

Drawings as a Pathway to Productive Literacy

Leong Ping Alvin

Language & Communication Centre
Nanyang Technological University

Abstract

The role of children's drawings as part of the writing process has attracted modest research interest, despite recent developments in multimodality studies. Early research tended to focus on drawings from a psycho-developmental perspective, where the child's efforts at drawing is seen as a scaffold to help him/her move from the pre-writing stage to the writing stage. More recently, attention has shifted to the meaning-making potential in children's drawings. Little else, however, has been ventured about the relationship between a child's drawing and his/her writing. This paper focuses on the picture-stories created by two children at a kindergarten in Singapore as case studies. It attempts to show how their drawings serve as *new* information, capturing details that are missing in the text. In this light, children's drawings serve as a portal to their make-believe worlds, and can be of immense help to teachers to both sieve out the intended meanings, and lead the children to fill in the missing details using language. The study argues that if writing difficulties are detected and remedied early enough through the use of children's drawings, further difficulties in the children's later schooling years can be avoided.

Keywords: early literacy, children's drawings, writing, conferencing

Introduction

Studies on the literacy development of young learners are important in shedding light on various strategies to help children develop competencies in reading and writing (e.g., Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007). Researchers and educators are acutely aware of both the importance of the early years of a child's life to his/her cognitive and social development, and the unique challenges that early education presents. Young (2009) aptly notes that "not all children have the opportunity of developing emergent literacy understandings, and inequality of opportunity still exists" (p. 164).

This situation may be worsened by teachers not being aware of the struggles of their charges, and what they can do to address their needs. This paper takes the view that the timely intervention and mediated instruction of teachers are crucial to firm up the foundation of young learners, particularly the weaker ones, to help them avoid literacy problems in their later schooling years. This requires teachers to move beyond a myopic understanding of literacy—often seen as nothing more than one's ability to read and write—to provide guidance on the appropriate use of language. Indeed, it has now become commonplace to speak of literacy in broad terms. Many scholars, like Gee (2007), regard literacy as one's mastery over various discourses, and it is the very diversity of such discourses that has given rise to a plethora of terms such as *scientific literacy*, *visual literacy*, *media literacy*, *multiliteracies*, among others. These are not theoretical constructs, but competencies rooted in reality, since learning to read and write, and the very acts of reading and writing, do not take place in a vacuum. Parents and teachers of young children, for instance, often read to them, familiarizing them with the basic elements of the discourse of stories (e.g., characters, complication, resolution), and thus sowing the seeds for *story literacy* when the children themselves start experimenting with ideas and storylines in self-authored writing.

As children progress differently in literacy development, their self-authored pieces serve as valuable indicators of their development and, more importantly, the difficulties they might be facing. All too often, however, teachers pay attention to only the written language, focusing on errors related to spelling, grammar, or structure. Ironically, this emphasis on the written language may address only the superficial inadequacies, but not the deeper issues affecting children's literacy development. As Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000) aptly note, "[t]eachers who value only conventional writing will stifle the exciting literary growth of young children" (p. 177). This is particularly relevant among pre-schoolers, since language is not the only resource available to them for communicating meaning on paper (Levin & Bus, 2003). From a developmental standpoint, Vygotsky (1978) observes:

Only one thing is certain—that written language of children develops in this fashion, shifting from drawings of things to drawings of words. The entire secret of teaching written language is to prepare and organize this natural transition appropriately ... (p. 115)

That children take more easily to drawing than to writing is unsurprising. In writing, children need to rely on a symbolic (and therefore unnatural) writing system to express meanings. In drawings, by contrast, children have the world around them as a template; all they need to do is to simply copy or modify what they see around them. For this reason, weaker learners may not always find it easy to express their thoughts using language and so turn to drawings or drawing-like devices instead (Levin & Bus, 2003). Such drawings, that is to say, tend to contain elements of the story discourse that may be missing in the written language. We see here, then, that focusing on various errors in the written language may provide teachers with only an incomplete idea of what the child may be attempting to convey. More worryingly, teachers may also miss the opportunity to offer mediated instruction to help the child express in words the meanings that are captured in the drawings.

This paper proposes a strategy—revolving around children’s drawings—that teachers could use during conferencing sessions with their students to help them manage the difficulties with a greater measure of confidence. Focusing on the productive literacy (i.e., writing) of pre-schoolers, it offers a qualitative analysis of the stories authored by two children at a kindergarten in Singapore. Based on the framework developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006), it attempts to show how the drawings in such stories serve as “new” information, capturing details that are missing in the text. In this light, children’s drawings serve as a portal to their make-believe worlds, and can be of immense help to teachers to both sieve out the intended meanings, and lead the children to fill in the missing details using language.

Drawings and Early Literacy

The role and significance of children’s drawings in the writing process have attracted only modest research interest over the years. Early research tended to focus on drawings from a psycho-developmental perspective (e.g., Clay, 1987; Eng, 1931; Rosenblatt & Winner, 1988), where the child’s efforts at drawing is seen as a scaffold to help him/her move from the pre-writing stage to the writing stage (e.g., Oken-Wright, 1998). More recently, attention has shifted to the meaning-making potential in children’s drawings (Anning & Ring, 2004; Cox, 2005; Harrison, Clarke, & Ungerer, 2007; van Leeuwen, 1998). Cox (2005), for instance, drew attention to the content of the drawing, rather than its form, arguing that “we should explain children’s drawings in terms of what information they are trying to convey, rather than what they contain” (p. 123).

Studies exploring the *connection* between children’s drawings and their written products are even fewer in number. In these studies, the link between drawing and writing is at times indirect, obscuring how the former complements the latter in self-authored texts. Some of these studies, for instance, examined the effectiveness of using drawing as a planning activity for writing (e.g., Baghban, 2007; Caldwell & Moore, 1991; Norris, Mokhtari, & Reichard, 1998), while others analyzed children’s verbal descriptions about their drawings (Brooks, 2005; Coates, 2002; Kendrick & Kay, 2002; Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009). A notable exception is the work

by van Leeuwen (1998), who analyzed the texts and drawings produced by eight- to ten-year-old children from three schools in England. Numbering 56 in all, the texts were produced after the children's visit to a science museum; they were asked to both write about a science exhibit that attracted him/her, and illustrate that exhibit. Among the research questions that he raised in his study, the following is most relevant to our discussion: "How did the children integrate writing and drawing?" (van Leeuwen, 1998, p. 277).

Van Leeuwen's analysis revealed several observations, two of which are of particular interest. First, he found that the vast majority of the children wrote about the exhibits before illustrating them. That is to say, in the production of the text, the act of writing tended to precede the act of drawing. This appears to imply an implicit acknowledgement among the children of the centrality of language in the communication of meaning.

Second, since most of the children wrote first and drew later, their written segments were frequently positioned at the top of the page, and the illustrations, at the bottom. While this might appear to be a self-evident outcome, van Leeuwen is careful to note that the top-bottom positioning of the elements reflects a deeper meaning, a polarization of two information values—the *ideal* vs. the *real*. Citing from his earlier work with Kress (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1990, 1996), he suggests that "vertical, top-bottom structures [...] present the top element as the generalized and/or idealized essence of the information, and the bottom element as contrasting with this by being more detailed and specific and/or more 'down to earth,' more oriented towards facts and practicalities" (van Leeuwen, 1998, p. 283).

van Leeuwen's observation, of course, rests on the premise that the written segment and the drawing are positioned in top-bottom fashion. It is entirely possible, however, for these elements to be arranged in a left-right order instead. Indeed, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) agree that this arrangement is typical of magazines in cultures adopting a left-to-right reading path¹, where "[the] left pages contain mostly verbal text, with graphically salient photographs on the right" (p. 179). They posit that elements placed on the left typically represent *given* information and those on the right, *new* information. Given information here is regarded as that which the reader is assumed to know as a point of departure for the message of the larger work. New information, by contrast, represents that to which the reader must pay special attention.

We therefore have two typical positions for drawings in a multimodal text—at the bottom of the page, or on the left of a two-page spread. The top-bottom and left-right structures are summarized in Figure 1 below (adapted from Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 197):

Figure 1. Positioning and information values of elements

| | |
|----------------|--------------|
| Ideal Given | Ideal New |
| Real Given | Real New |

If van Leeuwen (and Kress) is correct, this suggests that drawings, being either *real* or *new*, may therefore carry more factual or detailed information than what is expressed in the written segments. In the case of young learners, this helpfully points the way forward for teachers to use the children's drawings to fill in details that are missing or glossed over in the writing. In line with the larger goal of (productive) literacy, this has the added benefit of helping children appreciate the norms of discourse—that the ideas in a written piece should be complete and coherent.

Context of Study

The children involved in the study were six year olds attending a kindergarten in Singapore. They were in the graduating class, meaning that they would be moving on to primary education in the following year. Kindergartens in the country—apart from foreign-system kindergartens for expatriates—use English as the medium of instruction. They are managed by private operators, and are therefore regarded as private schools (Pre-school Education, 2010). Hence, while kindergartens receive guidance on curriculum matters from the Singaporean Ministry of Education, they are generally free to design and implement their own curricula. The kindergarten involved in the study is managed by a community foundation, presently the largest kindergarten operator in the country.

The class under observation comprised 16 children, most of whom had moderate proficiency in English. At play, and even in the classroom, the children used colloquial Singaporean English, the grammar and vocabulary of which are heavily influenced by various Chinese dialects (primarily Hokkien) and Malay. The children had already spent two years at the kindergarten, and most of them could write simple texts with little or no help from the teacher.

The teacher was a degree-holder in her forties, with five years' teaching experience at the pre-school level. She was into her first year of teaching at the kindergarten, having moved there from another centre. As part of an enrichment program on creative writing instituted by the kindergarten, the teacher introduced a storybook project, where each child wrote an original story to be presented to his/her parents at a book launch at the end of the academic year. Over a three-month period (June to August 2009), the children spent about 40 minutes each week to write their stories. They were also encouraged to illustrate their stories. The writing sessions were accompanied by story-telling sessions by the teacher and speech-and-drama activities. The teacher reviewed the children's work only at the end of the project in early September 2009, although she cheerfully attended to all the children's queries during each writing session. By doing so, the teacher ensured that the storybooks were the children's own work, an accurate reflection of their level of literacy.

Most of the children were excited about the project and came up with interesting ideas. As in many classes of this size though, there were a few children who found the writing task difficult (e.g., Perry & Winne, 2004). While they were able to articulate their thoughts eloquently in speech, they struggled to write them down. They tried to mask this by joking with their friends, playing with their stationery items or moving about the classroom frequently. During their time at school, these weaker learners tended to avoid writing because they lacked the confidence to produce *proper* sentences. Their being brought up in a relatively conservative Asian culture, which places emphasis on how one is evaluated by others, could be a further reason for their reluctance to write, even in the privacy of a small-group setting. The students, that is to say, had become convinced that since they were incapable of writing (well), they would simply avoid it as much as possible.

In such a scenario, the urgent task for any teacher is not to get such students to simply produce more sentences, but to change their mindset, and show them that they are not incapable of writing. Once this barrier is removed, the teacher can then start to work on other aspects of writing, such as spelling, word choice, and grammar. But a fundamental change in the child's belief about his/her own abilities is crucial, and this is an issue to which we now turn in the following section.

Case Studies

The case studies involved a boy ('Mark') and a girl ('Karen'), both ethnically Chinese.² They were among the weaker students in the class.

Mark

Mark wrote about a sheet of magic paper that was able to fly and talk. He wanted his story to be different from the typical animal- and royalty-themed tales favored by his friends. At the start of the project, he considered various objects around the classroom before finally finding inspiration in the blank sheet of paper on which he was supposed to write the story.

Mark spent most of the weekly writing sessions talking about the magic paper and what it could do. While this might appear to be some form of a pre-writing planning activity for the story, the child was probably doing nothing more than sharing with his friends what his magic paper was capable of. In a way, he also wanted to establish how his story stood out from the rest—that something as common and seemingly unimportant as a sheet of paper could be endowed with such unnatural power.

Very little actual writing was done in each session; Mark averaged just three or four words each week, or a short sentence at the very most. At the end of the three-month period, Mark submitted the following as his story (corrections of all misspelled words are in superscript):

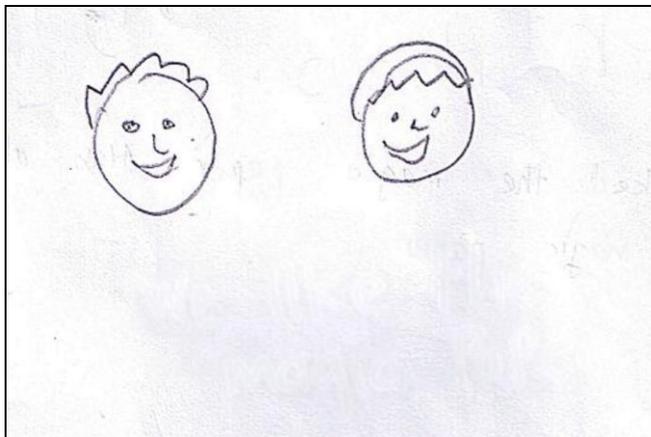
One day, a paper can fly. Because it is a mag^{magic} paper and He can do arete!^{anything}

He can do lots and lots fo^{of} things. He oso^{also} can tok^{talk} to Staneley^{Stanley} and tok^{talk} to Alex too.

What is immediately obvious from Mark's writing is the number of spelling errors (e.g., "mag", "arete"). As these errors are numerous, it is only natural for any teacher to focus on them and to get the child to correct them through any means possible. However, such an approach, while helpful, is likely to rectify only the superficial weaknesses in the written text; it may not address the larger problem holding the child back from writing more. As can be seen, Mark's story is very short and thin on content.

In terms of sequence, Mark wrote out his story before illustrating it. The written segment was positioned on the left page of the storybook, and the drawing, on the right. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) framework, the drawing may therefore be regarded as containing new information, capturing details that are focal to the story. Mark's drawing is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Mark's drawing of two faces



In what sense is the drawing new information? Mark drew two smiling faces, representing Stanley and Alex, but there is no indication in the written text on the source or reason of this happiness, apart from the fact that the magic paper could talk to both Stanley and Alex. In a private conferencing session, the teacher then asked Mark to explain the drawing in his own words. This suited Mark well, as he found it considerably easier to talk about the drawing than to write about it. He told the teacher that the two characters in the story enjoyed talking to the magic paper; they treasured the sense of camaraderie that was built up through the simple act of talking. This notion of friendship was clearly important to Mark because, as it turned out, one of the characters was named after his best friend.

Mark conceded, reluctantly, that his story could be improved by mentioning the characters' happiness in the writing. However, when the teacher asked him to add a few more lines to his story, he insisted that he was unable to do so, and preferred to leave the story as it was. The abstractness of the concept of happiness could be a reason for his reluctance to continue writing—writing about abstract concepts was very different from writing about a sheet of paper (which is tangible), or the acts of flying or talking (which are physical acts). This, coupled with the difficulties he encountered with spelling, rendered the idea of adding more details to his story a chore he would rather avoid.

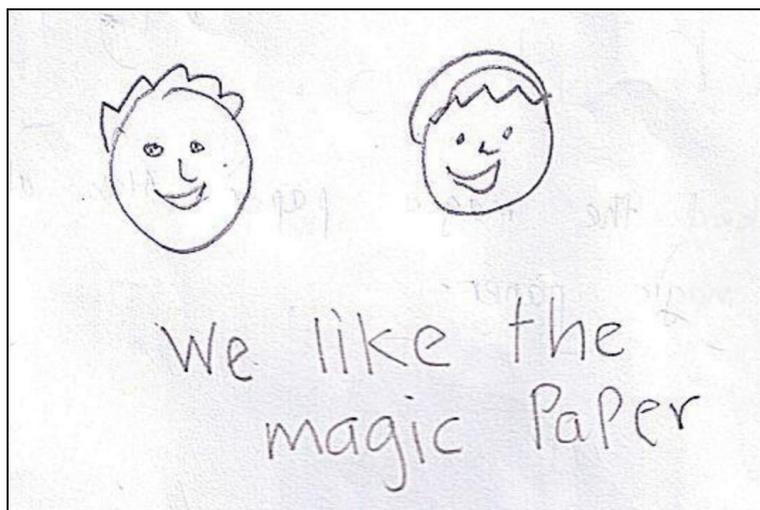
The teacher, though, encouraged him with simple questions—“how do you think the boys felt?”, “do you think the boys liked the magic paper?”, etc. Mark answered these questions readily and confidently, almost without thinking. As his answers were in the form of short sentences, the teacher then suggested that he try writing those same sentences. This struck Mark as a good idea, as the sentences were short and relatively easy to manage, even for him. By the end of the conferencing session, he produced the following:

and don^{then} Staneley^{Stanley} like the magic paper. Alex oso^{also} like the magic paper too.

The result surprised Mark, because barely fifteen minutes ago, he had been quite insistent that he would not be able to add anything further to his story. Through his drawing, the teacher had effectively showed him that he was *not* incapable of expressing abstract ideas in writing, or of extended writing in general.

After the conferencing session ended, Mark returned to his seat. However, instead of joking or playing with his friends as he usually did, he wrote a sentence below his drawing and proudly showed it to the teacher:

Figure 3. Additional sentence below Mark's drawing



For Mark, this was a significant development. Here, for the first time, he wrote a sentence on his own, without any prompting; he did so because he wanted to, and not because his teacher told him so. Notice, too, that the sentence is error free, in stark contrast to the original sentences in the story. He had asked the teacher for the correct spelling of the word “magic” during the conferencing, and took care to spell the word correctly. This represented an important step forward for the child. His earlier reluctance had now given way to an eagerness to try out a sentence on his own.

From this account, we can now interpret the newness in Mark's drawing in at least two ways. First, as we have seen, the information in the drawing is new in the sense that it captures complex ideas that are not evident in the writing. Tapping on this semiotic resource, then, offers teachers one way to help them better understand the rationale behind their students' work. Second, we may also interpret the use of drawings as an *alternative* approach for teachers to offer feedback during private conferencing sessions with their students. Since the discussion during such sessions revolves around the children's drawings in relation to their writing, the teacher's feedback is specific and addresses particular areas of weaknesses in the writing. In this particular instance, the teacher formulated her questions to elicit simple answers from Mark, with the aim of getting him to write those answers as part of his story. Granted, Mark's story is still short and full of spelling errors, but this approach goes some way to wean Mark off the self-defeating mentality that holds him back from writing more. As he becomes more confident and starts writing more, the teacher can then gradually target other problematic areas (e.g., spelling).

Karen

Karen was a quiet girl who kept mostly to herself. As she was not active in class, she was easy to miss. Like Mark, Karen also encountered problems in her writing, and managed only a few words in each in-class session. But whereas Mark was able to articulate his thoughts well in

speech, Karen was shy and rarely volunteered answers, making it difficult to understand her difficulties.

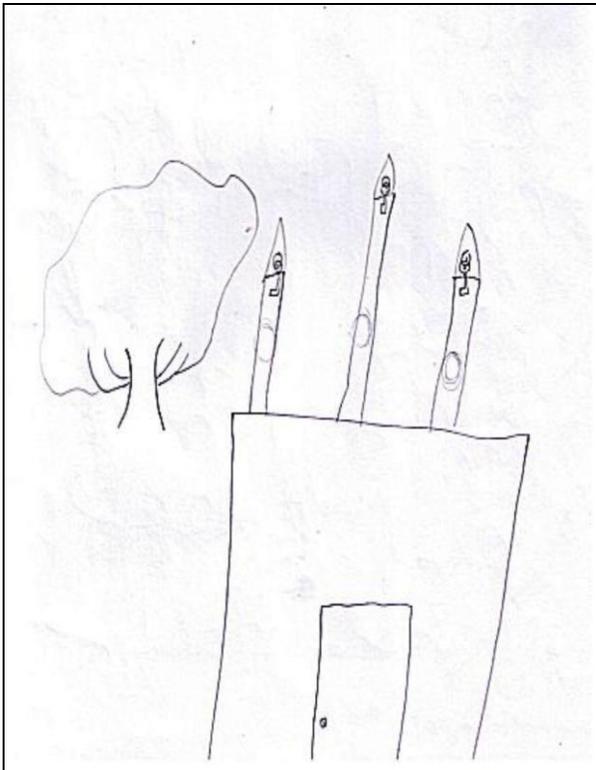
Karen chose to write about a girl, June, who met a boy at a dance. It started out promisingly as a love story, but Karen gradually lost interest in the writing and instead turned her attention to illustrating the little that she wrote. In terms of the layout of the storybook, the written segment was positioned on the left, and Karen's drawing, on the right. Karen's story is reproduced below:

One day Jure^{June} is going to the ballroom. She meet a boy.

We were walking

As compared to Mark's story, Karen's effort was a weak attempt at writing. Although she made only one spelling error and some minor grammatical slips (e.g., inconsistent tenses, use of the first-person "we" in reference to third-person antecedents), she left the story incomplete—we are not told what happened to June and the boy. The third sentence, in fact, had no period mark, leaving the impression that the writing was abruptly interrupted. The drawing that Karen spent much time on also seemed to have very little connection with the writing, as seen below in Figure 4:

Figure 4. Karen's drawing of a castle



The drawing is of a castle, with the stereotypical towers that are commonly depicted in children's stories. How that is related to June's dance with the boy, though, is not immediately clear.

At the superficial level, Karen's three-month project appeared to be a failure. She had only written fifteen words, which did not quite tell a story in the conventionally sense. Seeing that Karen had made very little progress in her writing, the teacher called her aside for a private conferencing session. As with Mark, the teacher asked her to describe the drawing and how it related to the story. It took quite a while for Karen to open up; slowly, she revealed that the castle actually represented the happy ending for both June and the boy, which the teacher learned was a prince. The teacher at first thought that June and the prince fell in love after the dance and got married. Karen, however, introduced two further elements into her tale—a complication and a resolution (cf. Labov & Waletzky, 1967)—both of which were absent in Mark's story. She talked about a girl who was jealous of June and tried to dance with the prince (*complication*). The prince, however, chose June over the jealous girl (*resolution*).

The teacher then encouraged Karen to write these details down. She used specific questions to help her along—e.g., “what was the girl's name?”, “how did she behave?”, “what did she do?”, etc. Using the questions as a guide, Karen wrote a short passage, and then ended the description with a sentence of her own emphasizing the fact that the boy still liked June.

There was a girl named Jill

Jill was jalas^{jealous} for June's lovely dance

Jill pushed June away she wanted to dance with the boy. But the boy sill^{still} like June.

While the above passage does contain a number of errors, it should be noted that Karen wrote out the sentences on her own, relying only on her teacher's questions. She did not ask the teacher if her sentences were grammatically acceptable or if her words were correctly spelled. Her use of the word “jealous” (i.e., “jalas”), in particular, is interesting as it is not an easy word for a six year old to spell; she was determined, though, to include it, and gamely combined the letters to match her pronunciation of the word. Like Mark, Karen was encouraged by her own progress, and included an additional sentence, almost symbolically, to show both the teacher and, importantly, herself of what she could accomplish.

Conclusion

Factors hindering children from writing are often difficult to tell. Some may mistake the children's reluctance to write as nothing more than a passing phase in their learning process. But this reluctance may be symptomatic of a confidence problem, as faced by the weaker learners in this study. The effect is paralyzing—the more insecure the children are about their writing abilities, the less they will be motivated to write, thus feeding the insecurity within and exacerbating the situation. But if this problem is detected early enough, even at the pre-school level, teachers can help their students avoid further difficulties in their later schooling years.

This paper suggests that this early detection can be facilitated by engaging the children in a simple write-and-draw project. By observing both the children's writing processes and final products, teachers will be in a better position to offer mediated instruction to help the children realize the potential in themselves. Drawings, in particular, are needed in such projects as they serve as an alternate semiotic resource for children, often carrying information that is absent in the writing. Indeed, when considering the final product at the end of the project, this study urges teachers to pay special attention to the children's drawings as a means to build up the children's confidence and so address specific areas of weaknesses in their written work. This can be done by encouraging the children to describe their drawings, and using simple, appropriate questions to keep the conversation focused. The children's answers to these questions, in turn, serve as a guide to help them fill in the missing details in their own work. To be sure, this approach, which relies on the conferencing method, is time intensive. But the potential benefits that it brings makes it well worth the while. A further point to note is that although the advantages of the conferencing method are well documented, such studies tend to involve older learners (e.g., Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). This study indicates, tentatively, that even the youngest of writers can also benefit from conferencing.

And what of spelling and grammar—should the weaker learners be taught the correct forms right from the very start? This, of course, depends on the aptitude of the children in each class. While more can be done (and at a quicker pace) with some children, a slower approach is perhaps best with others. In this present study, it did not appear wise to overload Mark and Karen with feedback about the superficial errors in their writing. The goal was more to change their self-defeating mindset than to get them to produce error-free sentences. In trying to build up their confidence to write more, the last thing that they needed was to be told that their spelling and grammar were also in a mess. Such negative feedback would only add to their sense of insecurity, and cancel out any fledgling interest they might have had about writing. While the additional sentences that Mark and Karen wrote may not seem like much, they are nevertheless baby steps forward for two children who would have preferred to do as little writing as possible. They are encouraging signs that, with the proper support and encouragement, children like Mark and Karen can be helped. Once the foundation is firmer, the teacher can then introduce other measures to correct systemic flaws in spelling and grammar.

A qualitative study of this nature certainly needs to be verified by further work on a larger scale. In the short term, controlled studies involving larger groups of children from diverse different backgrounds are needed to test and refine the proposed approach. In the medium to long term, collaborative work among teachers from different schools could be initiated. Experiences can then be shared to provide pre-school teachers (and researchers) with a pool of strategies to handle children with different needs. It is only through such shared experiences that trends in the literacy development of young learners can be observed and further explored.

Notes

1. Kress & van Leeuwen (1996, p. 192) are careful to note that the positioning of elements may be assigned different information values in cultures adopting different reading paths, e.g., texts in Arabic are read from right to left.

2. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.

About the author:

Leong Ping Alvin lectures at the Language & Communication Centre at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has research interests in systemic functional grammar, discourse analysis, and literacy studies. He is the author of 'Theme and Rheme' (Peter Lang, 2004), and a co-editor of 'Transforming Literacies and Language' (Continuum, 2011).

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