

# **The Role of Instruction Method on Children's Early Writing Development and Knowledge of Genre**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research was to analyze the role of instruction method in early writing applied by the teacher on children's early writing development and knowledge of genre. The research respondents were sixty students of the first and second grades of six different elementary schools in Makassar. They were asked to compose three different types of genre: a story, a personal letter, and a shopping list each of which was analyzed qualitatively. The finding showed that the applied teaching method had a big role on the students' early writing development and knowledge of genre. The emphasis of the traditional method on the neatness and correctness of the students' writing caused most of the students' writing to have reached the final stage of early writing development, which was correct formation and spelling of letters and words. However, the traditional method used by the teachers limited the students' freedom from exploring their writing freely since they focused only on the transcription skills.

**Keywords:** early writing, genre, early years, developmental writing, traditional/copying method.

Of all the language skills taught to pupils, writing is considered to be the most difficult one. Nevertheless, it is a central activity of the school curriculum. This results from the belief that writing is responsible for social and intellectual development. A number of researchers who looked closely at children's development explain the importance of literacy (writing). Czerniewska (1992),

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for example, argues that writing not only serves as an important skills to have, but it also represents a special kind of learning that provides access to higher intellectual levels and to better work prospects. Similarly, Gage (1986) emphasizes that writing is not simply a skill to be mastered, and then applied neutrally to knowledge, but the ongoing reflection of student's developing understanding of ideas.

From a Piagetan point of view, writing is also considered to be the key factor to higher reasoning abilities. Donaldson (1978), for example, explains that as well as encouraging language consciousness, those very features of the written word may also encourage one's own thinking consciousness through a great amount of consequences in building the kinds of thinking which are the characteristics of logic, mathematics and science. Other researchers see writing as the big breakthrough in the development of civilization. The acquisition of writing as explained by Goody (1983) is effective in transferring the nature of cognitive and social process.

While writing is of paramount importance and highly valued in curriculum, teachers should be careful in teaching it to young children. Teachers' method of instruction in writing, especially at the early stages, is believed to affect children's conception about writing. Poor attitudes to writing may arise from many reasons, but the way that writing is taught and the messages that the teacher transmits about writing will influence children's feelings about writing and their view of themselves as writers (Browne, 1993; Gorman, et al, 1989).

The development of written language, according to Goodman (1984), is very complex. When young children are placed in a rigid instructional setting, which ignores what they already know by focusing on mastery of one rule or skill before another, sight is lost of that complexity. One of the ten common principles of early childhood education specified by Bruce (1987) states that what a child can do, rather than what he cannot, should be the starting point in the child's education. The meaning of this principle is in line with Vygotsky's theory of ZDP (1978), which stresses the need to focus on the ripening structures of potential development, which requires the help of adults and other children. It means enhancing what they can do with sensitive and appropriate help. Vygotsky says that what the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow.

Approaches to learning to write should view writing as a process rather than a product (Beard, 1984; Dyson, 1984). Graves (1983) sets out several fundamental principles, which guide learning to write as a process. Firstly, it is important that children be given opportunity to control their own writing,

which includes such decisions as when to write, the materials to use, what to write and whom to write for. Secondly, children should be encouraged to become an independent writer as soon as possible. They should be free to concentrate on the cognitive and creative process of composition and therefore, initially, they must be released from the demands of transcription. Thirdly, children need to see pieces of writing as alterable. The creation of text is a process of attempts and partial successes; this process is only learnt if children really own their writing and feel responsible for it. Finally, the teacher should be facilitator, who provides materials and opportunities in a supportive environment in which children can learn to be writers, and the teacher should be a model of what it is to be a writer in a literate culture (Graves, 1983)

Methods of instruction in early writing are very important in shaping children's fundamental understandings about what literacy, particularly writing, is for. The methods used by teachers affect whether children develop literacy skills or literate behavior (Dahl and Freppon, 1995). The former refers to the concepts and behaviors learners use as they read and write. They are elements of proficient reading and writing that are taught and practiced in most school-based settings. The latter, being broader, includes learners reflecting on their own literate activity and using oral language to interact with written language by reacting to a story, explaining a piece of writing, or describing a favorite book to another person. In addition, literate behaviors also include taking on the tasks of reading and writing, valuing one's own experience and personal language and connecting them with written language and communicating about written language experiences (Dahl and Freppon, 1995). Undoubtedly, children should attempt to strive for such literate behavior. As well as having literacy skills, children should be also capable of reflecting on them and finding enjoyment in their use.

Method of instruction in early writing is also believed to have an effect on children's knowledge of different kinds of writing, called 'genre'. Genre produced through collaborative activities and through immersion in literacy-rich environment will differ from those generated in a more restricted context. An illustration is provided by Chapman's study (1995), which focused on the relationships among different genres, and between these genres and the social context of the classroom in which the children's written discourse is situated, both from the point of view of socio-cognitive constructivism and of emergent literacy. Her classroom discourse analyses revealed that children were active participants in the social dialogue within their classroom. They constructed their written genres in response to the texts with which they engaged during

collaborative reading, and to the ways in which the teacher structured the writing tasks. Children could write in a variety of genres even at the beginning of first grade and long before they could spell conventionally. Her study provided strong support for the notion that young children learn much about genre informally through immersion in a literacy-rich environment, and suggested the importance of teachers in providing models and examples of different genres and in structuring opportunities for children to explore written language independently and collaboratively.

The objectives of this study were to analyze (1) the developmental stage of children early writing in elementary school, (2) children's knowledge of characteristics of given genre indicated in their written products, and (3) the role of the classroom instruction on children's early writing development and knowledge of genre.

#### **METHOD**

This study involved sixty early-grade children from six elementary schools in Makassar. The data were derived from children's writings and informal classroom observation. In order to find out the developmental stage of children early writing and their knowledge of characteristics of the given genre, the children were asked to write three different types of genre in Indonesian: a shopping list, a personal letter, and a story. These particular genres were employed because they presented children with purposeful written communication events that have been observed to take place in children's cultural and socio-economic environments (Zecker, 1996). In addition, lists, personal letters, and stories have also been documented to be among young writers' favorite spontaneous writing products (Bissex, 1980). The data collection, conducted in September 2003, took place in a room separated from the children's classroom. Each of the children was asked to write without worrying about handwriting and spelling. The researcher worked with three children at a time to make it easier to control them. To avoid order effects, the tasks were given differently to each child, as follows:

|         |        |        |        |
|---------|--------|--------|--------|
| Child 1 | Letter | Story  | List   |
| Child 2 | List   | Letter | Story  |
| Child 3 | Story  | List   | Letter |

Before collecting children's written products, the researcher carried out informal classroom observation to find out how early writing was taught in

each class, and how the class teacher encouraged independent writing. The researcher sat and watched the activities taking place in the class and looked at the materials used in writing lessons. At the end of data collecting, the researcher had an informal talk with teachers. The information from classroom observation was used to find out the role of the classroom instruction on the children's early writing development and knowledge of genre.

To analyze different aspects of the writing samples collected from the children, the following categorization systems were applied.

### Stories

The writing samples for stories were categorized according to specific features of stories; the *inclusion of characters*, the use of *formal elements of story form*, and the *structure* of the stories. The first two categories were adapted from Applebee (1978), whilst the third one was adapted from Chapman (1995).

#### a. Character

The character element was categorized according to the number of characters the children included in their story.

#### b. Form

For the assessment of formal elements of story form, the children's stories were categorized based on the inclusion of a *formal beginning* (*once upon a time* or *one day*) and a *formal ending* (*the end* or *they live happily ever after*) in their story.

#### c. Structures of the stories

The structure of the children's story was analyzed in four categories:

1. Basic Record – single clause statement of action or event  
e.g. I' m going to school.
2. Basic Record Series- a series of two or more unrelated actions or events consisting of two or more unrelated clauses.  
e.g. Tomorrow is my birthday. I played football yesterday. My uncle came to my house.
3. Recount – three or more related actions, sequenced chronologically, usually with temporal connectives; no real plot crisis or complication.  
e.g. The chick went to the moon. He landed on the moon. He decided to live on the *moon*.

4. Narrative – three or more related actions, sequenced chronologically, with basic schematic structure such as orientation, complication and resolution.

*e.g. Far, far away in another galaxy, a rocket has been lost. No one has ever found it. The rocket crashed in Blood land. Everything is blood. The people are blood. The astronauts were running out of the fire. They got chased by the blood people. They got blood on their feet.*

### **Personal Letter**

Children's personal letters were categorized based on the inclusion of reference to an addressee or a sender, and the inclusion of a message. These categories were adapted from Zecker (1996).

### **Shopping List**

Like personal letter, the category used for shopping list was also adapted from Zecker (1996). The shopping list was categorized based on the number of appropriate items the children wrote. In the shopping list task, the children were asked to imagine making their favorite cake. But first of all, they had to do the shopping to buy the ingredients. Therefore, they needed to write a shopping list so that they would not forget what they were going to buy.

To analyze children's early writing development, the researcher applied categories developed by Saracho (1990): scribbling, horizontal scribbling, discrete units, and conventional writing, with correct words and spelling. The data were tabulated and analyzed into percentage.

## **RESULTS**

The findings revealed that the students' writing in this study generally has reached conventional writing where the students could form letters and spell words correctly. Out of 60 samples in this study, there were only three children whose writing belongs to discrete units, and none of the writings belong to the earliest stage such as scribbling and horizontal scribbling. Besides, children in this study were found to be capable of producing different kinds of genre types, although the majority of them had not yet mastered the form of the letter genre: only a few of them were aware of the elements of letter writing shown by including the sender, the addressee and the message in their letter. Although the list is considered as a less demanding text type, quite a few

children in this study applied less conventional writing systems when writing a list of words than when writing stories or letters. This is probably due to the task that imposed a list of appropriate items, which did not allow them to write well-known words of their choice.

Another finding shows that the children have also developed an understanding of the conventional characteristics of a story. They seem to be aware of characters, and the formal features of writing even without being taught formally in their classes. Even though children in this study have never been formally taught about characters, generally they were aware of this element. Out of 60 children, only 3 did not include a character in their stories. Twenty children even involved 2 to five characters. Most of the children use either themselves or their family as the main characters in their story. Less than 10% children involved characters based on their own imagination or the ones they heard before such as *Kancil dan Buaya*, Donald Duck etc. The extent to which these conventions are recognized and used by children, according to Applebee (1978), can be taken as an indication of the degree to which stories have begun the long march from the child's initial recognition that a story is in some way different from other uses of language, to the eventual established recognition of a story as a mode of communication.

With reference to the structure of the writing, the children unfortunately did not explore well their stories; most of them wrote stories based on their experience and only few students developed stories based on their imagination or what they had heard before. Apparently, the teaching method of early writing applied in each elementary school in this study had a big role in shaping the students' early writing development and knowledge of genre specific characteristics. The traditional or copying method emphasized the correct letter formation and transcription skills. As a result, most of the students' writings have reached the final stage of early writing development, which was correct formation and spelling of letters and words. However, the traditional method used by the teachers did not encourage the children to explore their writing freely since they focused only on the neatness of their writing and the correctness of their spelling. Furthermore, the writing program hardly included children's literature to suggest story themes and evoke topics. To sum up, most of the children were less expressive in their writing in spite of their capability of applying conventional writing systems when writing. This was presumably influenced by a rigid method of instruction that restricted the composition ability of students in the early years in elementary school.

## DISCUSSION

In agreement with Zecker's finding (1996), children in this study had an ability to write different kinds of genre. The results of the analysis of the letters, however, showed that the children in this study have not yet developed the knowledge of the form of a letter. Among the samples in this study, only few children (18%) managed to include all elements of a letter, stating clearly the addressee and the sender. A possible explanation for this might be that most of them did not have the idea that letter is a form of communication. Fontaine in Sulfasyah (1997) suggested that there are two ways that written language can function; socially – to create, express, or sustain human relationships; and conceptually – to express or describe experience, ideas, or interpretations. Lack of audience awareness, according to her, could be an indication that writers do not acknowledge the social functions of writing.

Language, as Halliday (1973) mentioned, can be regarded as a system by which people both express meanings and exchange meanings with others. The particular meanings chosen in any specific instance of language use will arise from the purpose for which the language is being used. Halliday further argued that as a young child extends her awareness of what she can do with language, her language system develops to allow her to realize a wider range of functions and meanings. This raises important questions for writing development and letter writing in particular. The kinds of things that a child uses writing for may be limited at first by the child's limited view of the potential of that mode of communication. With letter writing, it could be assumed that the child has to go through a process of discovering what letters are for and that, as her view of this widens, her letters will develop in their range of functions, meanings and language forms.

Like most of elementary schools in Indonesia, the sample schools in this study also applied traditional method, which places emphasis on transcription, in teaching early writing. Most writing activities children do in the class are structured to gain skill practice and rely heavily on tracing and copying. Most of the tasks are designed by the teacher, who will ask the children to work on making their writing neat and on spelling each word correctly.

This method, according to Knapp and Shield in Dahl and Freppon (1995), is based on the idea that written language is learned through teacher-directed lessons, and practices as discrete skills that are taught sequentially. It uses specific reading and writing tasks as the vehicle for skill acquisition and emphasizes standards of accuracy and neatness as children engage in writing. The instruments for learning specific skills in this classroom include materials



in the form of worksheets and writing workbooks. Many of the writing activities are primarily for learning sight words and specific skill practice. Children copy words from the board, either lists or sentences, or from their textbooks. Most of the time the children are engaged in teacher-directed or teacher-assigned tasks. They work on making their writing neat and on spelling each word correctly. There may be opportunities for the children to compose stories, but even this task is designed to provide practice in skills. The emphasis in the traditional method given on the neatness of the writing and correct spelling was assumed to be the reason why the children in this study focused more attention on their writing skills than on the content. In addition, the sample schools did not include various genres, especially narrative or imaginative writing in the learning and teaching process. This could be the reason why most of the children composed stories based on their own experience and very few used children's literature to evoke topics. Those who used the characters that they had read or heard about or invented characters were probably surrounded by literary-rich environment in their house.

The explanation above indicated that the teaching method of early writing applied in each elementary school in this study had a big role on the students' early writing development and knowledge of genre. Most of the students were able to write letters and words correctly most of the time since the method used by the teachers focused on the correct formation and spelling of letters and words. Children were so focusing on the neatness of their handwriting and trying to write words correctly that they did not freely develop their stories or express themselves widely through the content of their stories. Most of them probably wanted to write more but must have ended their stories earlier because of their worry to misspell words. In other words, traditional/copying method restricted the composition ability of students in the early years in elementary school.

The findings were in line with the arguments of a number of experts who have looked closely at children's early writing. Traditional method/copying makes children depend on their teachers, and that they become passive and inhibited since they are not encouraged to explore writing by themselves freely. Children will learn faster when they are encouraged to produce letters and words for themselves through a sequence of movements than if their hands are moved passively through that sequence. Although copying helps children form their first few letters or words and helps them cope with transcription, it is a slow way of extending their repertoire and may restrict their composition. In addition to this, copying does not always take into account of

children's existing knowledge (Clay, 1975). Because of the limitation of this method, a number of researchers have studied approaches that take into account children's understanding of the uses and forms of writing before they begin school. The work of Marie Clay (1975) has stimulated a great deal of interest in emergent writing, which refers to children's early attempts at writing. Her work helps people understand how children find out how the writing system works. As a result, many teachers begun to use approaches that consider what children already know and work from what children can do; this approach is known as *developmental writing*.

Principally, developmental writing works from an understanding of how writing develops in the context of a constructivist view of children's learning. This understanding, according to Browne (1993) is central for the teacher since it is around this that she makes decisions about when and how to intervene in order to develop each child's writing ability. The organization of resources and activities which lie at the heart of developmental writing provides the setting within which a child can experiment with writing and demonstrate what has been learnt about writing, and within which the teacher works to extend each child's achievement.

In a developmental writing classroom, children are encouraged to write regularly about self-selected topics in sustained writing periods. Through daily choices of writing topics, they exercise significant control of shaping their own learning. Teacher in this class leads from behind, demonstrates writing behaviors, supports children's effort to learn, and teaches them skills for their own writing (Newman, 1985). In addition, the curriculum in the developmental approach is primarily learner-centered and based on the view of children as active language learners (Halliday, 1978; Holdaway, 1979).

It is concluded that the applied method in teaching early writing is of influence towards the development of children's early writing and knowledge of genre.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

### Conclusion

The children's writing in this study generally has reached conventional writing where the students could form letters and spell words correctly. Besides, early-year-students in this study could compose different kinds of genre assigned to them although most of them were still not aware of certain characteristics of the given genre. However, they did not structurally well explore

their stories; most of them wrote stories based on their experience and only few students developed stories based on their imagination or what they had heard before. In addition, the teaching method of early writing applied in each elementary school in this study had a big role on the students' early writing development and genre knowledge acquisition. The emphasis of the traditional method on the neatness and correctness of the students' writing caused most of the students' writing to have reached the final stage of early writing development, which was correct formation and spelling of letters and words. However, the traditional method used by the teachers limited the students' freedom from exploring their writing freely since they focused only on the neatness of their writing and the correctness of their spelling.

### **Suggestion**

The use of traditional method in teaching early writing that emphasizes transcriptional skills should be replaced with 'a developmental writing approach', which focused on the children's content of writing. One of the advantages of this method is children are encouraged to use spelling that they invent by themselves and when they are unable to spell words correctly, they can sound the words and just write initial letters and followed by a line. E.g. m---- (makan), no---- (nonton). This strategy helps them focus on the content without having to stop writing when they encounter spelling problems. However, developmental writing, as has been discussed previously, does not mean telling the class they can write what they want, how they want, ignoring the transcription, but instead it should be introduced thoughtfully and systematically. Therefore, the role of the teacher is of importance for making this possible. As has been long known, teachers should know what children are likely to be able to do and why they do it at each stage of their growth in writing experience and ability. Such awareness is necessary when making judgments about what intervention is appropriate at each stage. It is acknowledged that teaching should be considered important within a developmental framework since it exists to move the learner on from one stage to the next and helps the children to learn skills, concepts and attitudes that are necessary if they are to achieve success in all aspects of writing.

Finally, various genres need to be widely introduced to children informally. This will improve their repertoire and help them express themselves in writing.

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