National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

# EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

# Writing

## SUMMARY REPORT

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# Introduction

■ The *Skills for Life* Strategy has led to unprecedented investment in adult literacy, language and numeracy (LLN), major reforms of teacher education and training, and the introduction of core curricula and national standards in 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 some teaching, and the need for improved standards.

It has been a strategic priority at the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy to investigate teaching and learning practices in all the subject areas and settings in *Skills for Life*. We also see it as our role to report on the most promising and effective practices, and to provide teachers, trainers, 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, English for Speakers of Other Languages and Using 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. 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 R's (2006) and in the work of the eminent American academic, Deborah Brandt. 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**

# The Effective Practice Studies

■ The five Effective Practice Studies explore teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT, and they set out to answer two questions:
- how can teaching, learning and assessing literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT be improved?
- which factors contribute to successful learning?

Even before NRDC was set up it was apparent from reviews of the field 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. Four preliminary studies on reading, writing, ESOL and ICT were undertaken between 2002 and 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 United States 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 their 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.

# Main findings

■ The principal aim of this study was to analyse the teaching of writing and its impact on learners' competence and confidence in writing and how they use it in their daily lives.

**Progress**
Learners made a small but significant improvement in their writing.

Demonstrable progress in writing - particularly free writing, which we measured in the 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 of tuition to progress by one level of the National Standards for Adult Literacy.

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 than in the classroom or a public place, and confidence tends to increase most as a consequence of attending a course.

**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 are provided as learners engage in composition.

Teachers and learners tend to perceive learning to write as a classroom-focused activity. Greater emphasis is placed on learners' diagnosed needs in relation to '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.

**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 has a positive impact on 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 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 finding 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 finding 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 and tended to be dismissive towards their everyday uses of writing.

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

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.

## A flexible approach to teaching and responsiveness to learners' concerns as they arise has a positive impact on progress in writing

# Recommendations

**Implications for practice**
The findings suggest that teachers need to:
- place the focus first and foremost on writing as communication
- 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
- approach the technical aspects of writing; spelling, grammatical correctness and punctuation, within the contexts of meaningful writing tasks rather than through decontextualised exercises
- be flexible and responsive to learners' needs, supporting learners as they draft, revise and proof-read their work
- 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.

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

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 have an emphasis on communication, in line with the advice in the Core Curriculum for Adult Literacy.

There should be 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 specifically for the teaching and learning of writing.

**Implications for research**
The potential of the features of practice identified in phase 1 to promote learners' development in writing should be investigated through an intervention study that provides development opportunities for teachers in the use of these particular strategies.

The hypotheses derived from the detailed analysis of the classes with the highest average increase in assessment scores should be tested. These could be usefully followed up through both experimental and ethnographic studies that focus more sharply on particular strategies.

# Background to the study

■ This project was undertaken in the context of the Government's Skills for Life Strategy for England, which 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.

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. This study analyses the relationship between classroom practice in the teaching of writing and changes in learners'
- competence in free writing
- confidence in writing and their uses of writing in their everyday lives.

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

Our research follows an earlier study (phase 1) undertaken for the NRDC (Kelly et al., 2004), which identified seven potential indicators of effective teaching:
- 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.

**The scope of the study**
The bulk of the fieldwork was undertaken during the academic year 2004-5 and involved a team of 13 practitioner-researchers, all with current or recent experience of teaching and/or management of adult literacy.

The team worked with 25 organisations across the UK that provide adult literacy. This allowed 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 were obtained.

**Method**
We observed each of the classes three times, providing more than 140 detailed observation logs. Together with 97 interviews with learners and records of conversations with more than 40 teachers, this provides a rich body of data.

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We used the following measures to assess the effectiveness of teaching:

- each session was rated against a range of general teaching strategies derived from the What Works study undertaken by Condelli (2003).
- an assessment tool for writing created specifically for the NRDC by the National Foundation for Educational Research. This requires learners to complete three free writing tasks and takes account of their ability to use writing for a purpose, as well as to use correct sentence structure, syntax, punctuation and spelling. It rewards strengths rather than counting errors.
- a brief questionnaire that asked learners to indicate how confident they felt about writing in different settings.
- a list of the uses learners had made of writing during the preceding week.
- an overall rating on a scale of 0-3 of each session based on seven indicators of effective practice in the teaching of writing drawn from the earlier study.
- a detailed log of activity in the classroom every five minutes, to provide data on groupings, the nature and focus of writing activities, the audience for writing, learner and teacher activity and the uses of IT.

Data were collected on the qualifications and experience of the teachers. Qualitative data were also collected to complement the statistical data. We should point out that the NFER assessment instrument differs from the instruments used for the national qualifications 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. Copies of the research instruments and guidance on the use of these are included in the full report which will be available on the NRDC website www.nrdc.org.uk in the spring of 2007.

**How the classes were selected**

The sample included further education (FE) colleges, adult and community learning (ACL), work-based learning, prisons and the voluntary sector. Classes were selected according to the following criteria:

- 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.

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 an additional language.

Researchers' pen portraits underline the uniqueness of each class and the complex range of factors that can influence learning (Ivanič and Tseng, 2005).

**Case study 1**

This was a class of Army recruits: young men in their late teens or early twenties. A number of the 17 learners had been 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.

Photofusion

**Case study 2**

This Entry to Employment class was held in a rather cramped room in part of an old Board 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. The room had a whiteboard, stationery and felt-tipped pens but no PCs.

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'.

Grant Lynch/UK Stocki Images

# The learners

■ Adult literacy learners are a diverse group with an extremely wide range of backgrounds, experiences, ages, abilities and status. The extent to which they attend classes on a voluntary basis also varies hugely. However, the learners in this study deviate slightly from the national profile. There is a more even balance between men and women (54 and 46 per cent) than nationally (60 and 40 per cent); more learners in the lower age ranges (24 per cent under 21 against 13 per cent nationally) and a greater proportion of ethnic minority learners (35 per cent against 27 per cent nationally).

### Who are they?
- Up to 72 per cent stated that they were not currently in employment - of these, 21 per cent were in full-time education; 13 per cent (all of them women) were looking after home and family full time and 7 per cent were retired. Some learners who were in prison or on government schemes for the unemployed preferred to identify themselves as full-time students.
- Up to 78 per cent had left full-time education at the age of 16 or earlier.
- One third (114) had attended literacy courses previously.
- Eighteen per cent said they were disabled and 22 per cent that they were dyslexic.

### What level are they?
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. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the levels.

Table 1 **Level of learners***

| Level | Number | % of sample |
|-------|--------|-------------|
| Entry 1 | 45 | 13.20 |
| Entry 2 | 109 | 31.96 |
| Entry 3 | 115 | 33.73 |
| Level 1 and above | 72 | 21.11 |

* (based on 341 learners)

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.

### Learners' uses of writing
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.

## What learners value

- 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 their own pace
- not having to worry about making mistakes
- teachers explaining things, particularly the technical aspects of written English that they had not understood before
- knowing that the teacher understands 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
*"I like working as a group, all helping each other."*

## Learners' motivation

- Some learners wanted to write well enough to develop careers; others hoped eventually to go on to FE courses, not necessarily linked to work.
- Many women were motivated by a desire to help their children.
- Some valued the opportunity to develop their writing as an intellectual challenge - *"It gets the brain working."*
- Some were ambitious to write creatively.
- Not all learners were attending courses as a matter of choice. Some had been required to attend courses by the Job Centre; prisoners had to attend classes as an alternative to work.

## Learners' progress

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

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

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 is statistically significant.

In interpreting the findings 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.
- 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 which, unlike the National Tests at Levels 1 and 2, required the composition of meaningful text, including expression of opinions, rather than responses to multiple-choice questions.
- the stakes were low; there were no personal consequences attached to learners' performance.

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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. Taking into account the average time learners attended classes between the two assessments the results tend to support the estimate, based on research undertaken in the US, that learners need on average around 150 - 200 hours' tuition to move up one level of the National Standards (Comings, 2006).

**Assessment results and attendance**
Although learners who attended for 40 to 49 hours between assessments made greater gains than those who attended for less than 40 hours, those who attended for more than 50 hours tended to make lower gains. The lower gains for learners on longer courses may be explained by the fact that such courses tended to include numeracy and IT as well as literacy. In addition, some classes which had more than 60 hours of tuition catered for a number of learners with additional learning needs.

**Assessment results and learner characteristics**
- **Gender** - on average, women made more progress than men.
- **Age** - the biggest statistically significant gains were made by the younger age groups, 16–19 years and 20–29 years.
- **First language** - learners for whom English was an additional language on average scored slightly lower marks than those for whom it was the first language at the first assessment.

They also made less progress between the two assessments.
- **Employment status** - the largest gains were made by learners who were in full-time education or in employment.
- **Literacy level** - learners below Entry Level 2 made the most progress, between the pre and post assessments. This result may be due to the nature of the assessment and some problems using it at Entry 1.
- **Non-voluntary attendance** – overall, learners whose attendance was not voluntary made average progress. However, learners in the Army and in prison made less progress. This is likely to be the result of the high number of dyslexic learners in these classes.
- **Regression** - Learners who regressed were more likely to be aged 16–19 and not to have English as their first language.

The assessment tool is discussed in more detail in the methodology section of the full report www.nrdc.org.uk

In interview, the learners tended to talk mainly about progress in spelling, punctuation and handwriting. This is possibly because these are the very visible features of writing by which learners are likely to have been judged negatively in the past and because the qualifications for which many learners were working place high value on these aspects of writing.

However, learners also valued the

importance of writing as communication and had enjoyed writing tasks with personal, relevant or interesting subjects.

**Confidence in writing**

A questionnaire asked learners how confident they felt in writing in three different situations: in class, at home, and at work or in a public place. They responded on a four-point scale to the same questions at the beginning and end of the course:

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

The overall increases in mean scores between the two questionnaires 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.

We found no statistical relationship between changes in assessment scores and reported changes in confidence. Confidence can increase as a result of being part of a supportive group. However, coming face to face with the need to write in class may, temporarily at least, undermine confidence in writing.

**Conclusion**

Learners expressed a broad range of reasons to write that include, but go well beyond, the 'functional' writing often associated with adult literacy. They valued teachers who took time to explain rules and patterns of which they had not previously been aware or had not understood. They also valued writing as 'meaning making' and, in particular, writing that had personal resonance.

On average, the learners made modest progress between the two assessments. The largest gains 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.

Achieving a measurable improvement in writing takes time, therefore 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.

# The teachers

■ The seven characteristics of teaching writing, identified in phase 1 as potential indicators of effective practice, are used here to provide a framework for discussion of the teaching practice observed. The effectiveness of these indicators is unproven and one of the objectives of this study was to explore whether correlations could be found between any of these and positive learner outcomes. Table 2 offers a flavour of the variety of practice observed.

Table 2 **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 |
| listening and speaking | 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

The figures indicate an uneven distribution of time between reading, writing and speaking and listening.

**The seven characteristics of teaching writing, identified in phase 1**

The researchers rated each observed session against each characteristic using the following scale (see Figure 1):

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

**Writing as a process**

Several researchers (Greenberg, 1987; Phillips, 1992; Russell, 1999) have noted that adult beginner writers are likely to have acquired an inaccurate or incomplete understanding 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.

The teachers in this study 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.

They used 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 to generate, develop and record ideas and students commented on how useful they found them.

At the drafting stage, most tutors gave

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Figure 1 **The seven features of practice:**
Percentage of sessions where they were observed to a high degree
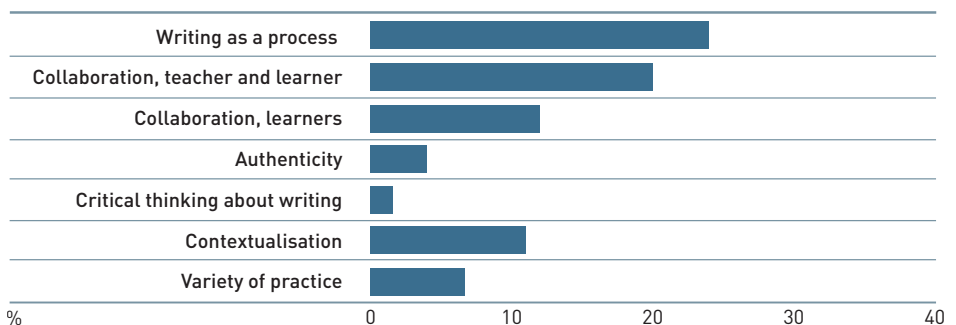
individual support, using questions and prompts to help learners check and revise their writing. The value of this type of feedback during the writing process, rather than after the text is finished, has been noted by Freedman (1980) and Duffin (1995).

In all cases the teachers appeared to view errors as a source of learning (Shaughnessy, 1977) and many 'mini lessons' were given in response to learners' errors.

### Learners working in collaborative groups

Collaboration between learners has been cited by a number of researchers as beneficial in the development of writing skills (Bruffee, 1987; Bryan, 1996; Clark and Ivaniĉ, 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).

Where learners were asked to collaborate this was nearly always at the stages of generating ideas and planning. There were only one or two examples of activities that required learners to draft writing together.

### Collaboration between teacher and 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; Ivaniĉ and Moss, 1991).

The teachers in this study were skilled at creating an atmosphere in their classes in which all learners could feel valued and contribute. They were also willing to be flexible and responsive to learners' needs. However, in the majority of classes teachers maintained firm control over the content of the sessions and the nature of the activities.

### Authenticity

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 Ivaniĉ (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.

In this study there were few examples of authentic writing activities although authentic materials were being used in a number of classes. Most of the writing 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.

We saw learners using the internet for research prior to writing in some classes but did not observe the internet being used to reach a wider audience, for example by sending emails. It should be noted that less than half the classes had access to the internet.

**Critical thinking about writing**
The notion of critical literacy, or critical language awareness, has developed from socially situated approaches to literacy (Street, 1985; Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton and Ivaniĉ, 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.

There was little evidence of this aspect of writing being addressed. The majority of the teaching was classroom–focused, with little opportunity for learners to explore and question the relationship between writing and its social context.

**Contextualisation**
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.

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

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.

**Varied practice**
The studies included in the systematic review of primary research undertaken during phase 1 (Kelly et al., 2004) identified teaching and learning activities taking account of differing learning styles that contributed to learners' success in writing.
Some teachers adopted a consistent pattern of activity for each session, often using part of the session for joint activity

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and part for individual work or working with computers.

Teachers used visual, auditory and kinesthetic 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 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 problems with syntax. Learners were also required at times to engage in a physical way with a task, such as sequencing and sorting of cards.

A lack of variety and pace was observed on occasion when learners were working individually or on a one-to-one basis with learning assistants.

**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 found the core curriculum useful. It helped to identify the individual elements of writing and to plan for individual needs. However, some found mismatches between the content of the different levels and their learners' needs.

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. 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".

*National literacy qualifications*
Most teachers felt it was important for learners to have an opportunity to obtain qualifications. However, a significant number said the need to obtain these within a limited timescale, and the requirements of the qualifications themselves, impacted detrimentally on the way they taught writing, particularly towards the end of a course. Whole sessions were taken up with practice tests in many classes.

**Conclusion**
Less than half of teaching sessions observed in this study were rated 'high' or 'to some extent' for the seven characteristics of teaching discussed

above. Only a quarter were rated so for 'authenticity' and 'critical thinking about writing'. 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 classes used authentic materials far fewer were 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. While many teachers said that they planned their lessons and courses to address their learners' needs, this did not always take adequate account of the purposes for which learners may need to write or the social contexts for their writing outside the class.

**Although classes used authentic materials far fewer were engaged in authentic writing activities**

# How teachers' practices may affect performance

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

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

We undertook this analysis on a class basis and included 34 classes for which complete pre and post data were available for more than one learner. We then quantified the degree of relatedness of two sets of numbers.

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

- 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).
- an overall rating of each observed session based on the seven dimensions derived from the phase 1 study (Kelly et al., 2004)
- data on the time given to teacher and learner activity derived from the coding of the detailed written logs including:

- classroom groupings
- the focus of the writing activity (word, sentence and text level)
- whether or not the activity was contextualised
- learner activity (different types of writing activity, reading or speaking and listening)
- the use of IT

- data on the teachers' experience and qualifications.

Correlation analysis was used to calculate the degree to which each set of data was related to change in:

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

We coded the observation logs 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.

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.

**Teachers' practice in relation to learners' progress**
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 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 are effective in enabling them to develop as writers.

Classes in which one of the seven features of practice, *"Use of authentic materials and activities"* 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 to the reading development of ESOL literacy learners. It is also contrary to the study by 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.

Several 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
• authentic materials and activities may be too complex or challenging for many learners
• 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.

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. Further research which involves classes using a broader range of authentic activities would be useful.

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**Teachers' practice and learners' confidence in writing**

Overall, learners reported that they were more confident in the post questionnaire, and this was statistically significant.

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 (authentic materials)"* was associated with an increase in confidence in writing at home.

One of the seven features, 'working in collaborative groups', appeared to be associated with a decrease in learners' confidence about writing. It is possible that working on writing with others takes learners out of their 'comfort zone' and moves them from a state of 'unconscious incompetence' to one of 'conscious incompetence'.

**Combining the teaching strategies**

When the general teaching strategies were combined into one scale and correlated with the assessment, confidence and uses of writing measures, we found no relationships. 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.

This lack of correlation may be less significant than it first appears.

Researchers rated some classes highly on these general strategies on the list generated for the *What Works* study (Condelli et al., 2003) 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.

In the same way we combined the seven features of practice in the teaching of writing, derived from phase 1, into one scale and correlated this with the outcome measures. Again we found no relationships. This is noteworthy as it means that the analysis did not support the hypothesis of the earlier study. It is possible that these features were also too general.

**Detailed analysis of the observation logs**

We decided to look in detail at the nine classes which had the highest average increase in assessment scores and the nine classes with the lowest increase in scores, bringing together evidence from the quantitative and qualitative data. In particular, we looked at the detailed coding of the observed sessions and the written logs on which the coding was based.

When we compared the characteristics of the two groups of classes we found that both included learners at a range of levels. Each included a prison class and a class run for Jobcentre Plus. However, the top group included a preponderance of ACL classes.

There were differences in the training and experience of the teachers. All the teachers of classes in the top group were qualified and over half had five or more years' experience. Two of the teachers in the bottom group had no qualifications or training and all had less than five years' experience.

Based on the coding of the learner activity in three observed sessions for each class, the classes in the top group spent on average:
- *less* time writing than classes in the bottom quartile
- slightly *more* time on listening and speaking than classes in the bottom quartile
- slightly *less* time on reading than classes in the bottom quartile

The fact that classes in the top group spent on average less time on writing than the bottom group fits with the observation 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 suggest 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.

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

- more time on contextualised writing tasks than classes in the bottom group

- more time on writing tasks at text level than classes in the bottom group
- less time on word level activities than classes in the bottom quartile

Analysis of the observation logs suggests that the majority of the classes with the highest average increase in scores had the following features:
- learners spent time composing meaningful texts
- teachers set up tasks carefully before learners were asked to embark on writing
- time was given to discussion of writing tasks in the full group
- exercises designed to introduce and practise spelling, grammar and punctuation were discussed in the full group and were often explicitly linked to a task involving extended writing
- individual feedback and support, which took account of learners' individual needs, was provided while learners were engaged in the process of writing.

By contrast, we found the following features in a number of the classes that had an average decrease in assessment scores:
- a significant amount of de-contextualised 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.

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**Time spent on writing and the impact on outcome**

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.

In addition, we found that classes that spent over 50 per cent of the writing activity focused on text level were significantly more likely to have made a larger gain than those that spent 50 per cent or less.

**Conclusion**

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 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.

Two negative correlations pose more questions. These suggest:

1. the use of authentic materials and authentic tasks may not support learners' progress in writing and could possibly hinder their progress

2. asking learners to work in collaborative groups may undermine confidence in writing in a public place or at work.

The first of these findings deserves a brief explanation, as it appears to contradict some of our other findings. We surmise that authentic practice has a greater impact on confidence than on competence in writing, and we know that impact on 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.

Based on detailed analysis of the observation logs 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 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."

# Conclusions

■ Learners in this study made a small but significant improvement in their writing. However, demonstrable progress in writing, and particularly in free writing, cannot be achieved quickly by the majority of learners. Our findings tend to support the estimate that learners need 150-200 hours to progress by one level of the National Standards.

Findings based solely on the correlation analysis need to be interpreted with some caution due to the relatively small size of the sample achieved for this study and the fact that in the majority of classes observed learners were enrolled for literacy and not specifically for writing.

However, evidence drawn from both the correlation analysis and the qualitative data suggest:
- learners' writing improves when the teacher is flexible and responsive to the learners' concerns and addresses these concerns as they arise. Teachers' support *during* the process of writing is of particular importance.
- learners' confidence in writing tends to be higher at home than in the classroom or a public place and confidence tends to increase most in this domain as a consequence of attending a course.

- 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.
- asking learners to work with each other in a collaborative way may make them feel less confident about writing in a public place or at work.
- there is a tendency for teachers and learners to perceive learning to write as a classroom-focused activity that links only indirectly to the learners' uses of writing outside the class. Teachers and managers need to be aware of the importance of providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful writing tasks that are relevant to their lives and have an emphasis on communication in line with the advice in the Core Curriculum for Adult Literacy.
- the following are likely to be characteristics of teaching that enables learners to develop as writers:
  - learners have opportunities to spend time composing their own texts
  - the production of meaningful text is the focus for planning sessions and courses
  - learners have opportunities to discuss writing and the writing task

- specific aspects of writing are taught in the context of meaningful text.

We found no evidence from the correlation analysis to support the hypothesis that the seven features of practice, identified in the phase 1 study (Kelly et al., 2004), were linked to learners' progress in writing. However, one of the features, contextualisation, did emerge as important in a more detailed analysis of the classes with the highest increase in assessment scores.

The finding that use of authentic materials and activities was linked to a *decrease* in assessment scores was unexpected and is of particular interest in the light of previous studies that have found links between authenticity and positive learner outcomes. We suggest that the use of authentic materials and activities may impact more on learners' confidence than on their competence as writers. The relationship between confidence and competence in writing is a priority for further development and research.

**Our findings tend to support the estimate that learners need 150-200 hours to progress by one level of the National Standards**

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