Early Experiences of Writing
Chandrika Mathur

What is involved in the act of writing in a new language? What difficulties does it pose for a new language learner?

Writing requires effort: mechanical, mental and emotional. Just as reading is not merely ‘decoding’ symbols into sounds, writing is not just the act of ‘encoding’ sounds into symbols. It is a multi-layered process, in which one of the elements is the process of ‘listening to’ or ‘sounding out’ words, noting which sounds it is made up of, and then putting on paper a string of connected letter shapes. This mechanical act is itself quite complex for the new learner of a language, who is just beginning to distinguish the different sounds and the associated script. In addition, writing involves recording, expressing or communicating something meaningful in a new language. The learner must therefore be able to process the meaning of what he is writing; or he should be able to find the words in his limited vocabulary for what he has to express.

All this makes writing a difficult and demanding task for the new learner. Its development needs to be supported in a variety of ways.

How are children’s drawings and writing related to each other?

Drawing and writing are both different forms in which children express themselves and communicate what is in their minds on paper. Children often begin by creating their ideas in the form of drawings, in which various icons and symbols stand for particular realities that they want to express (houses, people, trees – all have specific symbolic shapes). Writing is a further stage of expression, where the marks on paper are symbols that stand for sounds, which in turn stand for the ideas in their mind. Often drawing and writing go hand in hand when children express themselves on paper.

Moreover, when children first begin learning a new script, the shapes, forms and proportions of the letters are copied and practiced just as they would copy and practice specific drawings. The letter shapes are each like little drawings, which acquire symbolic meanings through their association with the sounds of the language.

How do reading and writing skills complement each other?

Often early writing involves reproducing words from a given (simple) text or from what is written on the blackboard. Children exercise their ability to read even as they write. Correct writing is aided if they first ‘sound out’ what is to be written and then transfer it to paper. Moreover, the teacher may create several kinds of writing exercises where children need to write in a blank space, which can be correctly filled in only by reading and comprehending the text around the ‘blank’.

These are only two examples of the fact that development of reading and writing skills go hand in hand.
What are some entry points and stages through which children learn to write the Devanagari script?

Writing practice most often starts with tracing over the letter shapes, and then trying to write each letter independently. It is important to learn, from the beginning, an effective sequence for ‘drawing’ the curves, lines and connectors for each letter. Moreover correct proportions – top to bottom as well as left to right – are important for a legible handwriting. Children then learn to place all letters of a word along a common line. They learn to add *matras* to consonants and then to combine a sequence of consonants and *matras* in order to write words. The use of ‘half-letters’ and special symbols (*chandra bindu* etc) is also introduced. All this should go hand in hand with the development of reading skills.

What kinds of writing can one expect from a new learner once his mechanical ability has developed?

Label simple drawings (as a means of consolidating knowledge of nouns and spelling)

Fill in the blanks with letters/*matras* (as in evaluation exercises).

Fill in the blank with an appropriate word in a sentence (in very simple, familiar situations). A choice of words may be given.

Copy and write a whole sentence, after selecting an appropriate word for a blank space.

Copy and write a very small text as a means of developing accuracy/control and speed in writing (but always a meaningful phrase, sentence or poem).

Draw a picture and label various features.

What other kinds of writing can one encourage in a young child in the next stage?

Child draws a picture and writes a sentence (or two) about it…teacher can help with correct expression of basic sentence patterns. Child can later read it back to himself

A short story to be read and then a comprehension sheet to be completed (that has a variety of question types from ‘one phrase’ answers to multiple-choice answers that can be copied out)

A part of a story is given with Qs and Ans to check comprehension and articulation in a new language (initially, phrases may be accepted as answers)

Writing very short dialogues based on poems or any short story that children have enjoyed (could then be enacted)

Writing about a simple situation: a) from their own lives b) from their imagination

Making up and writing riddles or jokes or cartoon strips.

What could motivate children to write in the new language?

Children will be motivated to write, if they: a) find that writing serves a useful purpose b) the teacher supports and encourages their own expression in the new language.
The former may include:
- Writing names and surnames on notebooks and other personal items
- Making labels for objects in the class
- Copying brief functional messages that grow out of the first or second grader’s activities and needs: notices, invitations, letters to parents about celebrations, requirements, shared experiences
- Lists of materials needed for parties, projects, or group responsibilities

The second kind of writing might include:
- Recording any event of significance to the children: visiting caterpillar, seeing the hatching of eggs, the behaviour of magnets, recipe for lemonade that they have made (teacher can aid by writing some new words on the board)
- Record of interests such as favorite television programs
- Attempts at writing short stories or incidents.
- Illustrations that lead to writing

**How can the teacher psychologically support the development of writing in a young child?**

Children’s efforts at writing need to be given a place for display and recognition. Display boards have a very key role in a pre-school and primary school classroom.

Spelling and correction of spelling can be dealt with in a light manner (where an inventive spelling impedes comprehension of the word, it is well worth correcting, but otherwise criticism or over-correction of early writing may lead to the children not wishing to write at all).

It is good if expressive writing in children is preceded by free drawing for often children’s drawings communicate much more than what they can express as yet by writing.

In a new language classroom, the child may not know the word for what he has drawn. It is not at all unhealthy for the teacher to label his drawing in Hindi himself. Usually, the child likes to ‘read’ back such text. The action of an adult writing for the child in no way leads to the child becoming ‘lazy’ about writing. Quite to the contrary! It makes him bond closer with the teacher and adds a special, personal touch to his work.

**Note: Our experience has shown that regular dictations are very difficult and demotivating for a new learner; whereas ‘picture dictations’ (illustrating what the teacher speaks or reads out) can be enjoyable and are quite popular.**