

## **Kidwatching and the Development of Children as Writers**

**Observación de los niños y su desarrollo como escritores**

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This research project aims at exploring, understanding, and analyzing second graders' development as writers in a private school of Bogotá. Group reading, writing stories, hyper-stories (non-linear stories) and messages as literacy activities were carried out with these children and allowed them to grow as writers in an EFL context. The findings are the result of data triangulation collected through interviews, teacher-student conferences and second graders' samples and show evidence of the significant growth in the type of texts written by children and in the quality of interaction they had when they constructed texts.

**Key words:** Children as authors-Primary School, Creative Ability in Children-Research, Writing-Teaching, Reading-Teaching, Reading Readiness-Teaching

Este proyecto de investigación pretende explorar, entender y analizar el desarrollo como escritores de los estudiantes de segundo de primaria de un colegio privado de Bogotá. Las actividades de lecto-escritura como la lectura en grupo, la creación escrita de historias, hiper-historias (historias no lineales) y mensajes permitieron que los niños se desarrollaran como escritores en un contexto extranjero. Los hallazgos como resultado de la triangulación de datos a través de entrevistas, conferencias entre el profesor(a) y el estudiante, y los trabajos elaborados por los estudiantes de segundo evidencian el crecimiento significativo en la clase de textos escritos por los niños y en la calidad de interacción presente cuando construyeron los textos.

**Palabras claves:** Niños autores-Enseñanza elemental, Aptitud creadora en niños-Investigación, Escritura-Enseñanza, Lectura-Enseñanza, Facilidad de lectura-Enseñanza

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## INTRODUCTION

Children's writing has caught my attention because during my experience as a teacher I have noticed that the pedagogy of writing usually focuses on mechanics. New perspectives that perceive writing as a dynamic process involving thought, language and interaction need to be implemented by teachers in their classrooms. These new perspectives consider the connections that exist between reading and writing, as well as the connections that should exist between students' home and school experiences.

This paper reports on my experience as a kidwatcher with a group of second graders developing as writers in an EFL context. I hope that it invites you to reflect upon your teaching practice, challenging you to create and adapt literacy activities that fit in with your students' interests, needs and context.

The research questions addressed in the qualitative research I conducted with second graders aim to answer the following:

- How do second graders' writing inform teachers about writing in an EFL context ?
- What do second graders' writings tell teachers about their knowledge of writing in two languages (English and Spanish)?

The following sections include a brief review of literature, the methodology, the findings and the conclusions.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Learning a language is much easier by exposing learners to a variety of meaningful experiences in which they use language, expressing and sharing thoughts to create and re-create knowledge. Similarly, learning to write is a complex process

that requires a rich meaningful environment as well as lots of input and support from others (teachers, parents, and peers). In other words, writing is a creative social practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Street, 1984; Goodman, 1996; Clavijo, 2001).

Providing students with a rich literacy environment in which teachers support students' learning deals with kidwatching. Goodman (1996) defines kidwatching as the conscious process that takes place when teachers watch and interact with their students in order to know and understand how they learn, what they are interested in, what motivates them, and how they perform a task. Similarly, Short & Harste (1996) define kidwatching as looking beyond the text to find deep meaning.

As I watched second graders, I gained significant insights for planning new experiences and creating possibilities for children to become creative and autonomous readers and writers. Literature was one of the experiences I provided second graders with during this study.

Neuman (1998) states that story reading contributes to literacy process in terms of understanding how print functions, constructing meaning or making sense of the reality and in learning language patterns. By using story reading as a curricular activity, students had the opportunity to expand their previous knowledge in terms of language, thinking and culture.

Through the different stories students selected for reading, they had the opportunity to explore the target language and to get familiar with new vocabulary, and its semantics and syntax (Cooper, 1993; Hudelson, 1996; Short, 1999). In addition, stories allow students

to organize their thinking relating the content of the stories to their experiences (Campbell, 2001).

Examining reading and writing development in different contexts, Goodman (1996), in first language, and Clavijo (2001), in second and foreign language contexts, share similar ideas and define writing as a dynamic and creative process that occurs in a context which gives writers the opportunity to interact among them and to express their perceptions about their world and what happens around them. Additionally, Dyson (1989), following Vygotsky's perception of writing, assumes that "it is a complex social tool that functions in varied ways in our society" (pp. 3).

In regards to foreign language learning, it is essential considering the knowledge learners have of their mother tongue. Learners start using their mother tongue in constructing hypothesis about how written language works (Hudelson, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978).

Considering all the above, it is important that we, as teachers, support our students' writing by understanding it and providing them with a variety of literacy opportunities that enhance their knowledge of the written language and at the same time allow children to read and to write their worlds. In other words, being a teacher "who is committed to discovering what each of my student knows, cares about, and can do... a teacher who respects the language and culture my students learn at home, and who respects the expansion of this knowledge at schools" (Owocki, G & Goodman, 2002 pp. ix).

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in a private catholic school in Bogotá, Colombia from April

2002 to March 2003. Taking into consideration the characteristics of qualitative research, this study followed the principles of qualitative case studies. It is descriptive in nature and it is concerned with exploring, understanding and analyzing second graders' development as writers in a rich EFL literacy environment.

### Participants:

The participants in this study were a group of second graders and the teacher as a researcher. The second graders were 26 students: two females and twenty four males aged between 8 and 9 years old. Second graders receive 6 English classes of 45 minutes per week. From the group I selected four of them at random in order to observe and analyze their growth as writers closely. Three of the students selected began their pre-school studies three years ago. The other student enrolled in the school last year.

In this research the four children will be named with their fictitious authors' names they chose to be identified. Their names are the following: Michael Douglas, Johan Breen, Tom Cruz, and Michael Peter Hamtaro.

In this study, as a teacher-researcher, my role was that of a participant observer. As a second graders' homeroom teacher I was privileged in spending the majority of the time with them and knowing more about their daily experiences, feelings, interests, and needs. According to Heath (as cited by Hubbard and Power, 1999) the teacher-researcher is the most important tool: "you are the key instrument, and you must keep that instrument on all the time" (pp. 104).

Taking into account that this study deals with the characteristics of a qualitative case study, I

selected the following methods or sources to collect data: interviews, teacher-student conferences, students' samples and the teacher's journal.

## PROCEDURES AND FINDINGS

Along this study I read to second graders "Thomas' birthday; Little Red Riding Hood; Sunny's birthday; Hippo's birthday; Franklin's Neighborhood; The Rainbow Fish; Souvenirs; That's not Santa!; and The True Story of the Little Pigs" stories. In addition, I implemented the following pedagogical activities in order to motivate children to brainstorm and to infer aspects dealing with the story we were going to read: describing the cover and giving a title to the story and making predictions about the story. Later on, I read the story loudly and invited children to draw their favorite part of it, to write a sentence related to it, to write a message or to draw and decorate a card to one of the characters of the story, to write their own story or hyper-story, and finally, to make their own storybook.

Additionally, I handled oral activities such as "retelling the story, asking me a question . . . , I think that . . . , presenting and reading my stories, interviewing authors; asking how to say and write in English; I think that . . . ; presenting and reading my stories; and finally, interviewing authors".

The first one dealt with inviting children to retell the story I read to them. The second one focused on asking comprehensive questions about the story as well as asking for the children's personal opinion about the story we had read. The third one engaged children in expressing their own opinions in terms of meaning, presentation, and creativity related to the students' samples displayed on the blackboard. The fourth one encouraged

children in reading and making oral presentations of their own stories in front of the group. For this activity children used the overhead projector. Finally, the fifth one was a complement of the previous one. The purpose of this activity was to give children the opportunity to interview their partners in order to enrich the story read, to know more information about the author's feelings when writing in English and to talk and to reflect upon non-conventional spelling.

The oral activities mentioned above encouraged children to express spontaneously their ideas, concerns, feelings, and points of view about the story and how it related to their lives. Furthermore, the children had the opportunity to interact with their partners when they did not know how to say or write a word or expression in English or when they had doubts related to the content of the stories.

Taking into account their interest in participating in these activities and the limited amount of time to handle them orally, I let the children do them in a written form. Watching the children during these activities I realized that oral activities allowed them to become more confident in using written English in their messages, stories, and hyper-stories.

From my point of view, as a teacher-researcher, the pedagogical and research activities that I conducted in this study revealed students' knowledge of the target language and the importance support has in the development of their writing. Additionally, these activities highlighted for both students and I the vital role of understanding the process in the development of writing.

The triangulation of interviews, students' samples and teacher's journal, as research

resources provided me with valuable information that allowed me to identify the following categories and subcategories that emerged: 1) becoming an author by writing about my own experiences; 2) children's creative forms to represent meaning, and 3) collaborative work in children's meaning construction processes.

### Becoming an Author by Writing about my Own Experiences

The first category depicted how children view themselves as authors by writing about their own experiences. Second graders highlighted the importance their experiences have both in expressing their ideas when they were talking formally and informally and also in the construction of the new written texts. The following quote from the first interview illustrates this category:

*Quando escribo me acuerdo o tengo en cuenta:*

*"De mis amigos. O sea... de los lugares también que yo he conocido, que he ido, qué personas he visto y de todo eso para hacer historias de los animales... de todo." (Michael Douglas).*

### Children's Creative Forms to Represent Meaning

The second category illustrates children's use of language when they communicate orally or in written form. This category includes the subcategories: uses of two languages in children's writing and children's own orthography.

The following story written by Johan Breen illustrates his creative form to represent meaning.

#### HIPPOS IN ISLAND

1. One day stiler invito a your Friends a one paseo in your
2. boat and your Friends going a home oF stiler, Fueron postem,
3. bakey, doctor, astronaut, Judge, Magician. And descembarcaron
4. and the boat se estrello in one island and estaban lejos
5. the city and the stiler se enFermo and doctor Fue a buscar
6. ones plants medisinales and Postem is Hangry and bakery
7. it plants se puede eating mientras go a pescar Fish and pescaron
8. more Fish and is delisius Fish and Pasaron three day and
9. isieron one busqueda and Pilot is buscandolos in helicopter
10. and stiler todabia nose recuperaba and Pilot los incontro
11. and dijo lla vengo voy a traer one helicopter mas big
12. and les isieron one sorpresa.
13. THE END

Observation: In line 1 it is evident the use of code-switching "One day stiler *invito a your friends a one paseo*", whereas in lines 6 and 8 the child used his invented spelling to the words *hungry /hangry/* and *delicious /delisius/*.

## Collaborative Work in Children's Meaning Construction Processes

The third category deals with the importance and value collaborative work has in constructing and reconstructing meaning.

The following quotes from children illustrate how useful and significant it was for them to work together in constructing knowledge:

*"Es incómodo cuando los otros no hacen nada. Pero chévere, nice eh... la de pareja, que es de hartas personas porque eh... uno le da más ideas a otro y si eso no le gusta entonces dice otra... le ayudan a uno a pensar a hacer cuentos con otras personas o cosas. Juan Ma me ha ayudado a escribir said, wake up y yo le he enseñado a él. (Tom Cruz)*

*"En el trabajo en grupo pues que se me hacen las cosas muy fáciles porque mis compañeros me ayudan. También pues chévere porque me aprecian yo así me siento como en familia con mis compañeros y contigo. Y además es muy bueno porque uno trabaja en equipo uno se da idas uno expresa lo que sus sentimientos hacia lo que está haciendo. Cuando escribo claro que me ha servido, pues sí porque yo aprendo cosas. Por ejemplo la pronunciación birthday yo decía/ birdei/. Aprendí a escribir Happy day! Y también a pronunciar /wan / yo decía /ONE/. (Michael Peter Hamtaro)*

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study I gained a lot of insight into children's language development. In my journey through kidwatching I realized how vital it is to provide students with a rich literacy environment in which the teacher takes into consideration his-her students needs, interests, concerns, previous knowledge and

context. Additionally, responding to students' writings and valuing the use of their mother tongue when writing texts in English makes them feel confident.

From my point of view, I believe that teachers need to bear in mind that in the development of language, children move gradually from unconventional to conventional language.

## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Some of the pedagogical implications of this study are related to the transformations observed in children's attitudes and perceptions towards writing in my class. Their changes in attitude informed me of the type of relationships that benefit their growth as writers. That is, teachers need to be supportive and respectful of children's ideas as readers and writers. Finally, kidwatching opens the door to understanding and exploring "how children learn". That allows teachers to enrich their teaching practices.

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