

INFLUENCES ON EMERGENT L2 WRITERS

by Andrea Liendo, OISE

As a grade-one teacher in a Toronto inner city elementary school for over 30 years, I have had the privilege of teaching a wide range of second language learners with a variety of different L1s. Most of these young learners were in the emergent writing stage. Emergent writing is a developmental stage of writing that all young L1 and L2 writers pass through. Emergent writers are beginning to understand that print carries a message and they may be familiar with many concepts about print simply from living in a print rich environment (Clay, 1988). These writers may use pictures, single letters to represent words, and inventive spelling to communicate their messages. Literacy acquisition in an L2 is a highly complex process, influenced by a variety of external factors, including parents and home environment, teachers, the classroom environment, prior life experiences, and peers (Cumming, Leki & Silva, 2008). I discuss these factors in relation to my teaching experience.

Buckwalter and Lo (2002) draw upon studies by a number of scholars to argue that children in the emergent stage of writing possess a variety of different skills that they have internalized from experiences with print at home or in their environment. They show that the attitude of parents and the home environment in which a child lives influences the success and attitude a young L2 learner has towards their newfound language. Ming, who was part of a study by Buckwalter and Lo (2002), is a 5 year old boy, from Taiwan, living with his parents in the United States and an emergent writer in English, his L2. Ming's parents, like many L2 parents I have encountered, believe inventive spelling occurs due to "carelessness or ignorance" (Buckwalter & Lo, p.274, 2002). Many parents fail to see the value of inventive spelling as part of the process of learning. This attitude may have detrimental effects on a young L2 learner. For example, one of my L2 students would erase the work on his paper so often he would make a hole right through the paper. His goal was to print the word perfectly and correctly. This student would end up spending 30 minutes simply printing one word, focusing on only this surface skill and not the meaning of his message and what he would like to say. He became perfectionistic and afraid of making errors, which detracted from his ability to learn to read and to write. I spoke with his parents, hoping to assist them with understanding that inventive spelling was part of the emergent writing process at this stage of learning. I explained there were words he could memorize, such as high frequency words. I also discussed how sounding out words and experimenting with letters and their sounds was part of how he would learn about the alphabetical sound system in English. This family came to accept this perception and

assisted their son in ways I suggested. Sadly, some families never embrace this philosophy and I have had occasions where I had to call The Children's Aid Society, as a parent had beaten their child for not printing a word or a sentence neatly and correctly.

Pictures are often considered irrelevant or ignored by both my L1 and L2 parents. Anning (2003) argues that, "drawing and writing are vehicles for both personal reflection and communication with others" (p.8). Parents often fail to see drawings as a part of writing and the meaning a child is attempting to convey. One of my students' mothers drew pictures for her child when an assignment was sent home that required a picture. The mother was afraid that her child's picture 'was not realistic enough' and she would be penalized for this. The child told me she was not allowed to draw. When reading, her parents would cover the pictures, telling her if she could not read the words without looking at the picture, then she did not know how to read or to write. Pictures that young children include with their work are as important in conveying meaning as words and should be valued (Anning, 2003).

I noticed that some children do prefer to begin their communication or message they are writing with a picture and then add print to it, drawing their words from the picture they made. In my experience, children that are punished or forbidden to draw pictures before writing struggle with the writing process. One of my students did not draw because it was forbidden at home. He would say, "No pictures. My mother does not like them." He found it challenging to write freely, and was focussed so intently on printing correctly, that any meaningful message was often lost. He was paralyzed, unable to freely enjoy drawing a picture as part of the writing process. Research indicates that children who are formally taught the difference between writing and drawing too early, have a more difficult time creating stories (Anning, 2004).

Parents who provide a literate home environment and positive attitude towards learning in any language can have a positive effect on L2 students (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002). For example, once Ming's parents believed that he was ready to write in Chinese, he learned to do so rapidly (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002; Cummins, 1991). I have found that parents who are enthusiastic, interested in their children's day, and ask questions, even if they do not speak or write the L2 themselves, can have a positive effect on their children's learning of the new L2. These positive families send their children to class prepared to learn. These parents and students frequently request materials to take home because they want to practise reading and writing at home as much as they can. They are eager to have their extra work displayed on our classroom wall. One of my L2 students who spoke Arabic as her first language drew a picture of her neighbourhood while at home after we had studied maps and created some in a class project. She requested that her work be posted in the classroom. Her map included the word 'Stop', on a stop sign, and 'Walmart', and 'M' for McDonalds. These were all places near her home and that she could explain and write in her L2.

Access to materials in both English and Chinese, assisted Ming in becoming literate in his L2. He did not experience any confusion between the two different language systems (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002). Intuitively, I understood when teaching L2 children that literacy

in L1 supported L2 learning (Cumming, Leki & Silva, 2008). I felt it was important to encourage my L2 students to be proud of any literacy knowledge they may already have in their L1. I would frequently read dual-language books in my classroom to encourage my students to take pride in their L1. At times, I felt students in my classroom seemed to be embarrassed or ashamed of their L1, reluctant to communicate with their parents in that language. Some parents valued learning the L2, English in this case, so highly that they often forced their children to read and write entirely in English, not teaching or exposing them to any reading or writing in their L1, for fear of language confusion. I frequently had to encourage parents to allow their children to read and write in their L1, explaining that they would learn literacy skills in their L1 which would be valuable to learning in their L2 and not detrimental (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002).

To encourage L1 pride, and an understanding of the value of my students' home knowledge, I suggested to my students that we all bring in books, food labels, games, and materials from our L1 (or L2 in my case). I wanted to avoid any of the "narrow versions of literacy" (Anning, p.6, 2003) that can sometimes be present in our school system and the undervaluing of the knowledge my students were bringing with them from home. Parents actually asked if it was really okay for their children to bring in materials in their L1 because they were concerned about their children confusing the two different language systems or not learning English because of their L1 knowledge. I invited parents in for these lessons. With these materials we discussed how languages were similar and how they were different and recorded this information on a class chart. We also examined how books, writing, and the alphabet were the same or how they were different in some L1s and L2s. The students noticed all books had pages, pictures, an author, some form of print, and a story, but some were read in opposite directions. They discussed the fact that their parents could often read in and use both languages and to some extent so could they. We also explored who read to them and from what materials. Students taught me how to read a few words and say numbers in their languages. We chose a different language in the morning from the afternoon lesson on numbers or words. We all learned the words or numbers each student taught. They found it fascinating that I had to relearn some of the words or the numbers in their language the next day. From this experience my young students came to understand they owned knowledge or literacy in their L1s and it was valuable and important. They also saw themselves as literate in their L1s and I was not, which I felt would impact the way in which they would now approach learning their L2. I also shared some of my own experiences with learning to speak and write in another language, and how I too needed to practise.

The more literacy my students were exposed to in their home and world prior to attending school, the easier it seemed to be for them to learn to read and write in their L2. Buckwalter and Lo (2002) drew upon research by Cambourne (1995) that argued "the more learners are exposed to literacy-related behaviours, observable print in the environment, and adequate periods of time to engage in reading and writing, the more likely they are to engage in literacy activities" (p. 272). Students who had used crayons, pencils, and books,

and attended school in their home country came into the classroom prepared and ready to learn.

One of my young students had spent his entire early life escaping persecution with his family. After they did find safety, he spent three years in a refugee camp. Initially I felt as if I was not teaching him so much as simply making him feel safe. This young boy seemed challenged by having missed out on many early emergent literacy and life experiences. In addition, his family confided in me they all had endured many deep traumas. This student struggled with literacy in all forms as he had never attended school and had limited exposure to any literacy in his life prior to walking into my classroom. In class he had more to learn than his peers. He had to learn early emergent skills that other students had already demonstrated. He also needed to learn not only how to speak in English but also how to hold a pencil or marker, how to draw, make shapes, or print the alphabet, how to use scissors, how to cut and paste, as well numerous other skills that were new to his daily life.

It was not about ability so much as lack of experiences with any schooling at all. This little boy loved to build structures at the art table and with blocks or Lego, often appearing relaxed and peaceful most often doing these activities. I recall one incident where he constructed this incredible-looking car out of boxes and tubes at the art table. I encouraged these activities hoping it would assist him in acquiring some confidence and a sense of place in his new classroom. When he completed his car, he chose to label his creation 'car' and print his name on the front and displayed it on our art table in the school hallway. He was now beginning to use and apply simple forms of emergent literacy.

The classroom environment and the peers surrounding the early L2 learner can have a tremendous impact on literacy success and learning (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002). Students in my class often need to learn genre-specific language. They rely on their peers who speak English more fluently to guide them and assist them in determining the correct words and phrases to use. When studying fairy tales in my class, L2 students who had never written a fairy tale were working in small groups, orally sharing their ideas. L1 peers taught them to copy the words, 'Once upon a time...' explaining this as one way to 'begin' or 'retell' a fairy tale. One of my students wrote nothing but those words and then drew a picture to explain the rest of his fairy tale. L1 writers can draw upon and use their oral language to support their writing whereas young L2 students may not have yet developed enough oral language in their L2 to support their writing (Cumming, Leki & Silva, 2008). Younger emergent writers may not have been using their oral language knowledge to learn to write, but they were drawing upon their L1 peers' oral and internal language abilities (Parks and McGuire, 1999).

Mentorship is beneficial at any age. I often pair my younger students up with older, more experienced mentors to assist them in navigating the school and their day more successfully, just as inexperienced L2 nurses were mentored by more experienced L1 and L2 nurses in the study by Parks and McGuire (1999). Older students truly enjoyed this role. One of

my L2 students looked forward to working with her new-found older friend, and shared snacks with her, read books to her, and wrote her cards. The impact on literacy was quite remarkable. This young student made cards and letters for her parents and family members and quickly learned to read simple pattern books in English. From this experience she was exposed to different genres, new vocabulary, English phrases, numbers, drawing, and oral interactions with an English-L1 speaker.

L2 learning is a complex process, but family support at home, paired with teacher support in classrooms and schools that value what knowledge children bring to school, will assist young students in learning to write. Emergent writers need time, practice, and encouragement to learn how to communicate effectively in writing. They also need the acceptance and respect of others for their style of communication, whether it is using pictures, lines that approximate letters, or letters and words themselves. Understanding the impact of past traumatic experiences and putting support systems into place to assist the students who have experienced trauma would also be valuable.

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Author Bio



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