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Using interactive writing with reluctant writers

Abstract

Interactive writing provides an authentic opportunity for children to learn the conventions of writing while constructing meaningful text. As the teacher and children compose a text together, children are active participants in analyzing sounds and constructing words. While writing, children develop strategies for spelling. Interactive writing gives children confidence to use invented spelling which increases children's independence in writing.

USING INTERACTIVE WRITING WITH RELUCTANT WRITERS

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"No, no, no." "Run, Puff, run." "Stop, Spot, stop." Does this sound familiar? Many of us learned to read from Fun with Dick and Jane (Gray, Artley, & Arhuthnot, 1951), which was based on a traditional view about reading and writing. A view that states, before being taught how to read and write, a child must go through a period of readiness, after which time reading instruction could begin. Children were considered literate only after their reading and writing began to look like adults (Strickland, 1990). In contrast, an emergent literacy program emphasizes the ongoing development of skill in reading and writing and stresses participation in literary activities that are meaningful and functional to the child (Strickland).

Researchers have linked theory and research to give us new insights into how children learn to read and write. Strickland and Morrow (1990) state that beginning reading and writing start naturally through exposure to print in the environment. An attempt should be made to surround the children with useful, meaningful print which they will want to understand and learn to read and write (Taylor, Walls, Strickland, & Morrow, 1990). The study of literacy learning also tells us that learning to read and write are interrelated processes and require active participation in activities that have meaning in a child's daily life (Strickland, 1990). Although children's learning about literacy can be described in terms of generalized stages, children pass through these stages in a variety of ways and at different ages (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The study of literacy learning also tells us that children's literature can be used to connect writing and reading throughout the curriculum (Edwards, Beasley, Thompson, Strickland & Morrow, 1991). Finally, children need many opportunities to practice these emerging skills (Taylor, Walls,

Strickland & Morrow, 1990). These insights into how young children learn to read and write tell us that learning to read and write is an active, interrelated, ongoing process that starts naturally. Children need to see the process of learning to read and write as useful and need opportunities to practice literacy skills in the context of real reading and writing. With these insights in mind, interactive reading fits into an emergent literacy program.

Interactive reading is an approach to teaching reading which involves reader and listener in an active, shared experience (Greenlaw, 1987). During shared reading the teacher models good reading behaviors. The children learn the conventions of print, increase their vocabularies, and use and read new sentence structure (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994). Interactive reading promotes the use of natural text (children's literature written in natural, uncontrolled language) which has a positive effect on reading (Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). Young readers learn to read by building their knowledge of written language through the use of natural texts. Students learn reading skills as they use them and as teachers provide direct instruction on reading skills within the use of texts in real reading tasks. Hearing written language provides an opportunity for children to develop their skills (Hoskisson, 1979). Children are exposed to correct sentence structure, new vocabulary, and story line and structure. Using shared reading experiences where teachers model and children listen can lead to opportunities for children to write. For example, children can create an alternative text based on a piece of children's literature that had been read aloud many times (Pinnell & McCarrier). In fact, there are many ways to connect reading to learning to write such as a retelling of a story, a story map, a recipe, writing a letter or news stories.

Interactive reading involves the reader and listener in an active experience in which they share natural text. Interactive reading provides authentic opportunities for children to write.

Writing in an interactive process is a form of shared writing that promotes young children's active involvement in literacy processes (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994). Pinnell and McCarrier describe interactive writing as a process that involves the teacher and the children negotiating text composition, constructing words by analyzing sounds, using conventions of print, reading texts, and confirming while reading and writing. Interactive writing incorporates principles from the process approach to writing (Graves, 1994). In the process approach the child has ownership of the writing process. Emphasis is placed on what the child knows. Writing is a social act. Children work together to compose texts and share their writing with others. This process of writing provides the means for a child to learn the conventions of writing including letters, words, spacing, punctuation, capitalization and spelling.

In fact, spelling and spelling knowledge greatly develop through the use of the writing process. The writing process encourages invented spelling use. Graves (1994) defines invented spelling as the spellings children create before they know the conventional spelling of a word. Clarke (1988) compared the effectiveness of invented spelling to traditional (correct spelling) in first-grade students. The children who used invented spelling had significantly greater skill in spelling and word analysis at the end of the year. Mann, Tobin, and Wilson (1987) conclude that invented spelling gives a picture of children's phonemic awareness (the awareness that speech consists of a series of sounds) and improves

children's phonemic awareness which is related to success in reading and spelling. Another benefit to children problem solving letter sound relationships in their writing through invented spelling is that when children have developed phonemic awareness, phonics instruction can be built on this foundation (Stahl, 1992).

Button, Johnson, and Furgerson (1996) explain that interactive writing provides an authentic means for instruction in phonics within the context of meaningful text. As children focus on writing meaningful text, they develop their knowledge of conventions within that text. Children learn the conventions of spelling, syntax, and semantics through their reading and in their own writing. An advantage to this approach is that phonemic awareness and phonics skills are learned not in an artificial predetermined scope and sequence but in a natural ongoing process of writing. Although teachers need not teach skills in a certain sequence, teachers need to have an understanding of these skills and are able to recognize through children's writing when skill instruction is appropriate. Overall, interactive writing provides an authentic opportunity for children to learn the convention of writing while constructing meaningful text.

Emergent literacy emphasizes that reading and writing are ongoing, active, interrelated processes that should be meaningful to the child. With this perspective in mind, interactive reading and writing should be an essential part of a literacy program. This led me to examine my reading and writing programs and ask, "How can I effectively incorporate interactive reading and writing approaches into my first-grade classroom?"

I have used interactive reading and writing with my whole class. However, in this article I will share how I used interactive reading and writing

with a pair of students who were reluctant to write. These two students were not willing to write on their own. I questioned why they lacked the confidence to invent spell. What could I do to help them gain confidence to write on their own? I will share my experience of using interactive reading and writing with two of my first grade students: Kate and Mike.

Kate

Kate could not identify the letters and sounds when she started first grade. After working on this through the fall, Kate could then identify all of the letters and names a word with the initial sound for each letter. Kate can read some predictable books. Kate uses the Writing To Read program in her Title I Reading class daily. During writing time, Kate is very hesitant about writing. I have encouraged her to write down the sounds that she hears, but she is not willing to take this chance. Kate copies color words and classmates' names. Kate goes to speech class. She has difficulty pronouncing a few sounds. I question if she has difficulty distinguishing sounds.

Mike

Mike can identify the letters and name a word with the initial sound for most letters. If he can not name the letter immediately, he panics. Then he gets frustrated. He usually answers as a question. "Is it a b?" Mike can read some predictable books and also attends Title I Reading. During writing time, Mike uses many stall tactics: sharpening pencils, going to the bathroom or talking to others. Mike will come to me begging for me to spell for him. When I tell him that I will help him write the sounds that he hears, he will say, "No, just spell it

for me." When I won't spell for him, he will go from classmate to classmate asking them to spell for him. At conferences, Mike's parents told me that Mike's brother still can not spell because in first grade he used invented spelling in Title I Reading. I wonder if this has had an effect on Mike so that he is not willing to use invented spelling.

Assessments

I used informal assessment activities to confirm Kate and Mike's strengths and to give me a clue if there are some skills they are lacking that would give them confidence to spell. I used phonemic awareness activities by Yopp (1988) that assessed blending speech sounds into words, isolating speech sounds, recognizing rhyming words, and segmenting phonemes. In blending speech sounds into words, Kate scored 18/30 and Mike 26/30. Both scored 13/15 in isolating speech sounds. Mike scored 15/20 and Kate 18/20 on recognizing rhyming words. Both were very hesitant. Both had difficulty segmenting phonemes (breaking words into sounds).

Using interactive writing

I met with Kate and Mike as a small group a couple of times each week during writers' workshop for 10 - 15 minutes. We would collaborate to write a text together. As we wrote, Kate and Mike would do the actual printing. I would give them many options during the writing time. They could choose the kind of paper to write on and if they wanted to use pencil, pen, or markers. They enjoyed having the freedom to make choices and often chose to write on a large chart tablet which gave them large spaces for writing the letters. On the table where we were working would lay an alphabet chart. This helped Kate and Mike when they

were not sure how to form a letter. If one would ask, "How do you make a g?" They could look at the alphabet quickly and they did not waste energy worrying how to write the letters. They could concentrate on what they were writing. I wanted Kate and Mike to be focused on making meaning in their stories and not get slowed down thinking about how to form the letters.

On most occasions I let Kate and Mike choose what kind of writing they would like to do. One option was writing an extension of a book or rhyme that had been read aloud to the class. For example, after reading "Peanut Butter and Jelly," they each wrote a recipe for a favorite sandwich. Mike wrote, *Put some meat on. Put some lettuce on. Put some tomatoes on. Put some bread on.* I also read many predictable books to the class to provide structure on which they could base their own version of the story. I would reread the story several times so the students were familiar with the text. I would ask Kate and Mike to identify the pattern in the story. They would use the predictable pattern to create their own version. A couple of books that I used were Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Martin, 1992) and Monster Party (Cowley, 1990). After reading Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? Kate and Mike used the same story pattern but replaced a new animal and color in their stories. For example, Mike wrote, *Yellow lion, yellow lion, What do you see?* Another option was to write about one of their own experiences. They usually chose this option. I was not concerned with which option they chose as long as it was meaningful to them.

Interactive writing offered many opportunities for teaching. For example, while collaborating a text, I would direct Kate and Mike's attention to using left to right directionality, spacing of letters and words and writing words by using

knowledge of sound-to-letter relationships. After Kate and Mike had decided on a topic to write about, I would guide the writing process by asking questions and including some direct instruction. I tried to start by building on what Kate and Mike already knew. Kate and Mike would take turns writing sentences about the topic. For example, during one writing session, Kate and Mike decided they wanted to write a story about birthdays. Kate said that she wanted to write, "At birthdays you have fun." I would ask, "How many words are in your sentence? What is the first word?" It was difficult for Kate and Mike to divide a thought into individual words. They wanted to write the whole thought at once. After deciding what was the first word, I would continue questioning. "Where will you start on the page? Say the word slowly. How many sounds do you hear in the word?" I would help Kate and Mike stretch the word to hear the sounds. If they heard three sounds, we would make three little lines. I would ask, "What sounds do you hear in the word? Can you write the letter that stands for the sound?" During the first few writing sessions, Kate and Mike could write beginning sounds fairly easily. They could say an ending sound with a little coaxing. I would encourage them to take a risk when writing, but I would provide letters representing unfamiliar sounds. I thought it was important that they knew all words contain a vowel and would help them fill in the vowel sounds. After writing one word, I would ask, "What do you have to remember to do?" I would have Kate and Mike put a finger on the paper after a word to leave a finger space. Then they would read what they had written. As they read, I had them point to the words to match the words to what they were saying. They would read all of the sentence they had written so far. Then they would know what word would

come next in their story. For example, in the birthday story Mike wanted to write, "You have cake and ice cream." Mike would say, "You" and then write the word. He would read, "You have" and write *have*. "You have cake" and write *cake*. We would go through the same process with each word. Consequently, the first stories that we wrote together were only a couple of sentences long. The stories were kept on a shelf and were read at the beginning of each writing session. Kate and Mike enjoyed rereading their stories.

As Kate and Mike wrote, I encouraged them to describe what they were doing. I wanted them to know what strategies they could use when writing. Some strategies are stretching out words to hear the sounds, leaving spaces, and rereading. While using interactive writing, Kate and Mike were actively involved in the writing process. Their phonics and spelling skills were being developed while writing their own stories. They had a purpose for learning writing skills.

Using rhyming words

I often gave Mike and Kate the option of choosing their writing topic, but on some occasions I had them work on a particular skill. One skill was identifying rhyming words. The beginning assessments showed they lacked this skill. I would start by reading a book containing rhymes such as Happy Hippopotami or Sheep in a Shop, or a rhyme printed on a chart such as "One, Two Buckle My Shoe." We would read the story or rhyme together. Then we would go back through the text and identify the rhyming words. Kate and Mike would write the rhyming words underlining the part of the word that is the same. They would see if they could substitute the initial sound to create a new rhyming word. Kate and Mike like using erasable boards and markers for this activity. They

could easily erase and replace the initial sound. I would then challenge Kate and Mike to see if they could fit the new rhyming words into the text. Kate and Mike had a difficult time identifying the rhyming words the first few times we did this activity. After repeating this activity several times, they realized that if they changed the initial sound they could spell many new words. If they knew how to spell cat, they could also spell hat, pat, sat, etc. I encouraged them to use this strategy when writing their stories. Kate used rhyming words to write a counting book. She wrote, *2 cat on a mat, 3 hen in a pen*. We put sets of rhyming words on white circles and connected them together to see how long a snowman they could build. The snowmen were hung in the room for the students to refer to when writing.

Role of high-frequency words

While Kate and Mike were writing, I wanted them to be able to write high-frequency words easily. I hung high-frequency words in the classroom that we called "Doozers." I wrote four words on both sides of word cards and taped them together and hung them up with string. A couple sets hung around the room. We read the words daily. Students were to spell these words correctly in their writing. I wanted students to be able to get their ideas written down and not get stuck while writing the high-frequency words. The following words were the first set of words that I hung; the, and, is and was. I watched the students' writing to see whether they spelled these words correctly. When writing with Kate and Mike I often heard one of them say, "I know how to spell that word. That's a Doozer." When I noticed that the students had been spelling a Doozer correctly and consistently, I would take that word down and replace it with a new Doozer. I

hung the old Doozer words together on the wall for students to refer to if needed. Using Doozer words gave students a collection of high-frequency words that they could spell to use in their writing.

Working cooperatively

During our writing sessions, I had Kate and Mike work together to gain confidence in their writing abilities. Alone they were not willing to try, but when working cooperatively they had the support to give writing a try. I had them alternate writing sentences to compose a story. As one wrote a sentence, the other could help with spelling if needed. They gave each other the nudge needed to take a risk when spelling. On one occasion another student asked to work with Mike and I to write a story. Mike did not have the confidence when writing with this other student as he did with Kate. He relied on this student to do the spelling for him. Consequently, I had Kate and Mike work together for many writing sessions. As Kate and Mike composed together I could see them getting over their anxiety of spelling. While writing they used each other's sentences as a pattern for writing their own sentence. For example, Kate wrote, *We wint down to the barn to see the cats*. Mike then wrote, *We wint down to the barn to see the dogs*. In another story about boats, Mike wrote, *Boats go fast*. Kate continued, *boats go in the water*. Mike then added a combination of the two previous sentences, *boats go fast in water*. Working together gave Kate and Mike confidence to take a risk while spelling and writing.

Literacy assessment

After two months of writing sessions with Kate and Mike, I reassessed the skills that had been difficult for them: recognizing rhyming words and segmenting

phonemes. Kate scored 18/20 and Mike 17/20 on recognizing rhyming words. Both acted very confident during the testing. On the test of phoneme segmentation, Kate scored 22/22 and Mike 21/22. In the earlier testing, Kate had score 9/22 and Mike 11/22. This showed that both could take a word and break it down into parts then write the sounds that they heard.

To document the growth of Kate and Mike as writers, I took anecdotal notes as I observed them writing. I also videotaped our interactive writing sessions, and also videotaped as they wrote during independent writing time. In addition, I collected samples of their writing. I also had the stories that they had written together. Through my observations, I noticed Kate and Mike becoming more confident as writers. During my first observations, Kate would copy color words or classmates names. She would not spell any words on her own. After many interactive writing sessions, I observed Kate starting to spell words by herself. As she wrote a story about cats, I watched her saying the words slowly out loud. She would say, "C-a-t, c-a-t." She would repeat the word a couple of times as she wrote it. When I wrote with her, I noticed after a few sessions she did not look to me for as much assistance. Near the end of our writing sessions, she usually only looked to me for help with some vowel sounds. This was a major improvement compared to when she would not attempt to spell on her own.

Mike took longer to gain confidence in his spelling. Mike knew how to spell the word dog. He worked on a story about dogs for days. He wrote, *1 dog*, *2 dog*, *3 dog* with a number on each page to one hundred. I had to do a lot of coaxing to get him to write about something other than dogs. After working with Mike many times, he would try to spell words but wanted my approval after each

sound. I kept encouraging him to write the sounds that he heard. He would ask, "Is that right?" Mike improved on saying the word slowly and listening for the sounds. Mike had made great progress when he drew a picture of a John Deere tractor and wrote the following about his picture: *Jan dere is my best tractr bekaisz my mom works thar*. Mike would often look for my approval as he wrote. However, I did not need to say anything. I could just sit and smile and nod my head and he would continue to write.

Final thoughts

Interactive writing provides an authentic opportunity for children to learn the conventions of writing while constructing meaningful text. As the teacher and children compose a text together, children are active participants in analyzing sounds and constructing words. While writing, children develop strategies for spelling. Interactive writing gives children confidence to use invented spelling which increases children's independence in writing. I observed Kate and Mike develop their writing skills and become more confident and independent in their writing. I was convinced that using interactive writing had been successful with Kate and Mike when during one writing session Mike looked to Kate and said, "We are good writers." And Kate agreed.

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