Emergent Writing in the Primary Grades
Julianne Hammink
University of Texas at El Paso

Hypotheses

How do young children learn to write? Is writing the result of habit formation? Do children need to master certain skills before they begin to write? We know that young children learn to speak with very little direct instruction. They develop and test ideas about how their language works based upon the language they hear around them. As their ideas, or hypotheses about language develop, their spoken language changes.

As a child refines his ideas about language, he makes mistakes. These errors are far more helpful than flawless speech to those who study child language development, because they provide a glimpse of the understanding that the child has about the language he speaks.

A simple example may help illustrate the utility of errors in research. Most English speaking children learn to use the past tense forms of irregular verbs in the same general way (from Aitchison): initially, a child uses irregular forms like *went* and *broke* correctly in her speech. Aitchison notes that these are common words in English, and are likely to be heard and acquired by a young child. Eventually, though, the child begins to notice that the past tense in English is often formed by adding the morpheme *–ed* to verbs. She learns this rule a bit too well, because, besides producing correct forms like *walked* and *played*, she will also produce *goed* and *breaked*. The child is not backsliding; she is merely over-applying a rule that she has recently learned. With time, the child will notice that *goed* and *breaked* never appear in English because the *–ed* rule does not apply in some cases, and she will begin saying *went* and *broke* again. Her hypothesis about how past tense is formed in English at this point resembles that of the other speakers of English, and she is considered to have "learned" the rule without ever being "taught."

Is writing acquired the same way spoken language is? All healthy humans acquire a spoken language whether they are schooled or not, yet it is possible for a person to never learn how to read or write. In fact, many human languages have no written form. Does that mean that, while speech is acquired, writing must be taught, skill-by-skill? Or is the process similar for both? Do children develop, test, and refine hypotheses about written language? In this chapter, we'll examine samples of Spanish and English writing done by first-grade students in a dual-language immersion program, and find that their writing does reflect their growing understanding of how written language works. We'll see that children write for many of the same reasons that they speak, and we'll briefly consider how the similarity of writing and speaking may affect how writing instruction is approached in the classroom.

Growing into Writing

Just as students acquire the language of their parents in a regular sequence over the course of several years, they also acquire the conventions of written language in a predictable order, by creating and refining hypotheses about how written language works. Marie Clay devotes her 1979 book *What Did I Write?* to a detailed examination of the writing development of young children. Many other descriptions of the stages of emergent writing have been developed since the publication of Clay's book. Two of these are described in tables 1 and 2. The Blackburn-Cramp Developmental Writing Scale (Table 1) was developed at Cramp Elementary School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for English-language writers at the first grade level and below. Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (Table 2) developed a similar list of spelling stages for students learning to write in Spanish. Their list is summarized in Freeman and Freeman, 1997.

Blackburn-Cramp	**Ferreiro-Teberosky**
1. Scribbling and/or drawing. May be able to verbalize about picture. 2. Letters and mock letters, often in lines and strings. 3. Letter strings that don't match intended sounds. Copied print. 4. Letters written in word grouping. Student can read back message. 5. Spaces between words. Invented spelling, initial consonants represent entire word. Familiar words spelled conventionally. Labels for pictures. 6. Simple pattern sentences of 3-4 words. Spelling more conventional. 7. Capitalization & simple punctuation, often random. Increasingly conventional spelling. Sentences longer, not patterned. 8. Logical cohesion among sentences. More regular use of conventions.	1. Writing does not serve to transmit information. No distinction between writing and drawing. 2. Fixed number and variety of characters. Letters of child's own name often used. 3. Each letter stands for one syllable. Vowels are stable and conventional. 4. Children move from syllabic to alphabetic hypotheses. More consonants added to words. 5. Children segment subject and predicate. Children notice characters within syllables. They begin to make orthographic distinctions between s and z, ll and y, and k, c and qu.

Table 1.   *Table 2.*

Notice the similarities between the two lists. In both, students move from scribbling to pre-phonetic to single-letter word representations to increasingly conventional spelling. Notice also that while students writing in English generally use consonants in their first spelling attempts,

those writing in Spanish begin phonetic spelling with vowels. This seems to be because English consonants are more regular than English vowels, while in Spanish, the vowels are more regular than the consonants.

Applying these stages to real student work takes practice. Often, a student may seem to be between stages, or may exhibit characteristics of two different stages in the same piece of writing. The examples below provide a general idea of how each developmental stage of writing may look, but since each child is an individual their writing will probably not be identical these samples.

The first two samples are from the same child, a Spanish-speaking student named José. In Figure 1., José displays the scribble writing typical of the earliest stages of emergent literacy. In Figure 2., taken several weeks later, José has begun using letter-like forms. He includes the s, e, and a backwards J from his own name. At this developmental level, students experiment with the directionality of letters, words and sentences. "Mirror writing" is not uncommon. This student has moved from a Level 1 to a Level 2 on the Blackburn-Cramp scale, and is nearly at a Level 2 on the Ferreiro-Teberosky scale. His writing is clearly pre-phonetic, but he has begun to make the distinction between drawing and writing.
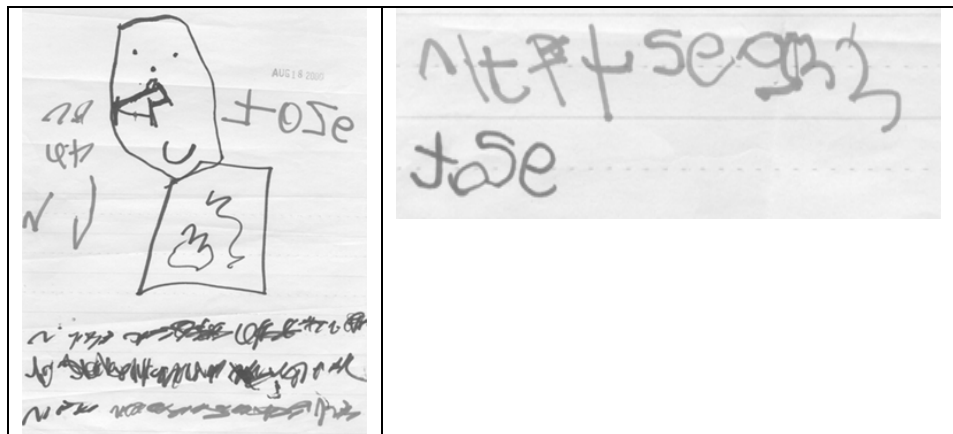

Figure 1. Scribbling   *Figure 2. Letter-like forms*

A more advanced stage of pre-phonetic writing consists of strings of conventional letters that do not represent sounds, as in Figure 3. Often, a student at this level can tell the story contained in the letter strings, and will be able to retell the same story a day or two later. From the first day of class, it is important to record the student's story as dictated on the student's paper. This allows rereading of the story later, or by a parent at home, and it models the act of writing for the student.
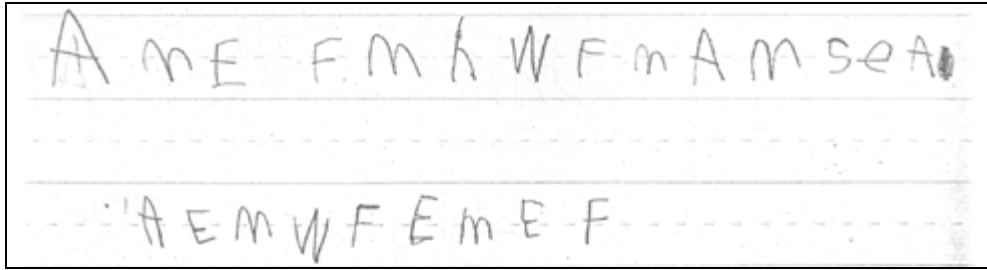
Figure 3. Letter strings

Another writing strategy that writers at this stage use is to copy environmental print. A print-rich classroom will provide the student with many opportunities to copy interesting words. This copying helps the student develop her hypotheses about what words look like and how they are formed. Copying is not the only form of writing that a child at this level should do, but it is helpful for many students.
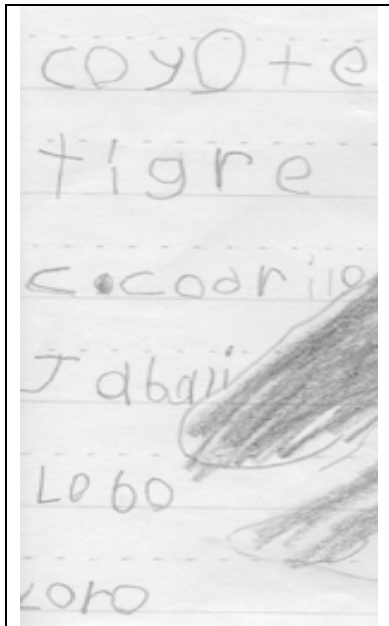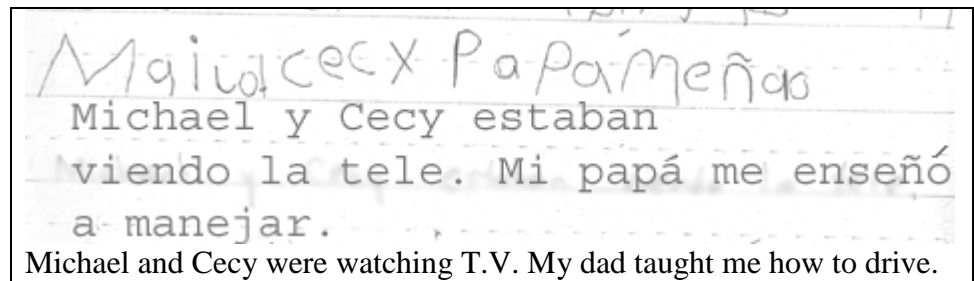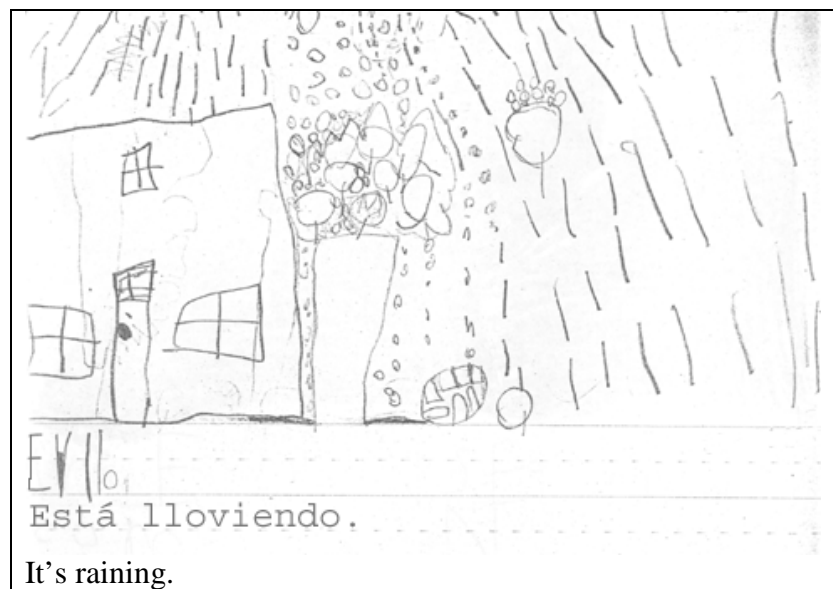

Figure 4. Copied print

Eventually, the student will begin to connect letter and sound, and to record brief sentences that contain letter-sound correspondences. At first, each word or syllable may be represented by a single letter. While difficult for an adult reader to decipher, the student can probably read back her sentence with few problems. As always, the teacher should record the sentence as dictated below the student's writing.

The student whose writing is shown in Figure 5 has some ideas about how letters represent sounds. She also has several known words, like "*Cecy*" and "*Papá*" that she does not need to spell out. The phrase "*me enseñó a manejar*" is represented with five letters: m, e, ñ, a, and o. Each letter represents an entire syllable, and for that reason this type of

writing is described as demonstrating a "syllabic hypothesis." Her writing is consistent with Level 5 of the Blackburn-Cramp Writing Scale, and Level 3 of Ferreiro-Teberosky.

Michael y Cecy estaban
viendo la tele. Mi papá me enseñó
a manejar.

Michael and Cecy were watching T.V. My dad taught me how to drive.

Figure 5. Single-letter spelling and known words

Está lloviendo.

It's raining.

Figure 6. Consonants and the alphabetic hypothesis

As students gain more experience reading and writing, they begin to notice that most words consist of more than one sound and are represented by a group of letters. When children begin to represent the internal structure of syllables in their writing, they have moved from a "syllabic" to an "alphabetic" hypothesis. In Figure 6, another student is beginning to discover that a word, and even a syllable, is comprised of more than one sound. Although each syllable of "*está*" is represented with a single vowel (the A is reversed) as in the single letter spelling above, "*lloviendo*" is spelled with both a consonant and a vowel. Figure 7 shows a more advanced example of the alphabetic hypothesis. Each syllable is represented with a vowel and most also contain one or more consonants. This student has internalized the consonant-vowel pattern of Spanish. His use of spacing suggests may be unsure about the difference between a syllable and a word.
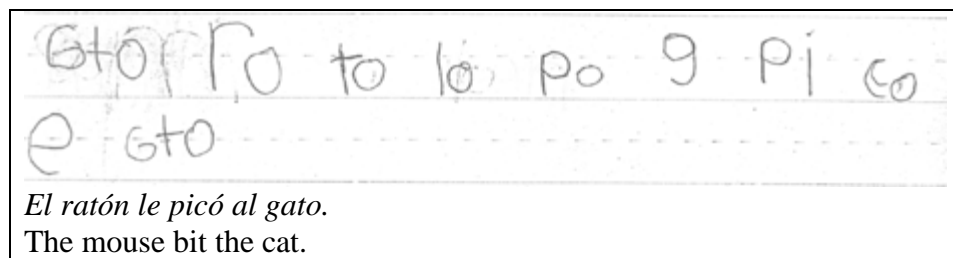
El ratón le picó al gato.
The mouse bit the cat.

Figure 7. Alphabetic hypothesis

Figure 8 shows what English writing of approximately the same level looks like. This student prefers spelling with the more regular English consonants, yet his writing does contain some vowels.


My picture is like a monkey picture.

Figure 8. Alphabetic hypothesis in English writing

Students at this level (around Level 6 on the Blackburn-Cramp scale and 4 on the Ferreiro-Teberosky scale) are able to label their drawings. Often these labels demonstrate more conventional spelling than the sentences these students write. A single word does not impose the memory demands that an entire sentence might. The students spend more time on the single word, and as a result are able to record more of the sounds in the word. Some examples of picture labels can be seen in Figure 9.

Dinosaur | Bike
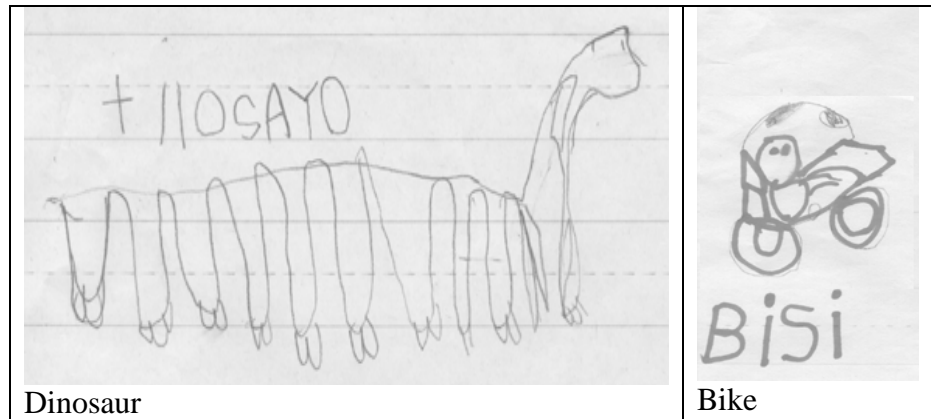
Figure 9. Labeling drawings

Toward the end of both the Blackburn-Cramp and the Ferreiro-Teberosky developmental writing scales, student writing approaches the standard for the language they are using. Students begin to apply spacing, punctuation and capitalization regularly, and spelling concerns change from merely representing all the sounds in a word to representing them conventionally. English writers begin to pay attention to correct vowel use and Spanish writers to distinguish between ll and y, or c, k and qu.

I like flowers and also clouds.
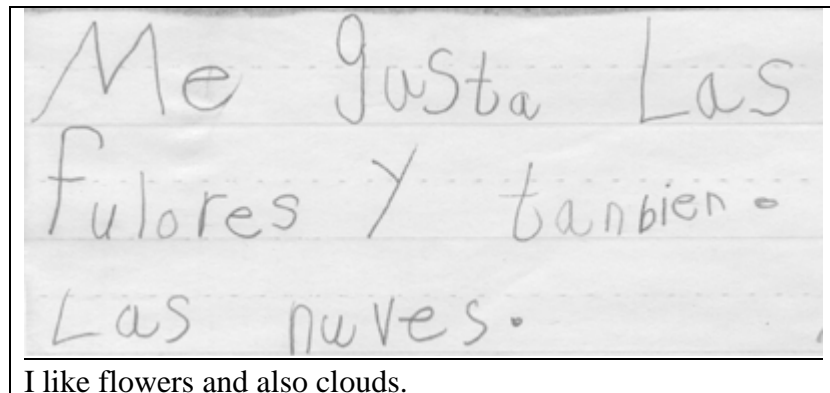
Figure 10. Conventional Spanish writing

Writing like that in Figures 10 and 11 is easy for nearly anyone to read. Some idiosyncrasies of punctuation and spelling remain, but writers at this stage are able to clearly communicate simple messages in writing.
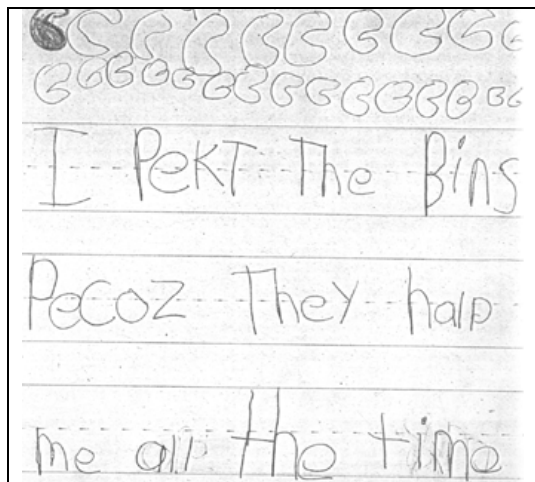
Figure 11. Conventional English writing

Beyond this point, the focus of writing instruction begins to change. The last level of the Blackburn-Cramp scale describes the next step: students begin to connect simple sentences into organized paragraphs and stories, as in Figure 12. This expansion of focus beyond the sentence continues through the primary years and beyond.
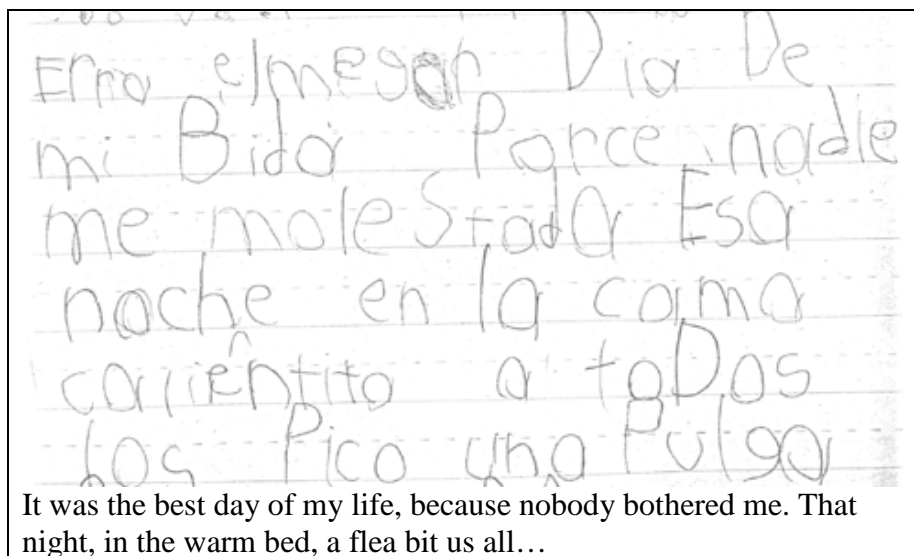

It was the best day of my life, because nobody bothered me. That night, in the warm bed, a flea bit us all…

Figure 12. Beyond the sentence

Learning Two Systems at Once

Students who begin their literacy education in two languages at once have special challenges, as we all know. Most of the students who receive instruction in two languages are not equally proficient in both, and their writing will probably reflect this. Yet, there are advantages to being biliterate, even at the earliest stages of literacy. Many of the skills of writing are not exclusive to one language, and once learned (in either

language), can be transferred to the other. In Figure 13, the English and Spanish writing of a single first-grade student is compared.

| Two little rabbits were hungry and thirsty but a bird shook the tree and an apple fell out and they ate. | My favorite part was when the cat got the dog. |

Figure 13. Transfer of writing knowledge from Spanish to English

In Spanish, this student uses conventional spelling, and writes complex sentences that progress logically to tell a simple story. Her use of capitalization and punctuation are still experimental. In English, this student writes simpler sentences. Her unconventional spelling obscures the fact that her English syntax is quite conventional, even despite several false starts and repetitions: "the cat got, what the cat got the dog." She uses both the present tense "is" and then, without erasing, adds the past tense "was." She also correctly uses another irregular past-tense verb, "got." Her spelling is very phonetic, showing clear Spanish influence, particularly in her use of vowels: "da cat gat da dag." (The cat got the dog.). Yet, other aspects of her Spanish writing have transferred more successfully to English. She uses conventional word spacing in English, and productively uses many consonants that are identical in Spanish and English, such as those found in "cat" and "dag."

A child's second-language writing can reveal a great deal about her growing understanding of that language, as in this sample of the work of an English-dominant student writing in Spanish, Figure 14.

Yo fui al lago. Nos encontramos una cosa para pescar.
I went to the lake. We found a thing to fish with.

Figure 14. Transfer from English to Spanish

This student learned to write in English first. The features of her Spanish writing reveal a great deal about her hypotheses about writing in Spanish, and even her understanding of the Spanish language itself. She uses spellings based on Spanish pronunciation ("*gui*"), rather than its written form ("*fui*"), and she also uses English orthography, as in the K of "*Kosa*" and "*Paneskar*" (*para pescar*). Clearly, she is transferring her knowledge of English spelling and her knowledge of spoken Spanish to her Spanish writing. She uses punctuation semi-conventionally, with a period at the end of the last sentence, but her use of capitalization, like that of the previous student, is still experimental.

This student's use of word spacing is particularly interesting. She systematically separates nouns and non-clitic pronouns from the rest of the sentence, as in "*Yo / fui al lago*," suggesting that she recognizes them as separate words. Verb phrases like "*fui al lago*" and prepositional phrases like "*para pescar*" are written without spaces, suggesting that she recognizes them as syntactic units, but has not yet analyzed their internal structure. Edelsky (1982) notes that this type of segmentation is common in inexperienced writers who are still developing an understanding of Spanish syntax, and the Ferreiro-Teberosky scale also mentions the segmentation of subject and predicate as a feature of Spanish writing that occurs rather late in the developmental process.

The Social Context of Writing

All language is social; that is, all language is intended to communicate a message. Writing, along with speaking, listening and reading, is a modality of language. When we teach emerging writers, we must never lose sight of the essential purpose of all language activities. Part of our job as teachers is to help our young students understand the purposes of writing, and this means that the writing students do in our classrooms must always be purposeful.

The linguist M.A.K. Halliday studied the emergent language of children, and proposed that the language of children as young as nine months old could be classified as fulfilling one of seven functions, as in Table 3:

Instrumental	*I want*	Child seeks to satisfy needs
Regulatory	*Do that*	Child attempts to control behavior of others
Interactional	*Me and you*	Child interacts with others
Personal	*Here I come*	Child expresses self
Heuristic	*Tell me why*	Child learns about and explores environment
Imaginative	*Let's pretend*	Child creates imaginary environment
Informative	*I have something to tell you*	Child conveys information

Table 3. Halliday's Functions of Child Language (Adapted from Halliday, 1975)

Just as children who are learning to speak already have purposes for their utterances, children who are learning to write will have a message to communicate even before they can write conventionally. Freeman and Freeman (1997) examine student writing in English and Spanish, and find that children allowed to choose their own writing topic do, indeed, write for the purposes described in Table 3. Edelsky also notes that the features of children's writing change as their purposes for writing, and their audiences, change.

A Writing Community in the Classroom

So, what do our young students need to thrive as writers? The evidence presented above indicates that students need to have a reason for communicating, they need an audience, and they need assistance to ensure that their message will be understood and appreciated by its intended target. The psycholinguist Frank Smith describes emergent writers as junior members of a literacy "club." This club, like any other, has both apprentices and experts who interact, read each other's work and comment on it. A student's progress from novice to expert writer occurs within this social matrix. A student writing for no audience, or for no self-motivated purpose, won't develop a self-image as a 'real' writer, and the quality of writing he produces will be negatively affected.

Effective writing approaches take the social aspects of writing very seriously. In many balanced literacy models, the writer's workshop is the cornerstone of writing instruction. The writer's workshop is a process approach to writing, where a particular piece of writing is chosen and developed by the student, with many opportunities for interaction with peers and instructors. The writer's workshop takes students through the same writing stages that mature writers pass through when preparing a writing project for public consumption. These stages are explained in Table 4. Note that these steps do not necessarily have to occur in the

sequence that they are presented here. Writing is a recursive process, and sometimes steps are repeated and occur out of order.

Prewriting	Seeking ideas for writing	Brainstorming, journaling, graphic organizers and lists
Drafting	Producing a first draft	Unedited, uninterrupted writing
Conferencing	Seeking input from others	Teacher conferences, peer response, author's chair
Revising	Improving the draft	Rewriting to improve organization, clarify focus
Editing	Correcting errors	Checking the writing for punctuation, spelling, capitalization mistakes
Publication	Producing and sharing a final draft	Word-processing or other electronic publication, public reading, creating a book

Table 4. Stages of the writing process. Adapted from Freeman (1998).

Later chapters will examine many of these stages in more depth, and suggest activities to assist students at each stage of the writing process. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll look at conferencing, and examine the important role it plays in the writer's workshop.

Conferencing allows a student to receive thoughtful feedback from others *before* the writing project is complete. Student writers are able to incorporate this feedback into their writing when they revise and edit their work. Teachers and other classmates both can be helpful reviewers of the novice writer's work. In addition, conferencing provides the teacher with valuable information about the strengths and weaknesses each student is facing in her writing.

Teachers usually conference with one to four students at a time. The conference may focus on any stage of writing, or may focus on a single target skill that needs to be reinforced. A log of teacher conferences, such as that in Figure 15, provides a record of student progress with a specific project, and documents particular needs of each student.

Name	Date	Project	Notes
Barbara	11-5	brainstorming	read journal for Topic ideas
Walter	11-5	Mummy story	Ready To publish as book
Samuel	11-8	Frog poem	Work on punctuation, silent 'e'

Figure 15. Writing conference record

In the sample log above, the teacher has met with three students. Each student is at a different point in the writing process, and each conference

topic is focused on the needs of the particular student. The first student, Barbara, is searching for a new writing project. Together, they reread the student's journal for an interesting idea that could be expanded. The teacher may help Barbara develop the idea with another brainstorming idea, such as a list or a semantic web. The second student, Walter, is ready to complete his latest writing project. The teacher may assist him in choosing a final format for his writing, or help him assemble the materials (paper, computer time, binding) he needs to produce the final copy. The last student here, Samuel, is at the editing stage with his poem, therefore teacher's conference goals deal with editing skills, such as his use of punctuation. Good record keeping also makes it possible for the teacher to identify students who have not conferenced recently, and those who are not moving from stage to stage.

Conferencing is time-consuming, and in large classes the teacher may feel that she is not giving each student the attention he deserves. Peer conferencing is another way for student writers to gain feedback about their writing. Peer interaction may in fact be more helpful in many cases, because the intended audience for many student writers is other students, not teachers.

Peer conferencing needs to be modeled. Students may not know how to read a peer's writing critically, and provide helpful comments. The time spent in modeling helpful feedback (and reminding students of the Golden Rule!) will be rewarded by increased student independence, and increased enthusiasm for sharing written work with others.

Teachers can guide what features of writing are addressed using a peer revision rubric. This rubric will change over time, as students begin to control some aspects of writing and wrestle with others. A simple rubric, appropriate for beginning readers and writers, Figure 16, comes from Freeman. This form asks students to verify that the writing (usually a single sentence at this level) begins with a capital letter, ends with a period, and that the author's name is written on the page. The reviewer checks which features are present, then initials the rubric on the line.

C☐   P☐   N☐   _____

Figure 16. Simple peer review rubric

A more advanced rubric, like that in Figure 17, can help more fluent readers look for more sophisticated features like varied vocabulary, and allows the reviewer to respond to the story itself.

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   Writer _____     Reader _____

☺☹☹  The writer used periods.

☺☹☹  The writer used capital letters.

☺☹☹  There were spaces between words.

☺☹☹  The writer used interesting words like _____

        I liked _____

        Please fix _____
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Figure 17. Peer editing/revision rubric

The nature of the writing assignment itself (if all students are writing in the same genre) may determine what is included on the rubric. A letter-writing assignment may prompt peer reviewers to look for a salutation, body and closing, while a story rubric may ask the reviewer to identify the problem and solution contained in the student story.

These peer response sheets can be stored with the drafts of the writing project, and discussed with the teacher during conferences. If portfolios are kept, all the drafts and response sheets should be included along with the published project, because the entire process, and all the student's growth, is displayed in them.

Conclusion

Marie Clay has pointed out that "the early months of schooling [are] crowded with complex learning." Children in the primary grades demonstrate an immense amount of growth in their reading and writing ability each year, perhaps more than at any other time of their school career. As primary-level teachers, we are privileged to witness this awesome development, and challenged to guide our students through it. Our efforts determine what kind of writers our students become later on. Our truest compass may be our understanding that students come to us *wanting* to communicate, and willing to do the work necessary for growth if it offers them the opportunity to interact and communicate more effectively.

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