

Aspects of writing and implications for EAL

Are bilingual learners a homogenous group?

Rarely: numbers and membership of different groups in the UK and elsewhere vary enormously from place to place and time to time, although overall numbers identified as bilingual learners needing support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) seem to be continually increasing and are currently around 10% nationally. Calculating this is often a matter of degree and placement on a continuum of development. There are differences in age ranges; linguistic, ethnic, social, cultural, and religious background and community membership; educational and social experience, and the role and extent of previous learning and use of English; the purpose of migration, and so on. For those who have arrived more recently or those who are at earlier stages or lower levels of developing English, their initial development of writing may be influenced by their first language or other languages they speak and write: it is helpful for teachers to find out about these factors and know something about the specific linguistic background of pupils as far as possible. This initial development is likely to be more influenced by the pupil's educational history, previous social and cultural environment and the context in which they learned English. Most general statements about developing writing skills for these learners will need to be modified in relation to school and classroom context and the individual learners' needs.

Why is it important for bilingual learners to develop writing?

- They will have to do a lot of writing in school and later (this depends on the context; quite a lot of school writing consists of lists, brief answers, texts of only several sentences; some writing is copied).
- It is personally fulfilling, gives confidence and is part of a learner's identity (this depends on how well one develops writing).
- It is necessary: progress and ability in writing helps learners to perform and demonstrate expected knowledge in education (but not every piece of writing in school needs to be a test or measure; children do not grow by being measured and writing ability does not necessarily reflect every other important ability).
- It helps to learn subject content: as a learning tool, pupils know what they have learned when they see what they have written, the writing process *is* learning, not just a reflection of learning (but this depends on the nature of writing tasks given to pupils).
- It is expected in higher levels of education and by many employers (but writing is rarely in isolation from other language skills or separated from other skills and abilities).
- English is an international language and the ability to write in English is increasingly useful worldwide (but not necessarily for everyone).
- It is empowering to develop one's own voice, creativity and culture through writing (but this may seem unrealistic in schools when the real audiences for writing are limited).
- BUT writing is not the only important aspect of language, of learning, of the person, of life.

- THEN AGAIN there are many different kinds of writing, with different demands, and there is a range of writing tasks in schools; some are easier than others and some, like written exams, are crucial for access to many fields.

Why is writing difficult, compared to speaking?

- **Time to produce:** writing by hand or on a computer takes time to produce and can be laboured; generally writers have more time to plan, review, and revise their work before it is finalized than speakers in most situations.
- **Permanence:** oral language is transitory and has to be processed in real time, while written language is permanent and can generally be read and re-read (recordings of speech can obviously change this)
- **Distance:** writers and readers are generally separated in time and space, in contrast to face-to-face speech situations; this means that writers often have less shared immediate context and so they have to be more explicit in constituting the context in the writing itself (in classrooms, pupils generally write for a teacher who is present but they still have to make sure that much of their writing is fully explicit and that give the context, although the teacher probably knows most of the content already)
- **Orthography:** carries a limited amount of expressive information compared to the stress, intonation, pitch, volume, pausing, gestures, etc. of speech
- **Complexity:** written language tends to have longer and more complex clauses, while speech tends to have shorter clauses connected by coordinators like *and*, with more repetition of words or ideas.
- **Formality:** writing tends to be thought of as more formal than speech
- **Vocabulary:** written texts tend to have a wider variety of words, with more lower-frequency words, than most speech.
- **Assessment:** education systems tend to value and evaluate writing more highly than speech
- **Delayed feedback:** face-to-face speakers get informal feedback (facial expression, nods, queries) from listeners about how they are communicating, but feedback on writing is generally delayed

From the above, some things to observe, ask about and consider in classrooms:

Do bilingual learners....

- Have adequate time to plan, review, and revise their writing?
- Think of their writing as being somewhat permanent and likely to be evaluated
- Check and revise their writing?
- Have the opportunity to read their writing aloud and, if necessary, explain what they mean orally as one means towards improving a piece of writing before it is assessed?
- Have the opportunity to discuss ways of saying things orally compared with ways in which much the same thing would be expected to be written?
- Get informal immediate feedback on some of their writing so that they can revise and improve it?

Common problems for EAL learners in writing in English

Not all advanced bilingual learners are affected by all of these problems; some of these problems apply to many other learners. The following are intended to be brief notes to prompt further thinking.

- **Handwriting:** may be slow with poor letter formation or joining; direction and letter formation, joining of letters, word division, punctuation...can be different in other scripts; bilingual pupils' slower speeds and limited fluency can affect other aspects of writing (teachers may need to observe pupils actually writing to detect problems; learners may need for specific guidance and practice).
- **Spelling:** pupils may attempt to spell words as they sound; correspondences between letters and speech sounds (phonemes) can be different in different languages, different spelling systems, lack of familiarity with vocabulary (encourage pupils to notice words, analyse words using prefixes, suffixes, relate new spellings to associated words in groups; encourage pupils to use their knowledge of English sound-symbol relationships and to use systems for learning spelling, e.g. 'look-cover-write-check').
- **Vocabulary:** can be long-term issue which relates to social meanings, idioms, metaphors, subject-specific terminology (draw specific attention to key terms, ensure that learners hear and read clear examples; use glosses to explain, word banks for pupils to draw on in their writing, synonyms and antonyms, show how terms are often classified in concepts; relate words to pictures, charts, diagrams where possible; repeat words in related contexts, associate new terms with known vocabulary, get pupils to learn words in associated groups, networks and combinations or collocations, analyse words with prefixes and suffixes).
- **Grammar:** pupils probably use a limited range of grammar; their writing may have inconsistent verb tenses, incorrect plural nouns and wrong uses of articles and prepositions; development of a wider range of sentence constructions can be a long-term issue and some aspects of grammar are more common in writing – and in particular kinds of writing - than in speech (notice examples of grammar that cause difficulty, draw attention to complex grammar in reading and in examples of other pupils' writing; give explicit correction, refer examples to a language specialist).
- **Text structures:** can be a long-term issue closely linked to reading and understanding of concept and writers' intentions; bilingual learners often pay attention to words more than to whole texts and may need explicit guidance and support to understand how particular paragraphs or texts are structured (be explicit about the expected structures of texts, use diagrams and key visuals to give an overview of texts in reading and in preparing writing; draw attention to the logic of writing in reading and comparing texts and in sharing good examples of other pupils' written work, e.g. linking words, such as *so*, *however*, *in contrast*; chunks of text which are connected by logical relations, such as *condition (if)* and *consequence (then)* or a *generalization* followed by an *example*).
- **Limited familiarity with relevant oral expressions in English:** linked to general language development, familiarity with social, cultural and educational situations; on the other hand, some pupils may write in a manner which reflect their oral speech style; (prepare writing tasks with explicit attention to relevant

background knowledge; some writing task might be group work with designated roles for bilingual learners; develop an approach that includes giving opportunities to hear oral models and to engage in oral rehearsals or presentations before actually writing)

- **Limited reading:** many writing tasks would be eased for bilingual pupils if they read more examples of appropriate writing within subject areas, but reading is often slow, partial, and limited by knowledge of vocabulary and frequent reference to dictionaries (provide some simplified texts which have some repetition and easier material such as well illustrated non-fiction – without patronizing; give glossaries of frequently used key terms; simplify some worksheets and differentiate reading material)
- **Lack of time:** a complex problem in demanding situations when teachers also lack time, but bilingual learners often need more time to read, understand, prepare for writing, writing and revising work, otherwise tasks are unfinished (consider giving fewer tasks but giving more time; prepare tasks with group work and oral previews or rehearsals of likely language)
- **Knowing the purpose and focus of writing tasks:** bilingual pupils may not follow parts of explanations and may be unfamiliar with some types of tasks (explain clearly; give examples and models, including actually writing out examples with bilingual pupils; use peer discussion as preparation for tasks, give explicit feedback later on how and how well the task was completed and how it might be improved)
- **Social and cultural expectations:** can be a deeper issue than it seems, because cultural communities and school systems around the world use, emphasise and value writing in different ways; pupils need to know teachers' expectations in writing tasks, being familiar with different types of writing for different purposes (reflect on the nature, purpose and focus of writing tasks and try to be explicit about what is expected; give models and discuss them; do some group writing or class writing to show the text structure and what is expected in a particular example)
- **Transferring knowledge and skills** from one curriculum area to another (encourage pupils to make connections; try to be familiar with the teaching approaches and examples in related subject areas; share practice with colleagues).
- **Combinations of the above:** perhaps with overlays of feeling frustration, isolation, culture shock, lack of recognition for abilities or achievements, limited exposure to English outside school,

Socio-cultural aspects of developing writing

Bilingual learners have generally had exposure to learning or schooling in other cultural contexts or in a wide variety of countries around the world. Often such experience continues in parallel with schooling in English in community schools, through social and religious organizations or at home. This may lead to particular expectations about teaching and learning or about reading and writing. It is worth observing pupils, talking to them and their parents or to those familiar with their social and cultural background to find out if and how influences of cultures of learning may affect the development of writing.

For example, about learning:

- Some pupils expect the teacher to explain everything, then they will read a book; through attentive listening and reading, they will expect to reproduce relevant parts of what the teacher or textbook has informed them. They may expect to answer questions but not to ask them in class because this interrupts the lesson, so they may ask after the class.
- Some pupils may expect to prepare for classwork by reading texts in advance; they may expect to be taught all relevant vocabulary early in a lesson and before they read a text. They may feel that memorizing texts is a good way to learn; they are used to memorizing and perhaps waiting to be asked to do this.

For example, about writing:

- Some pupils may expect to write what they have been told or what they have read, but could be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the idea of contributing their own ideas, opinions or arguments, and hence they may be unwilling to question, evaluate arguments or formulate a critique against authoritative textbook information or what the teacher has said. In these circumstances, being ‘critical’, ‘original’, ‘imaginative’, may be difficult until pupils feel they have mastered enough knowledge.
- In writing, different aspects of texts and text structure are sometimes evaluated in different ways, leaving some EAL learners with clear preferences or feelings about ways of writing. Cultural aspects of writing which can vary greatly in writing across and between cultures include:
 - how much emphasis is placed on oral communication compared to writing, in general in school and society, and particularly for assessment;
 - the role of preparation, rehearsal and memory in writing;
 - how to introduce a topic and how much background information to present;
 - how explicit or direct one needs to be in presenting an argument or how much it is appropriate to hint or indicate the general direction of logic;
 - how much repetition, use of poetic, metaphoric and persuasive language and how much exaggeration is necessary to present a convincing text to prove one’s point;
 - the moral qualities expected in writing;
 - expectations of how teachers will correct, give guidance and feedback on writing.

When bilingual pupils have written some school work, how do we think about their writing as texts?

- As a means of assessment?
- As a record of achievement?
- As homework to practise, complete or consolidate class work?
- As a one-off task with a particular purpose?
- As part of a sequence of tasks so that this text relates to many others?
- As a way of learning?
- As something relatively closed, fixed and stable or something open, revisable, expandable?

How do bilingual pupils think about the pieces of writing they produce in school?

Elements in recent ways of thinking about developing writing

