

FUN WRITING FOR CHILDREN: *HURRAY, I CAN WRITE!*

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Abstract

Writing. What comes to your mind when you hear this word? Hard, frustrating, tiring, or easy, fun, and pleasing? It depends on what kind of experiences we had in the past dealing with writing itself. The more fun and enjoyment we get from writing, the more we love writing. On the other hand, the more frustrating moments we face, the more discouraged we are. This paper tries to present some ideas that can make children addicted to writing. The central problem to be answered in this paper is. "How can we, as teachers and parents, encourage children of young ages to write?" Teaching writing to children It does not have to start from high-level topics which require much knowledge and lots of experiences, but writing can be started from our daily life and simple things in ordinary life. This paper is based on document reviews and observations on a six-year-old child whose spirit in writing was started since she was around 5. What is meant by documents in this case is the child's writing. In order to find more information on how to encourage children to love writing, three teachers of young learners' education were also interviewed. This paper will hopefully inspire kindergarten and primary school teachers, as well as parents, to encourage children to love writing.

Introduction

In Indonesia, kids are normally taught how to write the alphabets and numbers since they are in kindergarten, though some children, due to certain reasons, like lack of interest or ignorance, delay this process. Some children, once they are able to read and write skillfully, are so self-motivated and continue to develop writing habit, and do not stop at the point of writing the alphabets or numbers, but words, sentences, or even stories. They may retell famous stories that they know, or tell stories of their own imagination and experiences.

Parents and teachers should help them grow this positive talent. Once children find encouragement and spirit to write more and better, they will be motivated to do so. On the other hand, if they do not find supports from their surroundings, they may feel frustrated or

discouraged. Writing is not a nightmare, nor is it a difficult process for kids, if we can help them handle their fear and confusion. Supplying children with English story books will also help. Gordon (2007:66) mentions that target language words are learned most effectively when young learners pick them up unconsciously. The example is when they are reading an interesting story or book. This is better than asking them to memorize words deliberately.

In this paper, I would like to share some ways of motivating kids of lower primary education (Grade 1 or 2) to have high motivation in writing, in a level beyond the writing of alphabets or numbers. Some tricks and tips will be shared, all of which deal with motivating and helping children improve their writing. In this paper, I do not limit the language that kids write in. Any writing either in Bahasa Indonesia as the mother tongue or English as a foreign language that they learn, is acceptable in this context.

Ways to Hook and Enhance Children's Interest in Writing

When kids are interested in what they're learning, they go faster and farther

(Kathy Seal, 2003)

The above quotation seems to be right, when kids are absorbed in what they enjoy doing, they will speed up in that area, and thus become better and faster than before. On the other hand, when they are forced to do what they do not like or enjoy, they can be stressed out, bored, or even depressed. Enjoyment in doing something is closely related to children's inner motivation.

Among other ways, Seal (2003) suggests that in order to raise self-motivated children, parents should connect what children learn at school with the real world, and parents should share things in everyday life. For example, when children learn about the solar system, planets, and things in the sky at school, ask them to observe the moon or stars at night, and discuss with them. Questions like, "What is the color of the moon?" or "What do you think the moon is trying to say to us?" This will trigger children's curiosity and imagination.

It is undeniable that children's minds are full of imagination, wonder, and curiosity. According to an online writing course, Time4Writing (2014), "Writing can be an amazing outlet for kids – allowing them full reign to express their personality and creativity." The main problem is writing is always a "nightmare" for most students of all levels. Now that we are living in the era of thriving social media like email, SMS, internet, and social networking

like face book and twitter, all society members seem to be bombarded with fast-spread news, opinions, as well as criticisms.

Writing is a dimension of communication. Kern (2000:2) states that “A focus on literacy frames reading and writing as complementary dimensions of written communication.” Reading and writing in social contexts are of course taken into consideration. Peter Hannon, as cited by Grainger (2004), claims that literacy is never static. Literacy changes, and is changed by people who use literacy. Peter further states that children’s lived experiences is highly specific, since prior to school, the language and culture in their domain, that is at home, has structured and shaped their meaning making. “Unofficial literacy”, as Grainger (2004:5) mentions, is literacy in which families engage; there are voices of parents, grandparents, and siblings are involved.

Based on the facts above, Grainger (2004:6) claims that teachers need to acknowledge differences of how literacy is defined at home and school, and build on the cultural knowledge. Teachers also need to contrast literary practices of their learners. They need to perceive that learners actively draw upon home and school learning. Both parents at home and teachers at school have a significant role to help children build and improve their literacy skills, one of which is writing.

In this “literate era”, the ability to read and write well nowadays has absolutely become an essential skill. “*Being able to write and write well is an essential skill for all ages,*” is stated in the article by Time4Writing (2014). I therefore perceive the need to encourage our children or students at a very early age to write, to learn how to spell and follow rules of grammar and punctuation. This should be done both at home with their parents, grandparents, or siblings, as well as at school with their teachers. Below are some suggested ways to encourage kids to write.

- Make Creative Thank-you or Get-well-soon Cards

This is not a difficult thing to do. Children are very happy when exploring with paper, glue, scissors, and the accessories like ribbons, flowers, or little pandas. Once they are taught how to make a card with some writing in it, they will be very excited. The writing inside the card does not have to be long and complicated. It can be something very simple, like a thank-you for their mothers or friends.

- Let Their Imagination Wonder: Make-believe Stories

As mentioned above, children are so imaginative that they can make up any story that pop into their mind. Both teachers and parents can make use of this positively. Children can be asked to record their imaginative mind and write it down on their paper. With persistent help and encouragement, the results can be amazing.

- Retell Famous Stories

This is another fun activity to do. Most kids know the legendary stories of Pinocchio, Cinderella, Snow White, or Little Mermaid. We can ask them to retell their favorite stories in their own words.

- Play Some Writing Games

Some writing games that can be fun, like changing one word game, are also recommended (Time4Writing, 2014) To start with, teachers can have one child write out a sentence on a piece of paper then pass it to the next participant. The next child will change one word in the sentence and so on until it reaches the last player. When the final sentence is read aloud, everyone will be amazed at how one word can entirely change a story or message.

Another fun group writing game is creating your sentence. As a first step, a child begins a story with one sentence, then each person adds on a sentence and builds the story until everyone is doubled over in laughter or the story ends. Whenever your child begs or whines for something, turn it into a persuasive writing opportunity. Have him tell you in writing what he wants, why he wants it, what he would do with it if he got it and why he thinks he deserves it. Of course, you must set the expectation that his argument is no guarantee he will get what he wants, only that it will increase his chances.

- Write About Experiences

“Fun experiences are great writing prompts for children, and kids are especially eager to talk about their favorite things”, is stated in the article (Time4Writing, 2014). For example, when children go to the zoo or on family vacation, we can ask children to write a story about their experience. Giving a “writing prompt” before the kids go can be useful. They can be thinking about it during the trip.

When we go to the park, for example, we can have our children write about their favorite activity. Guiding questions or instructions as the following can be helpful, as stated in the article:

- What did you enjoy the most – the slide, the swings, the sandbox?
- Write about the animal that you liked the most.
- Write a story about your favorite place, tourist attraction or activity when you get home.

Being very young does not mean that all the time, children have to do what their teachers or parents ask them to. They have their own freedom and creativity. It is the teachers and parents' task to generate motivation in them. Once they are motivated to do something, they can go faster. The same case happens in their motivating them to write. It is not an exception. Once they get hooked in writing, I believe they will keep writing, no matter how their mood is and how few sentences they can produce.

Kern (2000:194) maintains that teachers can introduce free or creative writing. In free writing, students are asked to write about a topic without stopping. Creative writing deals with "playing with language". For example, "Create a dialog between two famous people who are not at the same room right now, between Jane and Paul". These two writing tasks, free writing and creative writing can motivate students to write more.

What Teachers and Parents Should Do Before and Whilst Writing

The following things are what teachers or parents should do in order to help children improve their writing. These are expected to be done during and after the writing process.

- Be Supportive and Encouraging

Still according to the online writing course (Time4Writing, 2014), supports and encouragement are significant in building children's interest in writing. No matter how dissatisfying the results are, parents or teachers should always give credits for their kids' writing results.

- Cultivate their creative writing talents with interesting and fun writing prompts

Whatever writing assignments parents give to their kids or the assignments that they bring home from school, parents should praise them for their efforts. The more positive feedback parents provide, the more confident children will become and the more they will enjoy writing. This will make children want to write more and more.

- Create an Interactive Writing Class

Another thing that should be done by teachers is building an interactive-atmosphere writing class. This will be a strong foundation e the children's writing interest in the next levels, upper primary school, secondary, and tertiary levels.

- **Read to and Read with Your Child**

An article by EF (2014) mentions that Reading and writing go hand-in-hand; good writers are well, not just in grammar and usage, but in various subjects also, and well versed in various writing styles. This means that without enough reading, anyone's writing will not be as good as expected.

Both teachers and parents can take an active part in it. Teachers can assign students to go the library and ask them to read as story books that they like. At home, parents can ask read stories or light articles with their kids and give some explanations needed. If these two – reading and writing- go “hand in hand”, children will be able to write better.

- **Give Enough Space and Materials for Creative Writing**

Providing a good place to practice writing is recommended. At home, a quiet place, which is away from the television, videos, or noise in the house, is needed. Providing children with needed stationery like journals, pens or pencils, colorful papers, crayons, and envelopes is necessary (EF, 2014). Other tools that they may need when writing in English are children's dictionary, or an Indonesian-English one.

When children feel the need to write on the computer, parents can help facilitate that. This is important to give a feeling of comfort, and a feeling that they are “listened to”; parents care for their needs. Of course, supervision and technical help are needed when they are using the computer.

- **Encourage Regular Writing Practice**

As the popular saying claims, “Practice makes perfect”, teachers and parents should bear in mind, that better writing is the one practiced regularly.

When children are stuck, and they do not know what to write, parents should help give some ideas about what to write. Daily experiences, pictures, friends, family members, and even feelings can be a good topic to write.

One thing to bear in mind is children's swing of moods. Both teachers and parents should help their kids to control their feelings, including their anger, rapidly changing moods,

anger, frustration, disappointment, and some other psychological conditions, which may ruin their mood to write.

- **Creating Guiding Questions**

Writing begins from brainstorming of ideas, mind-mapping, making an outline, writing the first draft, editing, and finalizing the writing. For children's level, not all stages can be passed through. However, parents can help "outlining" the writing by giving the following guiding questions (EF, 2014):

1. For story writing, for example, "When does the story take place?"
2. Asking about the main conflict "What is the most important event?"
3. Asking about action/resolution "How does Johnny get Green Lantern's power ring back to him?"
4. For a report, appropriate questions can revolve around the "W Questions: "who, what, where, when, why, and how."
5. Asking about experiences: Ask about things he or she has done in the past and particularly enjoyed.
6. Asking about someone he or she particularly admires, or something else centered on the child.

Another activity suggested, still related to outlining, is "Play stenographer". This is how the activity is done. Write down your child's thoughts and read them back. This is done with very young children to help them learn to connect spoken and written words or with older children to help them focus on their assignment.

- **Write Along with Them**

"Write along with them" means that parents do the writing assignment alongside the child. Doing the actual assignment and showing the results to children shows them that parents value creative writing skills.

- **Post-Writing Activity**

As the post writing activity, reviewing your child's work is worth doing. This is not to pinpoint the child's glaring errors or to correct their mistakes in writing. But this is more on suggesting ways to improve their writing. Polite, unthreatening sentences can be used, like "You might want to check the spelling of these 3 words."

On the other hand, it is necessary to look for writing skills that the child has displayed proficiently and points them out; praise is needed to show appreciation.

Observation and Interview Results

In this section, I will report the results of my observation on a six-year-old girl who happened to live in the same house as I did. This girl, Theta (not the real name), was very keen on writing. She was six, and sitting in the first grade of primary school. For her, writing is one of her hobbies besides drawing and coloring. She likes to write all things that pop in her mind, her ideas, her plans, her prayers. She also likes to retell children's stories in her own words. The stories retold could be in Bahasa Indonesia or in English.

Asked about her motivation to write, Theta mentioned that frankly speaking, she did not have any desire or motivation to write. She wrote because she was asked to, by her mother. However, in my observation, subconsciously, Theta often wrote what was in her mind: her plans, her crazy ideas, her anger, her sadness, and her imaginative story. This can be a good start to raise her interest in writing.

Making "thank you" cards is one of her writing habit. A "Thank You" card does not have to be factory-made and expensive. Even kids can make it themselves, and the personal touch is even stronger. Theta mentioned that she liked making her own cards, because in this way, she could make her own creations. The writing on it does not have to be long and complicated; one sentence can be enough to represent wishes and feelings.

Retelling famous fairytales or children stories is another kind of writing that Theta likes to do. This is another interesting activity that Theta likes to do. Having favorite stories like "Cinderella" or "Snow White" and knowing the story well can be a plus point for kids to retell them. Their knowledge of the characters, the conflicts, and the resolution in the story help do the story retelling better.

Besides those two activities, Theta likes telling about experiences. Experiences are what we face every day. For a story, experiences can be a valuable first-hand source of information. Whatever children experience, we can ask them to write one. Experiences to write can be a visit to the zoo, and the animals seen, meeting a new friend, being taught by a special teacher, and many others.

Telling about feelings or emotions also becomes a way that Theta does to express herself. Some people can express their feelings and emotions well through writing. So do

children. Once they get used to doing this, they will tend to do the same: pouring their heart into written expressions. This will be a kind of diary or journal writing.

About journal writing, Kern (2000) argues that journal writing has a principle goal, that is to encourage writing habit, develop fluency, and improve students' motivation and attitude toward writing. Brown (2001:344) also strengthens this idea, mentioning that in journal writing, students record their thoughts, feelings, and reactions. The instructor reads and responds to them.

Besides observing Theta, two people who were involved in young learners' education were interviewed. They were Ms. A, and Ms. B, and Ms. C. initials were used in order to keep the confidentiality of the respondents. I conducted all the interviews separately in September 2014. Ms. A was a first grade class teacher at a private elementary school in Salatiga, while Mrs. B was the owner as well as teacher of a leading bilingual playgroup and kindergarten in Salatiga, and Ms. C was a first and second grade English teacher, at a private school in the same town.

Asked about their opinions on teaching writing for elementary school children, these three teachers shared different opinions and experiences.

The first interviewee was Ms. A, a first grade teacher of a private school in Salatiga, who had experienced of teaching the first graders for five years. She said that to teach writing amidst the first graders with so many different abilities was very difficult. Some students, when entering the primary school, had been able to read and write well, while others still could not write and read at all. She had to give extra activities for students who could finish writing or reading tasks faster than others, in order to avoid boredom.

By the end of the third month, she had a target; at least all students could write a word well. To support this, she asked students to write down their hobbies in Bahasa Indonesia, for example, "berenang", and then asked them to bring a photograph showing that activity, and tell the class about it. By the end of the semester, her target was all students must be able to write at least one sentence of their own. Writing a word or sentence in Bahasa Indonesia is a start to build students' ability and habit in writing.

Different from Ms. A, Ms. B, with eleven years of being a principle as well as teacher, had special experiences and expectations in motivating and teaching young learners to write in English. Being the owner of a leading playgroup and kindergarten in Salatiga, she wanted

students in her school to be able to write in English. She always urged teachers in her school to encourage students to write.

Talking about strategies to motivate students, she said that she liked using two strategies in order to encourage children to write in English. The first one is whole class diary writing. I would like to call this “collaborative journal writing”. She gave the children in kindergarten level a diary. Each student should bring the diary home, and write at least one sentence. Parents’ help was of course needed. Before delivering the diary, together with the students, she decided the topic to be written. Sometimes, she asked the students to bring a doll home, a minion doll, for example. The diary was to be returned the next day, and completed by the whole students in the class. The story to be written in the journal should be a continuum. This strategy worked well.

The second strategy that she used was report on holidays or weekends. Similar to Ms. A, Ms. B also asked her students to bring a photograph of a holiday or weekend activity, and paste it on a piece of paper. First, the students had to report orally. After that, they were all required to write down their report, at least in one sentence. Spelling and grammatical mistakes were not a problem. Teachers would correct them.

Being a primary school English teacher, who taught lower levels, Ms. C had different strategies in motivating students to write. This academic year, she was teaching the first graders, and met the students only once a week. She often used tracing missing letters and rewriting erased words on the white board. For the second graders, which she taught last year, she often asked students to answer reading comprehension questions in full sentences, with her help.

Another way is asking students to arrange jumbled words. The main difficulty that she faced was similar to Ms. A’s; that is, some students even still got problems in writing words in Bahasa Indonesia. That is why, if her students wrote bres for breast, she did not blame them.

From the interviews with the teachers which were conducted separately on 5th, 15th and 19th of September, I could draw a red thread that in teaching writing to very young children needs lots of patience, understanding, as well as tolerance to any error that they make.

Conclusion

Dealing with young kids of six or seven years old is not an easy thing to do, not to mention asking them to write. Paper and pen can mean something scary and threatening, if they get negative experiences with writing. Writing in second language is indeed more complicated and will be more difficult and less effective than writing in native language, if learner is less familiar with these new resources and less confident in the use (Kern, 2000:177).

Writing activities can be a nightmare for children. In order to help kids gain positive experiences, both teachers and parents can try the suggested ways mentioned above. They should keep searching for ways and strategies to keep motivating their children and students. It is the task of both teachers and parents to encourage them to write, in home and school learning.

This paper of course still needs improvement. For future research, more respondents can be observed, and it is good if there are prospective researchers who can do a try-out on the suggested ways to motivate children to write. Deeper and wider perspectives can be derived from more source people, like teachers and parents. This paper hopefully inspires more teachers and parents to motivate their children to love writing and to write better.

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