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## Assessing children's involvement in the writing process

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## Assessing children's involvement in the writing process

### Abstract

Brian, a first grader, glanced up and muttered, "don't know what to write about yet." His teacher just smiled. Before anything else was said, his face lit up, and his pencil started moving as he wrote "A book. "Then he stopped and read over what he had written, whispering the words "a book. "Next he started laboriously working on writing the sounds and letters he heard in the word" about, "coming back again and again to portions of the word to vocalize the next sound and write down his representation of what he had said. He paused again to read what he had written 'A book abot.'" Then he quickly wrote "Me!" Brian held his paper up for his teacher to see. Then he said, "That's what I'm going to write a book about... Me!" He was actively using child-devised, or invented spelling.

ASSESSING CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE  
WRITING PROCESS

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Karen Schwarz  
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Brian, a first grader, glanced up and muttered, "I don't know what to write about yet." His teacher just smiled. Before anything else was said, his face lit up, and his pencil started moving as he wrote "A book." Then he stopped and read over what he had written, whispering the words "a book." Next he started laboriously working on writing the sounds and letters he heard in the word "about," coming back again and again to portions of the word to vocalize the next sound and write down his representation of what he had said. He paused again to read what he had written "A book abot." Then he quickly wrote "ME." Brian held his paper up for his teacher to see. Then he said, "That's what I'm going to write a book about . . . . Me!" He was actively using child-devised, or invented spelling.

Brian was involved in a language arts program that provided many opportunities for him to create meaning through writing. This writing program in first grade provided frequent opportunities for children to write.

The purpose of this study is to follow a first grade child's spelling development. The learning environment that will support the student's involvement in the writing process will be described. Continuous assessment will be made of a child's progress to help the teacher support and extend the child's spelling abilities. The three assessment techniques that will be used are anecdotal records, analysis of writing samples, and

a features test. From this assessment, an analysis of a first grader's spelling development will be made.

Even though the assessment techniques in this study are lifted and examined away from the context of the classroom environment, it is necessary to be aware that evaluation by classroom teachers is ongoing, both formal and informal, and cannot be separated from learning experiences. As Yetta Goodman (1985) states, "Whole language teachers know that evaluation is going on all the time; it is built into the plans every day. It is integral to the process of teaching and learning, not a separate, discrete activity" (p. 8).

#### YOUNG CHILDREN'S AWARENESS OF VISUAL LANGUAGE

In the past, spelling was usually taught as a separate subject, not as an integral part of the language arts program. Even in many schools today, spelling is encountered as pages in a workbook with pre-test, study, and post-test exercises.

Within the last thirty years, research has given us new information on the acquisition of language and spelling. In 1971 Carol Chomsky suggested that children should write first and read later. She found that kindergartners and first graders can write with meaning. Many have a great deal of phonetic acuity and ability to analyze words into their component sounds.

Charles Read (1971, 1975) studied the development of spelling patterns and concluded that young children can predict

the spelling of words auditorially in highly sophisticated ways. Read (1975) related, "One sees clearly that different children chose the same phonetically motivated spelling to a degree that can hardly be explained as resulting from random choice or the influence of adults" (p. 32). He also concluded that learning to spell is a developmental process, not a matter of memorizing words.

#### DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF SPELLING

Several researchers have delineated the major stages in children's spelling development (Clay, 1975; Gentry, 1982; Gillet & Temple, 1986). Progress from one stage to the next is gradual, and responses representative of more than one stage can be seen in a composition (Gentry, 1982). For this study, Gillet and Temple's five stages of spelling development (1986) will be described and used.

1. Prephonemic stage. Children first use symbols from the alphabet or numbers to represent words but they demonstrate no knowledge of letter-sound correspondence.

Example: TH4o for book

2. Early phonemic stage. Children represent letter-sound correspondence briefly with a few vowels and some consonant sounds.

Example: RbT for rabbit

3. Letter-name stage. Children reproduce all the surface sound features of a word.

Example: hom for home

4. Transitional stage. Children rely less on sound and more on the conventions of words.

Example: abowt for about

5. Correct stage. Children produce the correct sequence of letters in words.

#### WAYS TO ASSESS THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S SPELLING

The three assessment techniques used by the first grade teacher will be anecdotal records, an analysis of writing samples, and a features test. These forms of assessment were used in concert.

1. Anecdotal records -- Students were observed and scripted during the process of writing every two to three weeks. The six areas that were observed were subject matter used, drawings as part of writing (pre , post , or none), ability to stay on task, verbalization of sound-letter, social interaction taking place, and physical behavior.

2. Writing samples -- Daily samples of a child's writing were dated and collected in a folder. Periodically a sample was evaluated using the spelling stages developed by Gentry.

3. Features test -- A features test is a word list selected to assess the spelling of certain word features



characteristic of invented spelling stages. The results indicate the stage of spelling that predominates and the features of spelling that are causing problems (see Appendix A). As each word is read during the testing, it is illustrated with a sentence and then is repeated. The student is encouraged to try to spell as much of the word as possible. The features test is scored by first determining each word's spelling stage (prephonemic, early phonemic, letter-name, transitional, or correct) and then analyzing the entire list to determine the predominate spelling stage (Gillet & Temple, 1986).

The categories of spelling errors from Gillet and Temple (1986) are summarized below:

1. Prephonemic spelling. The letters written for each word have no apparent relation to the sound in the word.

Example: TAbi for chick

Give each phonemically spelled word a score of 1.

2. Early phonemic spelling. The letters represent the sounds but fewer than half of the sounds are represented.

Example: Wn for wind

Give each early phonemically spelled word a score of 2.

3. Letter-name spelling. Half or more of the sounds in the word are represented by letters.

Example: Wns for once

Give each letter-name spelled word a score of 3.

4. Transitional spelling. More than half of the sounds in a word are represented. It is more conventional than letter-name; it is more word-like with short vowels, consonants, and digraphs spelled correctly.

Example: shuv for shove

Give each transitionally spelled word a score of 4.

5. Correct spelling. The entire sequence of letters of a word is correct.

Give each correctly spelled word a score of 5.

#### A FIRST GRADE CHILD'S SPELLING DEVELOPMENT

The first grade student in the nine-month study was quiet and self reliant and from a stable home. Her hobbies were animals and soccer. As a student, she was very organized and a diligent worker. Other children sought her out to borrow materials and repeat directions. She was quietly attentive during discussions before expressing her own thoughts. Most learning came easily for this student.

Information about the child's spelling development obtained through observation, writing samples, and features test will be gathered three times during a nine-month period--September, February, and May. Each sampling will be followed by a conclusion statement about the child's spelling abilities during each time frame.

## Analysis of September Spelling Patterns

### Anecdotal Records

September 16, 1988. The student was observed during a scheduled writing time. She chose her own writing topic. The student drew a picture of herself using crayons. Then she carefully printed her name six times. She concentrated on it without talking to anyone else.

September 17, 1988. The student was observed during a writing time with no teacher-directed topic. The student listed the first names of her family. She wrote her own and her twin's name quickly. She used crayon to draw each person's face above their name. She asked if it was time for recess yet. When the teacher replied, No, she asked, "What can I do now?" The teacher looked at her picture and list of names and asked what she would call her picture. The student said, "Smiley Faces." Then she took her pencil and sub-vocalized as she wrote "Sme Fs" at the top. Then she read it out loud.

### Analysis of Writing Samples

September 20, 1988. The student's writing (Figure 1) shows another listing of family members. She often uses the same topic in her writing activity. Sometimes she gets a new idea from observing her neighbor. The student had a different spelling of "Smiley Faces" this time--"Scelmy Fag." (Her mother spells for her at home.) The student's errors in spelling represent the semiphonetic and phonetic stages.

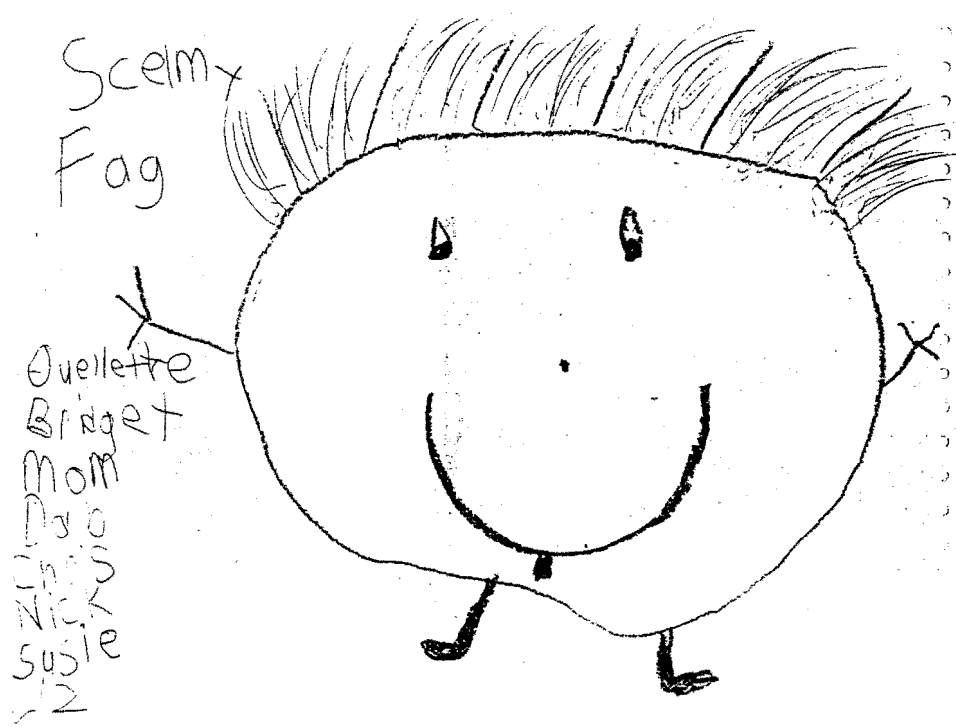


Figure 1

(reduced from a large computer paper sheet)

### Features Test

A features test was planned as a part of the assessment in the second semester. It will give information about spelling stages and patterns in an organized format.

### Conclusion

The student's writing is related to the pictures she draws and on very safe subjects. She has taken a risk to do some invented spelling which involved mostly labeling. She seems very hesitant to take any new risks.

### Analysis of February Spelling Patterns

#### Anecdotal Records

February 3, 1989. The student began a book on basketball entitled "A Book About Basketball." She asked for the correct spelling. She is still taking very few risks. Her mother believes that her brother has made fun of her invented spellings. The student made pictures of basketball players and copied their names from another student's basketball cards which he had shared. She uses invented spelling when labeling her drawings.

February 8, 1989. The student is making a Clown (clon) Book with another girl student. She is in charge of the pictures and has written some conversation in cartoons--"Hi," "Bye," and "My name is Nick." She continues to be conservative about writing, using one or two invented spellings and correctly

spelled available words. She has a positive manner in sharing with the other student.

February 16, 1989. The student's journal entry indicated advancement to the letter-name stage. For example, the student wrote--"I like to paly dls. It is fn."

February 22, 1989. The student looked at another girl student's bird book. Then she took a sheet of handwriting paper and began writing about the birds. She wrote two sentences using transitional spelling, for example, "bird" (brid) and "brought" (brot).

#### Analysis of Writing Samples

February 7, 1989. The student first drew a tree using the side of another pencil as a straight edge. Then she added the house and the trees. She copied her neighbor's sentence using correct spelling (see Appendix B).

February 22, 1989. The student used much correct spelling in her composition about a bird book. Her errors "bird" (brid) and "brought" (brot) indicate the transitional stage (see Appendix C).

February 27, 1989. The student drew a bear saying, "Hi," in a cartoon conversational format. Then she studied the picture before she wrote two sentences. She continues to use beginnings of sentences that she knows how to spell correctly such as--"This is my" and "I like." Her spelling errors were

night (nity), picture (pitachr) and lot (lat) indicating the phonetic and transitional stage (see Appendix D).

### Features Test

February 20, 1989. The features test was given using the Gillet and Temple list (Appendix A) and scoring guide (Appendix E). On the test, fifteen out of sixteen words fell in the letter-name or phonetic stages of spelling development (see Appendix F).

### Conclusion

The student fluctuated between the phonetic and transitional stage in her invented spelling. She writes few sentences unless the teacher directed her to write for a specific reason. She tends to take few risks in spelling and writes words she can correctly spell or ones another student can help her spell.

### Analysis of May Spelling Patterns

#### Anecdotal Records

May 10, 1989. The student is writing more stories and books. She stapled four pages together and wrote "Susie Cpcak" (the name of her dog) on the front. Then she drew a picture on each page followed by a sentence about the picture. She invented "play" (paly) and "jumped" (japed). She asked her neighbor to spell "brother" and "water." She seems to want to show a completed piece of writing each day.

May 16, 1989. The student went over to watch another student's hamster before she began writing. Then she started subvocalizing as she wrote and did not involve her neighbors. She would pause and reread often. The word "saw" (sall) caused her to ponder and to reread it several times. She did not have time to make a picture because of the upcoming library time.

#### Analysis of Writing Samples

May 8, 1989. The student chose to write about a book read during the shared book time. She copied the title "A Mouse in the House" from the book. She used an idea from the book as a springboard for her composition. Examining her spelling errors (see Appendix G), some were letter-name, for example, "before" (befor), "bumped" (bupt), and "through" (thou), and some were transitional, for example, "cheese" (chees), "kitchen" (kichin), and "almost" (olmost).

May 16, 1989. The student's spelling shows development to the transitional stage as evidenced by her spelling of "hamster" (hamstser), "peanut butter" (penit buttre), "play" (paly), and "then" (than). There are still some phonetic spellings, but they are lessening. Also she does not incorporate punctuation into her sentences (see Appendix H).

#### Features Test

May 22, 1989. The results of the student's spelling of eighteen words were that eleven were in the transitional



category, four were between the letter-name and the transitional stages, and three were in the phonemic stage (see Appendix I).

### Conclusion

The student is writing longer pieces and is using more invented spelling and drawing fewer illustrations. She has progressed to the transitional stage. Best of all, she appears more confident as she writes.

### SUMMARY

A teacher's evaluation of children's spelling development should be ongoing. Anne Dyson (1982) summarized the teacher's role in guiding and evaluating students as they continue to show growth in spelling by saying, "Each child is an unfolding story, written with style, recurrent themes, and strong patterns. A teacher's job, then, is to transform general goals for the class into personalized plans, and to select and provide the best means of supporting the development of individuals" (p. 680).

For this project the writer studied a first grade child's emerging spelling ability as she was engaged in the writing process. Data were gathered through observations, anecdotal records, and the analysis of writing samples using a features test. The student made rapid progress in learning to spell correctly. As a student in a middle class school, her responses easily placed her in the upper half of her class.

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## Appendix A

## Beginners' Features List\*

1. late        Kathy was late to school again today.
2. wind        The wind was loud last night.
3. shed        The wind blew down our shed.
4. geese       The geese fly over Texas every fall.
5. jumped     The frog jumped into the river.
6. yell        We can yell all we want on the playground.
7. chirped    The bird chirped when she saw a worm.
8. once        Jim rode his bike into a creek once.
9. learned    I learned to count in school.
10. shove     Don't shove your neighbor when you line up.
11. trained    I trained my dog to lie down and roll over.
12. year       Next year you'll have a new teacher.
13. shock     Electricity can shock you if you aren't careful.
14. stained    The ice cream spilled and stained my shirt.
15. chick     The egg cracked open and a baby chick climbed out.
16. drive     Jim's sister is learning how to drive.

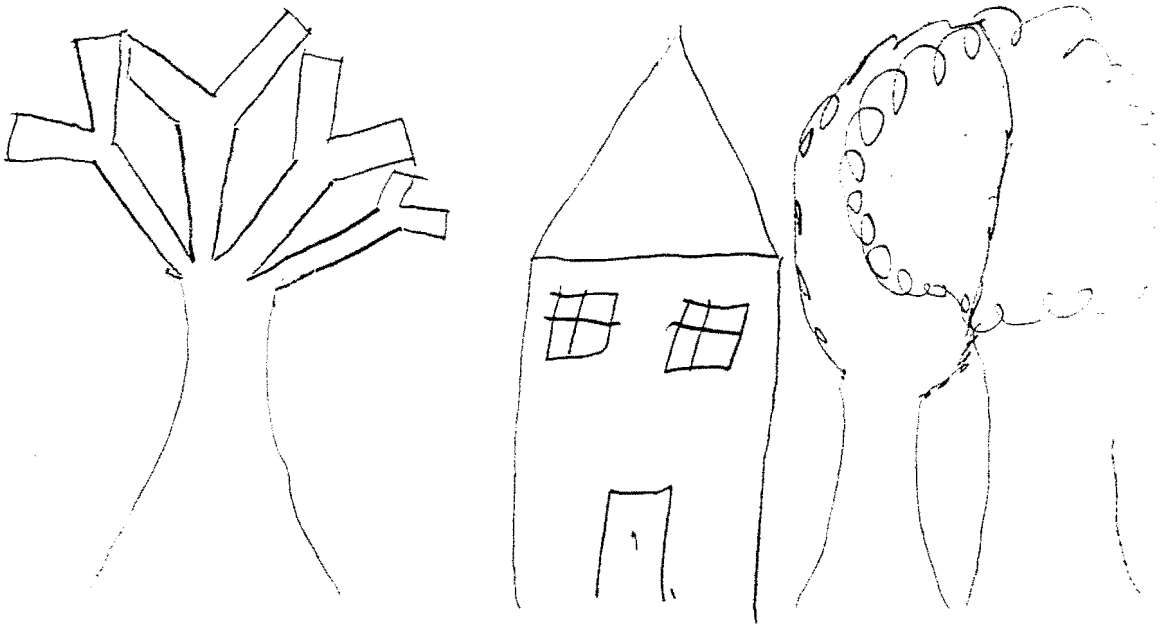
\*Gillet & Temple (1986, p. 299).

## Appendix B

Student's Writing Sample (February 7, 1989)

February 7

This is my House



## Appendix C

Student's Writing Sample (February 22, 1989)

We Re tak ing  
a Bout BRIDS  
I Like BRIDS Day  
But page BROt  
A BRid Book

## Appendix D

Student's Writing Sample (February 27, 1989)

This is my Nity Pitcher  
I like it alot



## Appendix E

## Analysis of a Beginner's Features List: Second Grader

1.	LAT	late	3
2.	WND	wind	3
3.	SEAD	shed	4
4.	GEES	geese	4
5.	GOMT	jumped	3
6.	UL	yell	3
7.	CUTP	chirped	3
8.	UOS	once	3
9.	LUD	learned	3
10.	SUF	shove	3
11.	TRAD	trained	3
12.	YER	year	3
13.	SOCK	shock	4
14.	SAD	stained	3
15.	CEK	chick	3
16.	DRIF	drive	3

Stage	No. of examples
Prephonemic	<u>0</u>
Early phonemic	<u>0</u>
Letter-name	<u>13</u>
Transitional	<u>3</u>
Correct	<u>0</u>

\*Gillet & Temple (1986, p. 299).



## Appendix F

Student's Features Test (February 20, 1989)

1. leat late 4 | 3. Sak shock 3  
 2. Wand wind 3 | 4. Sand stained 3  
 3. Shed shed 3 | 5. Chaitk chick 3  
 4. gees geese 3 | 6. dive drive 3  
 5. jaamed jumped 3  
 6. yale yell 3  
 7. Charbt chirped 3  
 8. One's once 3  
 9. land - learned 3  
 10. Sofva shove 3  
 11. Charred trained 3  
 12. Yars year 3

Name Elizabeth

sounds needed  
 sh "  
 tr  
 st  
 dr

## Appendix G-1

Student's Writing Sample (May 8, 1989)

There's a mouse about  
The house there  
Was a mouse in a house  
and he was looking for  
some cheese and he looked  
in the kitchen but  
before he looked a cat was

## Appendix G-2

Student's Writing Sample (May 8, 1989) p. 2

Thar so he almost  
Bapt the cat. The  
cat's one eye was  
opne But the mouse  
got Thou

## Appendix H-1

Student's Writing Sample (May 16, 1989)

Oles Thar was a  
hamster and its name  
was penit Buttre and he  
was nice he liked to  
paty and I han it  
got loos and a cat  
Sall The hamstster

## Appendix H-2

Student's Writing Sample (May 16, 1989) p. 2

and The hamstier did  
not sees the cat so  
the ran aftr the  
hamster

## Appendix I

Student's Features Test (May 22, 1989)

- |                      |                                    |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Laat late 4        | 12 Yeer year 4                     |
| 2 Witde wind 3       | 13 Shak shock 4                    |
| 3 Shad shed 3        | 14 Shited stored 3                 |
| 4 Gaees geese 4      | 15 Chirk chick 4                   |
| 5 Japed jumped 3-4   | 16 Dave drive 3                    |
| 6 yale yell 4        | 17 Thamp thump 4                   |
| 7 Chaprt chirped 4   | 8 Witsk whisk 3-4                  |
| 8 One's once 4       | Elizabeth                          |
| 9 Lared learned      | 3 or 4<br>got tr<br>sh<br>th<br>ch |
| 10 Sofv shoved 3     |                                    |
| 11 Troed trained 3-4 |                                    |