



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

**EFFECTIVE TEACHING  
AND LEARNING**

# Writing

---

Sue Grief, Bill Meyer and Amy Burgess



Published by the National Research and Development Centre  
for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

This document is also available in pdf and text-only format from  
the NRDC's website, [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)

For information on alternative formats, please contact:

Emily Brewer  
Marketing and Publications Officer  
Institute of Education  
University of London  
Tel: 020 7911 5501  
Email: [e.brewer@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:e.brewer@ioe.ac.uk)

We welcome feedback on the content and accessibility  
of this publication. This should be sent to:

**Publications**

**NRDC**

**Institute of Education**

**20 Bedford Way**

**London WC1H 0AL**

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7612 6476  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7612 6671  
email: [publications@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:publications@nrdc.org.uk)

ISBN 1-905188-29-3

© Crown Copyright 2007

Extracts from this publication may be used or reproduced for  
non-commercial, research, teaching or training purposes on  
condition that the source is acknowledged.

NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education,  
University of London (see back cover for a list of members) and is  
part of the Bedford Group for Lifecourse and Statistical Studies at  
the IoE. [www.ioe.ac.uk/bedfordgroup](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/bedfordgroup)

Design: [info@chapmandesign.net](mailto:info@chapmandesign.net)  
Photography: iStock.com  
Print: Redlin

EFFECTIVE TEACHING  
AND LEARNING

# Writing

**RESEARCH TEAM**

Sue Grief, Bill Meyer and Amy Burgess

**SERIES EDITOR**

John Vorhaus

**CONTENTS**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
PREFACE	6
<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 The Effective Practice Studies	7
1.2 The writing study	7
1.3 Findings	8
1.4 Recommendations	10
1.5 Limitations to this research	12
<b>2. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 A focus on writing	13
2.2 The Effective Practice Studies	13
2.3 The policy background	14
2.4 The aims of the study	14
2.5 Phase 1	14
2.6 The scope of the study	15
2.7 Method	16
2.8 The structure of the report	18
<b>3. LOCAL CHARACTERISTICS: THE PROVIDERS AND SETTINGS</b>	<b>19</b>
3.1 Introduction	19
3.2 The providers	19
3.3 The classes	19
<b>4. THE LEARNERS AND THEIR EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>24</b>
4.1 Introduction	24
4.2 The learner sample: descriptive statistics	24
4.3 The learners' perspective	26
4.4 Summary	29
<b>5. LEARNERS' PROGRESS</b>	<b>31</b>
5.1 Introduction	31
5.2 The learners' progress in writing as measured by the assessments	31
5.3 Assessment results and attendance	32
5.4 Assessment results and learner characteristics	32
5.5 Confidence in writing and learner characteristics	35

5.6	Confidence in writing and uses of writing outside the class	36
5.7	Correlations between changes in assessment scores and changes in confidence and uses of writing	37
5.8	Summary	37
<b>6.</b>	<b>TEACHERS' PRACTICE</b>	<b>39</b>
6.1	Introduction	39
6.2	Data derived from coding the observation logs	39
6.3	The seven characteristics of teaching writing, identified in Phase 1	40
6.4	Writing as a process	41
6.5	Learners working in collaborative groups	42
6.6	Collaboration between teacher and learners	43
6.7	Authenticity	43
6.8	Critical thinking about writing	44
6.9	Contextualisation	45
6.10	Varied practice	46
6.11	The <i>Skills for Life</i> Strategy	46
6.12	Summary	47
<b>7.</b>	<b>CORRELATIONS BETWEEN LEARNER OUTCOMES AND TEACHERS' PRACTICE</b>	<b>49</b>
7.1	Introduction	49
7.2	The correlations	49
7.3	Correlations between the general teaching strategies, the seven features of practice in teaching writing, and assessment measures	51
7.4	Correlations between the general teaching strategies, the seven features of teaching writing, and confidence measures	53
7.5	Correlations between teaching strategies and number of uses of writing outside the class	54
7.6	Correlations between combined general teaching strategies, combined characteristics of teaching writing, and the outcome measures	54
7.7	Correlations between data derived from timed observation logs and the three outcome measures	55
7.8	Teachers' qualifications and experience	55
7.9	The impact of the level of the class on assessment scores and confidence	55
7.10	Summary	56
<b>8.</b>	<b>FURTHER ANALYSIS</b>	<b>58</b>
8.1	Introduction	58
8.2	Comparing those classes with the highest increases in average assessment scores with classes in which the average assessment score decreased	58
8.3	Examples from practice	62
8.4	Summary	67
<b>9.</b>	<b>FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>68</b>
9.1	Findings	68
9.2	Recommendations	70
	REFERENCES	72
	APPENDIX 1	76

## Acknowledgements

---

The authors would like to thank the following for their contributions to the project.

The managers and teachers in the organisations we worked with who made us welcome, shared their ideas and allowed us to observe them in their classrooms.

All the learners who took part in the study, without whose help the study could not have happened.

The practitioner-researchers who undertook the fieldwork and contributed to the analysis of the data: Netta Azgad, Alison Bacon, Amy Burgess, Jan Chatterton, Heather Clary, Monica Collingham, Elaine Fisher, Nancy Gidley, Ann Janssen, Susanna Lee, Dianne Robinson, Trudy Sellars and Caroline Warburton.

Members of the extended project team who provided support and advice throughout the study: Dr Ursula Howard, Professor Roz Ivanič, Professor Greg Brooks and Jane Mace.

The script markers: Linda Cook, Amanda French, Karen Heath, Carol McGivern, Helen Ruddock, Melanie Sheath and Gillian Thompson.

Sally Faraday, manager of the Personalised Learning Research Centre, Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA).

David Collins, research assistant and administrator for the project.

Katerina Ananiadou formerly at NRDC, and Silvia Munoz and Jovan Luzajic of the LSDA Research Support Unit for their help with the statistical analysis.

Ian Graham and Pedro Gabriel at LSDA for their assistance in building the project database.

### Peer Review

This report was peer reviewed. The critical reviewers were:

Gay Loble, Basic Skills Agency

Jo Wellings, Milton Keynes Adult Continuing Education

Jane Mace, Consultant and Researcher

## Preface

---

The *Skills for Life* Strategy in England has led to unprecedented investment in adult literacy, language and numeracy (LLN), major reforms of teacher education and training, and the introduction of national standards, core curricula and assessment to inform teaching and learning. We have a unique opportunity to make a step change in improving levels of adult skills. But until recently too little was known about effective teaching and learning practices, and reports from Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate repeatedly drew attention to the quality of teaching, and the need for standards to improve.

It has been a strategic priority at the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) to investigate teaching and learning practices in all the subject areas and settings in Skills for Life: to report on the most promising and effective practices, and to provide teachers and trainers, along with policy-makers and researchers, with an unparalleled evidence base on which to build on the progress already made.

Our findings and recommendations are reported here, and in the four companion reports covering reading, numeracy, ESOL and ICT. The five studies, which have been co-ordinated by NRDC Associate Director John Vorhaus, provide material for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and for informing developments in initial teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD). We are also preparing a range of practitioner guides and development materials, as a major new resource for teachers and teacher educators. They will explore and develop the examples of good and promising practice documented in these pages.

Writing is an increasingly important skill in the 21st century and one on which adult literacy learners place great value. The growing importance of writing in the workplace, and as a social asset, has been underlined in the recent CBI report 'Working on the Three Rs (2006)' and in the work of the eminent American academic, Deborah Brandt, in her study of literacy learning and economic change (Brandt, 2001; 2006). However, very little primary research in the UK to date has looked specifically at writing for adult literacy learners. This study, which investigates the teaching and learning of writing (and which focused largely, but not exclusively, on free writing), is therefore both timely and necessary to develop and improve writing skills and practices.

**Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC**

# 1 Executive summary

---

## 1.1 The Effective Practice Studies

The five NRDC Effective Practice Studies explore teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT, and they set out to answer two questions:

1. How can teaching and learning literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT be improved?
2. Which factors contribute to successful learning?

Even before NRDC was set up it was apparent from reviews of the field (Brooks et al., 2001; Kruidenier, 2002) that there was little reliable research-based evidence to answer these questions. Various NRDC reviews showed that progress in amassing such evidence, though welcome where it was occurring, was slow (Coben et al., 2003; Barton and Pitt, 2003; Torgerson et al., 2003, 2004, 2005). Four preliminary studies on reading, writing, ESOL and ICT, were undertaken between 2002 and 2004 (Besser et al., 2004; Kelly et al., 2004; Roberts et al., 2004; Mellar et al., 2004). However, we recognised the urgent need to build on these in order greatly to increase the research base for the practice of teaching these subjects.

The inspiration for the design of the five projects was a study in the US of the teaching of literacy and English language to adult learners for whom English is an additional language (Condelli et al., 2003). This study was the first of its kind, and the lead author, Larry Condelli of the American Institutes for Research, has acted as an expert adviser on all five NRDC projects.

The research began in July 2003 and was completed in March 2006. It set out to recruit and gather information on 500 learners in each study, assess their attainment and attitudes at two points during the year in which they were participating in the study, interview both learners and teachers, observe the strategies the teachers used, and correlate those strategies with changes in the learners' attainment and attitudes.

The ICT study differed from the others in that its first phase was developmental, its sample size was smaller, and it had a shorter timescale, completing in March 2005.

## 1.2 The writing study

This study analyses the relationship between classroom practice in the teaching of writing and:

- changes in learners' competence in free writing
- changes in learners' confidence in writing and their uses of writing in their everyday lives.

We explore effective strategies for the teaching and learning of writing, and identify the most promising practices for further development and research.

We recruited 341 learners across 49 classes in 25 organisations and obtained complete data for 199 learners across 40 classes in 20 organisations. Each learner provided a wide range of personal information and undertook a writing assessment at the course's beginning and end, each class was observed three times and researchers completed a detailed, timed log of activity in the classroom. The study also drew on qualitative data to support and complement the statistical data.

Progress in learners' competence in writing was measured using an assessment created by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) for the NRDC for use in research studies. It requires learners to undertake three free writing tasks in response to a simulated magazine. It differs from the assessments used for the national qualifications in literacy. At Level 1 and Level 2 of the National Tests in literacy learners are not required to produce free writing and multiple choice questions are used to assess grammar, spelling and punctuation.

### 1.3 Findings

#### Progress

Learners made a small but significant improvement in their writing.

Demonstrable progress in writing – particularly free writing (which we assessed in this study) – cannot be achieved quickly. Our research lends support to the estimate, based on a study undertaken in the US (Comings, 2006), that learners need in the region of 150–200 hours to progress by one level of the National Standards.

Younger learners and learners in employment and full-time education made the most progress.

We found small increases in confidence in writing and uses of writing outside class.

Learners' confidence in writing tends to be higher at home, as compared to writing in the classroom or a public place, and confidence tends to increase most in this domain as a consequence of attending a course. Conversely confidence to write is lowest in a public place or at work and increases least in this domain.

Learners who were in employment were more confident in writing than those in other categories; people who were retired or not working due to sickness or disability gained most in confidence.

Learners who said they were dyslexic had the least confidence in writing and generally appeared to gain little in confidence from attending their courses. Learners whose attendance was not voluntary also recorded a decrease in confidence. (We were not able to look specifically at effective strategies for teaching learners with dyslexia.)

#### Teachers' practice

Our evidence suggests that the following are features of effective teaching of writing:

- learners spend time on the composition of texts of different kinds
- meaningful contexts are provided for writing activities



- time is given for discussion about writing and the writing task
- individual feedback and support is provided as learners engage in composition.

Teachers and learners tend to perceive learning to write as a classroom-focused activity that links only indirectly to uses of writing outside the class. Greater emphasis is placed on learners' diagnosed needs in relation to context-free 'skills' as set out in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, and assessed by national qualifications, than on learners' purposes and roles in relation to writing in their everyday lives.

Making links between what happens in the classroom and life outside the classroom, including the use of real materials, can enable learners to become more confident about the writing they undertake at home. However few teachers make this link strongly; use of real materials is limited and few teachers ask learners to engage in authentic writing tasks that have a purpose and audience beyond the classroom.

#### Teaching and learning relationships

Two particularly significant relationships between teaching and learning suggest that:

- A flexible approach to teaching and responsiveness to learners' concerns as they arise, as well as a willingness to 'go with the teachable moment', has a positive impact on learners' progress in writing.
- Practice that makes a strong link with the real world beyond the class may help learners to feel more confident, particularly in the everyday writing tasks they undertake at home.

We found negative correlations between:

- use of authentic materials and tasks and changes in learners' assessment scores
- asking learners to work in collaborative groups and learners' self-reported confidence in writing in a public place or at work.

Both findings are of considerable interest: the first runs counter to findings of earlier research and appears to contradict the findings above. We surmise that authentic practice has a greater impact on confidence than on competence in writing and we know that improved confidence tends to precede improved competence, often by a considerable period of time. But how confidence and competence in writing further affect one another remains an important question for development and research.. The second should be seen against evidence from the learners themselves – that they liked to work collaboratively. This is material for further development and research.

#### The learners

Many learners drew a sharp distinction between writing at home or at work, and writing learned in the literacy classroom. They tended to be dismissive towards everyday uses of writing, contrasting this with the 'proper writing' they were keen to understand better and improve in.

Learners placed considerable importance on the technical skills of writing, handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation and tended to measure their progress in writing in terms of these.

Learners also valued writing as 'meaning making' and, in particular, writing that had personal resonance. In reporting their ambitions and uses of writing they demonstrated many reasons to write that include, but go well beyond, the 'functional' writing often associated with adult literacy.

#### Teachers' qualifications and experience

Of the 37 teachers for whom we had qualifications information, 34 held a teaching qualification or were currently working towards one. In addition 29 teachers said that they had a qualification of some kind in teaching literacy.

The teachers' experience of teaching literacy ranged from less than one year to 19 years, with less than half having taught literacy for less than five years. No statistical correlations were found between teachers' qualifications and experience on the one hand, and measures of learners' progress on the other, but when we examined the nine classes that made the greatest progress and compared these with the nine classes that made the least progress, we noted that the teachers in the top nine classes were all trained, and most had substantial experience, while some of those in the bottom group of classes were not trained and overall the teachers had less experience.

#### The core curriculum

A majority of teachers who commented found the core curriculum useful, helping them to identify the individual elements of writing and to plan for individual needs. Several found it valuable to identify what learners should be expected to do at different levels, but others found mismatches between the content of the different levels and the needs of their learners.

Teachers' approaches to the curriculum differed. Some saw it as a point of reference but stressed that their learners' needs and interests were their starting point when planning courses and sessions. For others it was the starting point and some found it constraining.

### 1.4 Recommendations

#### Development work and quality improvement

Our findings endorse the recommendation in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum: 'The writing tasks that learners are asked to undertake need to be varied and meaningful, however basic, with an emphasis on communication. Learners need to practise writing at text level even when their grip on individual words is shaky.'

By looking separately at reading and writing, the Effective Practice Studies draw attention to how far teachers of adult literacy employ distinct strategies for the development of these two elements of literacy. This study suggests that, where improved writing is a significant goal, teaching should include planned and structured opportunities for the learner to achieve this.

The findings suggest that teachers need to:

1. place the focus first and foremost on writing as communication
2. encourage learners to compose their own texts and support learners to do this through the careful setting up of writing tasks and use of talk

3. approach the technical aspects of writing: spelling, grammatical correctness and punctuation, within the contexts of meaningful writing tasks rather than through decontextualised exercises
4. be flexible and responsive to learners' needs, supporting learners as they draft, revise and proofread their work
5. make links between the writing undertaken in the class and the learners' lives beyond the classroom.

These recommendations are as relevant to Entry level learners as to learners at Levels 1 and 2.

### Policy

Qualifications at all levels that include free writing at text level would encourage teachers to provide learners with opportunities to practise composition.

In relation to qualification outcomes, providers' expectations should be based on a realistic assessment of the time adult learners need to make demonstrable progress in writing. Attention should be given to the amount of time scheduled for the teaching and learning of writing.

Teachers and managers need to be aware of the importance of providing learners with opportunities to engage in a range of meaningful writing tasks that are relevant to their lives and with an emphasis on communication, in line with the advice in the Core Curriculum for Adult Literacy.

There is an emphasis on referencing work to the core curriculum, use of diagnostic assessment tools and individual learning plans (ILPs), and pressure to enable learners to achieve qualifications within the duration of a course. Together these tend to encourage teachers to address writing in ways that run counter to the guidance in the core curriculum itself, and the importance placed on the social context for literacy in the subject specifications for teachers.

### Research

Research should be undertaken that looks at ways in which learners use classroom learning about writing in other aspects of their lives, and at the teaching approaches most likely to increase both confidence and competence in writing outside the class.

The use of the NFER assessment for measuring progress in writing should be analysed carefully to ascertain whether it offers equal opportunities for learners at all levels to demonstrate learning gain. The guidance for the administration of the assessment tasks should also be reviewed to ensure that the assessment provides maximum opportunity to capture learners' progress. Alternative methods which might be used alongside this instrument should also be explored.

### 1.5 Limitations to this research

We acknowledge the following limitations to our research:

- The sample was smaller than is ideal for analysis of this type; the number of classes for which usable data was obtained and the number of learners within these classes was smaller than planned.
- Most classes in the study were 'literacy' classes and therefore included reading, speaking and listening, as well as writing. The time between assessments spent solely on writing was not separated out, although time spent on the different areas was recorded for the three observed classes.
- It was not possible to record learners' individual goals and targets.
- The tasks we assessed and those assessed in the National Tests are not the same. Learners were therefore less prepared than they might have been for completing the tasks asked of them in this study.

## 2. Introduction

---

### 2.1 A focus on writing

Writing is an increasingly important skill in the 21st century and one on which adult literacy learners place great value. However, very little primary research in the UK to date has looked specifically at writing for adult literacy learners. The *Effective Practice* programme undertaken by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) provided a welcome opportunity to make writing, as opposed to 'literacy', the central focus of a large scale study.

### 2.2 The Effective Practice Studies

The five NRDC Effective Practice Studies explore teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT, and they set out to answer two questions:

1. How can teaching and learning literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT be improved?
2. What factors contribute to successful learning?

Even before NRDC was set up it was apparent from reviews of the field (Brooks et al., 2001; Kruidenier, 2002) that there was little reliable research-based evidence to answer these questions. Various NRDC reviews showed that progress in amassing such evidence, though welcome where it was occurring, was slow (Coben et al., 2003; Barton and Pitt, 2003; Torgerson et al., 2003, 2004, 2005). Four preliminary studies on reading, writing, ESOL and ICT, were undertaken between 2002 and 2004 (Besser et al., 2004; Kelly et al., 2004; Roberts et al., 2004; Mellar et al., 2004). However, we recognised the urgent need to build on these in order greatly to increase the research base for the practice of teaching these subjects.

The inspiration for the design of the five projects was a study in the US of the teaching of literacy and English language to adult learners for whom English is an additional language (Condelli et al., 2003). This study was the first of its kind, and the lead author, Larry Condelli of the American Institutes for Research, has acted as an expert adviser on all five NRDC projects.

Our research began in July 2003 and was completed in March 2006. We set out to recruit and gather information on 500 learners in each study, assess their attainment and attitudes at two points during the year in which they were participating in the study, interview both learners and teachers, observe the strategies the teachers used, and correlate those strategies with changes in the learners' attainment and attitudes.

The ICT study differed from the others in that its first phase was developmental, its sample size was smaller, and it had a shorter timescale, completing in March 2005.

### 2.3 The policy background

This project was undertaken in the context of the Government's *Skills for Life* Strategy for England, put in place in response to *A New Start*, published in 1999, which was the report of a committee led by Sir Claus Moser. This strategy aims to raise the quality of provision for adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy and has set challenging targets for the number of adult learners to achieve national qualifications in literacy and numeracy by 2007.

As part of a new 'learning infrastructure' for *Skills for Life*, the DfES has introduced National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (QCA, 2000) and new core curricula for these subjects (DfES, 2001). The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum sets out the skills, knowledge and understanding that learners should achieve at Entry 1, 2 and 3 and at Levels 1 and 2. For literacy these are divided into word, sentence and text level, and include guidance and sample activities. Based on these, there are new qualifications at Entry level and Levels 1 and 2, and new diagnostic assessment materials. New qualifications have also been introduced for teachers of adult literacy and numeracy.

The National Test for Literacy at Level 1 and 2 is designed to be taken online and is marked electronically. It therefore relies on multiple choice questions and does not require learners to undertake any free writing. This contrasts with qualifications at Entry level which assess free writing including planning, drafting and proofreading. The national funding body, The Learning and Skills Council (LSC), emphasises the achievement of national qualifications that contribute to the national targets, which places pressure on providing organisations to ensure that learners are working towards a qualification at the appropriate level wherever possible.

### 2.4 The aims of the study

The writing study set out to identify effective approaches to teaching and learning writing within adult literacy programmes. The aims of the study were:

1. To analyse the relationship between naturally occurring classroom practice in the teaching of writing and:
  - changes in learners' competence in free writing
  - changes in learners' confidence in writing and their uses of writing in their everyday lives.
2. To further analyse and describe reasons for the effectiveness of strategies for the teaching and learning of writing.
3. To identify questions for further research on the development of writing in adult literacy.

### 2.5 Phase 1

This study follows an earlier one on writing in adult literacy programmes, undertaken by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) on behalf of the NRDC between July 2002 and October 2003. A report of this was published by the NRDC in 2004 (Kelly et al., 2004). This earlier study is referred to here as Phase 1.

Phase 1 comprised three separate reviews:

1. A narrative review that looked at the ways in which studies that conceptualise writing and writing development contribute to an understanding of how adult learners develop as writers.
2. A systematic review of primary research that addressed the question, 'What factors in adult literacy programmes enable learners to develop effective writing skills?'
3. A small review of current practice.

The systematic review of primary research concluded that: '... there is a need for studies with a primary focus on writing. The review has shown that most studies looked at writing along with reading as part of ... "literacy". The investigation of writing as a distinct and important skill would help to fill in the gaps in our understanding of how adult learners develop as writers.'

It also highlighted the need for: '... planned analyses to determine the classroom and programme variables related to and predictive of, progress in writing.'

Drawing on each of the three reviews the authors developed a set of characteristics of teaching that they hypothesised were potential indicators of effective practice in relation to the teaching of writing. These characteristics were:

- an emphasis on writing as a process
- learners working collaboratively
- a collaborative relationship between teacher and learners
- use of authentic materials and activities
- critical thinking about writing
- contextualisation
- varied practice.

These hypotheses were tested as one part of the current study. The list of characteristics is also used to provide a framework for the description of teachers' practice, presented in Chapter 6.

## 2.6 The scope of the study

The project team was based within the Personalised Learning Research Centre at LSDA and comprised a project manager, a full-time project-researcher and an administrator. In addition a team of 13 practitioner-researchers was recruited to undertake the fieldwork, all with current or recent experience of teaching and/or management of adult literacy. A further researcher was also employed part-time to assist with the recruitment of sites and the analysis of the qualitative data.

We worked with a total of 25 organisations that provide adult literacy across a range of sectors and with a broad geographical spread. This gave us access to 49 classes, each taught by a different teacher or teachers. Initial data was obtained on 341 learners. The quantitative aspects of the study rest on the 199 learners for whom it was possible to obtain both pre- and post-test assessment scores and the 34 classes for which adequate 'pre-' and 'post-' data was obtained. (Ten classes dropped out and five classes in which only one learner provided complete data were excluded from the correlation analysis.) The original target was to recruit

450 learners but recruitment of sites proved difficult and in many sites we were unable to gain access to three classes as we had hoped.

Each of the classes was observed three times providing over 140 detailed observation logs. Together with 97 interviews with learners and records of conversations with over 40 teachers, this provides a rich body of data. From the data, we have sought to derive coded information for the correlation analysis, and in-depth description and analysis to support the interpretation of the figures and provide illustrations that will bring these to life.

## 2.7 Method

The study used three measures to assess the effectiveness of the observed teaching:

1. An assessment tool for writing, designed for use with adult literacy learners by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).
2. A brief questionnaire that asked learners to indicate how confident they felt about writing in different settings.
3. A list of the uses learners had made of writing during the preceding week.

All three needed to be relatively quick and easy to administer to ensure that the demands on teachers' and learners' time were kept to a minimum. It was also important to use the resources of the project to obtain as large a sample as possible.

The NFER assessment selected for use in this study was created specifically for the NRDC and was designed to assess the range of skills, knowledge and understanding in writing included in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum. It is based on two issues of a simulated magazine that provide a stimulus and a context for writing. The assessment requires learners to complete three free writing tasks relating to the magazine. The marking scheme takes account of the learners' ability to use writing for a purpose, for example to express their opinion, as well as to use correct sentence structure, syntax, punctuation and spelling, and it rewards strengths rather than counting errors. We were aware that any assessment of free writing entails an element of judgement which introduces the issue of subjectivity. We therefore used double marking and a careful moderation process to mitigate this.

Data on teaching strategies was collected in three ways using:

1. An overall rating of each observed session against a list of general teaching strategies, based on the *What Works* study undertaken in the US (Condelli et al., 2003).
2. An overall rating of each observed session based on the seven potential indicators of effective practice in the teaching of writing, identified in Phase 1. Each characteristic was developed as a dimension of teacher and learner practice and the teaching sessions observed were rated on a scale of 0–3 for each of the seven dimensions.
3. A detailed log of activity in the classroom every five minutes, which was coded using a coding manual to provide timed data on groupings, the nature and focus of writing activities, the audience for writing, learner and teacher activity and the uses of IT.



Data was also collected on the qualifications and experience of the teachers of the observed classes.

Copies of the research instruments and guidance on the use of these are included in the full report which is available on the NRDC website. More information is also provided on the NFER assessment. However, as the assessment will be required for use in further research studies it is not possible to reproduce this as part of the report.

The main unit of analysis was the class, and the data was analysed to discover whether change in the average scores for the learners in each class, on each of the three measures, correlated with features of the observed practice. The data was also analysed for individual learners to assess the degree to which learner characteristics influenced the results.

Qualitative data was collected to support and complement the statistical data. Two or more learners in each class were interviewed at the end of the course or period of study. Full-scale interviews with teachers were a feature of the review of practice undertaken in Phase 1 but were not undertaken in the present study. Where possible researchers spoke briefly with the teachers after each observed session to obtain their perspective on the session and the strategies used. In addition the detailed written logs, examples of resources, teachers' session plans and examples of learners' work provided valuable data.

In reporting the findings of the quantitative analysis it is important to make three points clear. The first is that the sample, as described in Section 2.6 above, was smaller than would ideally be the case for an analysis of this type. In particular, the number of classes for which usable data was obtained was smaller than had been planned. This does not make the findings less interesting but calls for some caution in their interpretation.

The second point is that the majority of classes included in the study were 'literacy' classes and therefore included reading, and speaking and listening, as well as writing. No attempt was made to attribute the use of time between the two assessments which learners spent solely on writing. In any one teaching session, speaking and listening, and reading and writing are closely intertwined. It can be difficult to judge when an activity is intended to support writing or reading, for example, when a learner is writing answers to a reading comprehension exercise or reading a text as a stimulus for writing. In addition, the balance of time each learner in the study spent on these three skills over the duration of their course will have been different – recording it was not viable in a study of this size.

The time spent on the three activities was recorded for the three observed sessions for each class. Analysis of this data indicates that, on average, learners were engaged in writing activities for around 57 per cent of the time and that part of the time recorded as reading and discussion was linked directly to activities for which the main focus was writing. This information is used in Chapter 5 to provide a perspective for the findings on learners' progress and hours of study.

The third point is that in a study of this type it was not possible to record learners' individual targets. In the experience of the researchers, very few learners were working exclusively on reading or on speaking and listening. Those who were, tended to be learners working at Pre-entry who would have been unlikely to complete the assessment tasks independently and would therefore have been excluded from the analysis.

Finally, the NFER assessment instrument differs from the instruments used for the national qualifications in literacy at Levels 1 and 2, for which learners are not required to produce free writing and multiple choice questions are used to assess grammar, spelling and punctuation.

## 2.8 The structure of the report

Chapter 3 provides background information on the range of institutions that took part in the study and illustrates the wide variety of contexts within which practice was observed.

Chapter 4 provides descriptive statistical information on the learners who took part in the study and draws on the learner interviews to present the learners' perspective on writing both inside and outside the classroom.

Chapter 5 examines the degree to which progress in terms of the three measures of effectiveness correlates with specific learner characteristics.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the practice in the teaching of writing observed in the study and uses the 7 potential characteristics of effective practice derived from Phase 1 as a framework for analysis. It also reports teachers' views on the impact of the *Skills for Life* strategy on their practice in the teaching of writing.

Chapter 7 addresses the central focus of the study: the degree to which learner outcomes correlate with the features of the observed practice. Data is also provided on the qualifications and experience of the teachers included in the study.

Chapter 8 brings together evidence from the quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more holistic view of the observed practice and to identify approaches to the teaching of writing that may promote the development of writing skills.

Chapter 9 draws together the conclusions that can be drawn from the study and the implications of these conclusions for further research, policy and teaching practice.

This report provides a summary of the findings of the study. Readers who would like further detail are invited to read the full report which is available on the NRDC website [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk). This includes a detailed explanation of the methodology and discussion of its suitability for this field of study. It also includes an evaluation of the assessment tool.

## 3. Local characteristics: the providers and settings

---

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the range of contexts in which we observed classroom practice and illustrates some of the many factors that need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the information obtained through statistical analysis. We aimed to achieve a sample that included a cross-section of adult literacy provision in England, including provision from FE colleges, adult and community learning, work-based learning, prisons and the voluntary sector as well as a good geographical spread.

### 3.2 The providers

The sites used for this study included all the major types of provider of adult literacy and were spread across all nine English regions. Fieldwork commenced in 25 organisations and complete data were collected from 20 of these.

### 3.3 The classes

We worked with between one and four classes from each organisation, each taught by a different teacher and in some cases by more than one. In total, pre- and post-data was collected for learners in 39 classes. Observation data was collected from 49 classes.

The following criteria were set for classes to be included in the study:

- the main focus of the course is literacy
- writing is part of the literacy tuition
- learners are offered a minimum of 50 hours' tuition
- learners are 16 years of age and over
- the majority of learners, as assessed on entry, are between Entry level 2 and Level 2 against the National Standards for Adult Literacy.

We set the minimum course length at 50 hours to ensure that learners had opportunity to develop their skills sufficiently to demonstrate increased competence on an assessment that would not necessarily relate to the teaching they had received and for which they would have had no preparation. This requirement made recruitment of classes more difficult as it excluded many short and modular courses. A few classes that offered slightly fewer than 50 hours between the pre- and post-test were included in the final sample.

Classes in which the main focus was language learning were excluded but many 'literacy' groups included a high proportion of learners for whom English was not their language of origin.

The classes we studied illustrate the extraordinarily wide range of adult literacy provision. The courses differed in length, intensity, size and the degree to which they catered for mixed abilities. They also differed in the age and status of the learners for whom the course was intended and the degree to which learners attended on a voluntary basis. Some classes covered both literacy and numeracy and others literacy only. Table 3.1 illustrates some aspects of the range of provision covered by the study.

Table 3.1 **The nature of the courses included in the sample**

Type of course	Features of course	Organisation		
		FE College	Adult and community	Other
General literacy courses differentiated by level	Usually ongoing classes with roll-on, roll-off enrolment. Usually meet between two and four hours a week over the course of a year	7	1	Prisons 3 (3)
General literacy courses, mixed ability	Often ongoing classes with roll-on, roll-off enrolment. Usually meet between two to four hours a week over the course of a year		7	Voluntary org. 1
Workshops	Often ongoing classes with roll-on, roll-off enrolment. Mainly individual work. Usually meet once a week over the course of a year	2		Voluntary org. (1)
Drop in centres	Ongoing with roll-on, roll-off enrolment. Mainly individual work on both literacy and numeracy		1	
Family literacy	Specific start and end dates. Shared interest in children who attend one particular school. Eight hours a week over ten weeks but part of the time spent on activities with the children		1 (Infant school)	
Courses for full-time learners on vocational courses	Part of wider programme. Shared context for learning. Attendance required	Foundation 1 Care 1 Hairdressing 1 Horticulture (1)		Army 1
Access courses	Include literacy, numeracy and IT. Ten hours a week	1		
Short courses on writing	Specific start and end dates and a focus on particular aspects of writing	Residential 1 Spelling 1	1 Essay writing 1 Spelling 1 Pre-GCSE 1 Writing and IT	
Basic employability training (BET)	26-week course. Learners required to attend by JobcentrePlus. Daily sessions include literacy and numeracy. Learners required to achieve National Test at Level 1 or 2			Private Training providers 3
Short intensive basic skills courses (SIBS)	120 hours. Learners required to attend by JobcentrePlus. Daily sessions include literacy and numeracy. Learners join and leave at different times			Private training providers 2 (1)

Numbers in brackets refer to courses for which complete data was not collected

The majority of classes were to some degree 'mixed ability' and in some the range of levels was considerable as Table 3.2 illustrates. These categories were based on learner levels derived from scores for the first assessment for this study.

Table 3.2 **Number of classes by levels**

Range of levels	
Entry 1 – Entry 2	5
Entry 1 – Entry 3	4
Entry 2 – Entry 3	3
Entry 1 – Level 1	8
Entry 2 – Level 1	11
Entry 3 – Level 1	3

The following pen portraits, written by the researchers who worked with the classes, illustrate a sample of the contexts for learning in which this study was undertaken. They have been chosen to underline the uniqueness of each class and touch on some of the complex range of factors that can influence learning (Ivanič and Tseng, 2005).

1. This was a class of army recruits: young men in their late teens or early twenties. There were 17 learners, a number of them men recruited from overseas. The course was intensive, with daily attendance, full time, over three weeks, and the learners were able to enter for the National Tests as well as assessments prescribed by the Army.

The class appeared to be disciplined and purposeful. It was held in a number of large, well-appointed rooms, each having a teaching area with flexible seating arrangements and a computer area with a PC for every learner. The rooms were well supplied with teaching equipment and were cool and airy.

2. The class took place in a secondary school in a rural area a few miles from a large Midlands town. The local population comes from a range of different cultural backgrounds. The entrance lobby and corridors were full of rather noisy groups of young people.

The adult literacy class was held in a smallish room down its own little corridor. The room was long and narrow with a large table, with chairs around it at one end, where the class took place. At the other end of the room there were bookshelves and filing cabinets containing learning resources, and a table on which there was a kettle, mugs, etc., for making tea and coffee.

The class was called 'Improve your English' and met for two hours a week. There were only six learners on the register, and an average attendance of two to four. However, the learners had been attending the class for some time and appeared to have formed a very strong personal relationship with the previous literacy teacher. It was evident that this teacher had supported the learners through their various personal problems outside the class.

---

3. The class was a small literacy group held for two-and-a-half hours one day a week in a primary school in a large industrial town. It met in the Breakfast Club room where the walls were colourfully decorated with the children's artwork, and literacy classes were sometimes accompanied by the sound of PE lessons in the school hall. The tutor and students all sat at a large table, which occasionally had to be cleared of toast crumbs before the class could begin. The class catered for mixed abilities and included some learners whose native language was not English. Usually there were between two and five students attending each session, all of them women.

---

4. This class took place in an adult college in London. The college was in an old Victorian school building, which had been well-renovated and was now pleasant and welcoming. There was a café on the ground floor, and there were large photographs and examples of student writing professionally displayed on the walls.

The class formed part of an overall Basic Skills programme which enabled learners to attend up to a total of ten hours a week of literacy, numeracy and IT skills classes. The class was advertised in the prospectus as 'Writing with Computers'. It ran once a week for a full academic year.

There was a core of around six learners who attended regularly. Three of these spoke English as a second language; their first languages were Portuguese and Spanish. One of the learners had some form of learning difficulties.

The classroom was on the first floor of the building, with windows along one wall. There was a central table, and computers around the edge of the room, so that learners could sit around the table for whole-class work, or turn their chairs round and face the wall for individual work at the computers. There were about 10 or 12 computers – enough for everyone. There was also a digital display board.

---

5. This 'Entry to Employment' class was held in a rather cramped room in part of an old school building rented by a private training provider. There were two large tables for the learners – at which they sat once they had settled down. Equipment was basic (a whiteboard, stationery and felt-tipped pens, etc.) but the room had no PCs. It was quite difficult to move around the room.

The young people were there under an element of coercion and this impacted on the teaching and learning. A number of them made it plain that they were not interested in learning literacy and the teacher had to expend much of her time in getting and keeping the learners 'on side'.

---

6. All students in this prison participated in learning in a separate education block. Classes were differentiated by ability level and the classrooms were dedicated to the teaching of literacy and numeracy. Students kept their folders in locked cupboards in the classrooms. Posters and some students' work were displayed on walls. Furniture in these rooms was arranged so that learners sat in rows facing the whiteboard at the front of the class. Space was restricted in two of the classrooms making it almost

impossible to re-arrange the furniture. All students attended either every morning or every afternoon each weekday. Sessions were long, usually up to three hours in the morning when the Entry level classes took place. Students attending the morning sessions did not always have breakfast before arriving at 8.30am.

The teachers were very aware of the institution's requirements and the target that students take City & Guilds tests at an appropriate level or the National Tests at Levels 1 and 2. Enabling learners to achieve a national qualification was therefore a priority for teachers and this was reflected in the kinds of activity taking place in the observed sessions. In addition, because of the nature of the students and the institution, considerable and understandable value is placed on teachers who are able to manage and control the behaviour of the learners.

## 4. The learners and their experience

---

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter we look at the characteristics of the learners that made up the sample for the study. The data describes a very varied population and illustrates the range of individual factors that, in addition to the contextual factors discussed in the previous chapter, have the potential to impact on learning.

We have also drawn on the learner interviews to provide the learners' perspective on their experience of writing and learning to write, both inside and outside the classroom.

### 4.2 The learner sample: descriptive statistics

Learners who agreed to participate and signed a consent form were asked to complete a profile giving details of their characteristics such as gender, age range, language of origin, ethnicity, employment status, schooling and disability.

#### Gender

In total 341 learners agreed to participate, a mean number of seven per class. Of the 341 learners, 183 (54 per cent) were women and 158 (46 per cent) men.

#### Age of leaving full-time education

Twenty-four per cent of the sample were recent school or college leavers in the age range 16 to 19. At the other extreme, 7 per cent were over 59. The age ranges 20 to 29, 30 to 39 and 40 to 49 were all well represented; 29 (8 per cent) of the learners were aged between 50 and 59.

#### First language

Thirty per cent of the learners did not have English as a first language and the 85 learners who recorded their first language had 44 different first languages between them. Such was the variety that Punjabi and Urdu, the two most frequent first languages apart from English, were each spoken by only seven learners or 2 per cent of the overall sample.

We deliberately did not include in the sample classes in which the main focus of teaching was language. However in practice we encountered many learners in literacy classes who might have benefited from specialist teaching in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

#### Ethnicity

Sixty-five per cent of the learners in the sample gave their ethnicity as 'White'. Otherwise, only 'Black-African' (6 per cent) and 'Black-Caribbean' (5 per cent) accounted for more than 4 per cent of the learners.

#### Employment status

As regards employment status, 72 per cent of the learners stated that they were not currently



in employment. Of these, 27 per cent gave their employment status as unemployed and 21 per cent as engaged in full-time education. Thirteen per cent (all women) said they were looking after home and family full-time and 7 per cent said they were retired. These figures need to be treated with caution as some learners who were in prison or on government schemes for the unemployed preferred to identify themselves as full-time students.

#### Age

Of the 264 learners who gave the age at which they left full-time education, 205 (78 per cent) left at the age of 16 or earlier. Eighty-one (31 per cent of the 264) claimed to have left at 15 or earlier (one as young as eight).

#### Previous attendance on a literacy course

Thirty-three per cent (114) of learners said that their current literacy course was not the first they had attended. Eighteen per cent (62) stated that they were disabled and 22 per cent (74) that they were dyslexic (just over half of whom said that they had had a formal assessment).

#### Level of learners

The learners' levels in relation to writing, as defined by the National Standards for Adult Literacy, were judged by their overall score on the first assessment for this study, using cut scores provided by NFER. Table 4.1 provides a breakdown of the levels.

Table 4.1 **Level of learners (based on 341 learners)**

Level	Frequency	Percentage of sample
Entry 1	45	13.20
Entry 2	109	31.96
Entry 3	115	33.73
Level 1 and above	72	21.11

Men tended to be at a lower level than women and younger learners tended to be at a higher level than older learners. Those in full-time education and those in employment also tended to be at a higher level than those in other employment categories.

#### Hours of attendance over the period between the pre- and post-test

Attendance data were available for 108 of the learners for whom complete data were collected. Twenty per cent attended for less than 40 hours; a further 23 per cent attended for 40 to 49 hours; 50 per cent attended for 50 to 79 hours; and only 7 per cent attended for over 80 hours.

#### Non-voluntary attendance

Of the 341 learners in the initial sample, 118 (34 per cent) were in groups at which attendance was not entirely voluntary (see Section 3.3).

#### Comparison with national figures for adult literacy

Due to differences of categorisation, it is not possible to make a comprehensive comparison of the profile of our own sample with adult literacy learners for the country as a whole. However, reference to the national data for 2003–04 (LSC database for 2003–04) reveals a number of points at which our own sample deviates from the national profile. The national data show a somewhat greater difference between the proportion of men and women

learners than our sample (60 per cent and 40 per cent nationally against 54 per cent and 46 per cent in our sample). More of the learners in our sample were in the lower age ranges (24 per cent of our sample were under 21 against 13 per cent nationally). Our sample also included a greater proportion of ethnic minority learners (35 per cent against 27 per cent nationally).

### 4.3 The learners' perspective

The following picture was built from records of interviews with 98 learners across 38 different classes. Each researcher was asked to interview a minimum of two learners on their last visit to the class, choosing learners who differed in level and, where possible, gender or age. In some classes more than two were interviewed. The researchers used a semi-structured schedule of questions, and interviews tended to take differing paths so not all learners provided comment on all topics. Where possible the number of learner responses on which an observation is based is provided.

#### Uses of writing outside the class

Several learners reported that they wrote very little outside the class or spoke dismissively about the everyday literacy tasks they undertook. Some used the terms 'proper writing' or 'real writing' to distinguish what they learned in class from writing they do outside it, reflecting a tacit awareness that different types of writing are associated with differing levels of prestige.

*... only quick writing, informal, to get the meaning across, short sentences. I don't need to write at work.*

*I only write in class. Oh, I do text messages on my mobile phone. I write notes to my daughter in the house.*

The writing these learners described was purposeful, a means of communicating with others or providing reminders for themselves. Their writing was anchored in particular situations and closely bound up with the social roles they play in the different domains of their lives.

A number of learners indicated that they did not have the need or opportunity to use the type of writing they were mastering in class in the course of their everyday lives – a point noted by Gardener (1991). Others already wrote regularly outside class, some corresponding with officials regarding family matters and others writing for work, study or job-seeking. Four women in different groups, whose children had special educational needs and attended school some distance from home, used writing to maintain links with their children's teachers.

Learners' uses of writing were personal and creative as well as functional. Two wrote poems and others spoke of writing stories for children in a nursery, putting together a book about a disabled daughter, publishing stories on a website, and writing a novel. A learner not interviewed showed a researcher a published article she had written about her experience of being in care. Writing a journal had helped one woman at the time her husband died and another learner had found writing helped him to overcome depression after an accident.

Writing and learning to write outside the classroom were sometimes collaborative activities.

Friends and family provided support and in some cases learned together. Such support can mean that difficulties with writing do not need to be a barrier to pursuing interests and ambitions.

*P. has an interest that involves writing a lot of letters for fundraising, chairing committee meetings and writing the minutes of these. He explained how he drafts the letters and then asks a colleague to vet them. He then rewrites them. 'One person sets it going then someone else can pick holes in it.' Before meetings he writes briefing notes for himself. After the meeting he uses these notes to help him write the minutes then asks a colleague to check them before they are circulated.*

#### **What learners valued about the courses they attended**

Asked whether they felt their course had been of value to them and in what ways, learners frequently compared it positively with previous experiences of learning to write. They valued:

- being treated as an adult  
*(They) treat you like a person, not a kid, even knowing you have difficulties.*  
  
*They spur you on, treat you as an adult....It's respect isn't it?*
- being allowed to work at your own pace
- not being afraid of making mistakes
- teachers explaining things, particularly the technical aspects of written English that they had not understood before
- knowing that the teacher understood their difficulties with writing
- individual feedback on their writing
- encouragement to work things out for themselves
- working co-operatively with other learners and taking part in class discussions.  
*(The learner liked the fact that) no-one was pressed to answer a question and if someone couldn't answer or got it wrong, suggestions were invited from the group so they could help each other – 'a natural way of learning'*

*I like working as a group, all helping each other.*

#### **Learners' motivations**

Thirteen learners made reference to writing being important in relation to their careers. This included being able to write well enough to do a job 'okay', writing forms and letters of application for job-seeking or being able to deal with written work on a vocational course. Three were undertaking a literacy course as part of a full-time vocational programme and four others hoped eventually to go on to further education courses, not necessarily linked to work.

Children figured in the motivations of many women. Thirteen gave reasons for improving their writing that related to their children or grandchildren. Some already helped their children or grandchildren with school work and wrote notes to teachers but for others this was an aspiration.

'It gets the brain working,' and similar phrases were used by several learners. These and others valued the opportunity to develop their writing as an intellectual challenge even though they felt they could already cope with the writing they needed in their everyday lives.

*M said that writing 'made my brain think'. In other jobs she hadn't needed to write and it was easy to get stale. 'If you don't use it you lose it.' English had never been her forte but she had improved and was hoping to take the Level 2 qualification. However, she won't go on to college. She doesn't want to go further at her time of life.*

In addition to the learners who were already engaged in creative and personal writing, a number of other learners admitted to an ambition to write creatively. One learner who wrote poetry and stories felt he would not be able to do this if he did not attend courses that supported his writing.

Not all learners were attending courses as a matter of choice. Of those interviewed, 21 had been required to attend courses by the Job Centre, four prisoners had to attend classes as an alternative to work and one man claimed that he only attended the class because his mother made him.

#### **Learners' views of their progress**

In the group interviews undertaken in Phase 1, learners tended to talk about what Smith (1982) refers to as, the skills of 'transcription': spelling, punctuation and handwriting. The same pattern was evident in the learners' individual responses in the current study. Thirty-six learners stated that their spelling had improved, seventeen mentioned punctuation, eight handwriting or neatness and nine proofreading.

A number of factors may explain this:

- Spelling, punctuation and handwriting are the very visible features of writing by which learners are likely to have been judged negatively in the past. Mastering these skills is therefore likely to be important to learners and to be the measure by which they judge improvement in their performance in writing.
- Learners may find it easier to talk about handwriting, spelling or punctuation than grammar or composition.
- Teachers tended to spend more time on the skills of transcription than on aspects of composition when responding to learners' writing, even in those classes in which composition was encouraged.
- The qualifications for which many learners were working place high value on these aspects of writing.

The aspects of writing on which learners felt they needed further work bore a striking resemblance to those in which they said they reported improvement. This suggests that while learners felt they had begun to make sense of spelling, punctuation and grammar, they had also become more aware of the time it takes to improve these technical aspects of writing.

Seventeen learners spoke of greater 'confidence' in their writing and 11 talked of their writing being better, of writing more, writing more easily, writing faster, getting their ideas down or of their writing being more 'ordered' and 'sensible'. For others, confidence and increased self-esteem were a more general by-product of improving their writing.

Learners' emphasis on improvements in the skills of transcription should not be taken to indicate that they did not recognise or value the importance of writing as communication. When asked what they had enjoyed or to share a piece of work with which they were pleased, an interesting difference in focus emerged. Eleven learners made reference to the importance

of subjects being personal, relevant or interesting and nine others mentioned that they enjoyed personal or creative writing.

*When I wrote this I felt the same, like I was still living there. ... It was so easy to write because it was about my life.*

*It was informal writing – to a friend and felt comfortable.*

The criteria the following learner used for judging his piece of writing went beyond surface accuracy.

*P showed me (the researcher) a piece of writing he had done in class about his father. He explained that his tutor had given him a text to read which described a person and then asked him to write about a person he knows. He said he enjoyed doing this writing because 'you need to stretch yourself'. He was pleased with the finished piece because 'it makes sense ... it's truthful'.*

Several learners spoke of learning about different types of writing and of the importance of considering the audience for writing. Three referred to having written letters for official purposes and two mentioned receiving replies. Learners' comments reflect the sense of empowerment that mastery of writing can provide.

*The way I've writ. They'd take it seriously.*

*The learner was writing a follow up letter concerning a job application that he had sent off a couple of weeks earlier. He said that he was pleased that he could now write such a letter.*

One learner, when asked if there was anything she was particularly pleased with, showed the researcher her result on the Level 1 Literacy test and told her how she had been given a large bouquet of flowers by her husband to mark the occasion. Nineteen learners made some reference to qualifications and 16 of these were positive but four expressed anxiety, or a dislike of tests.

A small minority of the learners interviewed felt that their writing had not changed at all as a result of attending a course. Some were on courses that also included numeracy and IT and were more concerned about their progress in these subjects. Most felt that they had no need to write more than they did already. One judged his course to be too easy for him.

#### 4.4 Summary

The statistical data on learners and the records of the interviews illustrate how diverse adult literacy learners are and the extent to which they differ in their starting points, their experience and their aspirations.

Many learners appeared to perceive a distinction between the writing they did at home or at work and the writing they were learning to master in the literacy classroom. Their dismissive attitude towards their everyday uses of writing and use of terms such as 'proper writing' reflect the distinctions made by Barton and Hamilton (1998) between dominant and

vernacular literacies. Learners told us they did not always have the need or opportunity to use the types of writing they practised in class but many welcomed the opportunity to extend their skills and their understanding of writing. Some enjoyed it as an intellectual challenge.

Learners were very aware of the technical skills of writing, handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation and tended to measure their progress in writing in terms of these. They valued teachers who took time to explain rules and patterns which they had not previously been aware of or had not understood. They also valued writing as 'meaning making' and, in particular, writing that had personal resonance. In reporting their current uses of writing and their ambitions the learners demonstrated a broad range of reasons to write that include, but go well beyond, the 'functional' writing often associated with adult literacy.

Motivations in relation to writing are hard to separate from literacy more generally but work and training for work were frequently mentioned as reasons to improve writing. Supporting children with writing and communicating with their teachers were also important to many women learners. While a few learners spoke of the immediate benefits of what they had learned in terms of writing tasks they had achieved outside the class, most tended to see their class work as supporting their aims in a more indirect way. Classes were often viewed as an opportunity to gain confidence and self-esteem through improvement in a skill that, at different levels, they had not previously mastered to their satisfaction in a supportive and adult environment. Obtaining a qualification contributed to the sense of achievement for some but rarely appeared to be the learner's overriding goal.

Many of the themes arising in this chapter are revisited in relation to teachers' practice in Chapter 6.

## 5 Learners' progress

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we provide an overview of the progress made by individual learners in the sample between the beginning and end of a period of study in terms of:

- assessment scores
- confidence in writing
- uses of writing outside the classroom.

The analysis is based on 199 learners who completed both pre- and post-assessments and 195 who completed both pre- and post-questionnaires.

### 5.2 The learners' progress in writing as measured by the assessments

Of the 199 learners who completed both pre- and post-assessments:

- 104 (52 per cent) increased their score in the second assessment
- 28 (14 per cent) had the same score in both assessments
- 67 (34 per cent) had a lower score for the second assessment.

Overall, the learners made a modest but statistically significant degree of progress as measured by the assessments. Out of a possible 30 marks the mean pre-score was 16.14 and the mean post-score 17.65, a mean gain of 1.51, which was statistically significant at the 99 per cent confidence level.

In interpreting the findings on learners' progress it is important to note that:

- The majority of classes in the sample were literacy classes and therefore learners were working on reading, and speaking and listening, as well as writing (see Section 2.7).
- 43 per cent of learners attended for less than the 50 hours originally judged necessary to register progress on the assessment used in the study.
- Learners were given no opportunity to practise the type of tasks presented in the assessment. Also, unlike the National Tests at Levels 1 and 2, the assessment required the composition of meaningful text, including expression of learners' own opinions, rather than responses to multiple choice questions. Learners had to apply their knowledge, skills and understanding of writing to new tasks. The assessment used for the study therefore measured a more general improvement in learners' competence in writing than assessments for national qualifications.
- For the learners the stakes were low; there were no personal consequences attached to their performance. The results might have been different had learners been told that they and their teacher(s) would be given the results of the assessments.

In the light of these observations the increases in scores achieved by 52 per cent of learners may be judged to be more significant than they appear at first.

On the basis of trial tests, NFER calculated that an increase of seven marks is necessary on the writing assessment to move from one level, as defined by the National Standards for Adult Literacy, to the next. The average number of hours of tuition between the two assessments was 51.28 hours. However this was time spent on literacy more generally (see Section 2.7)

Using the figure derived from analysis of data from the observed sessions that on average 57 per cent of learners' time was spent on writing activities, it is possible to make a rough estimate that 29 hours was spent specifically on writing. Taken together with the mean gain of 1.51 marks, this suggests that, on average, the learners in this study would have required 134 hours to achieve one level in writing. However, this figure leaves aside the time spent on reading and talk that supported the writing tasks (Section 2.7).

Altogether the findings on learner progress tend to support the estimate, based on research undertaken in the US, that learners need on average 150–200 hours tuition to move up one level of the National Standards (Comings, 2006).

### 5.3 Assessment results and attendance

For 108 of the learners, data were available for the number of hours the learner attended the class between the pre- and post-assessments. When this data was matched against the learners' progress as measured by the assessments, it was found that learners who attended for under 40 hours between assessments made a mean gain of 1.60 marks and those who attended for 40 to 49 hours made a mean gain of 1.71 marks. Learners who had attended for 50 hours or more tended to make smaller gains, with those attending over 80 hours making an average gain of 0.48 between the assessments.

The lower gains for learners on longer courses may be explained by the fact that several of the longer courses included in the sample were courses that included numeracy, and in some cases IT, as well as literacy and accurate information on the time spent on literacy was not available. Two other classes, in which learners had over 60 hours of tuition, catered for a number of learners with additional learning needs. As discussed above (Section 5.2) it was not possible to obtain accurate figures for the amount of time individual learners spent on writing between the two assessments.

### 5.4 Assessment results and learner characteristics

Table 5.1 provides a summary of the assessment scores for different learner characteristics.

*Gender:* On average, women made more progress than men.

*Age:* The biggest statistically significant gains were made by learners in the younger age groups: 16–19 years and 20–29 years.

*First language:* At the first assessment, learners for whom English was an additional language on average scored more than two marks lower than those for whom it was the first language.



They also made less progress between the two assessments relative to the gains made by those who spoke English as their first language. (The difference in mean pre- and post-scores for learners who had English as an additional language was not statistically significant.)

*Employment status:* The largest gains were made by learners who were in full-time education or in employment. Learners in full-time education are likely to have benefited from the opportunity to practice their writing and obtain feedback on it in other parts of their programme, giving them more 'time on task' (Comings, 2006). Learners in employment may also have had cause to practise writing in the course of their work or feel a greater need to improve it.

Table 5.1 **Assessment results and learner characteristics**

Characteristic	Number of learners	Pre-score mean	Post-score mean	Mean gain
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	87	15.81	16.88	1.07
Female	112	16.37	18.23	1.86
<b>Age</b>				
16-19	49	16.52	18.86	2.34
20-29	44	15.60	17.80	2.20
30-39	42	19.57	20.43	0.86
40-49	34	13.83	15.00	1.17
50-59	18	12.38	14.85	2.47
Over 59	12	17.00	16.25	-0.75
<b>First language</b>				
English	167	16.54	18.20	1.66
Not English	32	14.14	14.91	0.77
<b>Employment status</b>				
Employed	50	16.24	18.00	1.76
Full-time education	47	14.44	17.09	2.65
Home/family	35	18.45	19.45	1.00
Not working: sick	15	17.17	18.17	1.00
Retired	15	17.08	16.77	-0.41
Unemployed	37	15.63	16.85	1.22
<b>Age left full-time education</b>				
Under 16	32	18.06	18.84	0.78
16-18	149	15.70	17.08	1.38
Over 18	18	17.57	18.71	1.14
<b>Previous writing course</b>				
Attended	60	15.68	17.26	1.58
Not attended	139	16.42	17.89	1.47

Table 5.1 **Assessment results and learner characteristics (cont.)**

Characteristic	Number of learners	Pre-score mean	Post-score mean	Mean gain
<b>Disability</b>				
Disability	36	14.57	15.96	1.39
No disability	163	16.56	18.11	1.55
<b>Dyslexia</b>				
Dyslexic	50	15.35	16.73	1.38
Not dyslexic	149	16.48	18.05	1.57

*Previous attendance on a literacy course:* Learners who said they had attended a previous writing course made marginally better progress than those who said they had not. However, those who said that they had not attended a previous course scored more highly in both pre- and post-assessments than those who said they had.

*Disability:* The learners in the sample who claimed to be disabled had lower mean assessment scores at both pre- and post-assessments than those who did not. Those who claimed a disability also made smaller gains than those who did not.

*Dyslexia:* Learners who claimed to have dyslexia had mean pre- and post-assessment scores that were almost one mark below the mean scores for the whole sample. Those who said they were not dyslexic had a higher increase in assessment scores than those who said they were dyslexic (this increase was not statistically significant).

#### **Literacy level**

Learners below Entry level 2 made the most progress, over three marks on average, between the pre- and post-assessments. Learners at Entry levels 2 and 3 made less progress and those at Level 1 made a mean regression.

#### **Non-voluntary attendance**

For the 74 learners whose attendance was not voluntary, the mean gain was 1.51 marks, precisely the same as the mean for the sample as a whole. Those taking Jobcentre Plus courses (30 learners) made a mean gain of 1.94 marks and those taking literacy courses linked to another programme of study (18 learners) made a mean gain of 1.97 marks. Learners in the Army (16) and in penal institutions (10), however, each made a mean gain of only 0.69 marks. The performance of Army and prison learners was almost certainly affected by dyslexia: 75 per cent of the Army learners and 60 per cent of the prison learners claimed to be dyslexic.

#### **Learners whose scores decreased at the second assessment**

The profile of the 67 learners who had a lower score for the second assessment was not markedly different from that of the whole group of 199 learners who completed both assessments. Those who regressed were rather more likely to be in the 16–19 age range (30 per cent against 25 per cent) and not to have English as their first language (25 per cent against 16 per cent).

Some caution is necessary in interpreting the results above. The assessment tool used in the study was designed to be used across a range of levels. However, learners least confident in writing sometimes wrote very little and often only attempted the first task. If they felt unable to attempt any or all of the tasks independently they were sometimes offered support to avoid any distress but those sections for which they received help were not included when the script was marked. Learners who attempted more tasks independently in the second assessment often made good gains.

It is possible that learners who were already at Level 1 at the start of their course were less able to demonstrate progress because of persistent difficulties with spelling and punctuation. For second language speakers, problems with English grammar may have made it harder to demonstrate progress. Further analysis is needed to evaluate the degree to which the NFER assessment offers learners at Entry 1 and Level 1 equal opportunity to demonstrate progress.

The script markers reported some problems interpreting the marking guide where learners' level of English grammar was very weak. The assessment tool is discussed in more detail in the methodology section of the full report (see [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)).

### 5.5 Confidence in writing and learner characteristics

The learner questionnaire asked the learners to say how confident they felt in writing in three different situations: in class, at home and at work or in a public place. They gave their responses on a four-point scale on which:

- 1 = 'not at all confident'
- 2 = 'not very confident'
- 3 = 'quite confident', and
- 4 = 'very confident'.

Learners responded to the same questions at the beginning and end of the course.

An analysis of learner responses showed only small increases (and in some cases small decreases) in learner confidence, both overall and in each of the categories for learner characteristics. Although adult literacy learners speak of increased confidence, as noted in Chapter 4, they have a reputation for being hard judges of their own progress and the small changes in reported confidence are not a surprise. The questionnaire was designed to be quick and easy to administer. A more sophisticated instrument would be needed to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the results.

An increase of 1 indicates movement between one of the categories above. The overall increases in mean scores between the two questionnaires, based on 195 learners were:

- writing in class 0.17 (2.76 to 2.93)
- writing at home 0.22 (2.83 to 3.05)
- writing at work or in a public place 0.09 (2.25 to 2.34).

Overall, learners reported that they were most confident in writing at home and least confident about writing at work or in a public place. Their confidence also increased most in writing at home and least in public. This supports the information learners gave at interview.

**Gender**

On average, men gained slightly more confidence than women in writing in class and slightly less in writing at home, though in all cases the changes were less than 0.30 points. In the case of writing at work or in public, men lost confidence very marginally while women had a marginal gain.

**Age**

Learners under 40, both men and women, generally started with a higher degree of confidence in writing in each of the three situations. Although they also tended to have higher scores than the older learners for the post-questionnaires, their reported changes in confidence were low and of the same order as those of the older learners.

**First language**

Learners with English as their first language felt considerably more confident about their writing at the start of their course than those for whom English was an additional language and had gained more in confidence in all three situations by the time they completed the post-questionnaires.

**Employment status**

Learners who were employed, self-employed or in full-time education felt more confident in writing in each of the three situations than those in the other categories. This is likely to be related to the opportunities these groups encounter for writing on their courses or at work. People who were retired or not working through sickness or disability tended to have greater gains in confidence in writing at home than those in employment or full-time education. This reflects the finding that classes where there is a strong emphasis on building confidence (often where there are several learners with additional needs) had higher reported gains in confidence (see Section 7.4).

**Dyslexia**

People in the sample who claimed to have dyslexia reported a low level of confidence in writing in each of the three situations in both pre- and post-questionnaires, but at both stages were more confident in writing at home.

**5.6 Confidence in writing and uses of writing outside the class**

Learners were asked to tick a series of 20 boxes to indicate ways in which they had used writing outside the classroom over the past week. This measure indicated a small increase in the number of ways in which learners used writing outside the course between the two questionnaires. The mean number of uses of writing changed from 4.48 to 5.07. The range of number of uses was 1 to 13 pre- and 1 to 14 post-, but in both cases more than 50 per cent of the learners ticked fewer than five uses of writing and only 3 per cent ticked more than ten. These figures reflect what learners told us in interview, that many of them had few opportunities to use writing outside the class.

### 5.7 Correlations between changes in assessment scores and changes in confidence and uses of writing

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to test for possible relationships between changes in assessment scores and reported changes in confidence and uses of writing scores. In each case there was found to be no statistical relationship. This suggests that feeling more confident about writing and being able to demonstrate an improvement on a writing task are different outcomes of attendance at a literacy class and not directly related to each other. Confidence can increase as a result of being part of a supportive group and recognising that other people also find writing hard. However, coming face to face with the need to write in class may, temporarily at least, undermine confidence in writing.

It is possible that learners' confidence in writing is closely related to a sense of confidence that embraces more than just writing and that, in reporting on their confidence in writing, learners were reflecting this wider confidence. This is supported by the analysis of gains in confidence at class level (reported in Chapter 7) which suggests that the nature of the group, and whether or not attendance at a class was voluntary, determined the reported growth in confidence in writing more than the nature of the teaching (see Section 7.4).

### 5.8 Summary

On average, the learners in the sample made modest progress between the two assessments and questionnaires, measured by changes in assessment scores, reported confidence in writing and number of uses made of writing.

Achieving a measurable improvement in writing takes time. We suggest that the findings for progress on the assessment need to be seen in the light of the limited number of hours for which some learners attended and the nature of the assessment used for the study (which measured a more general level of competence than assessments for national qualifications). Since the majority of classes in the sample were literacy classes, the overall progress between the two assessments tends to support the estimate that learners need about 150–200 hours tuition to progress by one level of the National Standards for Adult Literacy (Comings, 2006).

The largest gains in assessment scores were made by younger learners, those at the lower end of Entry level, and by learners in full-time education or who were employed or self-employed. Having taken a previous writing course appeared to have little effect on the degree of progress made.

Learners who were in employment were also more confident in writing than those in other categories. This may relate to their opportunities to use writing skills for work and a more general sense of self-esteem experienced by those in employment. The greatest increases in confidence were reported by people who were retired or not working due to sickness or disability. Learners who said they were dyslexic, had the least confidence in writing and generally appeared to gain little in confidence from attending their courses.

Any interpretation of the scores for confidence and uses of writing needs to take into account the nature of the questionnaire on which these were based. This was deliberately kept short and simple to enable learners to undertake it quickly and with the minimum of support. A more sophisticated tool might have provided a different picture.

Whilst the comparatively small size of the overall sample and the small number of learners in some of the learner characteristics groups make interpretation difficult, certain clear tendencies emerge which provide an insight into the ways in which learners' characteristics may influence their progress. These patterns should be taken into account when considering the analysis of the correlations between learners' progress and teaching strategies discussed in Chapter 7.

## 6. Teachers' practice

### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter we present an overview of teachers' practice, in relation to writing, observed during the course of the study. This provides a context for the statistical analysis discussed in Chapter 7 and complements the learners' views provided in Chapter 4. In addition we present teachers' views on the influence of the *Skills for Life* strategy on their practice.

### 6.2 Data derived from coding the observation logs

Using a coding manual, researchers coded each written observation log to provide data on the time spent on different activities. Table 6.1 provides a summary of some of the information from this coding and offers a flavour of the variety of practice observed.

Table 6.1 Figures from analysis of observation logs of three observed sessions

Time spent	Percentage of aggregate of time recorded for learner activities*	Range	
		highest %	lowest %
Writing	57	78	26
Reading	22	33	1
Speaking and listening	15	59	8
Activities coded 'other'	6	N/A	N/A
Planning, drafting, free writing, revision, editing	23	68	0
On writing exercises	34	100	0
Percentage of total class time**			
In whole group	35	70	0
In small groups and pairs	11	60	0
On independent work	54	95	9
Using computers (all classes)	13	64	0
Using computer (classes with computers only)	30	64	3
Percentage of time recorded as focus of writing task*			
Writing activities that were contextualised	44	97	3
Writing activities at word level	20	75	0
Writing activities at text level	40	97	0

\* These categories can overlap

\*\* These figures reflect more than one grouping occurring in a class at one time

On average, learners in the classes observed spent 57 per cent of class time on writing activities. Although we asked teachers not to alter their session plans when the researchers visited their classes, knowing the research was focused on writing did influence teachers' plans in some cases. However, taking this into account the figures indicate an uneven distribution of time between reading, writing and speaking and listening.

### 6.3 The seven characteristics of teaching writing, identified in Phase 1

The seven characteristics of teaching writing, identified in Phase 1 as potential indicators of effective practice, are used to provide a framework for discussion of the teaching practice observed. In addressing each characteristic we look briefly at the literature on which it was based and draw on the following data to assess the extent to which this characteristic was evident in the teaching we observed:

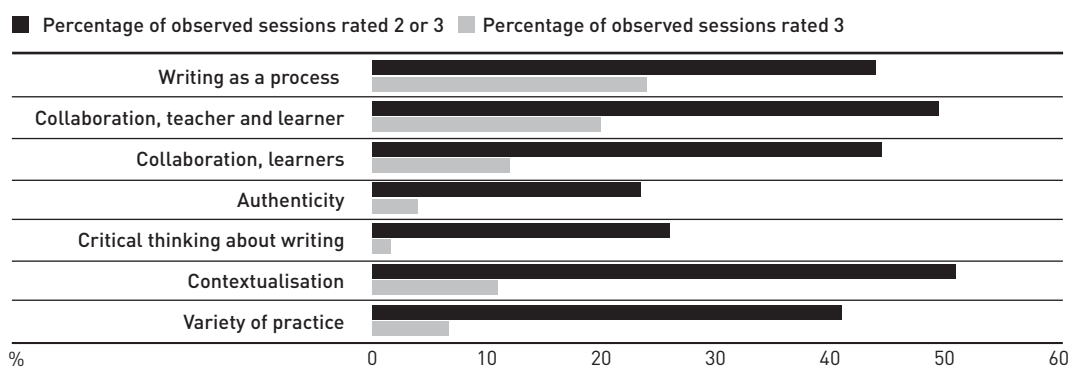
- written observation logs
- the teachers' own comments and observations recorded by researchers after the observed sessions
- the ratings for each observed session against the dimensions based on the seven characteristics identified in Phase 1 as potential indicators of learner progress in writing.

The researchers were asked to rate each observed session against each dimension using the following scale:

- 0 = not observed
- 1 = observed to a very limited extent
- 2 = observed to some extent
- 3 = observed to a high degree.

Figure 6.1 illustrates the percentage of observed sessions rated 2 or 3 and the percentage of those rated 3. The guidance provided for researchers for each dimension is presented at the head of each section.

Figure 6.1 **The seven features of practice derived from Phase 1: the percentage of observed sessions rated 3 and those rated 2 or 3**





## 6.4 Writing as a process

### The process dimension

This scale measures the extent to which the class focused on writing as a process, as opposed to writing as a product. A process-oriented class would emphasise, for example, fluency and communication in writing, getting one's ideas across, looking at patterns underlying spellings, drafting, revision, discussion of errors and freedom to make mistakes, with support and scaffolding from the teacher. In contrast a product-oriented class would emphasise, for example, tests and assessment, copying, editing, exercises and drills with an emphasis on correctness, and instruction and correction from the teacher.

Several researchers (Greenberg, 1987; Phillips, 1992; Russell, 1999) have noted that adult beginner writers are likely to have acquired inaccurate or incomplete understandings about writing, believing it to be a linear process in the sense that the writer starts with the first sentence and continues straight to the end. They suggest that this misconception needs to be rectified if adults are to develop their writing practices. Other writers have also argued that teachers need to provide learners with explicit understanding about writing as a process if they are to develop as writers (Eves-Bowden, 2001).

The teachers we observed typically encouraged learners to approach writing as a process by introducing them to a sequence of practical activities:

- generating content
- planning the overall organisation of the content
- drafting
- revising
- proofreading
- producing a final copy.

We observed teachers using reading texts to generate ideas for writing and as models for specific types of writing, such as letters of complaint or diaries. In other cases teachers encouraged students to generate ideas for writing through speaking and listening activities. Spidergrams were popular at this stage and we saw these being used to generate, develop and record ideas. Students commented on how useful they found them and we observed some using them unprompted.

Many teachers, recognising that composition and transcription require very different cognitive skills (Smith, 1982), urged students to 'get all their ideas down' before thinking about spelling or punctuation. Some students seemed to find this difficult, and anxiety about spelling in particular made them over-dependent on dictionaries.

At the drafting stage, most tutors gave individual support, using questions and prompts to help learners check and revise their writing and answering learners' questions on different aspects of writing. This individual support enabled learners to experience writing as a recursive activity. The value of this type of feedback during the writing process, rather than after the text is finished, has been noted by Freedman (1980) and Duffin (1995).

When the learners shared their first draft with the tutor we observed a tendency for tutors to be drawn into proofreading for surface errors rather than responding to the content and purpose of the text and the needs of the intended reader. A small number of tutors did provide explicit teaching about revision and we saw two examples of whole classes engaged in both proofreading and revision of texts (see Example 2, Chapter 8). In all cases the teachers appeared to view errors as a source of learning (Shaughnessy, 1977) and we observed many 'mini lessons' given in response to learners' errors.

### 6.5 Learners working in collaborative groups

#### The collaborative dimension – learners

This dimension measures the extent to which the class focused on collaborative rather than independent tasks and activities. A class with a collaborative focus would emphasise, for example, group work or work in pairs, peer support and student choice. In contrast a class with an independent focus would emphasise, for example, learners working on their own.

Collaboration between learners has been cited by a number of writers as beneficial in the development of writing skills (Bruffee, 1987; Bryan, 1996; Clark and Ivanič, 1997; Lunsford, 1987). It has been suggested that collaborative writing can:

- empower learners by enabling them to work in more democratic ways and become less dependent on the teacher's direction (Robinson, 2001; Hodges, 2002)
- encourage learners to share their strengths rather than focus on individual weaknesses (Bishop, 1995).

Researchers on this project observed the following collaborative activities:

- whole groups discussing a writing task or topic, usually teacher-led
- whole groups discussing and sharing knowledge and understanding of aspects of written language, such as punctuation or grammar
- activities set up which required pairs or small groups to work together on a task or exercise focused on a sub-skill of writing
- learners working in a group with the teacher to proofread and revise writing done by members of the group
- learners being encouraged to discuss their ideas together as they planned their written work.

Where learners were asked to collaborate this was nearly always at the stages of generating ideas and planning. We saw only one or two examples of activities that required learners to draft writing together. There appears to be a common expectation that written texts should be produced individually. Formal processes of peer review were not observed although a few teachers did encourage learners to exchange their drafts and to share comments. We also saw quite frequent examples of spontaneous collaboration between particular learners as they were writing.

Teachers reported a variety of motives for grouping learners in pairs or small groups, including the level of competence of the learners in relation to the task, and the needs of learners for personal support or opportunity to develop social skills.

## 6.6 Collaboration between teacher and learners

### The collaborative dimension – teachers and learners

This measures the extent to which teachers and learners have a collaborative relationship. In a highly collaborative class, for example, students would have choice and input into the type of tasks and materials, and the teacher would act as a facilitator. By contrast, in a class with less collaboration the emphasis would be on the teacher directing lesson content and instructing learners.

A number of researchers have seen benefits in the teacher taking a less dominant role in the classroom and establishing a more democratic relationship with students by acting as facilitator (Smith, 1983; Healy, 1995; Connors, 1987; Mace, 1992; Ivanič and Moss, 1991).

The teachers we observed were skilled at creating an atmosphere in their classes in which all learners could feel valued and contribute. Their comments on their sessions also indicated a willingness to be flexible and responsive to learners' needs. However, in the majority of classes observed teachers maintained a firm control over the content of the sessions and the nature of the activities.

In the small number of classes run as workshops in which learners worked on learning resources independently, learners were more autonomous, making decisions on activities and the time they spent on these.

To differing degrees some teachers did move towards the role of facilitator, once a framework for an activity had been established. To allow this to happen, they built in time for discussion and encouraged and valued learners' contributions, thus avoiding presenting themselves as the only source of knowledge. As confidence and trust developed over the weeks, we observed some learners taking more responsibility for their own learning and supporting one another.

## 6.7 Authenticity

### The authentic dimension

This scale measures the extent to which the class provided opportunity to use authentic materials and/or activities, as opposed to classroom-only materials and activities. A highly authentic class would emphasise, for example, activities that involve real audiences outside the classroom (eg, letters actually sent), real-world materials (eg, newspapers, diaries, brochures) and personal narratives. By contrast a classroom-only session would emphasise, for example, textbooks and worksheets, and tasks that are selected to practise writing skills. These may provide some context but are not authentic and do not involve communication with an audience outside the class. Use of simulated materials and activities would represent a fairly low degree of authenticity. Note that real materials such as forms can be used simply for practice.

Research carried out by Purcell-Gates et al. (2002) indicates that 'authenticity in the classroom' is positively related to change in students' everyday literacy practices. Clark and Ivanič (1997) draw a distinction between writing as meaning-making, which necessitates having a real context, audience and purpose, and writing as exercise, which involves the

practice of discrete skills and the production of pieces of writing purely for practice. However, they also acknowledge that in educational settings it may be difficult to engage in completely 'real' writing activities and propose instead that teachers should aim to use 'realistic' materials and activities.

Researchers' ratings of the classes on authenticity did not distinguish between authentic materials and authentic activities, but the detailed observation logs enabled us to separate them for analysis. These indicate that there were few examples of authentic writing activities although we saw authentic materials being used in a number of classes. Most of the writing we observed was done purely for practice with the teacher as the only audience. However, the teachers appeared happy to help learners with real-life literacy tasks when they brought them into class.

Teachers who attended a practitioner seminar as part of the project told us they thought learners who were not confident in writing could find authentic tasks 'scary'. They also stressed how difficult it could be to provide authentic purposes for writing, especially when under pressure to prepare learners for qualifications.

Authentic materials included junk mail, newspapers and magazines. Some teachers brought in articles from local newspapers or material on contentious issues printed from websites to provide a stimulus for discussion leading to writing. We saw learners using the internet for research prior to writing in five classes but did not observe the internet being used to reach a wider audience for writing. On two occasions we observed learners being asked to handwrite e-mails but we did not see e-mails actually being used to communicate with an audience outside the class. It should be noted that fewer than half the classes had access to the internet.

## 6.8 Critical thinking about writing

### The critical thinking dimension

This scale measures the extent to which teaching encourages reflective thinking about writing and language. It would include, for instance, thinking about literacy in its wider socio-political context and exploring issues such as why some kinds of literacy have a higher status than others (eg, essay writing in an educational context). It might also include a consideration of social factors that make some sorts of literacy difficult (or easy) for some people.

Critical literacy is the ability to 'read between the lines' of a text (whether written by oneself or someone else) and ask questions about how it might influence and affect the reader. It involves asking who produced it, when, where, how and for what purpose(s) and would include writing about the same subject from different points of view.

The notion of critical literacy, or critical language awareness (CLA), has developed from socially situated approaches to literacy (Street, 1985; Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič, 2000) and is concerned with the relationship between linguistic and social structures. A number of researchers have drawn attention to its importance and called for its inclusion in literacy education (see, for example, Brandt, 2001;

Luke, 2000; Lankshear et al., 1997). Critical literacy education looks beyond the classroom, enabling learners to reflect on the relationship between literacy and their own material and social circumstances. In this way literacy can become 'a resource for people acting back against the forces that limit their lives' (Crowther et al., 2001 p. 4).

We found little evidence of this aspect of writing being addressed in the teaching and learning we observed. The majority of the teaching observed was classroom-focused, with little opportunity for learners to explore and question the relationship between writing and its social context. Where researchers have rated this 'to some extent' this has generally been based on teachers' unplanned contributions to class discussion rather than planned activity.

## 6.9 Contextualisation

### The contextualisation dimension

This scale measures the extent to which writing tasks are isolated exercises or linked explicitly to a larger context and/or task. In a class which is highly contextualised, learners are clear how writing tasks, including those that focus on the sub-skills of writing, are linked to a wider learning purpose or context. For example, an exercise on punctuation arises from, or is designed to support the writing of, a particular letter; words for spelling practice are chosen because they are necessary in the context of a vocational course. By contrast, in a class that is not contextualised, written tasks are undertaken as discrete activities for their own sake and the sub-skills of writing are taught or practised independently of the writing of longer texts.

This dimension was included to explore the distinction, identified in Phase 1 (Kelly et al., 2004), between a 'fragmented' approach to writing where exercises focus on discrete skills (often presented as worksheets), and writing tasks that are located in a longer text or relate to a larger context or purpose (including those that focus on the component skills of writing, such as spelling or punctuation).

Contexts for writing activities were sometimes built up through reading material. We observed, for example, learners in a young offenders institution asked to write from the point of view of a character in a novel about homelessness, and a poignant short used to encourage learners to discuss and write about parenthood. Activities were frequently devised or materials selected with a theme that the teachers anticipated would be of interest to learners. Such themes were developed through discussion and/or reading and provided a context for tasks that focused on spelling, grammar or punctuation as well as a topic for more extended writing.

Some learning situations provided their own context, particularly where the group of learners had common interests or motivations, such as a class for army recruits or a class for learners working on a vocational qualification in hairdressing. We observed a few classes where learners' interests were engaged through researching and writing projects on subjects of their own choosing.

Where emphasis on contextualisation was low, the teachers' starting point was often a particular writing skill such as punctuation or a part of speech such as adjectives. This type of activity was sometimes undertaken in isolation from any extended writing.

## 6.10 Varied practice

### The varied practice dimension

This scale measures the extent to which the class provided learners with a variety of tasks and activities, opportunities to work both independently and with others, and a variety of methods of instruction from the teacher (eg, presenting concepts for both visual and auditory learning styles).

The studies included in the systematic review of primary research undertaken during Phase 1 (Kelly et al., 2004) identified a variety of activity in the classroom and teaching that took account of differing learning styles as related to learners' success in writing.

Classes in the current study varied greatly as the following quotes from researchers illustrate:

*It was all delivered at breakneck speed, very active with a spirit of fun.*

*The class is very quiet – people talk almost in whispers but it's not uncomfortable.*

One teacher commented that she deliberately planned a range of activities to cater for different learning styles and to maintain learners' motivation. Some adopted a consistent pattern of activity for each session, often using part of the session for joint activity and part for individual work or working with computers. Most sessions included a focus on text, sentence and word level but we observed a minority that were devoted solely to word level activities.

We observed teachers using visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities to teach writing. Several made good use of pictures and diagrams both to stimulate and to support writing. Learners were asked to listen to pieces of writing being read aloud and we saw learners read their own work aloud, sometimes with the teacher, but on a number of occasions to the whole class. Teachers also read learners' work aloud, sometimes to help the learner 'hear' where there were gaps or problems with syntax. We observed activities requiring learners to engage in a physical way with a task, such as sequencing and sorting of cards, usually with beginners.

A lack of variety and pace was observed on occasion when learners were working individually and when learners were paired with learning assistants or volunteers. However, researchers also noted times when learners were engrossed in a writing task for considerable periods and were reluctant to be interrupted.

## 6.11 The Skills for Life Strategy

Teachers were asked to comment briefly on any ways in which the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, national qualifications in literacy, diagnostic assessment of learners and the use of individual learning plans (ILPs) influenced their teaching of writing.

### The core curriculum

A majority of the teachers who commented found the core curriculum useful. It helped to

identify the individual elements of writing and to plan for individual needs. Several teachers found it valuable to identify what learners should be expected to do at different levels but others found mismatches between the content of the different levels and the needs of their learners.

Teachers' approaches to the curriculum differed. Some saw it as a point of reference but stressed that their learners' needs and interests were their starting point when planning courses and sessions. For others it was the starting point and some appeared to feel very constrained by it. A small minority of teachers felt that using the core curriculum could tend to focus skills in a more fragmented way.

#### **Diagnostic assessment and ILPs**

Some of the teachers who used published assessment tools said they found these helped them to focus on individual needs and were a useful aid to planning. A few voiced concern that, although it made it easy to identify specific weaknesses, there could be a tendency to focus on these in isolation from writing as a 'freer more communicative process'. From our observations it would appear that this was particularly the case in classes in which all or part of the time was devoted to individual work and learners were working on different tasks.

The majority of the teachers asked learners to undertake a piece of free writing on entry to the course, either in place of or in addition to the use of published diagnostic assessment materials, and found this to be the most effective way to assess a learner's writing.

#### **National literacy qualifications**

In all but one of the classes observed, some or all learners planned to undertake either an Entry level qualification or the National Test in Literacy at Level 1 or 2.

Most teachers felt it was important for learners to have an opportunity to obtain qualifications. However, a significant number said the need to enable learners to obtain these within a limited timescale, and the requirements of the qualifications themselves, impacted detrimentally on the way in which they taught writing, particularly towards the end of a course. A focus on qualifications made it harder to find time for longer projects or contextualised writing and tended to lead to individual work on specific component skills. We observed whole sessions taken up with practice tests in many classes.

Some accreditation schemes were seen to encourage the development of writing, particularly Open College Network schemes at Entry level. However, teachers and learners noted the anomaly that Entry 3 qualifications could be harder for learners who found writing difficult than the Level 1 test because they required learners to plan, draft and a write a fair copy of a piece of text they had composed themselves.

### **6.12 Summary**

In this chapter we took as our starting point the seven features of practice in the teaching of writing which may be indicators of effective practice, as identified in research reviewed for the Phase 1 study (Kelly et al., 2004). We considered the extent to which these were observed in the classes in the current study. The effectiveness of these features is unproven and one of the objectives of this study is to explore whether correlations can be found between any of

these and positive learner outcomes on the three measures described in Chapter 2. The results of this analysis are reported in Chapter 7.

Less than half of the observed sessions were rated 'high' or 'to some extent' for the dimensions based on these seven features. Only a quarter of observed sessions were rated so for 'authenticity' and 'critical thinking about writing'. Study of the written observation logs and teachers' and researchers' comments also indicates that, for several of the characteristics, the observed practice did not fully match that described in the literature from which the dimensions were drawn – even where researchers rated a session to be high on a particular dimension. For example, although we observed classes using authentic materials we observed far fewer engaged in authentic writing activities. Similarly, teachers encouraged learners to work together collaboratively on planning writing but this hardly ever led to the joint creation of a text.

It was noticeable that the great majority of the writing undertaken in the observed sessions was classroom focused and this resonates with learners' perceptions that what they learnt in class did not relate directly to writing they might undertake in their everyday lives (see Chapter 4). While many teachers told us that they planned their lessons and courses to address the needs of the learners, these needs were very often defined in their classes in terms of context-free, value-neutral skills of writing. They did not take account of the purposes for which learners may need to write or the social contexts for their writing outside the class. This tendency may contribute to the low incidence of authentic writing activities observed, and the lack of opportunities to think critically about the relationship between writing and its social context.



## 7. Correlations between learner outcomes and teachers' practice

---

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the question central to the study, namely, what is the relationship between the observed classroom practice in the teaching of writing and:

- the progress made by learners in writing
- change in learners' confidence in themselves as writers
- learners' uses of writing in their everyday lives.

### 7.2 The correlations

This analysis was undertaken on a class basis and included 34 classes for which complete pre- and post-data were available and for more than one learner. The technique used was Spearman's correlation coefficient, which quantifies the degree of relatedness of two sets of numbers. This was chosen because the teaching strategy variables were ordinal rather than interval. In addition to univariate analysis, multiple regression was also used where it was thought that variables might work in combination. Pearson coefficients were also used but were not found to yield any more significant results than those obtained through use of Spearman's coefficient.

The statistical data on practice in the classroom took four forms:

1. An overall rating of each observed session against a list of general teaching strategies, based on the *What Works Study* undertaken in the US (Condelli et al., 2003). See Appendix 1.
2. An overall rating of each observed session based on the seven dimensions derived from the Phase 1 study (Kelly et al., 2004) and discussed in Chapter 6.
3. Data on the time given to teacher and learner activity derived from the coding of the detailed written logs including:
  - a. classroom groupings
  - b. the focus of the writing activity (word, sentence and text level) and whether or not the activity was contextualised
  - c. learner activity (different types of writing activity, reading or speaking and listening)
  - d. the use of IT.
4. Data on the teachers' experience and qualifications.

Each set of data was used to calculate the correlation coefficients in relation to:

- change in learners' scores between the pre- and post-assessment tasks

- change in the number of words used in the pre- and post-assessment tasks
- change in confidence in writing as reported by learners:
  - in the classroom
  - at home
  - at work or in public
  - change in the number of uses of writing as given by learners.

The observation logs were coded for each five-minute interval under seven headings:

1. groupings
2. type of writing task
3. the focus of the writing task (word, sentence and text level and whether or not contextualised)
4. the audience for the writing
5. learner activity
6. teacher activity
7. uses of IT.

A coding manual provided a list of codes for each of these seven aspects of classroom activity. This approach was chosen in preference to a single list of teaching strategies. Researchers were trained and there was dual coding of some sessions to ensure a consistent approach. The resulting codes were complex because, in many classes, learners were engaged on different tasks for differing lengths of time. In particular, the codes for teacher activity proved difficult to use with sufficient consistency. However, selected parts of the coded data were analysed and relationships between the time spent on particular aspects of classroom activity and learner outcomes were explored. Further use is made of this data in the analysis reported in Chapter 8.

Table 7.1 summarises the correlation coefficients for all the above correlations.

Table 7.1 Correlations between learner outcomes and teachers' practice

Teaching strategy	Assessments	Confidence in class	Confidence in public	Confidence at home	Combined confidence	Uses of writing	Word count
<b>GENERAL</b>							
Shares overall goal	-.056	.105	-.165	-.106	-.121	.104	-.128
Flexible and responds	<b>.445</b>	-.092	.160	.109	-.015	.048	.008
Direct teaching	-.082	-.152	-.229	-.027	-.187	.118	-.036
Range of activities	.140	-.122	-.120	.073	-.217	.160	-.226
Opportunities for practice	-.069	-.095	-.056	-.107	-.032	-.211	.038
Open-ended responses	.132	-.210	.031	-.010	-.127	.210	-.071
Authentic communication	.081	-.050	<b>-.324</b>	.008	-.205	.053	-.117
Links learning to outside	-.042	-.172	-.102	.194	-.088	-.026	-.079
Brings outside in	-.120	.037	.192	<b>.521</b>	.312	-.151	.102
Opportunities to work together	.051	-.114	-.286	.182	-.123	.070	-.095
Provides feedback	-.122	-.234	.052	-.030	-.055	.077	-.007
Provides praise and encouragement	.152	-.234	-.076	-.115	-.196	.052	-.059
<b>OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNER INVOLVEMENT</b>							
Contribute ideas	.179	.036	.085	.260	.125	-.104	-.002
Learn with and from each other	.122	-.023	-.242	.209	-.104	.077	-.062
Make choices re content and method	.293	-.226	-.236	.116	-.247	-.085	.147
Think about a task	.046	-.161	-.129	.234	-.067	-.183	.158
Sufficient time on task	-.049	-.055	.070	.158	.030	-.064	.119
Express themselves	.090	.039	.056	.260	.078	.084	-.130
Range of text types	-.082	-.241	-.241	.140	-.200	-.188	.059
Classroom-outside connections	-.018	-.086	-.282	.141	-.165	.053	.027
<b>TEACHING OF WRITING STRATEGIES</b>							
Writing as process	.028	-.157	.024	.110	-.095	.051	.136
Collaborative groups	.033	-.074	<b>-.333</b>	.032	-.198	.048	-.055
Collaborative teacher-learner relationship	.149	-.254	-.220	.090	-.255	.083	-.024
Authentic materials and activities	<b>-.362</b>	-.201	-.240	.146	-.140	-.029	-.022
Critical thinking	-.079	-.197	-.115	-.007	-.195	-.027	-.019
Contextualising task	.130	-.084	.099	.295	.047	-.011	-.091
Varied practice	.035	-.216	-.169	.170	-.213	-.010	-.016

Correlations significant at  $p < 0.05$  emphasised in bold

### 7.3 Correlations between the general teaching strategies, the seven features of practice in teaching writing, and assessment measures

We found a significant correlation between the general strategy 'Is flexible and responds to learners' concerns as they arise. Goes with the teachable moment' and an improvement in learners' assessment scores. This strategy describes characteristics that have long been associated with good adult literacy teachers. It also tallies with learners' appreciation of teachers' understanding of their problems and willingness to explain things they did not understand (Chapter 4). In relation to writing it may suggest that support and feedback from the teacher while learners are drafting, and the 'mini lessons' in response to learners' errors

and queries (discussed in Section 6.2), are effective in enabling learners to develop as writers.

One of the seven features of practice, 'Use of authentic materials and activities' was found to have a negative correlation with changes in assessment scores. That is, it appeared that classes in which this strategy was a strong feature made less progress than those in which it was not. This finding is of particular interest as it appears to run counter to the finding of the *What Works Study* (Condelli et al., 2003) that using authentic materials in the classroom made a significant difference in reading development in ESOL literacy learners. It is also contrary to the study by Purcell-Gates (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002) which found a positive correlation between the use of authentic materials and practices in the classroom and learners' uses of literacy outside the classroom. Neither study, however, assessed learners' competence in writing.

A number of explanations could be offered for this finding and it is possible all had a part to play.

- Only 4 per cent of observed sessions were rated highly for authenticity and teachers' practice in relation to the use of authentic materials, and activities to develop writing was limited.
- Authentic materials and activities may be too complex or challenging for many learners in adult literacy classes, as suggested by the teachers' comments reported in Chapter 6.
- Teachers find it difficult to use authentic materials and activities to develop learners' writing skills. Closer analysis of the sessions awarded high ratings for authenticity suggests that, while authentic materials were read and discussed as models of different types of text, teachers did not always ask learners to write their own texts based on these models.

This result raises questions about the value placed by writers and researchers on authenticity in relation to the development of learners' writing. It could be argued that the classroom-focused writing activities we discussed in Chapter 6 are better suited to preparing learners for the type of assessment used in this study and that different measures would be needed to assess the impact of authenticity on learners' writing. It is possible that authentic materials and activities may be more important for developing learners' confidence to use writing outside the classroom than their competence as writers. This is the message of the Purcell-Gates study (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002) and it is supported by the findings relating to confidence reported in the Section 7.4 below.

It could also be argued that the hypothesis that authenticity is a feature of effective teaching of writing has not been adequately tested. Further research which involves classes using a broader range of authentic activities could usefully explore the impact of these practices on both learners' competence as writers and their confidence to use writing outside the classroom.

No other association was found between teaching strategies and changes in assessment scores.

The number of words produced for assessments, taking class averages, increased from 109 to 124 and this was statistically significant, but no association was found between any of the teaching strategies and this increased productivity.

#### **7.4 Correlations between the general teaching strategies, the seven features of teaching writing, and confidence measures**

Overall, learners reported that they were more confident in the post-questionnaire and this was statistically significant. When the three confidence measures (confidence at home, in class, in public or at work) were combined, however, no particular strategy appeared to be responsible for this overall increase.

When each of the confidence measures was analysed separately, we found two significant correlations. The general teaching strategy, 'Brings 'outside' into the classroom: for example, field trips, guest speakers, realia' was associated with an increase in confidence in writing at home. The use of 'realia' (or authentic materials) was discussed in the preceding section and the point made that a strong connection between activity in the classroom and the world outside may support the development of learners' confidence in writing outside the class rather than their competence. It is worth noting that this confidence is felt when writing at home, a domain in which learners suggested in interview they felt reasonably comfortable. It should be noted that this strategy was only observed to any degree in 11 classes.

In contrast to the overall increase in confidence at work or in public, one of the seven features, 'working in collaborative groups' appeared to be associated with a decrease in learners' confidence about writing in these domains. It is possible that working on writing with others takes learners out of their 'comfort zone' and, initially at least, exacerbates their anxieties about writing in front of other people. It may also serve to move learners from a state of 'unconscious incompetence' to one of 'conscious incompetence'. This finding has to be considered alongside the evidence from the interviews that 17 of the learners interviewed enjoyed working with other learners (see Chapter 4).

When 'learners working in collaborative groups' and 'a collaborative relationship between teacher and learner' were combined, we also found a negative correlation between the combined scale and learners' overall confidence. This suggests that learners' confidence decreases as teachers relinquish a firm control over activity in the classroom.

Comparing the confidence scores of different types of classes it appears that the nature of the class and the degree to which attendance is voluntary influences whether confidence increases or declines. Four of the five classes in the sample, run for JobcentrePlus, had an average decrease in confidence. Other classes in which confidence decreased were a prison group and a class for young people which formed part of a Foundation programme in care.

The development of trust between learners appears to support the development of confidence. Two of the classes with the highest average increase in confidence were groups made up of learners with a great deal in common: a family literacy group and a course for army recruits. Another was a group of learners who had attended a series of short courses together at a residential college. In each case the learners interviewed had made reference to the value of learning in a group. Classes in which the teacher placed considerable emphasis on the development of learners' confidence and self-esteem, often because the learners had health and social problems, also had higher increases in confidence.

### 7.5 Correlations between teaching strategies and number of uses of writing outside the class

Learners were offered a list of 15 different writing activities, for example writing a list or an e-mail, and were invited to tick those they had undertaken during the previous week. Space was provided to add other writing tasks not included in the list. On average learners ticked fewer activities on the second questionnaire. It is possible that this result simply reflects the needs or opportunities learners had to use writing in the weeks prior to the completion of each questionnaire and that a more direct question about their uses of writing would have produced a very different result.

No other statistical relationship was found between the degree to which any of the teaching strategies was used and an increase or decrease in the number of different uses of writing that learners reported.

### 7.6 Correlations between combined general teaching strategies, combined characteristics of teaching writing, and the outcome measures

When the general teaching strategies were combined into one scale and correlated with the assessment, confidence and uses of writing measures, no relationships were found. This remained the case even after controlling for a number of other class-level characteristics such as teachers' qualifications, teachers' years of experience, the level at which the class was working and the number of learners in the class. Further groupings of the strategies were tested with the same result.

This lack of correlations may be less significant than it first appears. Many of the general strategies on the list generated for the *What Works Study* (Condelli et al., 2003) are traditionally characteristic of adult literacy classes, which tend to be small and relatively informal. Examination of the combined ratings indicates that the researchers rated some classes highly on these general strategies although the practice in relation to writing was, in their professional judgment, quite weak. This suggests that practices that impact on learners' progress in writing may be specific to the teaching of writing rather than generic and the further analysis reported in Chapter 8 supports this conclusion.

In the same way, the seven features of practice in the teaching of writing, derived from Phase 1, were combined into one scale and correlated with the outcome measures without finding any relationships. This failure to find any positive correlation between learners' progress, as measured by the assessment, and individual features or the combined rating is noteworthy. It means that the data obtained in this study provide no support for the hypothesis that these features represent aspects of effective practice in the teaching of writing. It is possible that these features were also too general and that we need to look to the more detailed data obtained from the coding of the observation logs to understand effective practice in the teaching of writing.

We should also point out that there is a degree of mismatch between the measure and the practice being measured. The research on which this hypothesis was based was, in large part, linked to an 'ideological' model of literacy (Street, 1995) that sees it as reflecting and being shaped by the purposes, beliefs and values of those who use it. However, the infrastructure of the *Skills for Life* strategy with which the teachers in our study were required to work tends to support an 'autonomous' model, regarding literacy as a value-neutral, context-free set of

skills that learners can acquire and then apply to their own lives. At the same time, however, it is important to point out that the subject specifications for teachers of adult literacy emphasise the importance of context in language use. (FENTO, 2001)

### **7.7 Correlations between data derived from timed observation logs and the three outcome measures**

The percentage of time spent on certain aspects of classroom activity in the three observed sessions was analysed in relation to the outcome measures. These included: the grouping of learners, the nature and focus of the writing tasks undertaken, the time spent by learners on writing, reading, speaking and listening, and the time spent using computers. One positive correlation was found indicating a link between the time spent on writing in class and an increase in the learners' reported uses of writing.

Further analysis was undertaken on the figures for time spent on text level activity and time spent on contextualised writing activity. When the classes were split between those with over 51 per cent of the writing activity focused on text level and classes with 50 per cent or less, it was found that the 'high text focus' classes were significantly more likely to have made a larger gain in assessment scores than those with a 'low text focus'. A similar exercise in relation to the contextualisation showed no significant difference between the two groups.

### **7.8 Teachers' qualifications and experience**

Of the 37 teachers for whom we had qualifications information, 32 held a teaching qualification and two were working towards one. Some had gained teaching qualifications to teach in schools and had transferred to adult teaching. Others had qualifications in teaching adults. Twenty-nine teachers said that they had a qualification in teaching literacy. Only two had no relevant qualifications or training.

In terms of experience of teaching literacy, one teacher was in her first year; 21 had from one to four years' experience; four had from five to nine years; and six had ten or more years. Twenty-seven of the teachers reported that they had attended some form of training in literacy teaching 'recently'. No correlation was found between the teachers' years of experience and any of the three outcome measures.

### **7.9 The impact of the level of the class on assessment scores and confidence**

The relationship between the range of levels covered by the class and assessment scores was investigated. When the mean difference in moderated scores was calculated for each category set out in Chapter 3, Table 3.2, it was found that only category 6, those classes with highest levels, Entry level 3 to Level 1 (three classes), had a mean decrease in scores. There was, however, no overall upward or downward trend for assessment scores depending on level. In this context the cautionary note included in Section 5.4 regarding the nature of the assessment tool is relevant.

Class levels were also examined in relation to difference in total confidence scores. Again, there was no clear trend and differences were not statistically significant, although it appears

that learners in the lowest level classes (Entry level 1 to Entry level 2) made the least progress in confidence between the pre- and post-tests.

### 7.10 Summary

Three significant positive correlations have emerged from the analysis. These suggest:

1. A flexible approach to teaching and responsiveness to learners' concerns as they arise may have a positive impact on learners' progress in writing, as may a willingness to 'go with the teachable moment'.
2. Practice that makes a strong link with the real world beyond the class may help learners to feel more confident, particularly in the everyday writing tasks they undertake at home.
3. The more time learners spend on writing in class, the greater the impact on the range of writing tasks they undertake outside class.

The first finding fits well with the data obtained from learner interviews and analysis of the observation logs. As a general teaching strategy it reinforces long-held beliefs about the characteristics needed by teachers of adult literacy. In terms of writing it could be seen to support the observation made by Frank Smith (Smith, 1982) regarding the 'accessibility' of the teacher while learners are writing: '...teachers have to develop a sense of when to offer help, when to intervene and when to stand back.'

The second finding could be interpreted in the light of learners' greater confidence in writing at home as seen from their responses to the questionnaire and their comments in interviews. Opportunity to make a link between uses of writing outside class and the learning taking place within the class could understandably lead to an increase in confidence in this domain.

The third finding does not surprise, although the lack of correlation between time spent on writing and an increase in assessment scores might. The latter is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Two negative correlations pose more questions. These suggest:

1. The use of authentic materials and authentic tasks in the teaching of writing may not support learners' progress in writing and could possibly hinder their progress.
2. Asking learners to work in collaborative groups may undermine learners' confidence in writing in a public place or at work.

The first of these findings is the most controversial as it appears to contradict some of our other findings, and to run counter to findings from earlier studies in which authenticity in the classroom was found to have a positive impact on learner outcomes (Condelli et al., 2003; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002). However, the learner outcomes in these studies were, respectively, an improvement in reading scores and a greater use of literacy practices outside the classroom. This result raises questions about the role of authenticity in the teaching of writing which might usefully be addressed by future studies. We also surmise that authentic practice has a greater impact on confidence than on competence in writing, and we know that



improved confidence tends to precede improved competence, often by a considerable period of time. How confidence and competence in writing further affect one another remains an important question for development and research.

The drop in confidence in writing in public linked with the use of collaborative groups may, it has been suggested, be explained if this activity has the effect of moving learners from a level of 'unconscious incompetence' to 'conscious incompetence' in a domain that many learners find most challenging.

The absence of significant correlations in some cases was also important. The analysis identified no positive correlations between the seven features of practice in the teaching of writing, either individually or as a combined strategy, and any of the measures of learner progress. We have therefore found no evidence to support the hypothesis set out in the Phase 1 report (Kelly et al., 2004) that these features were indicative of learners' progress in writing.

In the light of the analysis of the learner data reported in Chapter 5, it is possible that individual learner characteristics are generally more influential in determining learners' progress and confidence in writing, than the particular approaches used by teachers.

A full description of the methodology used in this study is contained in the full report which will be available on the NRDC website.

## 8 Further analysis

---

### 8.1 Introduction

In the light of the results of the analysis reported in Chapter 7, we decided to look in detail at the nine classes which had the highest average increase in assessment scores (top quartile) and the nine classes with the lowest increase in scores (bottom quartile). This brought together evidence from the quantitative and qualitative data. In particular we looked at the data obtained from the detailed coding of the observed sessions and the written logs on which the coding was based. Through this exercise we were seeking to:

- identify any particular features of the classes, aside from the practice of teaching and learning, that might have contributed to the results
- investigate whether it was possible to identify any patterns in the statistical data for the classes with the highest increase in average scores and those in the classes in which average scores decreased
- look in a more holistic way at what happened in these classes to see if it was possible to identify features of practice, not fully captured by the quantitative data, that might contribute to the development of learners as writers.

Based on this further analysis we have identified examples of practice that our evidence suggests may be effective in helping learners to develop as writers and, supported by reference to wider research, have ventured to set out hypotheses that warrant testing through further studies.

### 8.2 Comparing those classes with the highest increases in average assessment scores with classes in which the average assessment score decreased

#### The nature of the classes

Both the top and bottom quartiles included classes working with different ranges of level. Based on figures derived from the first assessment score, the top quartile had slightly more classes which included learners at Entry level 1 in writing, while the bottom quartile had more classes that included learners at Level 1.

Both quartiles included classes in a variety of settings and both included a course run for JobcentrePlus and a prison class. However the top quartile included a preponderance of classes in adult and community learning (ACL) organisations (six) and the bottom a preponderance of classes based in FE colleges (five). This finding is noteworthy given that the sample of 34 classes for which correlations were analysed included an even number of classes from FE colleges and ACL organisations. The six ACL classes in the top quartile were, however, all very different and our data provides no clear explanation for this imbalance.

### The teachers

In the bottom quartile, two classes were taught by teachers with no teaching qualification or literacy qualification and with minimal experience in this area of work. None of the teachers in this group of classes had more than four years' experience. All the classes in the top quartile were taught by qualified teachers, and five of the nine teachers had five or more years' experience of teaching adult literacy.

### Learner characteristics

Table 8.1 shows the differences between the two quartiles in relation to three learner groups which achieved lower than average increases in assessment scores (see Chapter 5). These figures are only for the learners for whom we had complete data.

Table 8.1 **Learner characteristics for top and bottom quartiles**

	Top quartile		Bottom quartile	
	Number of classes including learners with this characteristic	Number of learners	Number of classes including learners with this characteristic	Number of learners
Non-native English speakers	4	9	6	13
Disabled learners	6	8	5	13
Dyslexia	7	9	4	9

The figures show that, while there were more non-native English speakers and disabled learners in the bottom quartile, learners from the three groups were present in a slightly larger number of classes in the top quartile. This suggests that the impact of learner characteristics is unlikely in itself to account for the differences in assessment scores.

One group in the bottom quartile included a mix of young learners who had a range of problems including drug and alcohol abuse.

### Overall time spent on writing, reading, and speaking and listening

Based on the coding of the learner activity in three observed sessions for each class, the classes in the top quartile spent on average:

- less time writing (50 per cent of aggregated time) than classes in the bottom quartile (62 per cent aggregated time)
- slightly more time on speaking and listening (26 per cent aggregated time) than the classes in the bottom quartile (21 per cent aggregated time)
- slightly less time on reading (13 per cent aggregated time) than the classes in the bottom quartile (15 per cent aggregated time).

*Notes: Some time was coded as 'other activity'. Aggregated time refers to the total of the times for which each coded activity was recorded in a class. This measure was used because a variety of activities happened simultaneously in many classes. It does not attempt to weight the times according to the number of learners undertaking a particular type of activity.*

The fact that classes in the top quartile spent on average less time on writing than the bottom quartile may seem surprising. However, it fits in with the observation made later in this chapter that, in many of these classes, teachers and learners spent a considerable time in discussion prior to writing and that exercises were often discussed in the whole group. It may also support the hypothesis that certain types of writing activity are more closely linked to improvement than others and that time spent on writing activities of any kind is not necessarily well spent. It should also be noted that 11 per cent of time in the classes in the top quartile was coded as 'other' as opposed to 2 per cent in the lower quartile. This covered a range of activities such as taking practice tests and working on IT skills, and changes the balance of activities.

#### Focus of writing tasks

Based on the coding of the three observed sessions for each class, the classes in the top quartile spent on average:

- more time on contextualised writing tasks (54 per cent writing activities) than the classes in the bottom quartile (30 per cent writing activities)
- more time on writing tasks at text level (47 per cent writing activities) than the classes in the bottom quartile (33 per cent writing activities)
- less time on word level activities (15 per cent writing activities) than classes in the bottom quartile (24 per cent writing activities).

*Note: These categories overlap. For example a writing task at text level may be contextualised.*

Contextualised writing tasks included tasks at word and sentence level as well as at text level. These served the purpose of a larger and meaningful writing task, as opposed to words, sentences or texts selected solely to illustrate or practise particular skills such as the use of commas or adjectives. 'Context' in this sense refers to the local writing environment and does not necessarily imply that the writing took account of a wider socio-cultural context for writing (Clark and Ivanič, 1997). Linked with the greater use of text level activities, this pattern suggests that approaches that focus on writing as 'meaning making', as opposed to writing purely for practice, are characteristic of classes with a high increase in assessment scores. This will be investigated further by reference to the detailed written logs.

#### Time spent in whole group

Based on the coding of the three observed sessions for each class, the classes in the top quartile spent on average more time working as a whole group (40 per cent aggregated time) than the classes in the bottom quartile (29 per cent aggregated time).

#### Evidence from observation logs

The analysis above suggests that there are differences between classes that had the highest increase in assessment scores and those in which the average scores decreased. In particular there are differences in the degree to which writing tasks were contextualised, the time spent on writing at text level and the time spent on whole-group activities. We looked at the qualitative data for these classes to discover whether this would add to our understanding of the patterns we had identified.

**Characteristics of classes with highest average increase in assessment scores**

The researchers who observed the classes were asked to record the activity in the classroom every five minutes. Their logs provide a detailed picture of the activity of teachers and learners. Analysis of these logs and the records of teachers' and researchers' comments suggest that the following are features of the majority of the classes in our study with the highest average increase in assessment scores.

- Learners spend time composing meaningful texts.
- Teachers set up tasks carefully before learners are asked to embark on writing.
- Time is given to discussion of writing tasks in the full group.
- Exercises designed to introduce and practice spelling, grammar and punctuation are discussed in the full group and are often explicitly linked to a task involving extended writing.
- Individual feedback and support, which takes account of learners' individual needs, is provided while learners are engaged in the process of writing.

We observed many sessions in these classes that were planned to build up to a task that required learners to compose text themselves. Teachers used a range of activities to prepare learners for the task in terms of the content and structure of the writing, the process, and specific aspects of style, layout, grammar and punctuation. Considerable time was often spent in discussion both with the teacher and between learners themselves. The key role of this type of social interaction in learning is pointed out by Ivanič and Tseng (2005).

Learners in these classes were sometimes engaged for extended periods in the composition of texts of different types including letters, personal accounts and presentations of arguments or personal views (Frater, 2001). For many this was a struggle but it provided an opportunity to try out what they had learned about writing for themselves; to learn through doing. Smith (1982) argues that: '... writing is learned by writing, by reading and by perceiving oneself as a writer. The practice of writing develops interest and with the help of a more able collaborator provides opportunities for discovering conventions relevant to what is being written.'

We observed teachers supporting learners as they were drafting, scaffolding the process when they got stuck and prompting self-correction. Errors and queries provided opportunities to discuss spelling, punctuation and grammar in the context of the learners' text (Shaughnessy, 1977). Individual needs were addressed through this approach.

The logs also provide evidence that in four of the classes in the top quartile, learners undertook writing at home linked to their work in class, which increased the time they spent engaged in the process of writing or 'time on task' (Comings, 2006).

Two classes in the top quartile differed significantly from the others. Both were run as workshops with learners spending almost the whole time on individual tasks so that the amount of time available for talk and for setting up writing tasks with individuals was necessarily less than that available to the whole class. In one of these classes there was a strong emphasis on preparing learners to take the National Test, and the teacher commented that this meant a limited amount of text level work was undertaken, since the National Literacy Tests at Levels 1 and 2 include no free writing. Both classes catered for learners at

Levels 1 and 2 and particular features of these classes were the higher degree of autonomy of the learners in managing their own work and a high level of motivation among learners.

#### **Characteristics of the classes in the bottom quartile**

The following are features of a number of the classes that had an average decrease in assessment scores:

- a significant amount of decontextualised writing activity
- a significant amount of time spent on activities at word and sentence level
- individual needs met through individual tasks and worksheets
- limited time given to the setting up of writing tasks.

Classes with these characteristics tended to be planned around specific skills related to the learners' needs and the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum. Activities designed to address these were often undertaken in isolation and no direct link was made to learners' use of these skills in composition. Teachers from Entry level classes in the lower quartile explained the limited use of text level work in terms of the learners' level.

As in the group with the highest increase in assessment scores, three classes differed from the others. In these classes learners spent a high percentage of the time on contextualised activities and in two of them they spent time on writing activities at text level. In two the teachers had planned work around different genres but in the sessions observed learners spent more time discussing, analysing and writing about the genres than they spent composing texts of their own. The third class was for young learners who had a range of problems and it is possible that these had an impact on their progress.

In three of the classes in the bottom quartile we observed periods of 'dead' time when learners were not 'on task'.

### **8.3 Examples from practice**

The following examples are taken from the nine classes with the highest increase in assessment scores and one class not included in the analysis because complete data was only available on one learner. They have been selected to illustrate practice in a range of very different contexts that includes the features identified above as characteristic of the top quartile. The features that are illustrated most strongly are listed at the head of each example.

#### **Example 1**

- Personal writing at Entry level
- Time given to generate ideas for writing
- Use of reading, and speaking and listening to lead up to writing task
- A specific teaching point addressed in the context of meaningful text

The following lesson took place in a prison in a class for Entry level 2–3 Literacy. The teaching space was small and somewhat crowded and the teacher had access to a restricted range of teaching materials. The lesson was structured around a theme and reading and discussion were used to prepare learners for a writing task. With support,

**learners who struggle with writing were able to compose sentences that described part of their own experience outside prison. This description was built up from the researcher's log and notes on the class.**

At the start the teacher shared the aims of the session which were to write a short account of a shopping trip in an area with which the learners were familiar and to recognise proper nouns and use these correctly in their writing. The teacher had chosen a description of a shopping area in Manchester as both a model and a stimulus for discussion, and the first activity focused on reading this aloud with the group, discussing the content and unknown words and identifying the key words. The learners then read the passage individually and as they were doing this the teacher asked them to focus on proper nouns and to underline these in the text.

The teacher encouraged the learners to summarise the report orally. They found this difficult but she supported them by using unfinished sentences as a scaffold. This was followed by 15 minutes of discussion about places with which the learners were familiar. The researcher noted that the teacher used 'lots of questioning to challenge learners to think about their senses'. She asked the learners about their experiences of shopping and supported each learner in turn to make a contribution, using a map to locate the places they described.

The learners were reminded of the task: to write about a place they knew where they go to shop or eat, and in the time before their coffee break they were asked to write down key words to help them plan the piece of writing.

Following the break the teacher talked briefly with the group about things they needed to remember when they were writing. The learners contributed to this. They were encouraged to try out spellings in rough first then look them up in a dictionary.

The learners spent up to 40 minutes working individually on their descriptions. During this time there was spontaneous discussion between some of the learners about both the technical aspects of their writing and the content. The teacher circulated, answering queries and supporting learners with particular difficulties such as sentence structure or the use of capital letters. As learners finished drafting she gave immediate feedback, marking errors such as spellings, missed words, etc. as she discussed them and often encouraging learners to check things themselves. The learners then wrote out a 'good copy'. Finally the teacher summed up the lesson giving each learner in turn brief feedback on the writing they had done. The writers achieved descriptions ranging in length from two sentences to four short paragraphs. Each piece was personal, recording the learner's own experience.

#### Example 2

- Sustained engagement with meaningful text for Entry level learners
- Imaginative use of technology which supports the teaching of writing
- Use of learners' own work to model processes of revising and editing
- Context for a piece of writing used to consider audience and purpose of writing

This example illustrates the way a teacher made use of a digital display board to engage a whole class in the revision of a piece of writing. The description was written by the researcher who observed the group.

This class was entitled 'Writing with Computers' and aimed to integrate the teaching of writing skills with an introduction to some basic computer skills. The learners were all at Entry 2 or Entry level 3 in literacy, and about half of them were English as an additional language speakers, with first languages of Spanish or Portuguese. None of the learners had used a computer before starting this course, and none had a computer at home.

The classroom had about 10 networked personal computer stations placed around three of the walls. On the fourth wall there was a digital display board. There was a large table in the centre of the room, and when the class was in whole-class mode, the learners sat around this table and faced the front so that they could see the digital display board. The teacher tended to start the lesson with an input/discussion with the whole class, after which the learners would move onto a computer to do their individual work.

The class was working on an e-mail letter. They had to imagine that they were the manager of a restaurant who had received a letter of complaint from a customer, and they now had to write a reply to the complaint. The class had written a first draft of this letter in the previous lesson.

Since the previous lesson, the teacher had taken all the learners' first drafts and put them together into one document. She had removed all the learners names and she had adapted some of the wording slightly. One of the major problems in the learners' first drafts was that they had omitted a lot of essential words, so where this had happened she had inserted a dash into the text, to indicate a missing word. The teacher told the learners that they could improve on the clarity of meaning, the spelling, and that there were some missing words.

The teacher gathered the learners around the central table and asked them to look at the digital display board, while she sat at the computer nearest the board. She put up one e-mail letter at a time onto the digital display board, and guided the learners through each e-mail, one sentence at a time, and asked them to suggest improvements. All the learners were very involved with the task, and there was plenty of lively discussion. The teacher's skilled questioning and elicitation kept the learners' focus on the audience and purpose of the e-mail; she asked questions such as 'what would you think if you read this letter?', 'what does the manager want the customer to think when she gets this letter?', 'how can we make this clearer?' and so on. As the learners made suggestions for improvements, the teacher typed them in and the learners could see the revised sentence immediately up on the board. They began to realise that as writers they could make choices about how to express themselves, and how they needed to consider the effects of their writing on their readers.

These learners tended not to read their own writing with sufficient care, but this exercise forced them to proofread carefully and to note the fine detail of the writing, such as whether they had chosen the best word for their intended purpose, whether any words were missing, or whether the spelling was correct. I felt that using the digital display board meant that the learners could focus solely on the text itself, as the teacher was keying in their ideas for them. They did not have to worry about doing any typing (which was slow for them as they were unfamiliar with the keyboard), and they were freed up to concentrate solely on the process of revision of the writing. The technology enabled them to see immediately the impact of their proposed revisions, and if they wanted to, they could immediately revise it again to make further improvements. So, in addition to the practical benefits of enabling a class to work collaboratively on proofreading and improving a piece of writing, the digital display board was also a powerful tool for fostering the concept that writing is a process.



**Example 3**

- Building up to the writing task
- Authentic purposes for writing
- Exercises shared and discussed as a group
- Teaching on sentences and paragraphs related to the writing task to be undertaken
- Time given to talk about content and structure of writing

This session was part of a 10-week 'Family Literacy' course held for parents of children in an infant school. The 10 young women in the group had joined the course primarily for the sake of their children but enjoyed the time for themselves and meeting up with other parents in the morning sessions. The course provided an opportunity for all the learners to take the National Literacy Test at Level 1 or 2 and the teacher attempted to use the morning sessions to address needs the learners had shared at initial interview together with preparation for the test. The class was of mixed ability ranging from Entry level to Level 2 in literacy. This account was written by the researcher.

The previous week the group had written letters to teachers and the session started with a discussion about the value of planning and drafting letters before writing the final version and a quick recap of the learning points from the previous session. The teacher introduced the aim for this session which was to write a formal letter, something several learners had mentioned they would like to address. The teacher then instigated a discussion around possible topics for such letters encouraging the learners to identify real letters they might need to write.

Having discussed the overall aim of the session the teacher introduced two 'revision' exercises, one on breaking up long sentences and one on organising text into paragraphs. On each the learners initially worked independently but as they completed the task the teacher talked about it with the whole group and shared sheets with possible solutions. There was considerable discussion about the value of alternative solutions and the teacher did not discount these but suggested various strategies to test them: for example, reading the sentences aloud.

These exercises were followed by another which required the learners to allocate sentences to one of three sections of a letter: the introduction, the main body of the letter or the conclusion. Again, once learners had tried this for themselves, it was discussed as a group with different answers being given due consideration. Learners were then given a sheet which provided a guide to the layout of a formal letter to keep in their files which led to further discussion about the conventions relating to the endings of letters and the ways in which paragraphs are marked.

After coffee the group returned to the task of writing letters and the teacher encouraged the learners to talk about the topics before beginning to write. Some time was spent in discussion, some in pairs and some with the teacher and after 10 to 15 minutes most learners began to plan their work. All used spidergrams and some made lists and used coloured pens to plan out their paragraphs, methods introduced in previous sessions. A few worked together or shared ideas at this stage.

The group spent the next hour writing while the teacher circulated, supporting learners individually. She told them all not to worry about spellings, to focus on getting ideas down and

to go back to proofreading and revising later. At the end of the session the scripts were handed in to the teacher. The teacher told the researcher that the learners had continued to work on their letters in the following session and had read the final versions aloud to the rest of the group. Most of the letters focused on issues that were real for the learners and some had actually been sent.

#### Example 4

- Sustained engagement with a piece of writing by an individual learner
- Writing that arose from personal experience
- Teacher support for writing during the drafting process
- Revision as well as proofreading

This example is based on an observation log for a small, mixed ability, evening class. It provides an example of sustained engagement by an individual learner with a writing task and offers some insights into the way a teacher and learner worked on a piece of descriptive writing. This learner was the only learner in his group to complete the second assessment so the class does not appear in the list of classes ranked by the average change in assessment scores. However the learner's score on the second assessment was significantly higher than on the first. He also achieved both an Entry level qualification and the National Test at Level 1 during the period between the initial and final assessments for this study. This account was put together by the researcher using the detailed log of the class.

The rationale for the activity was the teacher's diagnosis, from her experience of the learner's writing and acknowledged by the learner, that he had a tendency to write no more than absolutely necessary. She wanted him to try to write more expressively and asked him to write a piece that gave a 'rich description'.

The topic, discussed prior to the observed session, was a run that the learner had done. This had personal relevance and enabled the learner to draw on his experience rather than his imagination. The concentration and determination with which he addressed the piece suggested he both recognised the value of the activity and enjoyed working on it.

The learner spent 35 minutes drafting the piece. The teacher's first offer to look at his work after 20 was declined. After 35 minutes the teacher sat with him and started to read the draft. The learner then spent a further 50 minutes revising and editing his text before the teacher went through it with him again. The following points summarise the teacher's responses to the learner's drafts.

- The teacher's initial response is praise. This is spontaneous and appears to be genuine. It focuses on specific features of the writing where she recognises effort and improvement. She also picks out parts of the account she likes. She is a discerning and appreciative audience.
- The teacher supports the process of checking, reminding the learner of previous learning about complete sentences, subject and verb. Her comments on the influence of his speech on his writing extend and develop that understanding.
- The teacher reads parts of the work aloud to the learner. This helps him to recognise some of the gaps and see where punctuation is needed. Her suggestions are tentative, leaving the learner the responsibility to make changes. The copy of the draft provided later showed no corrections by the teacher on the script.

- Teaching points develop from specific features of the learners' text; the teacher making a more general point to explain or expand on her feedback.
- The learner's suggestion that he can 'put more into it' suggests revision rather than simply editing of surface features and this is born out by comparison of his draft and his final version.
- The learner had already learned and practised the process of planning, drafting and editing and the teacher here supports this process through her reading aloud and her prompts. The teacher notes the changes he has made.

#### 8.4 Summary

In the light of the results reported earlier, we decided to look in detail at the nine classes with the highest average increase in assessment scores and the nine classes with the lowest increases. Our analysis brought together evidence from the observations and written logs with the quantitative data. We sought to identify any particular features of the classes that might have contributed to the results, to discover any patterns in the statistical data and to look in a more holistic way at these classes.

We found no clear patterns in relation to learning context or learner characteristics. Both groups of classes included a wide range of provision and learner types. Information on the training and experience of the teachers in the two quartiles did however suggest that teacher qualifications and experience might be an important factor in learner progress. This analysis demonstrates differences in terms of quantitative measures, between classes that had the highest increase in assessment scores and those in which the average scores decreased. In particular there are differences in the degree to which writing tasks were contextualised, the time spent on writing at text level and the time spent on whole group activities.

Combining this with qualitative analysis we were able to identify features that were characteristic of the classes with the highest average increase in assessment scores and features of classes in which the average scores decreased. Based on the results of this analysis we suggest that effective teaching of writing:

- allows learners to spend time on the composition of texts of different kinds
- provides meaningful contexts for writing activities
- includes time for discussion about writing and the writing task
- provides individual feedback and support as learners engage in writing.

The findings tend to endorse the recommendation in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum that, 'The writing tasks that learners are asked to undertake need to be varied and meaningful, however basic, with an emphasis on communication. Learners need to practise writing at text level even when their grip on individual words is shaky.'

## 9 Findings and Recommendations

---

### 9.1 Findings

#### Progress

Learners made a small but significant improvement in their writing.

Demonstrable progress in writing – particularly free writing (which we assessed in this study) – cannot be achieved quickly. Our research lends support to the estimate, based on a study undertaken in the US (Comings, 2006), that learners need in the region of 150–200 hours to progress by one level of the National Standards.

Younger learners and learners in employment and full-time education made the most progress.

We found small increases in confidence in writing and uses of writing outside class.

Learners' confidence in writing tends to be higher at home, as compared to writing in the classroom or a public place, and confidence tends to increase most in this domain as a consequence of attending a course. Conversely confidence to write is lowest in a public place or at work and increases least in this domain.

Learners who were in employment were more confident in writing than those in other categories; people who were retired or not working due to sickness or disability gained most in confidence.

Learners who said they were dyslexic had the least confidence in writing and generally appeared to gain little in confidence from attending their courses. Learners whose attendance was not voluntary also recorded a decrease in confidence. (We were not able to look specifically at effective strategies for teaching learners with dyslexia.)

#### Teachers' practice

Our evidence suggests that the following are features of effective teaching of writing:

- learners spend time on the composition of texts of different kinds
- meaningful contexts are provided for writing activities
- time is given for discussion about writing and the writing task
- individual feedback and support is provided as learners engage in composition.

Teachers and learners tend to perceive learning to write as a classroom-focused activity that links only indirectly to uses of writing outside the class. Greater emphasis is placed on learners' diagnosed needs in relation to context-free 'skills' as set out in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, and assessed by national qualifications, than on learners' purposes and roles in relation to writing in their everyday lives.

Making links between what happens in the classroom and life outside the classroom,

including the use of real materials, can enable learners to become more confident about the writing they undertake at home. However few teachers make this link strongly; use of real materials is limited and few teachers ask learners to engage in authentic writing tasks that have a purpose and audience beyond the classroom.

#### Teaching and learning relationships

Two particularly significant relationships between teaching and learning suggest that:

- 1 A flexible approach to teaching and responsiveness to learners' concerns as they arise, as well as a willingness to 'go with the teachable moment', has a positive impact on learners' progress in writing.
- 2 Practice that makes a strong link with the real world beyond the class may help learners to feel more confident, particularly in the everyday writing tasks they undertake at home.

We found negative correlations between:

- use of authentic materials and tasks and changes in learners' assessment scores
- asking learners to work in collaborative groups and learners' self-reported confidence in writing in a public place or at work.

Both findings are of considerable interest: the first runs counter to findings of earlier research and appears to contradict the findings above (Condelli et al., 2003; Purcell-Gates, 2002). We surmise that authentic practice has a greater impact on confidence than on competence in writing and we know that improved confidence tends to precede improved competence, often by a considerable period of time. But how confidence and competence in writing further affect one another remains an important question for development and research. The second should be seen against evidence from the learners themselves – that they liked to work collaboratively. This is material for further development and research.

#### The learners

Many learners drew a sharp distinction between writing at home or at work, and writing learned in the literacy classroom. They tended to be dismissive towards everyday uses of writing, contrasting this with the 'proper writing' they were keen to understand better and improve in.

Learners placed considerable importance on the technical skills of writing, handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and tended to measure their progress in writing in terms of these.

Learners also valued writing as 'meaning-making' and, in particular, writing that had personal resonance. In reporting their ambitions and uses of writing they demonstrated many reasons to write that include, but go well beyond, the 'functional' writing often associated with adult literacy.

#### Teachers' qualifications and experience

Of the 37 teachers for whom we had qualifications information, 34 held a teaching qualification or were currently working towards one. In addition 29 teachers said that they had a qualification of some kind in teaching literacy.

The teachers' experience of teaching literacy ranged from less than one year to 19 years with less than half having taught literacy for less than five years. No statistical correlations were found between teachers' qualifications and experience on the one hand, and measures of learners' progress on the other, but when we examined the nine classes that made the greatest progress and compared these with the nine classes that made the least progress, we noted that the teachers in the top nine classes were all trained, and most had substantial experience, while some of those in the bottom group of classes were not trained and overall the teachers had less experience.

#### The core curriculum

A majority of teachers who commented found the core curriculum useful, helping them to identify the individual elements of writing and to plan for individual needs. Several found it valuable to identify what learners should be expected to do at different levels, but others found mismatches between the content of the different levels and the needs of their learners.

Teachers' approaches to the curriculum differed. Some saw it as a point of reference but stressed that their learners' needs and interests were their starting point when planning courses and sessions. For others it was the starting point and some found it constraining.

#### Phase 1 hypotheses

We found no evidence that the seven features of practice in the teaching of writing, identified in Phase 1 (Kelly et al., 2004), were, alone or together, linked to learners' progress in writing. However, one feature, contextualisation, did emerge as significant in an analysis of classes with the highest increase in assessment scores.

Analysis of ratings awarded by researchers against dimensions based on the seven features and the written logs showed that many of these features were observed only to a limited degree in this study. An intervention study would provide for a more probing test of the effectiveness of these features.

## 9.2 Recommendations

#### Development work and quality improvement

Our findings endorse the recommendation in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum: 'The writing tasks that learners are asked to undertake need to be varied and meaningful, however basic, with an emphasis on communication. Learners need to practise writing at text level even when their grip on individual words is shaky.'

By looking separately at reading and writing, the Effective Practice Studies draw attention to how far teachers of adult literacy employ distinct strategies for the development of these two elements of literacy. This study suggests that, where improved writing is a significant goal, teaching should include planned and structured opportunities for the learner to achieve this.

The findings suggest that teachers need to:

1. place the focus first and foremost on writing as communication
2. encourage learners to compose their own texts and support learners to do this through the careful setting up of writing tasks and use of talk

3. approach the technical aspects of writing: spelling, grammatical correctness and punctuation, within the contexts of meaningful writing tasks rather than through decontextualised exercises
4. be flexible and responsive to learners' needs, supporting learners as they draft, revise and proofread their work
5. make links between the writing undertaken in the class and the learners' lives beyond the classroom.

These recommendations are as relevant to Entry level learners as to learners at Levels 1 and 2.

#### **Policy**

Qualifications at all levels that include free writing at text level would encourage teachers to provide learners with opportunities to practise composition.

In relation to qualification outcomes, providers' expectations should be based on a realistic assessment of the time adult learners need to make demonstrable progress in writing. Attention should be given to the amount of time scheduled for the teaching and learning of writing.

Teachers and managers need to be aware of the importance of providing learners with opportunities to engage in a range of meaningful writing tasks that are relevant to their lives and with an emphasis on communication, in line with the advice in the Core Curriculum for Adult Literacy.

There is an emphasis on referencing work to the core curriculum, use of diagnostic assessment tools and ILPs, and pressure to enable learners to achieve qualifications within the duration of a course. Together these tend to encourage teachers to address writing in ways that run counter to the guidance in the core curriculum itself, and the importance placed on the social context for literacy in the subject specifications for teachers.

#### **Research**

Research should be undertaken that looks at ways in which learners use classroom learning about writing in other aspects of their lives, and at the teaching approaches most likely to increase both confidence and competence in writing outside the class.

The use of the NFER assessment for measuring progress in writing should be analysed carefully to ascertain whether it offers equal opportunities for learners at all levels to demonstrate learning gain. The guidance for the administration of the assessment tasks should also be reviewed to ensure that the assessment provides maximum opportunity to capture learners' progress. Alternative methods which might be used alongside this instrument should also be explored.

## References

---

Barton, D. (1994) *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (1998) *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. London: Routledge.

Barton, D., Hamilton, M. and Ivanič, R. (eds) (2000) *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. London: Routledge.

Barton, D. and Pitt, K. (2003) *Adult ESOL Pedagogy: A Review of Research, an Annotated Bibliography and Recommendations for Future Research*. London: NRDC.

Besser, S., Brooks, G., Burton, M., Parisella, M., Spare, Y., Stratford, S. and Wainwright, J. (2004) *Adult Learners' Difficulties with Reading: An Exploratory Study*. London: NRDC.

Bishop, W. (1995) 'Co-authoring changes the writing classroom: Students authorising the self, authoring together'. *Cosmopolitan Studies*. 23 (1) 54-62.

Brandt, D. (2001) *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brooks, G., Giles, K., Harman, J., Kendall, S., Rees, F. and Whittaker, S. (2001) *Assembling the Fragments: A Review of Research on Adult Basic Skills*. London: DfEE Research Report no. 220.

Bruffee, K. (1987) 'Writing and reading as collaborative or social acts'. In Enos, T. (ed.) *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Bryan, L. H. (1996) 'Cooperative writing groups in community college'. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. 40 (3) 188-193.

Clark, R. and Ivanič, R. (1997) *The Politics of Writing*. London: Routledge.

Coben, D. with Colwell, D., Macrae, S., Boaler, J., Brown, M. and Rhodes, V. (2003) *Adult Numeracy: Review of Research and Related Literature*. London: NRDC.

Comings, J. (2006) 'Evidence-based education: a perspective from the United States.' Paper presented at NRDC/CCER international conference, Nottingham, March.

Condelli, L., Wrigley, H., Yoon, K., Seburn, M. and Cronen, S. (2003) *What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.

Connors, R. (1987) 'Basic writing textbooks: history and current avatars'. In Enos, T. (ed.) *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*, pp. 259-274. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (eds) (2001) *Powerful Literacies*. Leicester: NIACE.



Department for Education and Employment (1999) *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A fresh start*. London: DfEE

Department for Education and Employment (2001) *Skills for Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*. London: DfEE.

Basic Skills Agency (2001) *Adult Literacy Core Curriculum*. London: Basic Skills Agency.

Duffin, P. (1995) 'Writers in search of an audience: taking writing from the personal to public'. Chapter 6 in Mace, J. (ed.) *Literacy, Language and Community Publishing*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Eves-Bowden, A. (2001) 'What basic writers think about writing'. *Journal of Basic Writing, Conference of Basic Writing*. 20 (2) 71-87.

FENTO (2001) Subject specifications for teachers of adult literacy and numeracy. Further Education National Training Organisation. [See [www.lifelonglearninguk.org/standards/standards\\_index.html](http://www.lifelonglearninguk.org/standards/standards_index.html)]

Frater, G. (2001) *Effective Practice in Writing at Key Stage 2: Essential Extras*. London: Basic Skills Agency.

Frater, G. (2004) *Writing to Learn: A Survey of Effective Practice with Writing at Key Stages 3 and 4*. London: Basic Skills Agency

Freedman, A. (1980) 'During not after: an untraditional approach to the teaching of writing'. *English in Education*. Vol. 14: No 1. Spring, 1980.

Greenberg, K. (1987) 'Research on basic writers: theoretical and methodological issues'. In Enos, T. (ed.) *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Healy, M. K. (1995) 'Beating the writing systems on our own ground'. *The Quarterly of the National Writing Project*. 17(1): 20-24.

Hodges, C. G. (2002) 'Learning through collaborative writing'. *Reading Literacy and Language*. 36: 4-10.

Ivanič, R. and Moss, W. (1991) 'Bringing community writing practices into education'. In Barton, D. and Ivanič, R. (eds) *Writing in the Community*. Vol 6, 193-223.

Ivanič, R. and Tseng, M. (2005) *Understanding the Relationships between Learning and Teaching: An Analysis of the Contribution of Applied Linguistics*. London: NRDC

Kelly, S., Soundranayagam, L. and Grief, S. (2004). *Teaching and Learning Writing: A Review of Research and Practice*. London: NRDC.

Kruidenier, J. (2002) *Research-based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: National Institute for Literacy.

Lankshear, C., Gee, J.P., Knobel, M. and Searle, C. (1997) *Changing Literacies*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Luke, A. (2000) 'Critical literacy in Australia: a matter of context and standpoint'. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. 43 (5): 448-461.

Lunsford, A. (1987) Politics and practices in basic writing. In Enos, T. (ed.) *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Mace, J. (1992) 'Talking about literacy'. *Principles and Practice of Adult Literacy Education*. London: Routledge.

Mellar, H., Kambouri, M., Sanderson, M. and Pavlou, V. (2004) *ICT and Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL*. London: Institute of Education.

National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (2003) *Three Years On: What the Research is Saying*. London: NRDC.

Phillips, J. (1992) A non-Academic Adult Writer's Workshop. In Padak, N.D. (ed.) and Rasinski, T.V. and Logan, J. (eds) 'Literacy research and practice: foundations of the year 2000'. *Fourteenth Yearbook of the College Reading Association*. 135-140.

Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S.C., Jacobson, E., and Soler, M. (2002) 'Impact of authentic adult literacy instruction on adult literacy practices'. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 37 (1) 70-92.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2000) *National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy*. London: Basic Skills Agency.

Roberts, C., Baynham, M., Shrubshall P., Barton, D., Chopra, P., Cooke, M., Hodge, R., Pitt, K., Schellekens, P., Wallace, C. and Whitfield, S. (2004) *English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL): Case Studies of Provision, Learners' Needs and Resources*. London: NRDC.

Robinson, S.J. (2001) 'A Cultural Case Study of Adult Literacy Education: Critical Pedagogy and Student Publishing in Community College Basic Writing.' Unpublished dissertation. Department of English, Michigan State University.

Russell, M. (1999) 'The assumptions we make: how learners and teachers understand writing'. National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (1999) *Focus on Basics*. 3: 1-4 (4D).

Shaughnessy, M.P. (1977) *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teaching of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, F. (1983) *Essays into Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Smith, F. (1982) *Writing and the Writer*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Street, B. (1995) *Social Literacies*. Harlow: Longman

Torgerson, C., Porthouse, J. and Brooks, G. (2005) 'A systematic review and meta-analysis of controlled trials evaluating interventions in adult literacy and numeracy'. *Journal of Research in Reading*. 28 (2): 87-107.

Torgerson, C., Brooks, G., Porthouse, J., Burton, M., Wright, K. and Watt, I. (2004) *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Interventions and Outcomes: A Review of Controlled Trials*. London: NRDC.

Torgerson, C.J., Porthouse, J. and Brooks, G. (2003) 'A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials evaluating interventions in adult literacy and numeracy'. *Journal of Research in Reading*. 26 (3): 234-55.

## Appendix 1

### General teaching strategies and opportunities for learner involvement (adapted from Condelli et al., 2003).

All the teaching sessions observed for the study were rated for the following teaching strategies using the scores below.

Key: 0 - Not observed

1 - Observed to a very limited extent

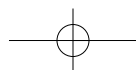
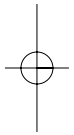
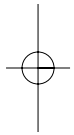
2 - Observed to some extent

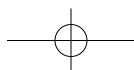
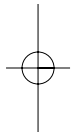
3 - Observed to a high degree (characteristic of teacher)

A General teaching strategies	Emphasis
<b>Tutor ...</b>	
1. Shares the overall goal for the lesson as well as individual activities; brings lesson back to the overall point or theme	0 1 2 3
2. Is flexible and responds to learners' concerns as they arise Goes with the teachable moment	0 1 2 3
3. Engages in direct teaching, for example: when point is unclear, pattern or point needs to be highlighted, or a generalisation is in order	0 1 2 3
4. Provides a range of activities that keep learners involved and engaged	0 1 2 3
5. Provides opportunities for practice	0 1 2 3
6. Asks for open-ended responses	0 1 2 3
7. Supports authentic communication	0 1 2 3
8. Links what is learned to life outside the classroom	0 1 2 3
9. Brings 'outside' into the classroom: for example, field trips, guest speakers, realia (should be evidence that this has happened during the course)	0 1 2 3
10. Provides opportunities to work together, do projects, jointly solve problems, read and write collaboratively	0 1 2 3
11. Provides feedback in class to learners on their work and understanding of what is taught	0 1 2 3
12. Provides praise and encouragement	0 1 2 3

**Opportunities provided in class for learners to:**

1. Contribute ideas based on their experience and knowledge	0 1 2 3
2. Learn with and from each other	0 1 2 3
3. Make choices regarding content and ways they want to learn	0 1 2 3
4. Think about a task and discuss it and how to approach it	0 1 2 3
5. Spend sufficient time on a task to 'get it'	0 1 2 3
6. Express (orally and/or in writing) themselves (even if it means making mistakes) without being immediately corrected	0 1 2 3
7. Work with range of text types	0 1 2 3
8. Make the connection between classroom-type tasks and the challenges they face outside the classroom	0 1 2 3





**EFFECTIVE TEACHING  
AND LEARNING**

# Writing

[www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)

**NRDC**  
**Institute of Education**  
**University of London**  
**20 Bedford Way**  
**London WC1H 0AL**  
**Telephone: +44 (0)20 7612 6476**  
**Fax: +44 (0)20 7612 6671**  
**email: [info@nrdc.org.uk](mailto:info@nrdc.org.uk)**  
**website: [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)**

NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education, University of London with:

- Lancaster University
- The University of Nottingham
- The University of Sheffield
- East London Pathfinder
- Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership

- Basic Skills Agency
- Learning and Skills Network
- LLU+, London South Bank University
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
- King's College London
- University of Leeds

Funded by the Department for Education and Skills as part of **Skills for Life**: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills.



Leading education  
and social research  
Institute of Education  
University of London



**EUROPEAN UNION**  
European Social Fund