

The Teaching of Writing

There are many forms of writing and initially I found it very hard to decide what to write? Should I write a letter, a poem or a literary form of writing such as narrative, personal or descriptive writing? After gathering a flock of ideas I chose to write a descriptive piece of writing from personal experience. Though prior to and during PGCE course, I have written letters, essays and assignments but writing for implied readers was quite challenging in itself. It also reminded me of my old college days in India when I use to write poems and stories in English, Punjabi and Hindi. I clearly remember the huge popularity I gained when my very first poem was published in a weekly magazine at age of 15 and I was thrilled. It certainly increased my confidence and urged me to walk along this road for further 6 years. I would like to share this with everybody;

They met, "hello",

And then parted, "Bye",

Next day an impatient tongue twittered, "They are in love".

My next step was the audience and the level I should be aiming. Audience encompasses real and implied readers. It is equally important to take an account of connection, or tenor, between the writer and the reader. Many thoughts went through my mind such, as I should be clear, informative and interesting. This even caused more confusion in my mind and I thought I am not writing a newspaper article or report. I gathered my thoughts and started planning on an original piece of work, maybe an experience. I knew that I would not get far without brainstorming. So I decided to make a framework for my story, which led, to a first draft copy and then to the final product. I was also aware of the fact that every piece of background detail will make my story far more real to my readers. Variety is the spice of life. In general to mix description with action, phrases and clauses, similes and metaphors as well as simple adjectives and adverbs are important to make writing interesting and appealing to readers. As a writer I felt that being able to write opens up several channels of communications and give a new dimension to the existing experiences.

During the spring term university sessions on Organising Writing in the Classroom which further led to 'composition', 'transcription', 'grammar for writing', 'non-fiction' and 'assessing children writing' with detailed discussion, practical activities and case studies extended and supported my knowledge in the above. I was able to use this knowledge to support children's writing skills during my school placement. It also gave an insight into the NC requirements for teaching of writing and made me aware of my own knowledge gaps in this area which prepared grounds for expected level of understanding needed to carry out a piece of writing.

Written language is a dominant feature of our environment. From the time they open their eyes, children see written language all around them: on the street signs and food packets, in shops, on the television and in the home.

Written language is also a dominant feature of the classroom. The written shape with which most children are familiar with is that of their own names. For younger children, their own special picture often accompanies the word so that they come to recognize the writing through its association with the picture. Children need to be provided with a range of stimuli to encourage and promote the development of writing skills. "Children gain more experience of writing through seeing it around them, imitating what they see, exploring its features for themselves (Brown e 1996).

Initially from a young age children need to experience opportunities for writing. They need opportunities to use writing tools, and to observe adults modelling the writing process. I have witnessed a good opportunity to convey writing to young children during my second teaching practice. In the Home Corner there is usually 'post-office', 'café' or 'doctor's reception' set out. Children are provided with appropriate writing materials such as note pads, pencils and diaries that encourage them to write, and also convey the purpose of writing to them.

Children's writing progresses through stages. In the initial stage the child recognizes that the marks he has made on paper represent a message and there is direct link between speech and writing. They also begin to follow writing conventions, for example text is written top to bottom and left to right. During these first stages children begin to generate writing that looks like short squiggles. They also develop an understanding to relate the sounds of words to letter shape from the recognition of their own name, and begin to leave spaces in between their markings, so that they look like 'words' rather than one whole scribble. "*Pupils should be introduced to the alphabetic nature of writing and be taught to discriminate between letters, learning to write their own name*" (DFE 1995). Some children assume that big words represent big things, so when they are pretending to write they always give *whale* many more letters than *tadpole*. Next step takes them writing one or two key words which then extend to short sentences, Then comes the use of punctuation, more complex sentences and wider use of vocabulary.

Children through exposure to a print rich environment begin to use phonic knowledge to build words such as my, is, but. "During this stage children need to learn the sounds that letters make and to be able to accurately attach the sound to the letter. This can be achieved by offering plenty of practice through rhyming or playing games which require the child to concentrate on initial letter sounds, blends or diagraph" (Whitwell, J and Gaunt, N).

Whitwell and Gaunt (1995) suggest that eventually over a period of time the child relies less on phonic building and more on memorizing the visual pattern of the word. They claim that the look-cover-write and spell approach can help children to memorize words in this way. *"When children have developed a range of strategies which enable them to spell with accuracy, the role of the teacher concentrates more on encouraging a fascination for words and promoting opportunities to extend vocabulary,* (Whitwell and Gaunt 1995).

In order to enhance these skills teachers should:

- provide opportunities for children to explore and identify sound -symbol relationships in meaningful contexts
- help children to segment spoken words into individual sounds and blend the sounds into whole words (for example, by slowly writing a word and saying its sound)
- frequently read interesting and conceptually rich stories to children
- provide daily opportunities for children to write
- help children build a sight vocabulary
- Create a literacy-rich environment for children to engage independently in reading and writing

Constructivist theorists such as Vygotsky and Bruner encouraged the move towards viewing children as ' active' learners and that learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge Cognitive structure (i.e., schema, mental models) provides meaning and organization to experiences and allows the individual to "go beyond the information given". They also emphasized the importance of learning within the social context, and the importance of learning through concrete experience. Vygotsky emphasized the role of the adult and of language in children's learning. In order to help children to understand language better it is necessary to scaffold their learning so that *the next step* can be taught. This demands both pedagogic and subject knowledge and recognition of the child's actual and potential levels of achievement. Curriculum should be organized in a spiral manner so that the student continually builds upon what they have already learned.

Bruner (1966) in his theory of instruction states good methods for structuring knowledge should result in simplifying, generating new propositions, and increasing the manipulation of information.

Bruner (1960) in his theory of cognitive growth suggests that intellectual ability develops in stages through step -by-step changes in how the mind is used.

In the National Literacy Strategy (NLS 2000) reading and writing is intended to take place at text, sentence and word level. This framework allows for a balance between writing, which is 'modelled' by the teacher in the first part of the literacy hour by doing shared writing with the whole class, and then independent writing. The NLS lists many aspects of the writing process, which will be taught. During Key Stage 1 the teaching of phonics, spelling and handwriting complements this process and in Key Stage 2 there is a progressive emphasis on the planning, drafting, revising, proof reading and the presentation of writing.

Within the Literacy hour guided and shared reading give the teacher an opportunity to promote awareness of non-fiction and fiction genre, through modelling the different forms and structures. Shared writing which is generally completed as a whole class activity at the beginning of the Literacy hour, allows the teacher to express and model the writing process, placing particular emphasis on relevant areas that need to be identified in the lesson's learning objectives. This may include work at word level, handwriting and spelling or developing composition skills including writing styles.

Children need a clearly identified purpose in order to develop meaningful writing. They need to clear about; who is the writing for? What is the purpose of writing? What form should the writing take? In other words they need to have read, discussed, modelled and experimented with a range of genres. Young children develop their writing through imitating the sort of literacy they observe in real life situations. The National Literacy Strategy states that "good oral work enhances pupils' understanding of language of both oral and written forms and the way language can be used to communicate" (NLS, 1998). Creating opportunities for writing for a range of real purposes and for the different audiences is an important aspect in promoting how language is used and how speech is adapted to meet purpose and audience. Roskos and Christie (2001) describe this as the 'play-literacy interface'.

Through guided writing pupils are given opportunities to work in small groups, with the teacher to assist in the development of literacy skills at an individual level. "Guided writing makes use of existing stories, poems and non-fiction structure which children use as a basis for their own writing through substitution, extension, retelling and modelling" (Wray and Medwell 1998). This provides a support structure for independent writing and helps children's awareness of a variety of structures and different text forms. A way in which this can be supported is to provide writing frames, which will help the children to organise and develop ideas. This will also provide guidance to the structure of a particular genre.

Children also need opportunities for small group discussion. This will encourage further development of strategies learned in a whole class context, and also independent use of the skills acquired. "In an effective group organization, individuals are dependant on each other to achieve a common goal" (Alan 1994). When organizing small group discussions, an important consideration is the group size because if the groups are too large then it may be difficult for all members to contribute.

Linguists as Halliday and Hasan (1989) and Martin (1989) influenced by the contribution of researchers (e.g. Heath 1983 and Barton & Hamilton 1998) has emphasised that literacy is essentially a *social practice* and it fulfils specific purposes in our everyday interactions with others. The English Curriculum (DfEE 2000) in line with the curriculum framework of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE 1998) indicates the use of a range of text types in the classroom. There are six types of texts referred in the NLS (DfEE 1998): 'Recount', 'Report', 'Explanation', 'Instruction', 'Persuasion' and 'Discussion'. It is important to keep a balance when looking at genre-based teaching. The purpose of writing is essentially to be made explicit in view of the role of language, whether it to persuade, make an argument, describe, report and so on, and how best to achieve this purpose. Before I started writing my story I asked myself all these questions and thought of different genres and considered different structures, which then I jotted down, in a writing frame.

A writing framework is very helpful in developing writing skills. It is any support that is given to make the task easier. Usually it will be a series of headings on which will give children a clear indication to move on and develop their thoughts in desired direction. I found the writing frame very useful as it helped me to sequence the content of the writing and include all the important elements. Sometimes children with more severe and complex needs may need to find alternative ways of recording information than writing. This is usually done when thinking is more important than actually producing a piece of writing.

Written language is different to spoken language and it is important that in learning to write, children must adjust to the conventions to a different medium. Writing requires a great deal more than putting words together with punctuation. There is an emphasis on the 'process' of writing rather than the end product. In a process approach teachers recognize that much more attention must be paid to the development of a piece of writing. "A process approach views children as authors and treats their work as creative and meaningful" (Graham and Kelly 1998). A process approach encourages children to take more responsibility of their own writing.

Composition plays an important role in children's writing. "Composition is what powers the writing. It is vital that the focus, in relation to children's writing, is first and foremost on composition, and that children perceive that this is so" (Barrs 1991). The distinction between the composition involved in writing and the transcriptional aspects of writing such as spelling, punctuation and handwriting is also important in a process approach. For many children, particularly with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia), there is a gap between their oral skills and their written language skills. They are not able to express their ideas in writing easily or fluently. In order to support and engage them in a writing task providing a list of common words that they can refer to would help develop confidence and stability in their learning.

I feel that children need opportunities at all stages to write independently. They need the freedom to choose how and what they write, and to explore the nature of the writing process. The teaching of both compositional and transcriptional skills is important to enable children to become confident and successful writers, who are capable of communicating their intended meaning with impact and clarity. It can be used to persuade, to suggest and indicate

appropriate behaviour and responses, to establish contact with others" (Browne 1996).

Children need opportunities to identify writing as a means of reflecting on and clarifying their feelings, experiences and concepts of the world around them. "Writing can be extension and reflection of all our efforts to develop and express ourselves in the world around us (Browne1996). My piece of descriptive writing has emerged as the result of my life experiences and the significant incidents I grappled with provided context for writing.

Children need to see that through writing they can share ideas and express their feelings. But above all, they need to experience that not only is writing an enjoyable experience, but that is also a very powerful tool that will assist them throughout their life.

Increasingly, ICT is being used in schools for a variety of purposes. Now there are lots of software programmes that assist to develop children's reading and writing skills e.g. reinforce letter/sound correspondence and encourage them to engage with stories, songs and rhymes. Many pupils use computers as a writing resource. Tape recording is also an excellent medium in which pupils can display their creative writing ability without the restrictions of the writing. Use a scanner to import children's drawings and writing.

Teachers also need to acknowledge that every learner is unique. According to Berman (1998), we take in information in line with our own *learning style*. This means that if the teacher chooses just one style of teaching (direct instruction, collaborative learning, inquiry learning, etc.), the students will not be maximizing their learning potential. Obviously, a teacher can not reach every student on the same level during one lesson, but implementing a variety of learning styles throughout the course allows all the students will have the chance to learn in at least one way that matches their learning style.

It should also be recognized that children's prior knowledge comes from their past experiences, culture, and their environment. Generally prior knowledge is good, but sometimes misconceptions and wrong information can be a hindrance. Sometimes time must be spent correcting prior knowledge before new learning can occur.

- learning is not the passive acceptance of knowledge, which exists "out there" but that learning involves the learner 's engaging with the world.
- People learn to learn as they learn. For example, if we learn the chronology of dates of a series of historical events, we are simultaneously learning the meaning of a chronology. Each meaning we construct makes us better able to give meaning to other sensations, which can fit a similar pattern.
- Learning involves language: the language we use influences learning.
- Learning is a social activity: our learning is intimately associated with our connection with other human beings, our teachers, our peers, our

family as well as casual acquaintances. We are more likely to be successful in our efforts to educate if we recognize this principle rather than try to avoid it.

- It takes time to learn: learning is not instantaneous. For significant learning we need to revisit ideas, ponder them, try them out, play with them and use them.
- Motivation is a key component in learning. Not only is it the case that motivation helps learning, it is essential for learning.

The children need to be clear and sure on their objectives, and also be given a specific outcome and a specific time limit to complete the task