to be creative; 2) publishers are unlikely to risk publishing expensive series of innovative coursebooks; instead, they would rather replicate the features of their previous most sold coursebooks; 3) high-stake exams have a negative backwash effect on the design of EFL coursebooks since their format remains unchanged and that leaves little space for book authors to make changes in the curriculum or classroom pedagogy; and 4) official institutions, ministries, and education inspectors are rigid and would not recommend language learning materials that do not conform with their expectations.

Elmahida et al. (2021) assert that in the process of materials design, language teachers should consider the characteristics of learners, the fun aspect of learning, and effective feedback strategies. The same applies to writing assignments, which should take into consideration the age and interests of young learners, their attitudes towards writing and learning in general, and peer and self-assessment as means of evaluating students' writing skills. Research has shown a discrepancy between young learners' writing experiences outside the classroom and the writing assignments provided in EFL coursebooks (Caws, 2012; Vue et al., 2016).

Based on the premise that young learners nowadays are dependent on electronic modes of communication, the affordances of online tools should be instrumental

in enhancing students' writing skills, in particular their functional and critical literacy (Caws, 2012; Karchmer-Klein, 2019). They would enhance instruction and motivate learners to become fully engaged in the writing process (Vue et al., 2016). Purcell et al. (2013) conducted a study with middle-school students on the effects of digital tools on student writing. The results indicate several benefits of digital technologies: 1) they enable learners to have their writing read by a large audience; 2) these tools foster collaboration and interaction among students; 3) they allow students to be more creative and express their personal opinions. On the other hand, survey findings show the concerns of teachers, such as students being careless, using informal language extensively, and putting little effort into their writing (Purcell et al., 2013). In another study on the effectiveness of integrating Web 2.0 tools in enhancing young learners' EFL writing skills, the use of Google Docs and blogs contributed to the development of collaborative writing skills. Students found these writing activities entertaining and authentic (Manidaki & Zafiri, 2021). Furthermore, posting students' writings on social media tools such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat can be effective as it 'promotes schools and showcases students' work' **(**Karchmer-Klein, 2019: 195). However, educators should also be informed about online safety and privacy issues that may arise.

Small Roseboro (2019) asserts that teachers should be critical when using writing assignments in coursebooks as it is important to learn about the ethnicities and cultures of their learners and to use customized rubrics for assessment. Students are more motivated to write well when they receive peer feedback on their written assignments (Karchmer-Klein, 2019). Research has shown that peer and self-assessment can assist young learners in producing more effective writing by remembering and self-monitoring crucial components of their writing assignments (Andrade et al., 2008; Bradford et al., 2016).

The overview of the literature highlights the importance of promoting the use of digital tools for the development of young learners' EFL writing skills. These tools allow students to engage in multimodal and authentic writing assignments. There is a lack of research on how writing tasks are designed in EFL coursebooks, and whether they comply with the affordances and constraints of digital tools. Therefore, this study aims to analyze and compare the design of writing assignments 15 years ago and nowadays in order to explore whether there is any progress in writing teaching practices and how much they reflect current trends in educational technology.

Research Methodology

The critical comparative evaluation method was adopted to analyze, compare, and contrast the writing assignments in two EFL coursebooks for young learners. The analysis was performed in line with 'the four principles of comparative evaluation: selection of the object for evaluation, level of comparison, conceptual comprehension, and analysis of the findings of an evaluation' (Vartiainen, 2002: 361).

Two EFL coursebooks were chosen from a series of textbooks for young learners printed by two publishing companies, namely *Fairyland 5*, published by Express Publishing in 2009, and *The Wilsons 2*, a product of Hamilton House Publishers from 2023. The books were written for young learners of English, aged 10-11, at A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The first book was selected because of its popularity in North Macedonia until eight years ago, while the second coursebook was chosen as it has recently been put on the market, and its unique selling proposition is that it incorporates all 21st-century skills. Seminars were organized by the respective publishers to promote both books to English teachers in North Macedonia.

The instrument used for the evaluation of the writing assignments was a checklist adapted from Cunningsworth's (1995) quick-reference checklist for evaluation and selection of coursebooks. The checklist for evaluation of the authenticity of the assignments was tailor-made by the author. The writing assignments were compared across 11 categories: clarity of instructions, writing model, language level appropriateness, relevance to learners, task variety, creativity, cultural sensitivity, flexibility, ICT skills, assessment criteria, and feedback (see Appendix B). The authenticity of the writing assignments was checked against the following criteria: real-life context, audience, purpose, task authenticity, use of genuine materials, and task authenticity (see Appendix C).

The procedure was as follows: the writing assignments were first identified and described (see Appendix A), then they were evaluated according to the Evaluation checklist for the design of the writing assignments, followed by the evaluation of their authenticity using the Evaluation checklist for the authenticity of the writing assignments. Finally, conclusions were drawn regarding best practices for designing authentic writing assignments that include effective assessment and feedback strategies.

Results

The results of the identification and description of the writing assignments in both EFL courses indicate that *Fairyland 5* has 17 assignments, while *The Wilsons 2* has only 5 writing assignments. The components of the student's pack for *The Wilsons* include a Writing & Project Booklet, Readers, and a CLIL & Culture Booklet, a mobile application, and an interactive talking pen, whereas the Fairyland 5 book has a language portfolio with a writing section. Both books have additional writing materials such as a writing booklet and a language portfolio.

The critical comparative evaluation of the writing assignments was conducted using two checklists. The results of the evaluation checklist indicate that the assignments in both coursebooks have clear and age-appropriate instructions. The writing models that are provided contain the necessary vocabulary and the grammar structures that have been taught previously. Concerning the appropriateness of the language level, all vocabulary and language structures in both coursebooks corresponded with the A2 CEFR level. The majority of the topics are relevant to the students and appropriate for their age, as they cover issues such as family, friends, travelling, school, nature, hobbies, and free-time activities. There are no topics typical of Generation Alpha, including social media, netiquette, cyber safety, or the use of smartphones. As for task variety, *Fairyland 5* has a much wider range of writing tasks is twice as big as the number of assignments in *The Wilsons 2*. *Fairyland 5* asks students to write an article, an email, a postcard, an article for a school magazine, a picture-based story, a descriptive paragraph, a narrative paragraph, a process paragraph, and to prepare a poster and present it in class. For two assignments, students are encouraged to find information online and present it in class. Contrary to this, *The Wilsons 5* contains an email, a 5-paragraph essay, a descriptive paragraph, and a reply to a post on a school website. There is no progression in the length and complexity of the writing assignments in both books, as assignments alternate between paragraphs and three to five-paragraph essays. The assignments in both books encourage students to be creative and express their personal opinions (e.g. write about their dream job or a memorable day). Regarding cultural sensitivity, the topics in *Fairyland 5* are partially culturally sensitive and inclusive. For example, students are given opportunities to share their own cultural experiences, including writing about a local festival or typical food. Yet, many of the writing models are related to US or UK culture (e.g. football). Similarly, *The Wilsons 2* provides topics that are oriented toward American or UK culture, such as entertainment and travel, as can be seen in the writing models provided for those assignments, whereas local culture is not covered in any of

the writing assignments. The assignments in both coursebooks lack the flexibility of design, as they are not graded or cannot be adapted to different classroom contexts. Both books lack suggestions for digital or AI tools that students could use for their writing assignments. They merely recommend to students to go online and search for information. Also, no assessment criteria or rubrics are provided in either of the two coursebooks. *The Wilsons 5* has clear instructions for the structure and content of each assignment, which serve as a kind of checklist that the students can use during the writing process, as well as for providing peer feedback or doing self-assessment.

The findings from the Evaluation checklist for the authenticity of the writing assignments show that some assignments in both books reflect tasks that young learners might encounter in real life (writing for a school magazine, describing a memorable event, writing about their dream job or future, giving cooking instructions, writing invitations, giving advice). However, the mode of communication for most of the transactional messages is via email, which does not correspond with the real-life context of young learners from Generation Z or Alpha. The reading audience is clear and appropriate for young learners and their level of proficiency, as the writing is intended for friends, classmates, or teachers. Interestingly, parents, siblings, or other family members are not included as the target audience. The writing assignments in both coursebooks have a clear purpose beyond language practice (e.g., giving advice, expressing opinions, providing information, and sharing experiences). The purpose is relevant and meaningful to young learners. The assignments in both coursebooks lack task authenticity. They ask students to write emails or postcards, although these media of communication are seldomly or never used by young learners. No authentic materials are incorporated into the writing assignments in either of the books evaluated. On the other hand, the assignments in the two books demand students to use functional language in authentic ways to achieve a practical goal, which compensates for the lack of task authenticity. Finally, cultural diversity is another issue in most of the assignments in both coursebooks, as the cultural perspectives are often related to American or British culture. Nevertheless, the information about these two cultures is age-appropriate.

To summarize, the writing assignments in both coursebooks are well-designed and support learners' language development but lack opportunities for peer and self-assessment, as well as for using digital and AI-powered tools for improving students' digital writing skills, which are necessary in the 21st century. Regarding authenticity, both analyzed coursebooks have assignments that may be encountered only in the EFL classroom.

Discussion

The comparative evaluation of the writing assignments in *Fairyland 5* and *The Wilsons 2* reveals the strengths and areas for improvement in their design. Although the *Fairyland* series is 14 years older than *The Wilsons 2*, the design of the writing assignments does not differ significantly. This implies that coursebook authors do not update the format of the writing assignments to align it with the writing needs of young learners in the third decade of the 21st century. Despite the fact that *The Wilsons* series has additional teaching and learning materials such as mobile phone applications and an interactive talking pen, the writing tasks are still limited to email and essay writing. Conversely, the older series, *Fairyland,* offers a broader range of tasks, thereby providing young learners with a more comprehensive writing experience. This discrepancy raises questions about the breadth of exposure to various writing genres and styles, which may impact their creativity and proficiency in writing. As mentioned previously, time pressure and motivation for profit of publishing houses leave book authors with limited space for creativity and innovation (Tomlinson, 2020).

Overall, the evaluation checklist for the design of the writing assignments indicates that both coursebooks provide carefully considered and formed instructions at A2 level, ensuring that young learners comprehend the tasks assigned. However, the lack of gradation of the length and complexity of assignments within each book indicates a missed opportunity for gradually scaffolding students' writing skills.

Another emerging issue in both books is insufficient cultural sensitivity by incorporating topics predominantly related to US or UK culture. As Small Roseboro (2019) points out educators should be aware of the cultural background of their students and modify writing assignments accordingly. Instead of teachers having to redesign writing tasks, book authors should make tasks flexible so that course instructors can adapt them to the different abilities of their students.

The two most prominent findings of the study pertain to the authenticity and the absence of assessment criteria for the writing assignments. While some tasks are realistic, such as writing for a school magazine or giving advice, the prevalent use of email as the primary mode of communication diverges from the actual communication practices of young learners nowadays. Previous studies have shown a mismatch between students' writing practices in and out of the EFL classroom (Caws, 2012; Vue et al., 2016). Extensive research has been conducted over the last years on the effects of implementation of digital and AI tools in writing classes in

secondary and tertiary education (Manidaki & Zafir, 2021; Karchmer-Klein, 2019). On the other hand, young learners have certain cognitive constraints due to their age, which need to be considered when designing writing tasks for this age group of students. If students are given the opportunity to engage in real-life writing scenarios such as texting in Whatsapp groups instead of writing emails on paper, they would be more motivated to write since they could easily relate to the writing experience. The authenticity could be increased by replacing the mode of communication (emails and articles) with actual messages on social media. Additionally, these platforms could serve as a basis for developing students' writing skills through collaborative writing. Authenticity is closely related to technological integration, and both coursebooks fail to leverage digital and AI-powered tools to enhance young learners' writing skills. This is particularly important for the more recent book, *The Wilsons 5*, which does not utilize these valuable resources for promoting students' digital literacy.

The second significant feature of the two coursebooks is the absence of assessment criteria and rubrics. The instructions for the assignments should include simple checklists for the young learners that would facilitate self and peer assessment and help teachers provide constructive feedback. Such checklists would not only improve students' writing skills (Andrade et al., 2008; Bradford et al., 2016) but also promote learners' autonomy and metacognitive skills.

In conclusion, while both *Fairyland 5* and *The Wilsons 2* offer well-designed writing assignments that support language development, several shortcomings have to be addressed, including task authenticity, integration of digital tools, clear assessment criteria, and opportunities for feedback.

The study provided answers to the three research questions.

RQ1: How are writing assignments in EFL coursebooks for young learners designed?

They are well-designed in terms of purpose, target audience, clear instructions, writing models, and age and level-appropriate language. Most topics are relevant to the students, but they lack authenticity as the assignments are not in line with the 21st-century writing practices of young learners. Assessment grids are also not provided to help teachers and students monitor the quality of their writing.

RQ2: How can writing assignments be modified to become more authentic?

They should be adapted to the most commonly used modes of communication by young learners, and digital and AI tools should be included to motivate young

learners to write. Instead of asking students to write emails, they could send messages on WhatsApp to their friends or family, or on any other social medium they use. Exchanging messages makes the writing process interactive and purposeful. The target audience has a real need to read and respond to the message. AI tools such as chat-animate.com, which mimic WhatsApp chat messages could also be utilized to simulate real-life writing practices. Stories and articles could be made more interactive by using free digital storytelling tools including app.bookcreator.com, wevideo.com, or storyboard.com. Digital tools appeal to young learners as they encompass multimodal features, which is not the case with writing a text that only the teacher reads. Digital content is easy to share and can reach wider audiences, which urges students to take more responsibility for the quality of their written work.

RQ3: How can the writing process be facilitated through carefully designed assessment rubrics?

As the study shows, there are no assessment checklists in the instructions for the assignments in both groups. Simple assessment checklists with yes/no questions would support students in fulfilling the requirements of the writing tasks. Due to their age, young learners need to be guided by well-structured questions with simple wording. Checklists would help learners produce writing that complies with the instructions and allow classmates to provide peer feedback. Teachers would also benefit from the checklists as they make the assessment process transparent for the students, who can rewrite or edit their assignments based on the checklist, peer assessment, or feedback from the teacher. A simple way to develop a checklist is to use the clear instructions about the structure of each writing assignment in *The Wilsons 5* by rewriting them as yes/no questions.

Limitations

The findings of the study are limited due to the low number of coursebooks compared. If more books were analyzed, the results may differ, or a design pattern may be established. The results of the study refer only to the two EFL coursebooks mentioned above. Consequently, no generalizations on the design of writing assignments can be made.

Recommendations For Further Research

Digital educational technology is advancing at an accelerating level. Future researchers could investigate potential ways of increasing task authenticity by using particular digital and AI tools. This would aid in bridging the gap between the reality of young learners and traditional writing assignments. Furthermore, studies could be done on how teacher education should be redesigned in order to prepare EFL educators to teach writing skills in the 21st century.

Conclusion

EFL coursebooks for young learners encourage the growth of the four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Publishers are beginning to include 21st-century soft skills, yet during the past 20 years, writing assignments have retained their conventional design, which has led to a gap between the real needs of young learners for written communication and the tasks provided in the coursebooks. The study aimed to explore the design of writing tasks in two EFL coursebooks for young learners to assist English teachers and coursebook authors in increasing authenticity and improving young learners' writing abilities.

Results showed that while the writing assignments in both coursebooks are well-organized, they lack authenticity and do not provide opportunities for students to evaluate their own and their peers' work or to use digital and AI-powered resources to enhance their writing skills. Coursebook authors should rethink and redesign the format of the assignments by changing the mode of written communication, introducing more AI and digital tools, and preparing simple checklists for students' self and peer assessment. In this way, students would be more motivated to write and enhance their writing and digital literacy skills.

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The checklist can help educators ensure that writing assignments are designed to promote authentic language use and meaningful communication in real-world contexts.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: List of writing assignments in the two coursebooks

Coursebook: Fairyland 5	Coursebook: The Wilsons 2
Write an email to a friend about your favourite video game	Write an email to a friend about a town or city.
Write an article about a famous person you admire for your school magazine.	Write an article about a wild animal.
Write your favourite recipe	Reply to a post which asks for advice. Read Eddie's post on the school website and write a reply.
You can't go to school today. Write a note to your teacher telling him/her what has happened to you.	Write an email inviting a friend to a day trip.
Write an email to your friend about a famous person you have met.	Write an essay (5 paragraphs) about your dream job.
Make a poster about the Fab Four in football in your country.	Write a description of something you enjoyed (a concert, a film, a special meal, a day at the zoo, etc.).
ICT – Find some non-food uses for honey and green tea. You can use the key phrases: non-food uses for honey/green tea. Present them to the class.	
Write an article for your school magazine about a place of great beauty in your country.	
Imagine you are on holiday. Write a postcard to your friend. Tell him/her what you are doing and what you are going to do.	

A friend of yours is coming to visit you. Write an email to him/her and tell him/her what you are going to see and do together.	
You are in the countryside with your mum or dad. Write an email to your friend and tell him/her about it.	
Giving advice to your friend who has a problem – an email	
Write a short paragraph about a festival in your country. Write about where/when it is held, what happens during festival,etc.	
Write an article for your school magazine about Captain James Cook.	
Write a short article about a famous race in your country. Include pictures and a short description.	
ICT find information about another mystery. Use the key phrase: world mysteries. Present your information to the class.	
Picture-based story	

APPENDIX B: Evaluation checklist for the design of the writing assignments

	Fairyland 5	The Wilsons 2
1. Clarity of instructions		
- clearly written	√	√
- appropriate for the age group	√	√
2. A writing model		
- previously provided	√	√
- vocabulary and grammar structures are taught previously	√	√

3. Language level appropriateness		
- vocabulary and language structures are appropriate for the A2 level	√	√
4. Relevance to learners		
- the topics are relevant and interesting to the students	√	√
- the assignments are age-appropriate, i.e. they relate to their daily lives and interests and abilities	√	√
5. Task variety		
- Various writing tasks	√	√
6. Creativity		
- the assignments encourage creativity and expression of personal ideas.	√	√
7. Cultural sensitivity		
- culturally sensitive and inclusive topics	√	√
- students are given opportunities to share their own cultural experiences	√	√
8. Flexibility		
- assignments are graded and can be adapted to different classroom dynamics and contexts	X	X
9. ICT skills		
- assignments allow students to search for information online and to use it in their writing.	√	X
- a variety of digital and AI tools are offered to students	X	X
10. Assessment criteria		
- assessment rubrics are provided	X	X
11. Feedback		
- opportunities for peer feedback	X	X
- opportunities for self-assessment	X	X

APPENDIX C: Evaluation checklist for the authenticity of the writing assignments

	Fairyland 5	The Wilsons 2
1. Real-life context - the assignment reflects tasks that young learners might encounter in real life	√	√
2. Audience - the intended audience is clear and appropriate for the learners' age and level	√	√
3. Purpose - writing assignments have a clear purpose beyond language practice (e.g., solving a problem, expressing opinions, providing information) - the purpose is relevant and meaningful to the students	√ √	√ √
4. Task authenticity - the writing assignments consist of tasks that students might encounter outside of the EFL classroom - students need to use functional language in authentic ways to achieve a practical goal	√ √	√ √
5. Use of genuine materials - authentic materials are incorporated into the assignments whenever possible - the authentic materials provide genuine language input for students	X X	X X
6. Cultural authenticity - cultural perspectives in the assignments are authentic and appropriate for the young learners' cultural background - diverse cultures are represented in the units and the tasks	√ X	√ X