

CHANGING TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS WRITING, TEACHING OF WRITING AND ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

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Abstract

Writing is the most visible and probably therefore the most criticized product of education, but often the teacher has not declared to him/her what is the essence of writing and what are the main goals of teaching and assessing writing. Usually, when teachers in Estonia claim about students' bad writing skills, they often mean spelling, which is actually only one element of writing. The present article is going to introduce the research, which goal was to convince teachers, that creating text is a complex process, which involves paying attention to numerous factors: choice of words, syntax, message, peculiarities of different text forms, language usage etc. Therefore analytical assessment is described more closely in named above research paper and in this article, with hoping to encourage teachers to use it more systematically and consciously. Analytical assessment model, worked out for the research and used for assessing 740 pupils written texts, gave complex information about pupils writing skills, from what brief overview will be presented in the current article. The fact, that all pupils had their strong sides and weaknesses, confirmed complex nature of writing and proved, that for assessing pupils writing skills we need to assess many aspects of writing, not only spelling and/or content.

Key words: *writing, analytical assessment of writing, writing skills, analytical assessment model, direct and indirect assessment of writing.*

Introduction

Writing skills of pupils in Estonia have been criticized for decades already. In the last years the discussion has become so intense that in the Teachers' Newspaper ("Õpetajate Leht", 27. 04. 2001) speech therapists claimed that the percentage of pupils in the need of (their) help is up to 40%. As the writing skill of our students has been considered poor for at least 20 years, one might think that the teaching methods were insufficient until the execution of a new curriculum in 1996 (Puik, 1989; Sepp, 1989; Siilbek, 1987).

The methods of teaching the mother tongue and writing are more human nowadays. The keywords are language as a whole and communication, but still the skill of writing is arguably poor and getting worse (Hennoste, 2004; Maila, 2003; Puik, 1997). As it was hard to agree with this, it was necessary to study the writing skills of the 1st and 2nd level students of our middle-school, to point out, what is the real problem with writing and writing skill.

If one wants to assess the level of writing skills, one must bear in mind at least three aspects: a) what is meant with the skill of writing and writing as a whole; b) how to assess the skill of writing as objectively as possible; c) what are the children capable of according to development psychology.

Often even teachers have not declared to themselves what is the essence of writing and what

are the main goals of teaching and learning writing. Usually, when people talk about not knowing how to write, they often mean spelling, which is actually only one element of writing. It is not taken into account that the skill of writing consists of different components and just saying that a student cannot write is unfair and uninformative.

Due to that one of the goals of dissertation, to which this article is based on, was to show, that creating text is a complex process, which involves paying attention to numerous factors: handwriting, choice of words, sentence fluency, message etc.

Similar misunderstanding is very common also in assessment of writing skill in Estonia. Therefore analytical assessment was described more closely in dissertation named above. Introducing and testing analytical assessment can be considered even as one of the most important results of research, because there is not enough material about this in Estonian.

Which components of good writing have pupils achieved better, which worse? Does the analytical evaluation give enough information about the components of writing? How good or bad are the 1st and 2nd stage students writing skills in Estonia? How big is the difference in the results between different classes? These were the main questions for what was got answers by researching 740 pupil's written texts.

Before taking a closer look on methodology and results of the research, we have to figure out what does broader meaning of writing mean and to give general overview from 6+1 analytical assessment model.

The broader meaning of writing

Different authors have defined writing in various ways. For example, writing is:

- producing visual symbols for the reader;
- the process of using a language to give an experience a meaning;
- a process with multiple features, where meanings and messages are created for the reader to interpret;
- using the writing system or orthography created by man in connection with their everyday activities;
- expressing ideas in written form;
- expressing ideas using letters, words, art or media, something that can happen only if mental operations (processes) are mobilized to express ideas;
- a skill that integrates knowledge and skill, it is an action which contains language, thoughts, experience, feelings, emotions, mechanical actions and different strategies etc (Ahvenainen & Holopainen, 2000, p. 28; Dahl & Farnan 2000, p. 5–6; Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 284; Hennings, 2000, p. 319; Sarmavuori, 2003, p. 85; Siniharju, 1997, p. 106–107).

Although the author's wording may be different, they all share a common idea – the idea, that writing is forwarding a message or a meaning to the reader (in a written form). It is important for the reader to understand what has been written (Buss & Karnowski, 2000; Indrisano & Squire, 2000; Parker, 1997, p. 55–57; Templeton, 1997; Wilkinson, 1999, p. 3).

The components of writing

Contents

(composition)

thoughts, ideas
the purpose of writing
vocabulary
build-up, clarity
taking the reader into consideration

Form

(secretarial aspect)

handwriting
spelling
syntax

punctuation

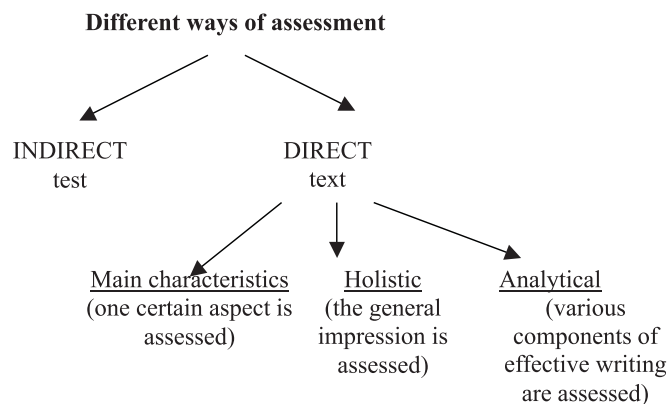
Graph 1. Components of writing.

Writing, in short, is a complex process of creating text. It contains multiple components (see Graph 1). In general, and when simplify, we have to distinguish between composition (contents, its development and forming) and transcriptional skills (in linguistics transcription means to make a copy of what has been said in writing, using phonetic symbols), which is more connected with the secretarial aspect of writing, like orthography and handwriting. Punctuation is an important part of both, as it is connected with syntax (grammar) and semantics (meaning) (Allan & Miller, 2000; Riley & Reedy, 2000). Contents also affect the author's choice of genre and form. The writer must decide how to organize and express the contents (Templeton, 1997, p. 146).

While writing, one must bare in mind various aspects: spelling, phonetic analysis, punctuation, choice of words/vocabulary, syntax, the purpose of writing, build-up, clarity, rhythm, reaction of the reader etc. To sum up – the skill of writing combines all the mentioned components. The contents and the form of the written piece flow directly from the purpose and from the meaning of writing or better from the function of writing.

Analytical 6+1 assessment model

There are many ways of assessing the student's texts. In general we can differentiate direct and indirect assessment (Dahl & Farnan, 2000, p. 111). Indirect assessment measures separately different components of writing. Direct assessment assesses the text and gives information about what should be improved and what should be focused on. Often three ways of direct assessment are used: main characteristics, holistic and analytical assessment.



Graph 2. Different ways of assessing writing.

In the beginning of the 80s teachers began to look for other options besides standard tests to evaluate and learn from children's writings. They hoped to find a way to get an accurate and trustworthy feedback both for the teachers & the students. And thus teachers began creating a difficult analytical evaluation system that would be fair and practical.

After having read through thousands of writings, the teachers discovered the general indicators for good writing, which consequently became the basis of the analytical model. Spandel and Stiggins (1997) offer 7 characteristics or traits or rubrics of effective writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions (contains spelling, punctuation, grammar) and presentation or performance (handwriting and layout) (Bellamy, 2005; Chapman, 1990; McMackin & Siegel, 2002; Spandel & Culham, 1993; Tierney & Marielle, 2004).

The analytical model gives the most objective information about improving teaching and feedback, because all the components are evaluated separately. For example a well built-up and organized piece of writing may get the maximum points for that component, but an average score for fluency, because the sentences are primitive, occasionally not spelled correctly and the meaning is somewhat unclear (Mertler, 2001). For all of the reasons mentioned earlier, all the writings in this research paper, named here, have been assessed analytically. Not all the elements of the method must be used, but three, four or five depending on the purpose. In my research I assessed four of

them, which I considered the most stressed in Estonia: ideas/content, vocabulary, sentence fluency and conventions (spelling and punctuation).

Methodology of Research

The choice was as it was because vocabulary, sentence fluency etc. can be assessed objectively. In addition to that I came to a conclusion that those aspects have been the most important ones so far, when evaluating skill of writing. They also play a big role in text quality. Evaluating the ideas and content of the story is a bit more complicated, because it is quite hard to assess that objectively. It would be fair to evaluate ideas if a single person did that and therefore I evaluated all the 740 pieces of writing myself.

The sentence fluency and vocabulary figure was a result of adding the number of words to the amount of verbs in the text and from that sum misused verbs were subtracted. That figure shows the difference in students' vocabulary quite objectively.

The key figure in assessing sentence fluency was the number of sentences, added the average length of a sentence. As more complex sentence structures show a more advanced grasp of reality, a more complex way of thinking and of course better sentence fluency. The student got an extra point for a compound sentence (including a contracted sentence and an abbreviated sentence) and for a sentence with direct speech. A sentence must be understood in a similar way and that helps to guarantee a correct syntax. In other cases a point is deducted if a sentence: 1) is not logical; 2) is incomplete; 3) has wording mistakes.

When evaluating conventions a mistake is an orthographic error which can be: a) a phonetic orthography mistake; b) mistakes of compound word; c) a punctuation mistakes; d) a capital letter mistake; e) a mistake done when being careless. Although, the latter was not taken into account.

Several certain evaluating criterias were taken as a basis of assessment when assessing idea and content.

A piece of writing (grade 5) has a clear idea, understandable to the reader and also interesting. The focus is on the main subject. The ideas are fresh and the reader gets the answers to his or her questions, because enough information is given. The plot can be unpredictable at times. The story has details, which enrich the main idea and the interest of the reader is kept alive until the end of the story.

Grades for the idea and contents were given, taking into account the key features mentioned earlier.

To evaluate the writing skills of 3rd and 6th grade students, texts were gathered using the help of the distance-learning students (mostly working as class teachers) of Tallinn University

Every student of the university could pick a 3rd or 6th grade class (not their own). The writing assignment was explained to the pupils and they were encouraged to write like they always do. The only difference from their everyday writing was that there was no pre-writing discussion. The maximum allowed time was 90 minutes (2 teaching periods). One could finish his or her work early and turn it in.

The student that conducted the writing assignment read the instructions to the pupils wrote it on the blackboard or just gave copies with the instructions to the pupils.

Students were given a choice between two types of text: narrative or convincing (persuasive) writing. I chose different types of text because the students should be able to write prose, fiction, stories based on facts and further on the students are different in nature – some like to fantasize and make up stories, characters and some like to write stories based on facts. That way the students (at least they thought so) had the chance to pick a writing assignment based on what they liked, and the researcher could also gather information about the preferences of the students.

As mentioned before, altogether 740 writings were collected for the research.

Results of Research

Linear correlation figures were used to combine and compare different assessment aspects of writing evaluation. The statistical importantness of the average value was measured with the Student

t-test. The level of the importantness was 0.05 and is marked with α . To pick the right t-test formula, F-test was conducted.

Most of the students chose the narrative writing assignment, which is usually more common among students in that age: both 3rd and 6th grade and both boys and girls. In the 3rd grade 378 students wrote the narrative and 94 (25%) wrote the convincing text. In the 6th grade the numbers were 227 and 41 (18%) accordingly.

Vocabulary

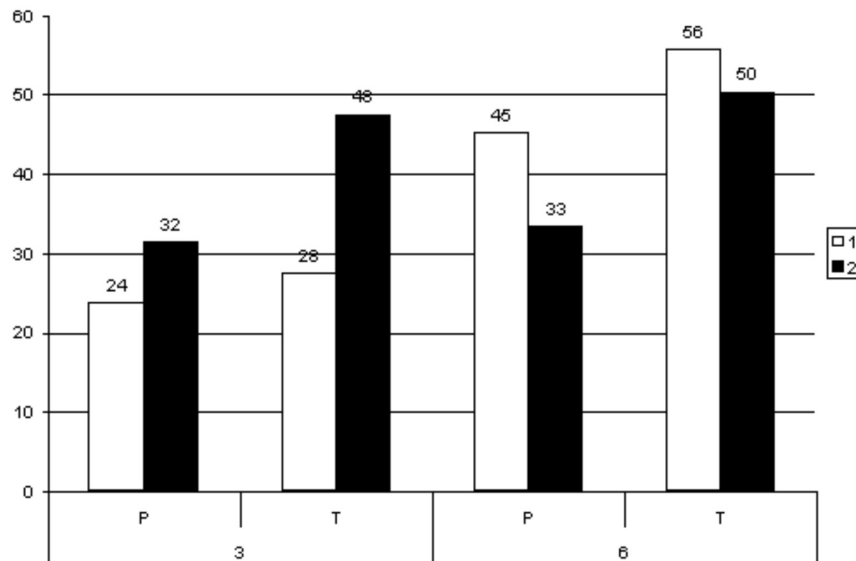


Figure 1. Common vocabulary index by grades (3 – grade 3; 6 – grade 6), sex (P – boys; T- girls) and text type (1 – narrative stories; 2 – persuasive letters).

The total amount words and the common vocabulary index was a lot bigger for 6th grade students compared to the students of the 3rd grade. Although in both grades the girls wrote more words than boys, the difference was not statistically different. The same cannot be said about vocabulary, because the vocabulary of 3rd grade girls was significantly bigger than the vocabulary of 3rd grade boys. Furthermore, the difference was bigger in the convincing texts. The girls that wrote the convincing texts in the 3rd grade had a wider vocabulary. The differences were not that noticeable when comparing the narrative stories. Therefore it is important to encourage the younger boys to write different kinds of texts.

When analyzing the total amount of verbs used (both 3rd and 6th grade students), I noticed that one verb had 4–5 arguments (3rd grade average of 4.5 and 6th grade average of 4.6 arguments). It was quite predictable that the amount verbs used was directly connected to the total amount of words. When studying the usage of verbs I discovered that the amount of verbs in narrative and convincing stories was equal – the amount of verbs is not connected to the type of text. Therefore little knowledge was gathered from the verb point of view when comparing vocabulary. The most common verb used was “be” (“olema” in Estonian).

Mistakes in words were quite uncommon and words were never used with a wrong meaning. As the amount of mistakes was directly connected with the total amount of words for the 3rd grade students then for 6th grade it was not the case. The most common reason of making mistakes in words was the intention to use more uncommon words. As the 6th grade boys tended to force themselves to fantasize more, it also reflected in the amount of mistakes. As the number of mistakes was not directly connected with the total amount of words used, then encouraging the students to write more would not affect the number of word-mistakes.

The total amount of words, as well as the common vocabulary index was somewhat different by

class. In general the order of schools when comparing these figures was quite equal – especially in the 6th grades. It is understandable because one of the components of the common vocabulary index was the total amount of words. Another proof for that is the correlation between the amount of words and the common vocabulary index ($r = 0.88 > r_{\text{critical}} = 0.05$). As the sentence fluency index was divided by 2 in case of the convincing text (by 5 in case of the narrative) then it also reflected in the order of the schools. As a surprise I found out that in the 3rd grade the students that wrote the convincing stories, had a better vocabulary. The changes were not that drastic in the 6th grade. Four schools that had the biggest total amount of words also had the biggest common vocabulary index.

Evaluating the vocabulary of the students is therefore easier when comparing the same type of text – the circumstances are similar and one can just analyze the total amount of words. It is also possible to compare the vocabulary when the students are given the opportunity to choose between the types of text.

Sentence fluency

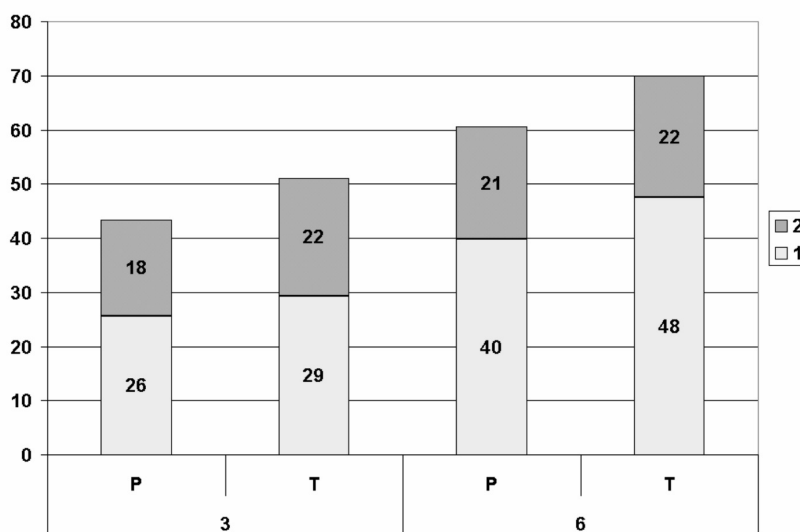


Figure 2. Common index of sentence fluency by grades (3 – grade 3; 6 – grade 6), sex (P – boys; T- girls) and text type (1 – narrative stories; 2 – persuasive letters).

Certain differences occurred when evaluating sentence fluency. The figures for sentence fluency 3rd and 6th grade students were equal for convincing letters, but different for narrative stories. The same tendency also occurred by sex. As the points for sentence fluency in convincing letters for 3rd and 6th grade girls were equal and almost equal for boys, then with narrative stories, the numbers for girls and boys were significantly different. It was obvious that there has been no improvement in the second level. It would be logical to think that 6th grade students would have better sentence fluency than 3rd grade students when writing convincing letters. As the school must give the students more knowledge on how to coop with everyday life, more attention should be given to writing texts that are necessary every day.

Correct use of language

Although the skill of writing consists of many parts (which I am trying to prove with this thesis), still people often talk about the skill of writing when they actually mean spelling. That is wrong and one of the practical outputs of this thesis is to change that way of thinking.

If one were to combine all the mistakes (phonetic orthographic mistakes, solid and separate writing,

punctuation mistakes, capital letter mistakes) with words then there was a mistake in 5% of the words, which is actually not much. To sum up, 3rd grade students made about two times more mistakes than 6th grade students (about 2 times more 3rd grade students took part in the study). So actually the sum of mistakes was almost equal. The most common type of mistake was a punctuation mistake (equal for both 3rd and 6th grade students). But 3rd grade students made a lot more phonetic orthographic mistakes. Solid and separate writing and capital letter mistakes were quite rare.

The average number of orthographic mistakes per student for both age groups was equal, which was quite surprising, because the older students had studied spelling longer and more thoroughly. There was a slight correlation between the total amount of words and orthographic mistakes ($r = 0.20 > r_{\text{critical}} = 0.05$), but the 6th grade students had more words in total as well. The average amount of punctuation mistakes was also equal. The fact that older students tended to write more complex and longer sentences showed that one cannot compare the average amount of mistakes.

The correct use of language showed that students have more problems concerning punctuation than phonetic orthography. The results for the latter were impressive: 59% of 3rd grade and 54% of 6th grade students made a few or very few orthographic mistakes. The spelling level of only 8% of the students would be considered insufficient. The level of narrative writers was quite equal but the level for convincing text writers was not. Therefore more attention should be drawn to the fact that students should be given more opportunities of writing different types of text (e.g. manual, guide-line, explanatory text, commercial, advertisement, contract etc).

Results of spelling studies showed also following: a text richer in words and content would not have more spelling mistakes and spelling skills of both boys and girls of the same age were equal. The fact that the level of spelling is quite high does not mean that teachers should stop teaching it. It rather gives an opportunity to develop other aspects.

21% of students made more than 5 spelling mistakes (who were also referred to as “in need of special education”). That is almost two times less than 40%. The percentages by class were 26% for 3rd grade and only 13% for 6th grade. Therefore 40% of our students do not need special education. There were classes in both age groups where the overall level was insufficient. I was not able to determine the reasons for that in this thesis.

Content

Comparing the grades for content by age, sex and type of text one could conclude that there was no statistical pattern, meaning the quality of the content was not connected with the age, sex or type of text. Students of both sexes and levels of middle school managed to fantasize and convince. The students have had their chance of expressing their opinions and wishes.

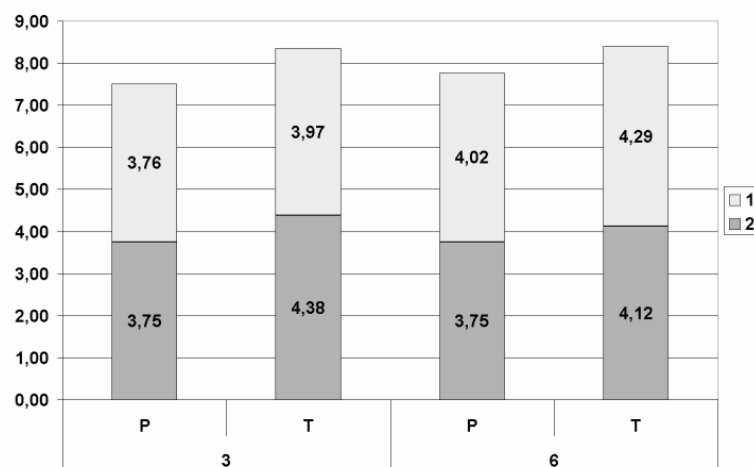


Figure 3. Average index of content by grades (3 – grade 3; 6 – grade 6), sex (P – boys; T- girls) and text type (1 – narrative stories; 2 – persuasive letters).

In the 3rd grade the average content grades somewhat differed from the grades of the 6th grade students (3rd grade: 3.15–5.0 and 6th grade: 3.5–4.63). On the other hand there were 1st level classes in which all the students received a 5. Those classes were in the 26th and 34th school, where the pupils also wrote a rough copy. In general 54% of the students of the 3rd grade wrote a good or a very good text and 62% of the 6th grade.

13% of the 3rd grade classes had an insufficient average grade for content. There was a class, where there were children with health problems. There were no 6th grade classes where the average grade for content was insufficient. The minimal average was 3.5, which is sufficient.

The boys and girls of the 2nd level of middle school managed to fantasize and convince equally. The average grade for content of convincing texts for 3rd grade boys was remarkably lower than the average grade of 3rd grade girls. The grades were equal in case of narrative stories. Therefore boys should be given more opportunities of expressing themselves verbally as well as in writing.

In the 6th grade a common denominator for rich content texts was the lack of spelling mistakes. The teaching style of teachers was also different. All the teachers believed that a lot of work must be done before the test and they also were convinced that guiding and directing before, during and after writing was necessary.

Conclusions

Most people do not have a correct understanding of what is writing. Starting with the fact that effective writing is a drill exercise and ending with the fact that a bad writer is the one that makes the most spelling mistakes. Even teachers tend to forget that the aim of writing is to deliver a message. For the reader to understand that message correctly, the writer must follow certain rules and agreements and a lot more.

The aim of above described research was to announce that writing is complex process, during which attention must be lead to a lot of aspects, and that the process of writing consists of many components. It was important equally to declare that mastering all the aspects is a process that needs time. The skill of writing, as any other skill develops with the overall development of the child. The writer must pay attention to how to write down words and letters, how to compose sentences, how to grab the reader's attention, how to place the text on the paper, what words to use to express ideas etc.

Research, which was described above, showed, that the guideline created for evaluation really proved itself and gave necessary information about writing skills. The fact that all the students had their own stronger and weaker sides and that no class was exceptionally weak or strong, shows that when evaluating skill of writing one must pay attention to several aspects.

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