

Languages in Education
Languages for Education



Language Policy Division

Writing

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Writing

This section of the platform provides an overview of writing as a key dimension of language as subject. It considers various aspects of the writing process and addresses some key questions facing policy developers and teachers. It stresses the need for a broad approach to writing in language as subject. The section ends with a series of 'questions for consideration' to help readers reflect critically on their own policy and practice.

List of contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Learning how to write	5
3. Writing development	6
4. Writing for different purposes	7
5. Genres in writing	8
6. The writing process	9
7. Writing in language as subject in multicultural and plurilingual classrooms	10
8. Writing in modernity- multimodal texts	10
9. Writing as text production	11
10. Questions for consideration	12

1. Introduction

Modern society is more dependent on written text than any former society. Most people will have a need to use reading and writing in virtually every domain of their lives: personally, educationally and professionally. Reading and writing are competences which are closely connected; the competent reader benefits from writing and vice versa.

There have been different opinions on how children can best develop their writing abilities. Advocates of an intuitive, natural-development approach claim that a sense of form and genre in writing will develop automatically through reading as long as the students are provided with opportunities to develop their own ideas. Others argue that an intuitive approach favours learners from privileged backgrounds who already have implicit knowledge of text forms.

There are also different opinions on how the intended progression and development may be ensured, and there are different opinions on which domains of writing should have a more prominent place within school curricula. Young students seem to prefer to write narratives if given a choice, but this may be because they are not given enough opportunities or tools to write in factual genres. There is a view that argumentative writing should not be ignored even with young students. Whereas narratives are structured by following a time line and to a certain degree can draw upon oral forms of expression, argumentative writing demands more knowledge of writing conventions and structuring systems. The writer is not in a position to depend on oral examples when writing these kinds of texts because, for the most part, ordinary “argumentative” oral productions are not sufficiently precise for direct transfer to a written form.

There are likewise different traditions and opinions on the purposes and contexts for language as subject writing, and what type of connections should be made between language as subject writing and writing across the curriculum (See text on [Language in other subjects](#)). In language as subject, writing abilities are seen as general competences covering a great variety of cultural expressions, artistic and utilitarian. However there is an area of overlap between writing in other subjects and language as subject writing, especially in skill areas like descriptions, explanation, argumentation and discussion. Curriculum developers face the challenge of how to finding ways of making language as subject writing and writing in other subjects more coherent.

There are also different views on which writing competences should be expected at different stages, as well as different views on which tasks and genres a writing programme should contain. Finally there are different views on what the teacher’s role should be and what methods should be used to enhance writing ability. Some educators claim the need for real communication situations for writing, and some research supports the idea that quality of student writing increases when the learners write for a genuine audience other than just the teacher as assessor. The students should have the opportunity to express their own thoughts and opinions and relate to others through writing. The idea is that students write better if they feel a personal ownership towards, and have interest for, what they write. Other educators object to this view by pointing out the limits of this approach: writing to known readers is limiting the scope of genre as well as the content and issues of writing. Strict procedures of methodological approaches to writing, for example in process writing in the 1980s, seem to have less prominence in recent years. Research confirms that there is no single solution on how to become a good writer or to develop a good text. There does, however, seem to be a

growing consensus on the need for conferencing (one-to-one support) and supervision during writing processes as well as an increased understanding of writing as a social event, an activity in community with others. There is a challenge in finding the right balance between explicit systematic approaches and providing opportunities for learners to express their own ideas in writing. These issues will be elaborated and discussed in more detail.

The overall aims for writing in language as subject are often closely connected to the general aims for schooling and education. Writing abilities are crucial for thinking, meta-cognition, self expression, and learning as well as for mastering writing specifically for different purposes in and outside school. Thus writing is important not only from a utilitarian perspective, but also plays a crucial role in meeting broader curriculum aims (related for example to the concept of *Bildung*). Learning to write in education helps students to think, to express themselves and to develop competences necessary to participate in society.

2. Learning how to write

While the development of the ability to speak is often viewed as an individual, natural process, reading and writing require conscious, guided teaching. Some children do appear to learn to read and write with minimum intervention and not necessarily in a pre-determined order but generally these abilities need to be taught and nurtured. There are mainly two approaches to initial school writing. One is based on the understanding of the connections between sounds and graphemes. The child is able to make the transfer from the sound to the letter and to understand words as a compound of letters. The integration of reading and writing is crucial to this approach. Further there is a strong linear logic involved, both for the learning and for the physical process of writing: the progress goes from letters via morphemes and words to sentences. These are seen as language levels, which are taught explicitly as well as through practice. Accordingly, mastering spelling and grammar in children's writing is an indication of whether the child is making progress in their learning to write.

The other approach to teaching writing is related to meaning in a broad sense. Some theorists consider the core motivation for speaking and writing to be meaning making. Hence an adequate writing pedagogy and a suitable didactic approach should stimulate even initial learners to produce real utterances. Methodologies connected to this ideology will support the children to think and express themselves right from their first encounter with writing. 'Writing' becomes shared enterprise around real meanings between school, teacher and class. In classrooms based on these ideas of initial writing, children may produce 'texts' even before they master their 'own' actual writing. They may dictate to the teacher who can act as secretary for stories or utterances the children want to communicate. Supporters of this approach emphasise the communicative perspective as well as the idea of helping pupils to understand writing as an activity for producing and conveying meaning. The assumption is that this approach also enhances the notion of coherent text. Combinations of the two methodologies are possible and desirable in practical classroom work.

The young writer often needs to communicate with others not only as a result of the writing process, but during the process as well. Writing becomes part of a social interaction within a learning group or between teacher and pupil. In this process the teacher has the possibility of strengthening the idea of the intended reader of the text and the purpose of the communication.

3. Writing development

There is a challenge involved in defining some writing as more advanced than another without simplifying too much. It is fairly self-evident that some writing tasks are more demanding than others, but this should not lead to an oversimplification of what is involved in more basic tasks; even the simplest form of writing implies more than one skill. Children have to master a number of competences at the same time. They have to have an idea of why they are writing, to whom and for what purpose. They must find words, make sentences and choose a form suitable for the purpose. This means that there always is a cultural aspect in writing. Writing a short text may be an easier task than writing a longer one, but not necessarily. Competences for initial learning to write may turn out to be multiple. Despite these complexities, it is necessary to identify a likely or possible progression for learners' writing development.

A writing programme also needs to be specific about certain prioritised text types or genres. In practice one may tell a story chronologically, but the quality of the text will increase if the writer has the ability to arrange sequences according to a main idea, to use style and details purposefully and to emphasise important parts. In other words: there is a possible development of competences in writing narrative that goes from simple description of events to a more fully developed story. This goes for other genres as well. Writing an article based on simple description or presentation of facts is normally less complicated than presenting different views on an issue or discussing them. The level of competences often is dependent on the issue itself and the expectation of elaboration and discussion.

However, this implied expected development of learners' competences may not happen at all, and increased capacity to write stories may not follow the same pattern for all learners. There are risks involved in tracking and describing development in learners' writing over time, and it is even more problematic to prove from which activities increased quality originates. Learners may reach higher levels of competence without following a predicted and taught step by step development.

Nevertheless, most curricula developers make decisions about progression, either implicitly or explicitly. Implicitly this is done by the year by year arrangement of expected activities and achieved competence. It is for instance expected in some programmes that writers in general develop a sense of text with a defined issue and that they are able to describe or tell consistently through sentences and paragraphs and produce a headline appropriate for the content. The dilemma later on in language as subject schooling is what demands should be introduced at which levels (see text on [The use of descriptors in learning, teaching and assessment](#)).

Generally writing competences will grow over the years. But this does not happen automatically for the learner, it happens through maturation, practice and education. The challenge is to know which activities lead to which competences. An impression from newer research on writing development is that writing has never been seen as more open, intricate, manifold and complex than now. Thus at the moment there is hardly enough research to support a valid explanation of progression. Nevertheless, experienced teachers who have the opportunity to follow their learners over years may have developed a fair sense of what progression they might expect on a level in a certain class and at a certain age. To transform these personal experiences to national and international curricular thinking is not a straightforward matter.

4. Writing for different purposes

Writing outside school has almost an infinite number of functions. Language theories have through the last century developed a range of different explanatory sets of functions based on research to try to create some sort of order in this chaos. Most of these stem directly from grammars. Different educational systems have at different times selected simplified categories from those theories, often rather uncritically to be used in school writing. In addition schools have had their own traditions, shifting through centuries, taking purpose and direction from rhetorics as well as cultural, religious, didactic and political ideologies.

After the pragmatic turn in 1970s many models for writing purposes were introduced in schools and educational programmes. Generally these purposes were directly related to simplified sets of language functions. As society has changed, understanding of the different communicative functions and purposes for writing has changed accordingly. Educators are therefore faced with the question of choosing a necessary restricted set of didactic purposes. A symptom of how different countries have handled this issue is found in the great variation of genres in written curricula over time and across borders. This genre variety reflects more or less directly the many different societal needs for communication purposes.

Although writing in school has great variety and a number of functions, it is possible to identify two main functions: epistemic and communicative writing. In other words: there is writing which has a function mainly for learning and for clarifying thoughts (*epistemic*) and writing for communicating knowledge, thoughts and ideas to others (*communicative*). Writing down their understanding and knowledge helps learners to get a better grasp of their learning processes. This epistemic writing may have an impact not only on learning processes but may indeed also serve as preparation for communicative writing. Inconsistent and fragmentary epistemic writing may have the function of exploring possibilities of text content. Without having to focus so much on structure and genre the pupil may use this writing for developing ideas, thoughts and arguments and to have a more clarified idea of aspects that may be included in the final text.

Communicative writing of text on the other hand demands cohesion and coherence and genre awareness. The young learner will have to learn how to structure a text according to elements of the content in sentences and paragraphs and arrange the different parts in logical sequences, and will have to develop a variety of writing strategies for different writing tasks. For instance two basic structures, such as following a time structure in narrative and a thematic structure in non fictional texts and learning to combine them in different genres will gradually have to be part of the repertoire of the learner.

Emphasis on different purposes for writing may enhance an increased understanding of how written and oral language differs and how style and vocabulary vary in different contexts. The child will normally enter school with a functional oral language for everyday use. Reading and writing contribute to a wider scope of language use, but one can not depend on this happening without systematic approaches of teaching and a clear understanding of how progression may take place. In this process that develops over many years, the child will get acquainted with more academic uses of language and also various forms of artistic language of literature. This extended language awareness and competences are key issues in language as subject. While some children benefit from backgrounds which automatically offer socializing into academic uses of language, children in vulnerable groups are dependent on school to help them understand and learn the wide spectre of cultural codes embedded in formal language use. Especially for these children curriculum aims like participation and access remain empty phrases if not directly connected to acquisition of a broad notion of language for many purposes.

5. Genres in writing

Despite theoretical disagreements, genres are given a key role in many language as subject curricula, and especially regarding writing. It is assumed, for example that pupils should be able to write articles, stories, reports, résumés, essays etc. The ways genres are defined and understood have both a cultural impact and pedagogical implications; they emerge at different historical periods as a result of textual needs or needs in society; they change over time and they are defined more or less specifically: through form, function, modes of communication and tradition. Focus of genre in writing can raise some problems: the danger of confusing genre with text *forms* only. If genre is reduced to a text form and dynamics of communicative functions are ignored, teaching and assessment of student text may likewise be in danger of being reduced to formal procedures

In various school subjects particular genres seem to constitute the very field of knowledge specific for the subject. To learn and to be assessed in a school subject will imply the ability to express its disciplinarity in its core genres. Learners take on a role when writing (and talking) in the various discourses of the subject. Their ideas of vocabulary and style somehow become echoes from textbooks, teachers, the Internet and other sources in society. Their way of thinking about cultural forms will also be influenced by the discourses. There is a difference between writing in language in other subjects and language as subject in this respect. In language as subject the aim is to master a chosen *general* set of genres for cultural communication, while writing in each school subject serves disciplinarity in a broad sense.

A comparative perspective on curricula and exam tasks in compulsory school in Europe shows that although demands of writing abilities are similar, the way these demands are expressed differs. In some countries genre is the focus; pupils should be able to write articles, stories, etc. In others the focus is placed on modes of expression like being able to describe, explain, present, discuss, argue, tell etc. These two approaches are, of course, strongly connected; to master a genre implies knowledge of the latter, and mastering the modes of expression will consequently lead to something often recognised as genres.

The idea of writing ability being not just *one* phenomenon but several different competences connected to different kinds of texts for a variety of purposes may lead to prioritising explicit teaching of writing in different genres/modes of expression. There are however different opinions on how this best can be performed. Should genre be taught as explicit categories or is it enough to assume that a child will learn genres more intuitively through reading and connection with cultural forms in the text culture around them? Should the point of departure be the text or the student?

In many European classrooms there seems to be a balance between specific genre teaching and learning through text models. It is sometimes felt that focusing on rules for genres is too restrictive. However learners could be taught important traits of genre structure and style even if emphasis on genre rules is subdued. Pupils may benefit from having a clear idea of possibilities and boundaries of a genre. They may use well known frames for their own personal expression and even be more creative within some restrictions than they would without them. Those who argue for specific genre instruction claim that a clear notion of a genre is a prerequisite for being able to participate in criticism of existing discourses and for change.

A key question in language as subject curricula is which genres should be included in a writing programme. In many schools all over Europe there exists almost a canon of school

genres for writing. The problem occurs when writing practices in schools limits the understanding of what writing implies and thus limits the understanding of written texts in society. If the aims of language as subject include extensive language competences for personal and social purposes in and outside education, the scope of writing genres should have an equally extensive scope. Again, attention should be paid to the learner's repertoire and its extension. Recent genres occur along the line of written and oral communication. Genres can be observed in chats, but also in popular arts, e.g. Hiphop-Raps, where socio-cultural contexts as constituents of the genre can be observed. Developing a differentiated spectre of genres in language as subject may be a challenge for teaching but has the advantage of bringing the activity and the pupils' competences more in accordance with text forms used in society.

It is possible to distinguish broadly between three basic forms or of institutionalised writing: initial learning to write (normally in the first years in school), writing for goal directed learning (educational writing) and writing as an integrated activity (in institutions and contexts outside school). What is common for all these contexts though is that the interplay and hence the communication between the writer and the institution is heavily *task based*. The concept 'task' is often given a rather broad meaning including the short direct oral orders a teacher gives or, outside the school context, the vague expectations an employer has of what an employee is supposed to achieve by writing. However a 'task' can also take a much more explicit form. The balance between giving strong guidance and allowing a high degree of independence is at the heart of the challenge of teaching writing and of creating a sensible writing programme with progression from year one to the end of schooling, or rather, to the end of education.

6. The writing process

After a longlasting and heavy tradition of focusing on the product of writing in schools worldwide, more pedagogical energy in the last decades has been directed to the writing process. In some countries this widening of focus has only recently impacted on the curriculum. This change of emphasis brings several unsolved tensions: firstly between the amount of time and resources that should be spent on each text, secondly how formative and summative evaluation should be balanced and thirdly how much didactic energy teachers should put into helping learners to find more individual ways into writing relative to the impact on writing practices from national and international testing.

The knowledge and skills needed for text production cover a wide range of competences. Some of them can be taught and learnt through instruction, others must be acquired in a cultural context over a long period of time. It seems obvious that declarative knowledge of texts is not sufficient, procedural knowledge must also be developed. In other words: learners must develop functional strategies for writing. A common, but not very functional strategy for students' writing is text production based on associations that may occur arbitrarily as the writing proceeds. This strategy may work well in drafts, but would normally be unsatisfactory for a finished product. One way of attaining more functional strategies for writing is to expose students to a systematic way of going through a writing process: various ways of inventing/creating content, various ways of structuring etc. The ultimate aim would then be that pupils automatically supervise their own writing and produce the critical questions needed for revision and correction. Self-assessment based on knowledge of text is a key to progression in writing. Before this can happen, learners need help from the teacher or from peers who may comment on the writing, pointing out strengths and weaknesses and suggesting alterations.

The methodological approaches to obtain an understanding of the writing processes are multiple, but an underlying principle is the idea of separating supervision from evaluation. To keep track of drafts and comments and thus help learners to follow their own progression and enhance self assessment, many language as subject teachers find it useful to use writing portfolios.

7. Writing in language as subject in multicultural and plurilingual classrooms

It is sometimes assumed that European classrooms have only recently changed from being monocultural to multicultural. However this view may be challenged by pointing out that many European countries have had minority groups who have spoken their own language for a long time. Furthermore, even monolingual societies consist of different subcultures. Heterogeneity has been a constant trait in many contexts, although not always taken into consideration in teaching practice. However in contemporary societies the heterogeneity of many classrooms may look different and have different implications due to increased immigration. This has an impact on language as subject writing. In the past it was generally assumed that the learners' main spoken language could function as a sound basis for the school's writing pedagogy. In many countries this ideal condition no longer exists.

Therefore curriculum designers face a dilemma when deciding in which language initial literacy (learning to read and write) should happen where the learner's and the state's preferred language do not coincide. When learning to write also means learning to write in a second or foreign language, the mistake of taking general knowledge of text and communication for granted becomes obvious. Teaching writing in homogeneous groups is often based on implicitly expected knowledge of text and cultural codes. However, when teaching writing in different genres to minority groups, the need for making the implicit explicit becomes evident and urgent. Learners from minority backgrounds and possibly different traditions for writing genres, purposes and styles will have to get acquainted with the cultural conventions of writing in and outside school. This means special attention to specific writing for this group of learners as well as for other vulnerable groups who need special attention. One may however emphasise that coming from another cultural background does not necessarily represent a problem for the individual learner or for the classroom situation. Comparative perspectives on different traditions for genres and texts in different societies may indeed enhance plurilingual competences for the minority learner as well as for the majority group.

8. Writing in modernity- multimodal texts

Children's early text production is multi modal. They express themselves through combinations of drawings, letters and other semiotic visual signs even before they come to school. In pre school we often find examples of how children practise something we may call 'play writing' which may be understood as part of socialising into the world of texts. Using computers for this play writing gives children new opportunities to enter this domain. They might write without mastering the skill of the hand and they might play with combinations of pictures and words in new ways.

In modern society literacy in writing has been redefined not only to be able to write in the traditional sense, but also to command the production of text in new media. This implies composing texts by combining visual effects and pictures with verbal language and thus create meaning. Mastering digital tools play an important part in such text production and has

become an immanent part of writing classes in many schools. Digital text production however may play a major role in pupils' life outside school; they communicate in new media and genres and use their production of text for new purposes. It has become more common to use literacies in plural to be able to describe the complexities of uses and competences in dealing with texts. In describing reading and writing as social practices or events it becomes more clear that language use is not just behaviour but also involves values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships.

School is definitely not the only arena for writing and text production for young learners. They present their texts in public, often for an unknown audience without always being aware of the consequences of shifting from a private to public scene. Learning how to act and how to be cautious in publishing texts in different media will have to be part of writing competence in the future. And the enormous possibilities of copying other people's texts available in the internet calls for a new awareness of who owns a text and how other people's texts may or may not be used for one's own purposes.

9. Writing as text production

Writing abilities are developed over time, not as separate skills, but as a complex system with a wide notion of cultural competences: knowledge, skills and attitudes/ dispositions, components and cultures developed by schools. The proposed table illustrates this complexity and shows how the different components are dependent on each other.

subject: language as subject	knowledge	skills (specific methods and strategies)	dispositions and attitudes	learning to learn (methods and strategies; self assessment)
Writing (Text production)	General knowledge of text structures, coherency and writing conventions (differences between oral and written texts) Specific genre related knowledge. Various cultural background knowledge to create content. knowledge of language (grammar and vocabulary)	Writing strategies and methods for text production in a variety of contexts and for a variety of aims. Ability to use and combine knowledge adapted to a specific task	Understanding purposes of communication. Creativity in exploring various modes of expression. Judgement of selecting form and content., Critical and flexible thinking	transferable procedures based on using communication and interaction in learning metacognition

10. Questions for consideration

Do the aims of the language as subject curriculum reflect a sufficiently wide conception of the educational value of writing?

Is there a sufficient balance between an emphasis on technical aspects of writing and a focus on meaning, engagement and motivation?

Is the writing curriculum sufficiently broad with regard to the range of genres pupils are expected to master?

How does the writing curriculum ensure an element of progression without constraining teaching practice and pupil achievement?

Is there in practice sufficient connection between reading and writing?

Are teachers given sufficient support to ensure their explicit teaching of writing is sufficiently focused without being too disjointed and mechanical?