



Effective approaches to the teaching and learning of writing:

a report of phase 1 of the project.

Synopsis

This research summary relates to the first phase of a project that aims to identify principles of effective teaching in adult learning of writing. The report presents the findings of three reviews designed to provide a basis for the research to be undertaken in phase 2 of the project:

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

Key Points

- ✘ The review of literature suggests that writing should be viewed as a process in which the writer interacts with what he/she has written, planning, physically writing and revising a text.
- ✘ It also suggests that writing is intimately connected to the writer's processes of thinking, as well as his/her feelings and self identity, and cannot be separated from its social, cultural and political contexts.
- ✘ There is very little sound research evidence on the factors in adult literacy programmes that

enable learners to develop effective writing skills. There is a particular need for research that will help to identify the variables that impact on adult learners' development as writers. This would make it possible to provide an empirical basis for recommendations on the teaching and learning of writing for adult literacy learners.

- ✘ Most of the primary research studies were outcome evaluations, but few reported specific causal factors. Use of authentic literacy practices in the classroom was the only variable found to be significantly and positively related to changes in learners' literacy skills and practices.
- ✘ Responsiveness to the needs of individual learners and the use of a variety of tasks and approaches are held to be important by the teachers interviewed as part of the review of practice.
- ✘ Learners placed value on the mastery of spelling and punctuation and identified these as aspects of writing that caused them the most difficulty. The teachers valued the expression of ideas above, or in addition to, correctness in the surface aspects of writing.
- ✘ Classroom observations indicated a heavy use of exercises that focused on the sub-skills of writing, which may reflect teachers' concern to respond to the needs of the learners.
- ✘ Findings from the three reviews suggest a number of variables that may be significant in the teaching and/or learning of writing. In order to test

whether these factors can be identified as predictors of learner progress, they have been developed as dimensions of teacher and learner practice that will be used in phase 2 of the project. The dimensions include the degree to which practice involves:

- authenticity of materials and communication
- collaborative approaches to writing
- making the process of writing explicit to learners
- contextualisation of writing tasks, and relevance of teaching and materials to learners' lives.

Background and rationale of research

Writing is a vital skill in modern society and in work. It is a skill that adult learners value highly. Far less research has been undertaken on the teaching and learning of writing for adult learners than on reading. As a member of the consortium that makes up the NRDC, the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) proposed a major study that had writing as its primary focus. Phase one of the project aimed to inform both the research questions and the methodology for phase 2 which commenced in January 2004.

Main elements of research

In reviewing what was known about the teaching and learning of writing that might be relevant to adult literacy learners it was important to include insights from research from a range of sectors. To make the task manageable, two separate literature reviews were undertaken. The first was a narrative review, which drew on a wide range of sources and included studies written in the context of schools or higher education. The second was a systematic review, which looked specifically at primary research in the field of adult literacy and addressed the question; 'What factors in adult literacy programmes enable learners to develop effective writing skills?'

Phase 1 also included a review of current practice. This involved 4 focus groups with teachers and 1 with learners in addition to 9 case studies across a range of provision in 8 of the 9 English regions and one penal establishment. Observation of 2 classes in each of the 9 organisations, interviews with teachers and group interviews with learners were undertaken by trained practitioner researchers. The small scale of the review requires that any generalisations drawn from it must be treated with caution. The findings have informed the design of research tools for phase 2 which will provide more authoritative evidence.

Consultation meetings with practitioners, managers and researchers in the field of adult literacy provided invaluable feedback on the findings of the 3 reviews and this has been incorporated into the report.

References and further reading

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