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Adults learning to write: exploring alternatives to functional writing

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Stein (2001) has observed how writing is frequently the most 'privileged' and valued mode of the forms of representation within a classroom, despite the many different modes that occur in classrooms: visual, written, performed, spoken, gestural. Stein compares three texts produced around the same story by one child, Nobayeni, who told a story, drew a picture of the two main characters and wrote her story. Stein compares the richness of the way she told the story with the relative poverty of the written version. Both 'tellings' were done in her mother-tongue (Zulu), so it was not a question of using an unfamiliar language (an issue which complicates both adult and childhood education in South Africa.) In telling the story orally, she was able to make use of language, sound, gesture and body movement, to produce different effects on her audience, the other members of her class. When she wrote the story, however, much of the richness of the oral version was lost. The complex descriptions and actions in the oral version were reduced to a recount of the main events in the plot.

Stein argues that the different models of what writing is and does, what performance (or the visual) is and does, are constructed through school, home and the community. For many students, their preferred modes of representing will be modes other than writing. She argues for the importance of using a number of semiotic modes and making use of performance, role play and gesture prior to reading or writing. Having used other modes, learners are more likely to be able to link the concrete and the abstract.

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) use the word 'Multiliteracies' to describe the multiplicity of communications channels and media. For them, a pedagogy of 'Multiliteracies' would focus on modes of representation much broader than language alone. In many contexts, meaning is being made in increasingly multimodal ways. Written modes of meaning are closely related to visual, audio, and spatial and behavioural patterns of meaning.

According to Vygotsky, we use listening, speaking, reading and writing when we learn. He stresses the essential role that speech plays in 'the organisation of higher psychological functions' (1978: 27-28). Learning, for Vygotsky, is essentially a social process, with language playing a vital role, in the dialogue between the child, her teacher and her peers. As the child interacts with people in her environment, internal developmental processes operate and what began as interpersonal, becomes intrapersonal.

Vygotsky's thinking about what he termed the 'Zone of Proximal Development' has been important in pedagogical contexts. He defines the zone of proximal development as: 'the difference between the actual developmental levels, as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (1978: 86).

Thus, what children can do under guidance, or with assistance or 'scaffolding' from their teacher or with more capable peers, they will be able to do independently on subsequent occasions. Vygotsky did not specify exactly what he meant by scaffolding but later researchers, such as Bruner (1986) have described this concept in more detail. Graves (1983) and Cazden (1988) elaborate on Bruner's use of the term and describe how a mother with a young child will make use of temporary structures to adapt to the child's language, gestures and activity. The scaffold 'self-destructs' as the child's competence grows and the child assumes an increasingly active role in the activity (Cazden, 1988). Tsui contrasts this supportive situation with the way that writing is often taught in schools in Taiwan (and elsewhere) where the students are often simply given 'a title and 60 minutes' to do a piece of writing (1996: 100).

Although Vygotsky's research was with children, his concepts of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development also apply to older learners. I have found both concepts to be relevant to the writing intervention I undertook with adult learners and will outline the methods used to scaffold the students' writing in chapter 3, following a description of the research methodology.

2.7 Learning to write in a second language

The relationship between learning to write in one's first language, and in a second one, is not clear and L1 research findings can not be assumed to apply automatically to L2 contexts (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Silva, 1992,1993). There is evidence that both L1 and L2 writers use a recursive composing process. But despite similarities, there are some important differences, some of which have been noted by Silva (1993), after reviewing research. L2 composing is generally more difficult and less 'effective' (getting lower holistic scores) than L1 composing. In Silva's studies, L2 students spent more time working out the topic and generated less useful material. More of the generated ideas did not find their way into the text. Transcribing (producing written text) was more laborious. More time was spent consulting a dictionary; there was more concern and difficulty with vocabulary; pauses were more frequent and final texts tended to be shorter.

Silva (1992, 1993) noted some linguistic differences between L1 and L2 writers in the way they use language. Features in L2 writing included: less subordination of clauses, more conjunction; less passivisation; different use of cohesive markers; less lexical variety, less noun modification and a simpler style. Many of these observations could be expected, in view of L2 learners' having much less control of the target language than L1 speakers. I will examine the writing of the learners I taught in the light of some of these categories.

Some researchers (Jones, 1982, Zamel, 1987 and Raimes, 1985) have found that a lack of competence in writing in English as a second language results more from lack of composing competence than linguistic competence. This may be so for advanced students but it certainly cannot hold for beginner L2 writers. Beginner writers in an additional language lack vocabulary and syntax to draw on to express their meaning (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). Often they are not aware of errors as they read their work out loud, and will not correct as they read, as mother tongue speakers usually do. Their revision tends to focus on a few things only, such as spelling and vocabulary (Kroll, 1990). Silva (1992, 1993) found that L2 learners could not make use of intuitive editing, as L1 writers could, re-reading the text to see if it 'sounded' right. Revision was more difficult for L2 writers. Cresswell (2000) found that even in the case of his L2 students who were near to proficiency level, their annotations focused mainly on grammar rules or spelling, until he actively helped them to become more conscious of global factors, such as organisation, in reviewing their work.
In addition, in South Africa many ABE students have inadequate, if any, strategies for writing in their first language. Despite the convincing argument for learning to read and write in their first language before they do so in another language (Freire, 1987; Heugh, 1995), many literacy learners see no use for writing in their mother tongue, apart from sending letters home, and go straight for English.

2.7.1 Formal accuracy in L2 writing

Teachers of second languages have often focused on correct form and feedback on writing often addresses only form, rather than content. However, an undue emphasis on form can become problematic. Some students are inhibited by formal considerations, and are afraid to write, in case they make mistakes. Tsui (1996) found that the major cause of anxiety for her ESL students in Hong

Kong was concern for grammatical accuracy. Her students saw writing as a high risk, low gain activity. Other researchers (Gungle and Taylor, 1989; Arnold, 2000) have identified anxiety as a common factor among L2 writers. Arnold notes students' need to express mature ideas 'in an obviously still immature linguistic vehicle' (2000: 777) which can reduce student self-esteem. Gungle and Taylor consider an overemphasis on 'grammar, sentence structure and prescribed forms' (1989: 240) to increase writing apprehension and to be detrimental to ESL acquisition.

Zamel (1987) claims that writing, which is a process of discovery, cannot be explored when attention to form becomes the dominant focus. Perl (1980) and Sommers (1980) both found that inexperienced L2 writers pay such undue attention to form that the ongoing process of discovery is constantly interrupted. Even within a first language context, Britton (1978) has noted the negative effects when the language itself becomes the focus, rather than the purpose for which it is being used.

Anxiety in a foreign language class has the potential to inhibit students' performance in the language (Arnold, 2000; Krashen, 1987) and Krashen, among others, has argued for the importance of reducing anxiety in language learners, or 'lowering the affective filter', so that defences are lowered and learning occurs.

A fluent student writer, according to Gutstein, may still make some errors. However, other aspects of writing will be evident. Generally, a fluent student writer is able to:

- write easily and quickly, with few pauses;
- get meaning across in coherent, reasoned sentences;

- use writing to express a wide range of language functions;
- be creative and imaginative in writing, e.g. make use of humour or metaphor.

(Gutstein in Kreeft Peyton, 1997:11)

2.8 Debates within second language teaching

Learning a language is a complicated activity. Despite research, it is not easy to say which methods really work best. In addition, both teachers and students often have strongly held beliefs about how to learn (Bartram and Walton, 1991).

2.8.1 The teaching of grammar

Given that implicit, or automatic knowledge is the primary goal of most language teaching, what is the role of explicit, or conscious knowledge? Ellis (1990) describes the difference between 'declarative knowledge', (or 'knowing that') and 'procedural knowledge' (or 'knowing how.') New knowledge is declarative; automated knowledge is procedural. Learners typically progress from declarative to procedural knowledge as they develop control.
In form-focused teaching, the assumption is that learners are able to learn what they are taught. Krashen (1982) has challenged this, arguing that grammar teaching will not alter the 'natural' route of L2 acquisition. He distinguishes between 'acquisition', a subconscious process by which linguistic competence is developed as language is used for real communication, and 'learning', the conscious process by which knowledge of a language is developed through study. Krashen sees only a very limited role for explicit knowledge about a language. He claims that the two forms of knowledge are different, are stored in separate parts of the brain and that learnt knowledge can not be converted into acquired knowledge. The way that learnt knowledge may be used is through

the 'monitor', or editing of utterances made through acquired knowledge, if there is sufficient time to do so. In writing, a student may have time to edit her work; in speech, which is immediate, there is seldom enough time to do so.

In Krashen's model of second language acquisition, the teacher's main aim is to supply enough comprehensible input to facilitate acquisition. He claims that any grammar teaching is of limited value, with only 'peripheral and fragile' effects (1997: 725) and useful only for learning, not for acquisition.

Krashen's model has been criticised by a number of linguists and researchers (Lightbown, 1985, Ellis, 1990). Ellis offers a tentative 'yes' to the question of whether formal instruction is effective in teaching languages. He claims that instructed learners tend to outperform naturalistic learners and sees some role for form-focused instruction. Schmidt (1983) found that naturalistic learners sometimes do not develop high levels of accuracy, even though they may communicate effectively. Lightbown and Spada (1993) comment on programs that only emphasise meaning:

> "Research has demonstrated that learners *do* benefit from instruction which is meaning-based. ..... The problem remains, however, that certain aspects of the linguistic knowledge and performance of second-language learners are not fully developed in such programs."
>
> (Lightbown and Spada, 1993:104)

For them, an important issue is how to incorporate form-based instruction effectively into a communicative framework (ibid, 106).

Worldwide, it seems that language learners' expectations are often for direct, grammatical approaches (Thornbury, 1998). With reference to the teacher, Thornbury notes that the direct teaching of grammar 'offers the teacher order,

security and power' (1998: 112), as opposed to the potential noise and chaos of a communicative classroom.

2.8.2 Treatment of errors

Traditionally, the treatment of errors consisted of their immediate correction (Ellis, 1990). Within certain teaching methodologies, such as the Audio-lingual model, errors were seen to be undesirable and as needing to be corrected immediately to avoid fossilisation. Prior to the introduction of the process approach to writing, in 'traditional' language classes, feedback on student writing came as a final mark with plenty of red ink throughout the essay.

> 'This practice assumed that students would take to heart all the mistakes pointed out, infer the reasoning behind the grade, and be motivated to avoid the multiplicity of mistakes on their next writing tasks. It is now apparent.... that such an approach left many bewildered and confused students unable to work constructively on their writing skills.
>
> (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996:378).

Subsequently researchers began to see errors as an integral part of language learning. Bartram and Walton hold that errors (why students make them and how teachers can deal with them) are of 'crucial and central importance' in teaching languages. (1991:1) There is an enormous variety of practice and attitudes to errors and error correction. For Lewis, the teacher's attitude to correction is 'probably the single most important issue in a language teacher's professional development' (1991: iii). Does correcting errors do any good? Can it do harm? Lewis argues that research is needed to ascertain what teachers actually do in class, rather than what they think they do.

Every language learner makes errors, whether a young child acquiring its primary language or an older learner of a second language. Some of these errors are due to hypothesis forming. Bartram and Walton argue that if the teacher hinders the guesses of the student, she will also hinder the learning.

There are problems for both a 'heavy' corrector and for a non-corrector (Bartram and Walton, 1991). Heavy correction may lead to teacher dominance, caution and anxiety on the part of the students and a possible stifling of creativity and imagination because accuracy is so valued. However, a non-corrector also faces problems. Students and parents may complain, believing that the teacher is lazy or incompetent. Examinations are often accuracy based. Students may become anxious and wonder if the teacher knows what she is doing. Many students, their parents and administrators, have a traditional view of teachers, seeing them as upholders of traditions and values within the society. Correction may have a number of psychological effects on students, either positive or negative: some students gain confidence from being allowed to express themselves freely, others from knowing the limits of what is correct or incorrect. Heavy error correction may discourage students from taking risks. It is difficult to assess the real effect a teacher has on her students. How a teacher reacts to error is part of her vision of 'what a language is, what learning is, and what a teacher is' (Bartram and Walton, 1991:5).

The long-term effectiveness of correction is also questionable. Students often manage to put overt correction into practice shortly afterwards. However, after a longer time lapse many students revert to the old, incorrect version (ibid, 1991).

Leki (1990) asks about students' own purposes in learning to write. Should they try to develop a vivid and varied style, to grow intellectually as they

struggle to express their ideas, or is it enough that they produce formally correct writing? Weaver (1996) suggests that students may actually make more mistakes as they take more risks and argues that growth and error go hand in hand. Shaughnessy concurs: 'it is not unusual for people acquiring a skill to get 'worse' before they get better and for writers to err more as they venture more' (1977:119).

Direct correction of errors is not the only way that a teacher can assist students to improve in correct use of the language. One alternative to correction of all errors is to prepare activities that help students practise the construction with which they have difficulties, for example by using a game or a jazz chant (Ur, 1988; Bartram and Walton, 1991). This would apply largely to a second-language context and implies that the teacher is giving specific attention to certain errors.

Flynn (1993) mentions an interesting finding, backed up by similar findings by Oye (1993) and Horn (1993): as tutors and students worked together in writing conferences and the students grew in confidence in writing, other aspects of writing, such as grammar, structure and vocabulary improved markedly, even though there had not been specific discussion of some of these areas. 'Striking, spontaneous improvement' in lower-order concerns often accompany improvement in higher-order skills (Flynn, 1993: 8). Flynn argues that writing is a higher-order thinking skill, which is: 'a strenuous, risky attempt by an individual to impose meaning on a situation that demands that he or she speak out' (1993: 7).

2.8.3 Assessment

I have included a section on assessment because the students I worked with were preparing for the Independent Examination Board ABET examinations.

This had an influence on what they wanted to learn and what they felt was 'real' learning.

Davies (1990:1) has described what he terms "the notorious 'backwash' or 'washback' effect" which testing has on teaching. He describes its effect as "a potent...influence, (a) salient... presence" (ibid: 1). However, he does not consider this simply a negative influence. It is rather a question of how far the testing is servant and how far master. Language testing offers "a means of establishing goals and standards for teaching courses and syllabuses." There are severe demands on language testing, however. For one, no sample of language used can represent "the variability and the infinite nature of language" (ibid: 2). The tester must generalise from a language sample to the whole of the language. It is also difficult to define the criterion for a language test. Although Davies considers language testing central to language teaching, he admits that it is not an exact science and that no true scores are available (though some are more true than others). It is important, he states, to recognise and accept the uncertainty involved.

Brown and Hudson (1998) describe the positive and negative consequences of 'washback'. They claim that if there is a mismatch between the curriculum and the assessment procedures, students will generally insist on studying whatever is in the tests and ignore any curriculum that is not directly related to the tests. Holland and Street (1994) have a somewhat negative view of the standardised literacy tests developed in the UK. In their view, it is problematic that the teaching may be geared wholly towards the testing. They quote Law (1984), who describes the situation as 'the exam tail wagging the curriculum dog.' Holland and Street criticise the fact that 'success in the classroom becomes more important than success outside it, and test scores tend to count more than coping in real life' (1994: 233).

Measuring and assessing adult literacy is a complex process. Holland describes literacy as: '..... multi-faceted, changing, culturally varied and defined differently from one student to another' (1994: 236). Holland and Street recommend that rather than measuring progress, progress should be recognised and identified. They suggest various 'indicators' that progress is taking place: confidence in relating to text, social interaction in the classroom, improved self-confidence and self-value, a sense of ownership among the students and the ability to perform a task that was previously out of reach.

2.8.3.1 The I.E.B. ABET examination

Both the students in my class and the Centre organisers were under the impression that mistakes in spelling and grammar would have a very negative effect on examination results. The examination papers themselves do not state whether marks will be deducted for spelling mistakes. A spokesperson from the I.E.B. explained that in Levels 1 and 2, marks are not deducted for spelling and grammatical mistakes, as long as the meaning is clear. At Level 3 these mistakes begin to be counted and by Level 4, they are taken more seriously. She stressed that the title (and goal) of the examinations was 'Communication in English.'

The I.E.B. A.B.E.T. examination, in fact, does not concentrate on form. (See copies in Appendices 1 and 2.) Each paper is titled, 'Communication in English.' There are some questions related to form in the higher level papers, but the focus of these examinations is very much on content and meaning. The socio-cultural context of the students likely to be writing them has been considered as well.

I include a brief description of papers at different levels.

A Level One paper (Grades 1-3 in the context of schooling) includes a picture, about which students are asked to write a story. Given a set of pictures of familiar products, they are asked to write a shopping list.

The level 2 (Grade 5 at school level) paper includes comprehension tasks. Some questions must be answered in full, others by a True/False choice, or multiple choice answers. Students are asked to give an opinion, give a heading for a story, and write their own story or letter on a given topic. One paper asks for responses to a "Found" column in a newspaper.

The Level 3 (Grade 7) and Level 4 (Grade 9) papers include questions on vocabulary in context and rewriting a passage in the past tense. But these are for two marks only. There is one question on punctuation, for one mark. The bulk of the paper focuses on comprehension and the student's own writing on a topic. The content includes issues such as hire purchase, child care, using a bus timetable, or South African history, such as the Sharpeville massacre.

2.9 Research in adult literacy education

Although adult literacy education is a branch of adult education, I have chosen to discuss the two separately in this chapter, because of the specific issues related to the teaching of literacy to adults.

The term "literacy" is a contested term. There are debates and questions at every level, with no simple answers to the questions surrounding literacy work (Lyster, 1992). Definitions of what constitutes literacy for an individual or community are complicated. Literacy in which language? How many years of schooling make someone 'literate'? Lyster argues that literacy must be

considered a continuum and that literacy statistics are "absolutely not absolute" (1992:13).

Literacy has been regarded as simply a set of technical skills that are learnt in formal education, independent of any context. This view has been described as the 'autonomous' model of literacy (Street, 1984). Within this model, it is assumed that literacy itself will affect other social and cognitive practices. Cognitive functioning is believed to be enhanced as people acquire literacy, with greater facility in abstraction, logical thought and meta-linguistic awareness.

An alternative approach treats literacy as a set of social practices embedded in specific contexts. This view, the "ideological" model, focuses on the uses and meanings of literacy, which is seen as a variety of social practices, rather than a single phenomenon which results from formal education. Reading and writing are seen as cultural practices and always have a social meaning. Barton (1994), Gee (1990), Street (1996) and Prinsloo and Breier (1996) argue for this ideological view of literacy. Barton, while starting from the social approach, does not ignore the psychological and historical aspects of literacy and so makes use of the metaphor of ecology to draw together the psychological, the social and the historical, to examine the interrelationship of the practice of literacy and its environment.

A key element, for Prinsloo and Breier, is literacy's location as communicative practice (1996: 21) and their approach starts from people's uses of literacy, rather than their formal learning of literacy. They focus their studies 'not just on what people *do* with literacy, but also their *understandings* of what they do, the *values* they give to their actions, and the ideologies and practices that encapsulate their use and valuing of literacy' (1996:24).

However, as Cretchley (2000) has pointed out, it is not possible to separate the two models entirely. In the autonomous model, for example, the acquisition of literacy skills is seen as a personal achievement. Cretchley comments: '.....but every educator must believe that it is at least possible to help build up an individual's skills by deliberate teaching' (2000: 243).

In the 'strong' ideological version, dilemmas exist for assessors. Should the literacy of the dominant or the subordinate group be assessed? Measuring and certifying literacy in a multi-ethnic society, where English, essay-text schooled literacy is the only literacy associated with economic and social power remains an unresolved question (ibid, 246).

Cretchley also notes the movement in Street's thinking: whereas in 1984 he claimed that his autonomous and ideological models clarified 'significant lines of cleavage in the field of literacy studies' (1984:3), in 1993, he stated that the two models are not in opposition, as the ideological model includes the autonomous model. She observes that a number of things are happening in any literacy event: 'An individual will be using certain learned literacy skills for processing written material, and will also be individually engaged in socially situated behaviours while engaging with texts' (2000: 228).

Statistics vary as to the number of 'illiterate' people in South Africa. The ANC's 1994 estimate was 15 million functionally illiterate adults (CEPD, 1994: 1; ANC, 1994; 87, quoted in Prinsloo and Breier, 1996) although Prinsloo and Breier question these figures. The 1996 census found that there were between 3-4 million adults with no schooling at all and between 7.5 and 8.5 million adults who were found to be functionally illiterate (figures quoted in Aitchison, 2001:16). Oxenham (1990) argues that literacy in one of the African languages

is of limited use in the industrialised urban areas. To be 'functionally literate' in South African society, one needs to be literate in English or Afrikaans.

With this level of illiteracy in mind, an understandable expectation would be a high demand for adult literacy classes in South Africa. But fewer than one percent of the potential learners is enrolled in any of the programmes on offer and many experience low rates of attendance and high drop-out rates. There is an apparent contradiction between need and take-up. This is not unique to South Africa but is a frequent phenomenon world wide (Lyster, 1992). Many reasons have been suggested for this, among them the following:

- Learners are tired after a long day at work.
- Teachers are frequently inadequately trained, materials can be of a poor quality and classes can be boring.
- Classes, and the written words learners meet, can be unrelated to their lives and needs.
- Learners, some of whom may be community leaders with considerable power in some areas of life, can be 'infantilised' and disempowered in class.
- It takes a long time to learn to read at a level where it makes a difference to one's life and learners may become discouraged.
- Many learners have little access or exposure to print.
- There is little suitable literature for learners to read outside class.
- Safe transport home may be a problem since many classes are at night.

(Lyster, 1992; Oxenham and French, 1990; Kell, 1996; Staton, 1991; Harley et al, 1996).

2.10 Research into adult education in general

Rogers (1986) has described some characteristics of adult learning. Adults come to class with experience and values. They bring expectations about the learning process and they already have their own patterns of learning. Adult students see all new material they encounter through the lens of their existing experience and knowledge. This has important implications for the teacher. Cretchley (2000) notes that adults need to know why they are learning something and will be ready to learn it when it will fill a real need in their lives.

Adult learners will often have to face the difficult process of unlearning:

> 'Not all of this set of values, experiences and knowledge is correct or helpful to the required learning. What is correct and helpful needs to be confirmed and reinforced; what is not correct needs unlearning. Experience of teaching adults reveals that there is often as much unlearning to be done as new learning, and because of the emotional investment in the existing patterns of experience and knowledge, the unlearning process is one of the most difficult tasks facing the teaching of adults.'
>
> (Rogers, 1986:28)

Teachers of adults may not know where the new material conflicts with pre-existing patterns. It is important to be aware of the learners' reactions to the new material (or ways of learning). Rogers suggests that the new material, if it is to be learned, must 'enmesh' with the older knowledge, and not be left lying on top of the existing patterns, leaving them unchanged. This may mean an exploration of the pre-existing knowledge and the way it was acquired. However, learning changes do not happen without effort and the process may be painful.

Bailey et al (1996) describe the use of autobiography as an entry point to help teachers in training explore their own history of schooling, or 'apprenticeship of

observation.' Teachers often teach in the way that they themselves were taught, rather than in the new ways that they have learned to teach at university or college. Bailey compares the approximately 3060 days of classroom experience with the 75 days of teacher preparation and asks: 'What could possibly happen during these 75 days to significantly alter the practices learned during the preceding 3060 days?' (1996: 11).

As a way of responding to, and reflecting on, the powerful impact of their 'apprenticeship of observation' (1996: 11) Bailey asked students to write autobiographies about their previous language learning, including their concepts of 'good' and 'bad' teaching. As they examined their 'apprenticeships', half forgotten memories surfaced. The process of re-examining the past helped many of the students to discover and gain insight into why they held the beliefs they did, as well as to articulate them (1996: 22).

Adult expectations of learning are often based on their experience of schooling. Students may assume that adult education will be like school, and learners may feel uneasy about the different methods of learning used in adult classes. An activity such as play, for example, might be seen as undignified or a waste of time. In South Africa, many adult learners have memories of their own schooling in D.E.T. schools, or in the earlier Bantu Education. For many students, this is the imprint that has been left, despite the poor quality of this schooling.

Lightbown and Spada (2001) comment on learner beliefs:

> 'Second language learners are not always conscious of their individual learning styles, but virtually all learners, particularly older learners, have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be delivered. These beliefs are usually based on previous experiences and the assumption (rightly or wrongly) that a particular type of instruction is the best way for them to learn.'
>
> (2001: 35)

Learner beliefs, they claim, can be strong mediating factors in their experiences in the classroom. Lightbown and Spada cite an example, where high levels of dissatisfaction were found among ESL students at an English university, in a highly communicative programme, which focused on meaning and spontaneous communication in group work interaction. Most of the students were concerned about the absence of attention to language form and lack of corrective feedback, feeling that the approach used was 'not consistent with their beliefs about the best ways for them to learn' (2001: 35). Even school children may have firm opinions about how learning should take place. Li (1998) has described school children in South Korea, who did not believe they were learning anything if they did not learn new vocabulary and grammar.

Spolsky (1989) in considering the personal characteristics of learners which will affect their language learning, includes their previous knowledge and attitudes, as well as other factors such as their age, personality, capabilities and motivation.

The question of how new knowledge translates into new patterns of behaviour (or does not) is an important one for anyone involved in education, whether of adults or children. Perhaps this 'translation' is more difficult for adult learners, who already have patterns of behaviour and learning. New knowledge must be received and engaged with, then responded to. Rogers uses the example of smoking. How does the knowledge that this is an unhealthy practice translate into the decision to give up smoking?

The writing intervention outlined in Chapter 3 was informed by the literature reviewed in this chapter. Insights from this literature also informed the analysis of the research data which is discussed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe the nature of the writing intervention on which the research is based and the kinds of data collected and analysed. I begin by describing the context of this study.

3.1 Context

Research site

The research was conducted from mid April 2002 to mid November 2002 in a weekly Literacy class at an Adult Education Centre located in a primary school in a Johannesburg suburb. The duration of each of the weekly classes was 90 minutes.

Before I began the study, I spent several months at the Centre, observing classes and interviewing students.

Research subjects

There are several classes at the Centre, with students grouped according to their literacy levels. The group I worked with had progressed the furthest with their reading and writing of English. Initially, when I began interviewing students, there were four students in this group. By the time I began the writing intervention, only two students remained. For reasons of privacy I refer to these two students by the pseudonyms of Lettie Mkhize and Florence Dlamini. Mostly I use only their first names for reasons of brevity. Lettie and Florence expected the return of the two missing students and sometimes took work to

them, but their absence proved to be permanent and so the group consisted of only the two regular students. The group had another teacher, who was prepared to share class time with me. Sometimes we divided the lesson, each taking a portion of the time; at other times we alternated and taught the entire lesson on our own.

Both students are domestic workers in their early fifties who work in the neighbourhood of the Centre and come to the school to improve their reading and writing in English. Both are Zulu speakers. Each spent a number of years at primary school as a child, Lettie until Std 3 (Grade 5) and Florence until Std 4 (Grade 6.) They learned some English there but it was mostly reading, much of which they say they did not understand. Both came to Johannesburg as young women to find work.

3.2 Case study

This research project is an educational case study of a writing intervention in an Adult Education class. It could be described as a "picture-drawing" case study (Bassey, 1999:62), a largely descriptive account which draws together the results of the exploration and the analysis of the case.

This research project has the following features of a case study:

- the focus is on particular individuals;
- the research was conducted within a localised boundary of space and time (over a period of seven months);
- it was done largely within its natural context (in class and in the students' homes, where they wrote in their journals);

- detailed data was collected through a range of methods, enough for the researcher to be able to explore significant features and create plausible interpretations;
- the data includes the accounts that the subjects themselves provided;
- as researcher, I was involved from a number of perspectives (I planned the course material, taught classes and observed and analysed the resultant writing).

(Bassey, 1999: 58-59, Hitchcock and Hughes, 1993: 214)

The case study approach is one which does not aim for universal generalisations (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1993) especially with a small group such as the one in my study. However, insights emerged which would influence my teaching in other adult literacy contexts and which may be of interest to other adult literacy teachers.

3.3 The nature of the intervention

3.3.1 Rationale for the teaching approach and activities chosen

My impression from watching classes at the centre (and other literacy classes elsewhere) is that frequently the emphasis has been on formal features, such as correct spelling and grammar, almost to the exclusion of content. Students in these classes seemed to concentrate more on spelling correctly, than on what they wanted to say. Fear of making mistakes became an inhibiting factor which robbed them of their confidence in writing.

I accept that there is a place for teaching spelling and grammar. However, if the teacher's focus is on 'correctness', this is likely to be the students' focus as

well. My purpose in doing this research was to investigate learners' responses to a classroom focus on meaning and content, rather than on form.

In designing activities for the students, major influences came from the 'process' writing school, with its focus on the communication of meaning, personal involvement and writing frequently, as practice. (Atwell, 1987; Elbow, 1981; Calkins, 1986, 1991; Murray, 1987). Some activities came from the 'Writing, Theory and Practice' course which I had done in 2001 with Dr Pamela Nichols as a module for the MA degree in English Language Education.

I chose activities with the following in mind:

- The activities were meaning focused and the students would be likely to have something to communicate. I hoped students would discover the many resources which they possessed for writing.

- Dialogue and discussion in the initial stages were integral to the process. Writing is a social act and we tend to discover what we have to say by talking to other people (Shaughnessy, 1977).

- I wanted to help students lose their fear of writing. My purpose was to lower their affective filter' (Krashen, 1987) to the extent that fear of mistakes would not be an inhibiting factor.

- Because I felt that large quantities of red pen corrections were a potential discouragement to students (Bartram and Walton, 1991), and because I wanted to shift their focus away from formal considerations, I explained to the students at the beginning of the writing intervention that I would be

correcting their writing minimally, especially the personal writing that they did in their journals.

3.3.2 Genres used

Narrative was the starting point for writing, offering an accessible place to enter. Narrative appears to be universal, part of being human, a 'primary act of mind' (Rosen, 1994:195), acquired early in life (Perera, 1984) and adults, in particular, have considerable lived experience to draw on. We tell our stories for many reasons: for comic relief, to make sense of something that happened, to share our joy and pain, to reconsider events (Knezevic and Scholl, 1996: 80). Stories are interpretive resources for dealing with the everyday world (Kamler, 2001). Telling one's story can be a means of recovering the experiences of those who have been silenced and marginalised and perceptions of events may change in the telling (Stein, 1998).

Other genres used included instructions, descriptions, lists, proverbs, letters and cartoon speech bubbles.

3.3.3 Activities used in the writing class

I did not ask the students to redraft their work, although this is an important stage in the development of a text within the process model. There were several reasons for this. One was that transcribing, the actual act of writing, took a reasonably long time for these students and having to write everything again could prove discouraging. Another was that beginner writers in a second language lack the intuitive skills that mother tongue speakers have, so that in re-reading work they can not always hear when something does not 'sound' right

(Silva, 1993). Students' revision will often focus on surface elements only, such as spelling or vocabulary (Kroll, 1990).

Revision appears to be related to skill in writing. Hayes and Flower (1989) found that the more 'expert' the writer, the greater the proportion of time that was likely to be spent on revision. 'Experts' revised more globally than novice writers, who often saw revision as a sentence-level task and seldom altered the structure of the text. Within schools, a similar pattern emerged. Younger children tended to revise much less than older ones and Stallard (1974) found that even in the case of older children, very few revisions were focused above the word and sentence level.

3.3.3.1 Discussion of ideas before writing.

Discussion of ideas before writing was a way of preparing the students for writing, so that they could formulate their ideas out loud, hesitate, or clarify something unclear. Speech is a more primary way of using language than writing is; we learn to talk before we learn to write. My assumption was that once students had expressed their ideas orally and heard others expressing theirs, writing would not involve much searching for material. Instead, ideas which had been considered and spoken about could now be expressed in writing (Michelson, 1992; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991).

3.3.3.2 Making a list

Examples of possible lists are given below. The aim was to generate writing quickly, without too much thought beforehand and to inspire creative thought.

The following are examples of lists:

- Write five things that really annoy you.

• Make five (or more) excuses:

- you didn't phone your friend on her birthday;
- you were caught speeding;
- you came back late to your job after your holiday.

• Write down five things:

- that you are good at cooking;
- that give you a clean feeling.

3.3.3.3 Autobiography, narrative and memories

Students were asked to write narratives of significant parts of their life stories, including memories from early life and later. The value of autobiography as a pedagogical tool has been discussed in the previous chapter (see Stein, 1998; Brady, 1990; Abbs, 1974; Bailey et al, 1996).

Autobiographies and memories provide a rich source of material for writing, because of adults' lived experience. Frequently memories evoke strong feelings, which may provide an impetus for writing. For those who were marginalised during the apartheid era in South Africa, such as the students with whom I was working, writing one's personal history could be an important act of 'recovery and validation' (Stein, 1998: 523-524).

Recalling memoirs is always double-edged, because the writer is older and wiser (Calkins, 1991) and can see events in a new and different light. Autobiography provides an opportunity to reflect on one's life experiences and perhaps to change one's behaviour as a result (Bailey et al, 1996).

3.3.3.4 The use of pictures, drawings and cartoons.

Visual material was used as a further entry point into writing. Students were asked to interpret the visuals in comics, discuss them and then write words for

the characters, based on their facial expressions and gestures. I used the *Madam and Eve* cartoons (Francis, Dugmore and Rico) because of the context of domestic work they provide, with the possibility for the women of giving an 'insider's' point of view.

3.3.3.5 Reading one's own writing out aloud.

The students were encouraged to listen to, and read, each other's writing. The aim was to extend the audience for their writing. Within a school, very often the only audience is the teacher who marks the work. In daily life, writing is an interactive process whether one is writing a letter to a friend or a story book. The response of the audience will often have an effect on the writer. Calkins quotes Baker, a published writer who recalls the pleasure of realising that his (written) words had the power to make other people laugh, when the teacher read out his essay in class (Baker, 1982: 239, quoted in Calkins, 1991:110).

3.3.3.6 Publishing students' writing.

I decided to publish students' writing, in a booklet printed with a computer, in order to extend the audience for their writing. This book could be read by family members or friends as well as fellow students. In addition, it could provide a way for each student to see her own writing in print and to see herself as an author.

Atwell (1987) argues that a sense of audience, the knowledge that someone will read what they have written, is crucial to young writers. In her school, students made use of class magazines and bulletin boards, and wrote to people outside of the classroom context.

Publishing can be part of the process of writing. When someone writes with other readers in mind, different demands are made on the writing from (for example) the more private writing done in a journal (Calkins, 1991). The writer needs to consider her work with regard to the reaction of the intended reader(s).

3.3.3.7 The inclusion of Zulu folk stories and proverbs

Folk stories and other oral genres were initially encountered by the students in the research group when they were young children. In asking them to recount folk stories and talk about proverbs and their meanings, I wanted to acknowledge and draw on their mother-tongue (Zulu, in both cases), and for the women themselves to see it as a resource for their writing. The first language of a speaker is usually the language of her thinking, conversation, dreaming, relationship to the primary care-giver in early life and early learning. It has a significant and close relationship with the speaker (Heugh, 1995).

I also wanted to draw on the "layers of language" that each of us possesses, that have been "laid down" in us since early childhood. Robert MacNeill (quoted in Calkins, 1991) writes of these early layers of language which include hymns, jokes, prayers, proverbs, stories, songs, etc. MacNeill describes these as 'wells' of experience and knowledge. I hoped that these could be brought into the students' writing in English.

Because I speak (and teach) Sotho and Zulu, I have some knowledge of oral literary genres, which provided an entry point here.

3.3.3.8 Writing instructions

In writing instructions students were to make use of a genre other than narrative. Students were asked to write instructions for use of a product such as window cleaning fluid, to explain a recipe, or to give instructions for using a

sewing machine, first orally and then in writing. In the case of the cleaning product or the recipes, they were required to read the instructions and then summarise them, using their own words. In the case of the sewing machine, which had no written instructions, the difference between the oral and written modes was to be used to open a discussion about how the two modes differ and how one has to be explicit with words in writing, whereas gestures may be adequate in speaking.

3.3.3.9 Making a family tree.

This activity was included in the intervention to facilitate description and explanation and to involve some oral history.

3.3.3.10 Writing a letter

'Writing letters' is one of the reasons frequently given by learners as to why they attend literacy classes (Harley et al, 1996). A number of students, both from this centre and another where I taught previously, mentioned their dislike of having to rely on someone else to read their personal letters to them. Although it is likely that letters to family members would be written in their primary language, the students indicated an interest in learning to write letters in English.

Writing letters also involved the use of a non-narrative genre.

3.3.3.11 Grammar exercises and language games

Towards the end of the intervention I wrote some grammar notes and exercises, in response to perceived needs the students had expressed and based on mistakes they made frequently. This was a compromise. I had not planned to do this but the students valued grammar and felt disadvantaged by its omission. We

also made some use of language games, to practise particular language structures.

3.4 Writing done at home.

3.4.1 Journals

At the start of the intervention, I provided each student with an exercise book and asked her to keep a daily journal. I used the term 'diary', since the women were already familiar with this term. They were able to extend the idea of a book of appointments and future plans to a book that is written in daily to record events, thoughts and feelings. I suggested to them that the regular practice of writing could improve their writing and we discussed how the journals could be used and what sort of writing could be included. As privacy is a possible issue, I told the students at the start that I would be reading them each week and they should include only what they felt at ease about allowing me to read. I also let them know that I would not be correcting their journals because this was their personal writing (Fulweiler, 1987; Lowenstein, 1987). A few weeks later, we read published journal entries written by other women and considered the content of the writing and the features that showed that this writing fitted into the genre of journal writing.

An unintended benefit of letting the students write daily journals, was that it provided me with some feedback about their impressions of what we were doing in class (Barkhuisen, 1998).