

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE

If one is to write, one must believe—in the truth and worth of the scrawl, in the ability of the reader to receive and decode the message. —William Strunk and E.B. White (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 84)¹

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN’S WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Australian researcher Marie Clay notes that parents and teachers of young children attribute great importance to reading experiences during the preschool years, but understand very little about the value of preschool writing experiences (Clay M., 2001). Don Holdaway remarks that “the major written output of very young children in natural or developmental ways” has generally been seen as having “little value or significance in traditional schooling.” He proposes that a child’s attempts at written language need to be “better understood,” and “compared from week to week for significant growth.” He also asserts that these attempts at written language should be “as strongly rewarded” as a child’s first attempts at spoken language. If these changes happen, a “quite new perspective” on children’s “early production of written language” would come to light (Holdaway D., 1979, p. 36).

In their studies, Holdaway and his colleagues recognized a “natural and continuous progression from scribble-like forms of play-writing, through a very complex series of approximations and experiments each displaying the mastery of some new convention.” They believed that children were working “towards goals which imply an understanding of the conventions of print rather than simply the ability to form acceptable letter shapes” (Holdaway D., 1979, p. 34).

Some adults view “scribble” as careless writing in which children do not attend to the shape and legibility of letters, and disregard the accuracy of spelling or grammar. Many researchers, however, believe that the term “scribble” is not an appropriate one to use to describe children’s early writing. They see scribble as an “extremely functional” strategy that “allows language users to search for, find, and placehold text” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 142). They find that early writings are organized and include systematic reflections of decisions the child has made about how written language and artistic systems are organized.

Frequently adults view children’s early writing as erroneous, disorganized, or lacking meaning, or cute. Educator John Holt points out that when we view youngsters “as being ‘cute’ we become incapable of perceiving their behavior accurately or taking its significance with due seriousness” (Holt, 1975). Similarly, researcher Kate Foley Cusumano (Foley Cusumano, 2008, p. 11)² notes David Yaden’s statement

that it is important to understand, “...every mark a child makes on a paper is made for a purpose” (Yaden, 2008).

Understanding and supporting language learners so that they can realize the human rights of education and literacy require a shift in emphasis. Adults need to turn their attention from a focus on the form of language to a focus on the child. They need to consider the child’s interests, level of maturity, natural language, learning activities and the meaning the child is attempting to make. Learners need confidence to take risks, to make mistakes and readjust, and to ask for help. Risk taking can result in learning new skills, concepts, and knowledge about written language. Learners also need to be willing to share and engage with others. In a world of learners, not only teachers, but parents, grandparents, other caregivers—adults in general—need to understand and value what the child is writing. By studying a piece of writing, it is possible to find out many things about the child’s knowledge of the world and the child’s knowledge of written language. We see how children use their current understandings of written language to generate new understandings.

All too often, the significance of their written words goes unnoticed. That was not the case in my household, however, when I put a protest in writing as a young child.

View from a Small Place

My first realization of the power of writing occurred when I was four-years-old. It was the Friday before Easter, and the members of my Roman Catholic family were observing a three-hour period of silence on the afternoon of Good Friday, a ritual that commemorates the period of time during which Christ hung on the cross. My father was cooking the noontime meal. Because it was Good Friday, my family abstained from eating meat, and he was cooking fish. I did not like fish and absolutely refused to eat it. Usually, I would just voice my resistance to having fish for lunch. But no one was talking because of the Good Friday rule of silence. As the fish continued to cook, my anxiety rose. I would not eat the fish. In desperation, I found a small piece of paper and wrote the word “no” and drew the outline of a fish. I marched to the stove and handed the message to my father without speaking. My father’s reaction taught me the power of written symbols. The silence of the Good Friday ritual was immediately shattered as he called my mother, and I was chastised by both of my parents for refusing to eat the fish that my father was preparing. I cannot remember if I reluctantly ate a bit of fish that day, but I have never forgotten the power of putting my protest in writing.

THE BEGINNINGS OF WRITING

From the time they are born, children gesture as a way of communicating their intentions. Children babble when they begin to speak. Likewise, when they begin to grasp writing implements, they engage in what could be called, babbling on paper.

Howard Gardner describes the transition from these early markings to the child's recognition that markings have meanings and are of importance.

To be sure, in these early markings [the child] has yet to discover the full potentials of his behavior... his activity is limited to just what it is called—sheer scribbling. Yet, something of a moment has already occurred. For in the transition from infant who is not cognizant of the product of his pen to the child who cares deeply whether a mark has been made, a crucial realization has come about: the awareness that, by the action of his own hand, he can create something—something that lasts, something that has importance for him, and (judging by their responses) something that has significance for those about him. (Gardner, 1980, p. 24)

Gardner further states:

The potential to create a product that matters—a mark that can stand on its own—is one of the first indications to the child of his own efficacy, his nascent capacity to use a tool to create a product with it. At this time when the child is gradually breaking away from his caretakers and attempting to establish autonomy, this evidence (as clear as a black line against a white backdrop) that he can himself produce something assumes critical developmental importance. (Gardner, 1980, p. 24)

Writing researcher Liliana Tolchinsky concurs. She states that the child does not produce the marks “for the sake of the activity, nor as a mere exercise, but for the traces.” She describes a study by Gibson and Levin (Gibson & Levin, 1980) who gave children, age fifteen to thirty-eight months, paper attached to a board and one of two tools. The tools looked “identical except that one left a trace whereas, the other did not.” The researchers found that “elimination of the trace significantly reduced the graphic activity.” The children rejected the non-tracing tools. During and after making the marks, “the infants pointed and named the products, but this behavior disappeared when no traces were left” (Tolchinsky, 2006, p. 84).

Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky noted that until the early 1900's psychology had conceived of writing as a complicated motor skill. In reference to psychology, he writes, “It has paid remarkably little attention to the question of the acquisition of written language as such, that is, a particular system of symbols and signs whose mastery heralds a turning point in the entire cultural development of the child.” He also states, “It seems clear that mastery of such a complex sign system cannot be accomplished in a purely mechanical and external manner; rather it is the culmination of a long process of development of complex behavioral functions in the child” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 106).³

Gardner adds:

The contriving of certain geometric forms —circles, crosses, rectangles, triangles—coupled with an increasing proclivity to combine these marks into

more intricate patterns, is a fundamental development of the third and fourth years of life. The child is establishing a vocabulary of lines and forms—the basic building blocks of graphic language—which, like the sounds of language, eventually combine into meaningful, referential units. (Gardner, 1980, p. 11)⁴

Edelsky and her colleagues state, “Like reading, writing is a dynamic process as writers discover new meanings. Just as readers do in the course of their reading, writers in the course of their writing continuously revise their own thoughts, meanings, and linguistic expressions as they read their own texts” (Edelsky, Altwater, & Flores, 1991, p. 20). Holdaway explains that oral language tends to occur in, and be supported by, the senses and social situation in which it takes place. Ambiguities can be clarified within that situation—and by voice intonation, facial expression and gesture. Written language lacks the support found within the immediate situation of talk, and therefore conventions are necessary to avoid ambiguity. These conventions are so distinctive that they make written language a separate dialect (Holdaway D., 1979, p. 54). Written language is a language and therefore it cannot be reduced to a series of skills. It is not learned from doing activities or exercises.

Mayer (Mayer, 2007, p. 35), drawing on the work of several researchers, notes that children gain knowledge about how to write through their observations and interactions with more advanced writers (Teale, 1995; Chapman, 1996; McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997; Morrow & Sharkey, 1993; Schickedanz, 1999). Like speech, written language develops over time. Both drawing and writing convey meaning. Therefore, children do not initially distinguish the two (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004; Mayer, 2007). Understandings of written language are not gained in an all-or-none fashion. Concepts build up slowly and generalizations emerge from words that are familiar to the child (Taylor, 1986). At first, children take in generalities and gradually gain understanding of the specifics. For this reason, children’s writing does not look like that of adults. Children manipulate and extend what they already know to create increasingly complex texts.

The period from ages 3–6 is seen as “a period of phenomenal literacy growth for all children” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 45). Like acquiring oral language, a great deal of this learning occurs through a child’s involvement with people and things in the environment. Harste and his colleagues describe this involvement as “inclusion,” in daily events like cooking, going shopping, going to the courthouse, or going on trips. Their research shows that children who are “underfoot,” and therefore naturally part of these events have an advantage for acquiring literacy (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Drawing on the work of several researchers, Mayer (Mayer, 2007) also explains that when acquiring literacy, children interact with others and the things that surround them (Teale, 1995; Chapman, 1996; McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997; Schickedanz, 1999). When learning to write in any language, learners need to witness many demonstrations of how written symbols work. Demonstrations need to be meaningful and relevant to a child’s life, not just abstract concepts beyond the child’s grasp. Children require numerous examples of how the

markings relate to their world as they interact with others through notes, lists, bible passages, web pages, books, maps and other text. "This process of attending to and orchestrating available demonstrations is never-ending... There is no sequence to the order in which demonstrations are inherently learned" (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 195). Citing the work of Dyson, Mayer (Mayer, 2007, p. 35) points out, "...children learn about writing by constructing texts with one another and expressing their ideas in other unbounded ways" (Dyson A., 1997; Dyson A., 2003). As children interact with one another, they explore and gain an understanding of the process and purposes of writing (Mayer, 2007).

Young children show interest in the print around them on signs, labels, advertisements, television and electronic devices, and often imitate these forms. In its earliest forms, even though the child's writing does not look like that of the more experienced writers around him, the child has become a written-language user. Universally, written language users assume that written marks are signs that have the power to make meaning. This assumption holds true even before children can report what the marks that they've made signify, or have a purpose. Frequently, young children make marks on paper and ask an adult or older child, "What does this say?" The question itself indicates that the child believes that the markings have meaning. Clay refers to the point at which the child comes to realize that the marks signify meaning the sign concept. The next step she identifies is when the child realizes that a whole message can be written down (Clay M., 1982). The assumption that written marks are intentional is a force that provides access to literacy and moves literacy learning forward. The endeavor to make meaning controls any written-language user's very first markings as well as her present ones. The assumption holds true for both reading and writing (Wilson, 1988).

When children first write, they treat writing as speech. They draw to supply background for their subject, run words together, spell words the way they sound, allow words to run around the page, talk out loud as they write, blacken in letters, use capital letters and exclamation points liberally (Graves, 1979). But writing is not a direct representation of speech, and the entire writing task is not limited to what's on the page. Young children surround their written marks with meaning by talking about them as they write. This talk helps them organize their writing. The presence of "speech during writing almost always reflects the presence of a plan, either in being abandoned or in operation" (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 37). Drawing on the work of several researchers, Johnson and Sulzby (Johnson & Sulzby, 1999, p. 2) explain that children often 'read' their printed messages using language and a style that sounds like reading (Clay M., 1982; McGee & Richgels, 1996; Sulzby, 1985). Children who read print in this way have internalized the difference between the sound of written and oral language.

Children who are writing explore the ways in which messages are organized on the page. This organization is something that they learn by noticing print, by observing others as they write, and by attempting to write themselves. By observing children as they write, adults can come to understand the knowledge that children

have gained through interactions with other learners, what they know about stories and other genre, and how they connect speech and sounds to print. First letters are often capital letters that children mimic from signs. Capital letters are more distinctive than lower case letters, and many, such as the letters T and W, retain their identity even if reversed (Goodman & Goodman, 1983). Organizational decisions are strongly influenced by the written form of a child's name. As children learn to write their names, they also explore how to create letters and letter-like symbols with a variety of writing devices. Children who make recognizable objects in their drawings also make recognizable letters (Brittain, 1979).

Children's first written letters appear in the midst of drawn objects—these letters represent significant aspects of the environment. As linguist Carol Chomsky states, “Much of the early the writing looks unkempt, until inexperienced fingers develop the control to make it more readable” (Chomsky, 1976, p. 19). As children continue to write, they continue to explore the ways in which words and messages are generated from a finite group of twenty-six symbols. “Using recurring letters and words helps develop fluency and habitual responses, and likely makes [the child] feel more capable” (Foley Cusumano, 2008, p. 13).

View from a Small Place

When my son, Noah was four years old, I was collecting writing samples for a graduate class. I asked him to write on a plain piece of paper. At first, all I saw were a few squiggles. Noah had written three small circular symbols at the top, and three larger circular figures in the middle of the page. When I asked him what this said, he told me that the figures at the top of the page were leaves and a wheel. He then pointed to the larger figures and named three items: the ambulance (sic), the man inside, and the big thing. He became annoyed and did not give me further information when I asked for the specific name of the “big thing.” I believe that this was the stretcher inside the ambulance. I then asked him what the paper was “for” and he said, “It's for Santa.” I understood immediately.

The previous day, we had been in the toy aisle at a local store and Noah found an ambulance with a stretcher and small figures inside that he wanted for Christmas. Now, using his own symbols in a way that held meaning for him, he was writing a message to Santa. The day after he wrote the message, I took the paper out again and asked Noah what it said. He put his hands on his hips—annoyed this time by my lack of recall—and in a loud voice, informed me that as he had told me yesterday, the figures were leaves and a wheel, the ambulance (sic), the man inside, and the big thing.

Although his writing would certainly be described by some as just scribble, and it would be probably be difficult to determine what language he spoke from his markings, Noah understood that his markings served the function of conveying his

message to Santa. At the time he wrote this letter, he was able to print his name, a few other words, and some letters. This text, however, required words that he had not yet acquired orally or was not yet able to write in conventional or invented spelling. Therefore, he reverted to representing them with circular-style markings. Several researchers have noted that the more complex the task, the more emergent the form of writing used by the child. As Mayer (Mayer, 2007, p. 35) notes from other researchers, even when young children are aware that letters represent sounds, “they may still produce writing samples characteristic of lower levels of development in order to preserve a message they are trying to convey” (Barnhart, 1986; Fox & Saracho, 1990; Strickland & Morrow, 1991; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Greer & Lockman, 1998; Bus, Both-de Vries, de Jong, Sulzby, de Jong, & de Jong, 2001).

Noah’s writing stemmed from demonstrations of a purpose for writing in our community and household. He had seen me write and receive letters and knew that sending messages through the mail is common practice. He also understood that children write letters to a man named Santa and ask him to bring them presents for Christmas. Each symbol on his paper represented an individual item. Although the words were not arranged in a linear manner, his letter was actually a list of the items that he wanted. A list is the conventional way of organizing a letter to Santa. Noah had a purpose for his writing and a particular reader in mind. He saw his markings as fixed symbols that had meaning and retain meaning over time—from one day to the next, from the day he wrote them until Christmas. He also understood that through his markings he could convey a message that would reach someone in a distant place. Noah’s message came from his oral language. He could read it both when he wrote it and the next day. He was able to retrieve the content of the message since he had composed it himself. The writing stemmed from an interest of his and served a need. If he had gone to visit Santa in person, he would have told him what he wanted, but it was two months before Christmas, and oral language would not suffice. He needed to preserve the information in written form. As seen in Noah’s example, writing does not wait for oral language to develop completely. He could not fully pronounce each word yet, and he did not know the name for the “stretcher,” so he used the general term “big thing.” Although his oral language was still in the process of developing, he plunged in and took the risk of attempting written language, and, of course, the result was that he received the “ambulance” for Christmas!

In both Noah’s example and my story about Good Friday from my childhood, oral language was not sufficient. As writers, both of us were driven by more than interest. We were not just making marks on paper; we were compelled to use writing to get something that we wanted—or in my case did not want. We were learning at very young ages that writing has agency, allowing us to take responsibility and advocate for ourselves. The examples I present are rooted in our cultural practices, situated within our specific contexts. My written note with the fish symbol would not have been needed within my household on another day or even at a time outside the three-hour period of silence on Good Friday. People from different places and cultures engage in different practices and events, but the use of symbols to represent

meaning and the act of writing about what is compelling, necessary, and sought after, are the same.

THE WORK OF HARSTE WOODWARD AND BURKE

Researchers Jerome Harste, Virginia Woodward, and Carolyn Burke from the University of Indiana conducted a 10-year longitudinal study examining what children ages 3–6 knew about reading and writing prior to going to school. Black and White boys and girls were included in the study. They were from high, middle and low income families and lived in both small towns and urban neighborhoods. The study resulted in the publication of *Language Stories & Literacy Lessons* in 1984 (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

These researchers state, “In use, language is an open system which permits the maintenance and generation of meaning” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 118). They continue, “...engagement and reengagement in the language process increases the opportunities language users have to discover for themselves the generativeness and self-educative aspects of language in use” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 119). They explain that “access to the process” of constructing written language “can only be gained through involvement in the process.” This engagement has to take place on the language user’s terms. Therefore, it is necessary for language users to “set aside” constraints that are either “perceived or real” and take risks to try out new forms of expression (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 130).

Several studies document that children learn to write before beginning school (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Freeman & Sanders, 1989). Long before formal instruction, the young child is making sense of the world, including the world of print. Harste, Woodward, and Burke caution that age is a “dangerous criterion” by which to measure language development because “it does not consistently covary with the operational factor of experience” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 23). However, their studies led them to conclude that “by the age of 3, children demonstrate a personal as well as a social history of literacy” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 146). They state:

The single act of putting pen to paper when requested to write, repeated as it was across sixty-eight children in our Bloomington and Indianapolis studies... tells any observer—including a hypothetical man from Mars—that the children being observed came from a culture in which making marks on paper is an accepted and important form of social behavior. (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, pp. 146–147)

Harste, Woodward, and Burke also find:

Many middle- and upper-class homes...were far from ideal literacy environments. Because both parents worked, many children in these homes were left with baby-sitters or involved in preschool programs that had little

or no interest in literacy. While the homes were supposedly better literacy environments, little of this benefit automatically shifted down to the children in any directly observable way. (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 42)

They did not find major distinctions between lower-, middle-, and upper-class homes. They note “Some homes whether upper- or lower-class, were rather sterile literacy environments, while others were filled with ongoing written language events and were seemingly hard places in which to avoid print involvement” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 42).

Harste, Woodward and Burke contend:

The most salient home factor relating to literacy learning is one we have termed the “availability and opportunity to engage in written language events.” Homes where books were out and readily available, where paper, pens, pencils, crayons, magic markers, and other instruments were handy, where children seemed quite naturally to be included and involved, seemed to provide the key conditions for children to go exploring and for parents to involve themselves in using and encouraging reading and writing, whether they “technically” reported that they knew what they were doing or not. (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, pp. 42–43)

These researchers further propose that the “quantity of literacy materials (number of books, for example) does not seem to be the key element but rather, that what materials there are, are highly accessible, so that both parents and children have to be more or less constantly tripping over them.” They find, “When paper and books were in the way, children used them, often coming up with quite creative uses (writing out a menu for supper, writing traffic tickets, writing notes, posting signs on doors, labeling their toys during play). When there were books in the family room, children were read to, an activity which seemed to be equally initiated by both parents and children.” They also note, “Some homes stored quantities of little-used literacy materials. Others made creative and concentrated use of more minimal quantities of readily accessible materials” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 43).

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS: DIFFERENT DISPLAYS OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE CAPABILITIES

Argentinean researchers, Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky, studied the literacy behaviors of four-, five-, and six-year-olds in the urban areas of Buenos Aires. They believe that children learn by constructing “their own categories of thought while organizing their world.” They state that, “It is absurd to imagine that four- or five-year-old children growing up in an urban environment that displays print everywhere (on toys, on billboards and road signs, on their clothes, on TV) do not develop any ideas about this cultural object until they find themselves sitting before a teacher at the age of six.” Ferreiro and Teberosky view urban children as empowered language

and literacy learners who are not waiting “for someone to transmit knowledge to them in an act of benevolence” (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982, p. 12).

African American reading scholar, Dorothy Strickland drawing on the work of Donaldson, (Donaldson, 1978) Smith, (Smith F., 1982) and Wells (Wells, 1986), makes a similar case for African American children. She states:

African American children deserve literacy programs that stress the construction of meaning right from the start. As with every other aspect of their learning, these young children are attempting to make sense of the world around them. Print is simply one of the many curiosities in the world about which they are eager to learn. (Strickland D., 2005, p. 153)⁵

Additionally, researcher Carole Edelsky points out that when looking at one’s child’s writing under different circumstances, it is possible to see that different contexts elicit different displays of what a child knows (Edelsky, 1985, p. 66).

After studying the work of other researchers, I conducted a study of my own that documented the understandings of written language of fifty African American, White, and Latino first-grade participants from within the same city (Wilson, 1988). In the study, I attempted to tap different displays of what a child knows (Edelsky, 1985) by framing different contexts for writing. I wanted to get beyond limitations and find out as much as possible about what they knew. I theorized that the writers would produce connected text within certain tasks.

I worked individually with each writer, presenting three tasks adapted from Harste, Woodward, and Burke’s work (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). First, the children were asked to write anything of their choice that they could write or pretend to write. Second, they were asked to write a known text they knew, like a story, poem, song, rhyme, or jingle or part thereof that they held in their head. Third, they were asked to write a story about themselves. I attempted to discover whether requesting these writers to produce texts within in different contexts revealed different understandings that the writer had of written language. I hypothesized that within different contexts, children would reveal what they knew about writing connected text.

The second task differed from the other two tasks because I tried to get at a text that was so meaningful or familiar that the child had committed it to memory. I was trying to snag a thread of the tapestry of language within the child’s personal storehouse of language, beyond the conversational level. Within a context where children were generally not viewed as writers, I wanted to find out what they could write. The children reread and self-corrected as they wrote, therefore I saw that they were using their knowledge of the text, words, letters and sounds. They were not writing strictly from memory, but because they held the text in memory, they could refer to it as they wrote it on the page.

The writings were not exact transcriptions from memory—rather, they were written re-enactments that merged the child’s knowledge of syntax, knowledge of how print works, vocabulary, and their interest in print. Although the writing came about in a school setting, the children drew upon modes of language common

outside of school, including songs, stories from their daily lives, and language play. In all, I collected and analyzed 150 writing samples. Many of the texts were ones that they had encountered in the domains described earlier in this book by Anderson and Stokes (Anderson & Stokes, 1984), including religion, daily living, entertainment and school-related events. In the third task, children wrote stories about themselves.

As the children wrote, I focused on helping them recall text that was meaningful to them. I removed constraints by encouraging children to spell as best they could or put down as much as they knew. I encouraged the children to spell words by saying them slowly and putting down the letters that they heard, so they would try out texts that would go beyond the limits of conventional spelling.

This study shows that there were variations among the responses of the writers to the three writing tasks. These variations occurred in the writers' processes and in the genre, organization, spelling and length of their products. It is important to note that by the time they completed the third task of the study, forty-six of the fifty writers, or ninety-three percent wrote at least a single line of connected text. Six writers wrote no words or only a few words in the first task, and therefore appeared to reveal limited knowledge of written English. Major changes took place when these writers were able to write down a text that they held in their head or a story about themselves. They wrote lengthier responses in other tasks and revealed more extensive knowledge of written language when the tasks were framed within a different context. The writers showed greater evidence of organizational patterns, revealed a sense of story, and employed other organizational strategies when writing out pieces of familiar oral language. These pieces also helped establish a connection between oral and written language.

As the chart that follows indicates, only 14% of the African American writers and 28% of the Hispanic writers wrote connected texts in the first task. When the context changed, 86% of these African American and 56% of the Hispanic writers wrote connected text. In the third task, the 86% of the African American writers continued to write connected text. The percentage of Hispanic writers doing so increased to 58%.

Percentage of Writers Who Wrote Connected Text Across Three Tasks

	<i>TASK I</i>	<i>TASK II</i>	<i>TASK III</i>
African American Writers	14%	86%	86%
Hispanic Writers	28%	56%	58%

(Wilson, 1988)

This chart includes the percentages of African American and Hispanic writers who wrote connected text for each of the three tasks in the study. The differences in percentages among the tasks show that writers who had not produced connected text initially were able to do so when the context changed.

THE GROWTH OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE

In cultures where book reading takes place, infants participate in book-reading activities. “Book reading is, however, a cultural practice that is not democratically distributed.” Therefore, children who grow up in “communities with no experience with book reading practices, develop a representation of writing before developing a meaning for reading” (Tolchinsky, 2006, p. 84).

Tolchinsky cites research that shows across many languages, children’s writing languages displays common characteristics of form. These characteristics include: linearity, directionality, distinct units, and recurrent placement of blanks (Gibson & Levin, 1980). She reports on the findings of several additional studies (Tolchinsky, 2006, pp. 87–88) that show, “By the age of 4, children’s writing already appears as a linearly arranged string of distinctive marks separated by regular spacing.” Again, these results are “supported by numerous studies carried out in a variety of languages...” They are consistent regardless of “socioeconomic status or microcultural milieu” (Bissex, 1980; Clay M., 1982; Chan, 1998; Gibson & Levin, 1980; Goodman Y., 1982; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Further, Tolchinsky notes that Emilia Ferreiro identified criteria of *distinctive features* that graphic displays must have in order to be readable. First, the number of forms in a string must be limited. Secondly, there has to be a variety of forms. Even before children know how to write conventionally they understand these criteria for readable graphic displays. These two constraints also influence children’s writing, and they appear “to hold true across languages and scripts” (Tolchinsky, 2006, p. 88). Children eventually come to write using the symbols, directionality, and conventions that are employed within their culture. For example, children writing English orient the letters from left to right and use capital letters and punctuation. Children progress from writing letter-like forms, to writing the letters of the alphabet, to writing strings of symbols, to eventually spelling words. However, even when children are capable of writing a number of letters, they may use a number of strategies to create messages.

Names are reference points for learning about print (Dyson A., 1984). The first conventionally written words are often names (Clay, 1977; Durkin, 1966; Stine, 1980; Dyson A., 1984). Tolchinsky finds, “In all studies in the different languages explored, whenever a child is required to write his or her name along with other words or sentences, the child’s name always shows the higher level of development in any of the features being considered” (Tolchinsky, 2006, p. 89). The studies to which she refers were conducted in Hebrew, Spanish, and Chinese.

Novick explains, “Like infants and toddlers who can speak a number of clearly enunciated words but who use a mixture of jargon and words to approximate sentences, young children may use a mixture of scribbling and writing when they write long messages” (Novick, 1996, pp. 11–12). As young writers add new forms to their repertoires, they continue to employ older forms, but less frequently (Fox & Saracho, 1990; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Greer & Lockman, 1998; Bus, Both-de Vries, de Jong, Sulzby, de Jong, & de Jong, 2001) in (Mayer, 2007).

SPELLING DEVELOPMENT

Judith Schickedanz, professor and author of *More than ABC's*, explains that following “much exploration” and “much exposure to print, children discover that letters represent phonemes, and not some larger unit of speech, such as a syllable or a word.” Schickedanz views this as a “very important discovery” (Schickedanz, 1986, p. 87). She also notes that children’s first attempts at spellings are not conventional form. For example, some may include only the initial and final sound, like “kr” for car, and “bl” for ball. However, they are systematic, and they provide evidence of children’s ability to distinguish similarities and differences in the production of sounds.

Many adults view these spellings as erroneous. They fail to see the child’s systematic way of producing the words. They also fail to understand the level of phonemic awareness and systematic knowledge of phonics that the child has internalized. When observing a child who is writing, we begin to understand what the child knows about spelling. In this developmental view, invented spelling is seen, not as a sign of incompetence, but as an important component of writing. We can also come to understand the child’s message and what the child understands about directional rules, the concept of a word, the alphabet, and letter names.

View from a Small Place

The concerns of many adults focus on spelling. One teacher asked me about a child in her room who was copying messages from the board and various other print sources in the classroom. As long as she was copying, her spelling remained conventional, and her paper was neat, then the teacher was satisfied. Correct spelling and neatness fit her expectations. When the child began writing on her own with temporary spellings, however, relying on her understandings of the rules of spelling, the teacher became upset. She feared that she was encouraging the child to develop immature habits. To her eyes, the child’s work was erroneous and of lower quality than the work she had copied. The teacher did not understand that the child was using her own knowledge of the letters and sounds. The teacher did not understand that children acquire knowledge about language by working with language. When children simply copy, they are working at the surface level of language. They are not actually constructing the meaning themselves.

Teacher-researcher Kate Foley Cusumano states, “A successful young writer uses symbols to communicate a message while testing out rules for making and combining those symbols” (Foley Cusumano, 2008, p. 10). What is important is that adults look for and value the message that the child is composing without cleaning up the conventions at this point in their growth.

Foley Cusumano documents the reaction of one parent to what she perceived as spelling errors.

View from a Small Place—Kate Foley Cusuamo's Classroom

Bryan's mother, a volunteer in my first-grade classroom, had tears in her eyes when she turned to me one day. She asked if I have ever seen Bryan's eyes rolling or flickering as if he were having mini-seizures. I assured her I had never observed that.

"Well," she continued, "I've asked the doctor for a CAT scan. I'm convinced he's having seizures during writing workshop time."

Stunned, I asked, "What makes you think that?"

"Just look at his paper today. He spelled 'like' wrong and he spelled 'want' two different ways, neither of them right. I know he knows how to spell those words because I give him weekly spelling tests at home. He must be having seizures while he's writing."

Bryan's mother is not alone in expecting adult conventions out of 6-year-old children. Regardless of the education or socioeconomic level of the children's families, all of them care about their children's progress in writing, and they may have concerns, expressed and unexpressed, about their child's progress. My encounters with students' families and other community members over the years have led me to believe that teachers need to take a proactive role in educating them on this matter. (Foley Cusumano, 2008, pp. 9–10)

Carol Chomsky explains that once children use invented spellings, using some letters from the conventional spellings of words, "The message can usually be retrieved, and the children are deriving the satisfaction of self-expression." She adds, "By age five or earlier many children's ability to analyze words phonetically will already be well developed" (Chomsky, 1976, pp. 18–19). Young children are also able to "recognize words that begin with the same sound, and words that rhyme." If they cannot do these things, they "will need practice in this sort of analysis before they can be expected to spell (cf Liberman, 1973)." Chomsky notes, however, "It is surprising how much phonetic information is available to introspection at this age, and how readily this knowledge can be raised to the level of awareness through word play, questioning and talk about sounds." She emphasizes that "in order to get started with spelling only the simplest phonetic awareness is needed." For example, "Children who know that *man* begins with a [m] sound are ready. If they know letter names or sounds, they are prepared to find the letters that they need to spell their first word." This does not mean that children need to be drilled in learning all letter names and sounds before they are allowed to begin to write. Chomsky adds, "Just the letters needed for the particular word are enough" (Chomsky, 1976, pp. 18–19).

Researchers Johnson and Sulzby note that even when children begin to employ phonetic knowledge to create invented spellings, they do not immediately employ phonetic cues to read what they write (Johnson & Sulzby, 1999, p. 2). These researchers cite studies showing that in place of using letter-sound cues, children will try to recall what they have written or will rely on a picture that they have drawn to convey the message of text (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Kamberelis & Sulzby, 1988). Chomsky explains that an additional aspect that contributes to the greater accessibility of writing is that when writing, the writer already knows the words and messages, but in reading, the words must be identified (Chomsky, 1976). She also states, “Although much of the same background information may be required in translating from pronunciation to print and from print to pronunciation, the need to identify the word, which reading involves, is a considerable extra step that is not required in learning to write” (Chomsky, 1976, p. 8).

ENGAGEMENT IN OTHER WRITTEN LANGUAGE SYSTEMS

So far in this chapter, the writing that has been considered uses an alphabetic writing system. Writers from various countries, however, parts of the world use different writing systems, direct symbols differently and employ them in different ways. As Gunther Kress, professor of semiotics and education at the University of London states, “It’s a hugely important thing.” He explains that in some areas of the world, direction of symbols “tends not to be linear as in the West; it tends to be much more centering.” He cautions that this is where the “danger is” (Harste J., 2012, p. 209).⁶

Kress continues:

The moment there is something that resembles a grammar-like concept, then people are glad to have it and apply it as if it were the same everywhere...I would want to join the people who are saying, “No, no. We need to understand how those from the Indian subcontinent or from Southeast Asia or from China or from a Middle Eastern country use semiotic means.” (Harste J., 2012, p. 209)

Researcher Benedetta Bassetti states, “The main language feature investigated in many studies originates from the alphabetic system, English.” She explains other kinds of writing systems as well:

However, there are different types of writing systems depending on what linguistic units are represented by their graphemes: phonemic (or alphabetic) writing systems represent phonemes (e.g. English, Greek); consonantal writing systems represent consonants (e.g. Hebrew, Arabic); syllabic writing systems represent syllables (e.g. Thai, Tibetan); morphemic writing systems represent morphemes (e.g. Chinese, Japanese). (Bassetti, 2008)⁷

A writing system represents a language by segmenting it into a sequence of small discrete units, each represented by a *grapheme* (the smallest identifiable unit of a writing system). For instance, the English writing system segments

language into phonemes, represented by letters or letter combinations (represents /b/, <sh> represents /ʃ/). The Chinese writing system segments language into monosyllabic morphemes represented by ‘hanzi’, or ‘Chinese characters’ (东 represents the morpheme ‘East’, pronounced /tuŋ/; 冬 represents ‘winter’, also pronounced /tuŋ/). Japanese kana mostly represent syllables (か represents /ka/, き represents /ki/); Arabic and Hebrew graphemes represent consonants. (Bassetti, 2008)

The following are examples of studies of written language that were conducted in languages systems other than the alphabetic system. They address both the reading and writing of these systems. Many brain imaging studies have focused on handwriting, rather than on meaning-making processes, development, or sociocultural aspects of learning to write. Others have focused mainly on transcription rather than text generation. Most imaging studies have been done on adults who speak English, Japanese, Italian, German, or Finnish. More research is needed to evaluate if the findings about adults apply to children (Berninger & Winn, 2006). Some of the studies described here compare the writing of bilingual writers who are using two different writing systems.

Researchers Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole conducted five years of research on the written language of the Vai people of Liberia. The Vai have a writing system that is of their own invention. It is used for commercial and personal affairs. The Vai script is generally learned by young men who are in their late teens or twenties. It is taught at home rather than in schools. It is almost always learned by an individual from another person. The average lesson lasts for about 45 minutes. Usually, the learner is provided with a letter written in Vai. He learns the content of the letter and how to identify each character. Once the first letter is learned, others are studied. After a few letters, the learner writes one of his own. A person who is able to read Vai is considered to be fully literate in the language, although people who read it report that they are able to write it as well. (Scribner & Cole, 1981). As a result of their study, Scribner and Cole approach literacy as “a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system technology for producing and disseminating it.” They also state, “Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236).⁸

Another study described the writing of a third-grade Japanese bilingual child who lives in both Japan and the U.S. and writes in both Japanese and English. Eiko Kato-Otani, the researcher, found that the child was able to acquire both writing systems simultaneously and successfully. The child also used code-switching to effectively support her writing. When she was writing, and did not know a word in English, she would put in the word in Japanese. The study showed that being schooled in both Japanese and English supported the child's writing in both languages (Kato-Otani, 2008).

View from a Small Place

By the age of three, the Russian American child in our family, who was introduced in the previous chapter, was able to differentiate between books written in the English and those written in Russian. When she was looking through a Russian picture book, her grandfather would play a game with her and tell her that the book was written in English. She would staunchly protest, saying, “No, R-r-r-ussian, R-r-r-ussian!”

Researcher Charmian Kenner takes a multimodal approach to the production of written symbols. She believes that this process is not just a mechanical or lower-level skill. Rather, it has the equivalent cognitive value of other aspects of learning to write. She worked with bilingual children who spoke Chinese and English, Arabic and English, and Spanish and English. She studied the children’s understandings of the act of writing. Kenner found that the children understood the differences between their two writing systems, but they looked for ways to connect them to transform meaning across the languages. Kenner also saw that even though the time that children committed to English was greater than the limited time committed to Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish, they still understood the key concepts of their two writing systems. Kenner concludes that young biliterate writers acquire “embodied knowledges” of the production of written symbols, spatiality, and directionality. These knowledges position these writers to both design and understand multimodal texts, particularly texts on the screen that are non-linear and have varied arrangements and directionality (Kenner, 2003).

This chapter has focused on the production of written language. The next chapter focuses on how children come to understand writing produced by others.

NOTES

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- ⁶ From *Image, Identity, and Insights into Language* by Jerome Harste and Gunther Kress, in *Language Arts*, Volume 89 Number 3, January 2012. Usage determined by the National Council of Teachers of English.

CHAPTER 9

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