In as much the same way as we write e-mails, shopping lists or personal memos, children use their writing skills not only during Maltese and English lessons, but also during their science, mathematics and social studies.

Learning how to write involves more than putting pen to paper. Writers – whatever the age – need practice and encouragement, as well as room where to test ideas, make mistakes and write badly,” Lil Brannon, professor of English and Education at the University of North Carolina, US, said recently.

Prof. Brannon has just been to Malta to train a group of teachers on how to help their students be better writers, and how to train other teachers to develop teaching strategies.

During her stay, she contributed to the Eighth Writing Teachers’ Convention, which was attended by over 40 teachers, and attended a meeting of the Writing Leaders’ Forum.

The training was organised by the Malta Writing Programme within the Foundation for Educational Services, and the Department for Curriculum Development and e-Learning within the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE). The Malta Writing Programme is affiliated to the National Writing Project (NWP) – the US national network which links teachers in every state with the aim of sharing resources and best practices on writing.

Prof. Brannon, NWP site director at the University of North Carolina, whose visit to Malta to assist the Malta Writing Programme was sponsored, in part, by the US Embassy, said that one of the methodologies is to encourage children to express themselves through writing and emphasize the funding of knowledge rather than spelling mistakes.

“Spelling mistakes occur in a pattern, and therefore teachers are encouraged to correct that pattern rather than mark every single mistake. While an essay covered in red circles discourages a child, the circling of good ideas encourages the child to bring out better ideas.

The importance of writing cannot be underestimated. It lies at the basis of other crucial skills, such as reading. Through writing, the programme teaches children how to be able to create, have something interesting they want to write about.

"Teaching writing skills also involves knowing the student and knowing how to work with interesting ideas," she said.

However, the programme does not only use writing as an entry-point to literacy and academic attainment, but goes beyond to teach teachers and to foster a community of teacher-leaders who can have a key role in the development of their school community. In fact, Prof. Brannon’s visit was thematic on School Improvement Through Teacher Leadership, and was centred around NYP’s model of fostering an intellectual community of teacher-leaders.

“Teachers also need role models in the schools. They need to create or form part of an intellectual community. In fact, through the programme, the teachers are involved in study groups, they undergo training, read professional literature, and create lessons based on what’s going on in their professional sphere.”

Ms. Anastasi is the chair of the Writing Teachers’ Leaders’ Forum. She thinks that every teacher is responsible for teaching children how to write, and in fact, writing does not only take place during language lessons, but in all subjects.

“IT is rather, the genre of writing and the aims it strives to achieve, that change from one subject to another. In this way if teaching is about preparing students for life, then writing becomes one of the strongest and most effective tools a teacher can use to push students towards their respective potential. We believe that we do not simply think to write, but also and more importantly to write. Thus, for example, through writing a student learning mathematics, physics or geography can make sense of new ideas and information. In this way we move towards writing across the curriculum.”

The forum aims to keep the writing process alive and provides support to local teachers and students, Ms. Anastasi explains.

"Inspired by practices already going on in their professional community, the teachers are invited to join the programme. They become experts within their area and the aims it stretches to achieve, goes beyond to be part of a learning community of teachers who undertake professional reading and share best practices."

The Malta Writing Programme has been sponsoring this approach for the past seven years, with collaboration from the US Embassy, he said.

The involvement of teachers is by invitation – teachers who have become experts within their area are invited to join the programme.

"The programme is strong in terms of dissemination model because it involves teachers with long years of experience. Newly graduated teachers might have concerns of their own, such as how to control a class. Rather, the programme selects experienced teachers who have settled in their field, and whose intellectual prospects to them finding answers to more-than-basic questions, such as whether a student writing a scientific or history essay should be assessed on writing."

The programme gives these teachers the tools to work with and to reflect on. It does not give them the answers they search, but helps them be part of a learning community of teachers who undertake professional reading and share best practices.

"The Malta Writing Programme undertakes an action research approach. In this, it follows the principles promulgated in the National Minimum Curriculum, which places at the core the concept of teachers’ reflections as practitioners. In this area, action and reflection can be said to be the royal road to improve and succeed," Mr. Spiteri said.

The US Embassy has been supporting the Malta Writing Programme since 2001. In April, NWP promoted the Malta Writing Programme as an international affiliate site. Malta’s recognition makes it the first in Europe, and the first co-shared with Honk Kong – in the world.