

# LEARNING TO WRITE AND WRITING TO LEARN

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## INTRODUCTION

When children come to school at the age of five they are full of enthusiasm. They look forward to learning to read and write. They spend much of their time experimenting with pencils, crayons, paper and notebooks. They quickly learn how to write their name, numbers and some letters. This is referred to as 'emergent writing' and precedes reading. Why, then, after this initial motivation to learn to write do children later dislike writing and find it difficult? As Frank Smith says, "children do not come to school ignorant, but they often leave school ignorant."

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM CHILDREN?

If we look at the comments below made by children in relation to writing, they have strong implications for teachers whether they are teaching L1 or L2 learners.

### Comments from children

"I do my best, but it's still wrong"

"I never know what to write"

"I need peace and quiet"

"I can't spell"

"Writing's boring"

"I like to write with Martin 'cos he writes good stories"

"I don't like when the bell goes and I haven't finished"

"I like when I've filled up my book"

"I want to be a writer"

From this list of comments the following points can be derived:

1. If children feel they "can't spell", they will be inhibited about writing.
2. If writing "is boring" for children, it is up to us as teachers to provide a reason for writing which will stimulate learners. They must be cognitively and emotionally involved in what they are doing in order to find it meaningful.
3. If we "don't know what to write", it is most likely because there is no framework provided. In real life, we write for a specific reason, for real readers so teachers have to provide as real-life a situation as possible in the classroom.

4. Perhaps, the hustle and bustle of a classroom is not the most appropriate place for some children to write. If possible, the teacher can set up a 'writing corner' with a variety of stationery where children can write in "peace and quiet".
5. Some learners try very hard to produce a piece of written work, but feel dissatisfied because "it is still wrong". Why is it wrong? Is it the teacher who says it is wrong? What does 'wrong' mean both to the teacher and to the learner?
6. Children have a sense of achievement when they complete an activity or "fill up a book". This motivates them to continue.
7. A child of three said, "I want to be a writer". At an early age, if children are exposed to books and writing materials they can have literary ambitions. In this particular case, the child had a model: her father is a writer and works at home.
8. Children who like to write with other children demonstrate the values of shared writing. Working collaboratively suggests the process will be focused on as much as the product.
9. Time is important when writing. If children do not complete a piece of work they often feel cheated. It is therefore important to offer tasks of a manageable length or to encourage project work which the children accept as ongoing.

## WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

When children start writing they write as they speak. At primary school, they begin to develop a form or a style of written language which is different from speech and is helped by extensive reading. However, not all children continue to develop their written skills after the age of ten and this has implications for second and foreign language teachers. If children do not feel competent readers and writers in L1, to what extent will they develop in L2?

One way of encouraging children to write in any language is to provide a specific task which allows for personal involvement while at the same time has a structure. For instance, handing learners a blank piece of paper and asking them to write about 'Myself' — or any other topic — can be extremely daunting. A blank page looks as if it ought to be filled — possible on both

sides and for many children this task would be impossible. I recently taught a class of Colombian children where one pupil did not write a word on her blank sheet of paper. The topic was 'Where I live'. After some time, I gave her a specific task on the same topic and this is what she produced: three informative sentences where the message was clear despite some spelling errors.

### **WHERE YOU LIVE**

Tell me 3 things about your house or apartment.  
[all handwritten]

1. My house a big.
2. The house has a carden.
3. We haf a doock. (We have a dog.)

Poor spelling or a lack of confidence in this area can inhibit writing. And in the assessment of a piece of writing it is on spelling that the teacher focusses. A piece of written work may be interesting in content but all too often, teachers downgrade it because of spelling errors: and grammar. But sometimes, there is a delicate balance between what is a spelling mistake and what is a grammar mistake. For instance, is 'she like school' a spelling mistake, a grammatical inaccuracy or merely a slip of the pen? Slips of the pen happen to all of us and do not necessarily mean we are careless or stupid. According to Torbe (1985), there are two main reasons for poor spelling:

1. Weak visual memory
2. Weak auditory analysis

However, poor spellers with weak visual memory are not necessarily poor readers, whereas poor spellers with weak auditory analysis are probably poor readers too. In order to help children take responsibility for helping themselves to spell, Torbe suggests the following strategy:

### **LOOK AND LISTEN. COVER. MEMORIZE AND WRITE.**

Copying a word into a notebook from the blackboard or a piece of paper does not improve spelling. When a child wants a word spelt, write it in a notebook you keep on your desk and apply the above strategy. The child should memorize the word and have a clear visual image of it before s/he writes it. However, learning to spell requires effort and commitment on the part of the learner but if we can offer a strategy such as the one above the learner can then begin to take responsibility for his/her own spelling.

### **CONCLUSION**

Learning to write, as we have seen, can be a tedious task if the appropriate language environment is missing. However, given a relevant 'task environment' where children are encouraged to focus on content, share their ideas, and experiment with techniques they then begin to write to learn.

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