

Note de recherche / Research Note

The Effect of Topic Choice on Narrative Writing, Grades 1–6

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Throughout our teaching careers we have suspected that the writing task assigned may affect the nature and quality of the writing produced. Writing tasks may vary from completion of a story from a “story starter,” to a journal entry, or work on a topic of one’s own choice. The effect of topic choice on children’s written composition has been studied by such researchers as Carlman (1986), Graves (1973), King (1981), King and Rentel (1979), and Prater and Padia (1983). Prater’s and Padia’s study of fourth-grade writers supported the strategic importance of children’s topic choice, of their purpose and of their sense of audience, and clearly illustrated that these factors affect writers’ “word choice, syntax and organization” (p. 127).

Research generally has stressed the importance to the development of writing ability of topic choice, a sense of purpose, and a varied audience. However, we could not locate a study that answered the question: What type of writing task encourages children to produce their best written work, and challenges and expands their current abilities? Little or no evidence suggests that teacher or pupil control of topic choice improves quality of written texts. In addition, “choice” may mean anything from “anything the writer wishes to write about,” to the choice of a topic from three or more provided by the teacher.

THE STUDY

The subjects of our study are eleven children, eight boys and three girls, in one classroom in a large public school system. This entire longitudinal study of writing at the elementary-school level will follow the children from grade one to grade six. We shall investigate children’s first drafts of two texts, one on a topic of the child’s choice, and one on a topic chosen by the classroom teacher. We have so far examined only texts from students in grades one to

three. The texts were collected in May each year, as the children passed from grades one to three. They were analysed for syntax, according to T-unit and embedding ratio; for cohesion, considering personal pronouns, collocation and reiteration; and for story structure, using exposition, complication and resolution as our criteria (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). The data on syntax and cohesion were analysed for variance using a two-by-three repeated measures design. The three-level factor was grade, the two-level factor was task, and analysis was in both directions. With such a small sample (11 children) any significant difference would be highly significant. Audio-taped interviews with the children and teachers were also analysed to reveal the teachers' and children's perceptions of the writing tasks. The same data will be collected and analysed as the children progress through grades 4–6.

THE FINDINGS FOR GRADES 1–3

Most pieces of writing by students in grades 1 and 2 could be classified as stories, and by grade 3 all texts met the "story" criteria. The topic-directed stories usually followed scenarios discussed in class. In the first-grade directed samples on the topic of volcanos, almost all texts were personal, descriptions of real or imaginary events involving the child, friends and family. This personalism may have assisted the children to write texts that were stories. For the non-directed texts the children received no guidance whatsoever from their teacher, and had to rely on their own resources. Many of these texts were not stories but personal statements such as, "I go to the lake. I ride my bike."

In the second-grade samples, non-directed stories were quite different and more imaginative than topic-directed texts (Juliebö & Edwards, 1987). Titles included, "One night I shrank," "The grumpy old frog," "The very fierce dragon," and "The magic baseball." These putatively interesting titles lure the reader into the texts. We found they contained many necessary elements of the fairytale and folktale genre (Applebee, 1978; Propp, 1968; Rentel & King, 1983). The children used their literacy experiences (i.e., prior knowledge of fairytales) to create original stories rather than simply to re-tell stories they had previously experienced. The children were thus contributing to their culture rather than merely reproducing it (Britton, 1985). In the directed texts, however, the children largely listed actions and events woven around the storyteller. This "flat recital of lists of events" characterizes of much writing of children at this age (Hadley, 1983). In grade 3, however, story structure differed very little between the non-directed and the directed texts; all could be classified as stories.

Statistical analysis of our data showed no significant difference in embedding ratios, nor in average length of T-unit, between directed and non-directed texts, as the children progressed through the grades.

In respect of cohesion, that is, the linking of elements of a discourse through a range of possible ties including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion, we discovered a significant difference between non-directed and directed texts. Non-directed stories contained a significantly greater proportion of reiterative ties, the simple repetition of vocabulary; directed writing contained a significantly higher proportion of collocative ties, the use of related words. Our data indicate that when children write a story on their own choice of topic, using their own vocabulary and their own schema, the expression of that schema is more limited than when they write on a topic chosen by the teacher. The reason for this is not clear. It could be that a directed topic is usually associated with some teaching or some discussion. The children thus would have greater exposure to the topic's vocabulary and ideas, and perhaps create a more substantial schema. The child appears to take on the vocabulary and schema of the learning topic, as shown in collocation rather than reiteration as a means of creating cohesion in the text. Or, the non-directed writing task may be restrictive in not allowing children time to research and to develop background on their topic. We continue to study these and other questions.

REFLECTIONS

Researchers have suggested young writers benefit from choosing their own topics. We therefore expected to find a higher quality of language and story structure in non-directed than in directed stories. We were surprised to find that this is not so. Our interviews with children overwhelmingly showed that they prefer to choose their writing topic. It gives them greater "ownership," satisfaction, pride, and motivation. But when children write on their own topics they do not necessarily produce better texts.

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