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Independent writing and reading right from the start: the language experience approach in German classrooms[1]

Learning to read and write is a very personal activity. The language experience approach takes the different experiences of children before school seriously and motivates them through personally important encounters with print to expand these experiences and their competence. Free writing and invented spelling are key activities in this process.

Long before school, children encounter print in their environment. Based on their individual experiences, they develop ideas of what role literacy plays in everyday life and associate positive or negative feelings with the activities of reading and writing. For some children, writing is so interesting at an early age that they already get to grips with it very intensively and begin to understand in principle how reading and writing work technically, other children are more interested in other things and only casually perceive print in their environment.

The language experience approach is a concept of teaching reading and writing that takes the different experiences of children seriously - based on the following key ideas (cf. Brügelmann/ Brinkmann 2012):

- Writing is a medium with its own logic, but due to its underlying alphabetical principle its **structure** has a close relationship to spoken language. The promotion of reading and writing should therefore first of all be linked to the spoken language, both in content and form, and make clear the mutual translatability of its spoken and written forms, but also their respective peculiarities (for example, that in writing different phonetic variants are represented by one and the same grapheme).

- Without insight into the **functions** of reading and writing, many children lack the motivation to engage in the cognitive and motor efforts required for the complex acquisition of the technical aspects of written language. In the classroom reading and writing therefore should be staged as a cultural practice that makes individually significant experiences possible.

- Learning to read and write is a process of active **reconstruction** of the writing system by the children. These therefore need scope and time for individual approaches and for experimenting with intermediate forms while gradually aquiring the conventions.

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[1] Translation of: Brinkmann, E. (2018): Der Spracherfahrungsansatz im Anfangsunterricht. In: Grundschule, 50. Jg., H. 6, 28-32.

- However, progress in this development is possible only through the encounter with alternatives to one's own experiments. Therefore, adults with writing experience are important as **models** for reading and writing, but also for giving specific feedback, for example by confronting the singular of the respective children's writing attempts with the norms of adult writing. Equally important is the cooperation and exchange with other children whose divergent reading and writing activities can also stimulate or challenge ("learning with and from one another").

The implementation of these basic ideas is conceivable in various forms. We have systematised them as a "4-pillar model" as an organisational framework for teaching, which focusses on the following activities (cf. Brügelmann 1986):

(I) Reading rich and interesting stories to the group – and allowing for individual reading and viewing of books of one's own choice;

(II) stimulating children's free writing of texts on personally important topics in their own language and their publication in books, on posters, through reading them to the group;

(III) explaining and modelling basic ways of dealing with print in order to make its technical structure comprehensible and to further develop the individually available strategies of reading and writing;

(IV) preparing space for individual exercises with a limited vocabulary of particularly frequent and personally important words to automatize basic reading and spelling patterns.

We have presented concrete didactic formats for structuring such an "open teaching" in the "Ideenkiste Schriftsprache", a flexible file for teachers (Brinkmann/Brügelmann 1993/2010). The tasks and activities are assigned to eight learning fields within the framework of a didactic map (cf. Brügelmann 1986), in which all children should gain experience during their initial lessons - albeit at different levels. Secondly, as an alternative to the small-step primer course, we have developed the "ABC Learning Landscape" with materials for independent work for pupils in years 1 to 6 (cf. Brinkmann et al. 2008ff).

Learning to read by reading

The aim of primary school, to develop the reading ability of all children as far as possible, can only be achieved through activities that respond to the great differences in previous experience with writing. Children must have the chance to experience reading (and writing) as meaningful activities in a stimulating literacy culture. That means specifically:

- From the very beginning, the classroom offers a wide range of picture and children's books to suit the different skills and interests of the children.
- Regular "free reading times" with individually selected reading encourage access to books as a matter of course.
- The - often dialogical - reading aloud of challenging children's literature creates rich occasions for discussion and writing through joint reading experiences.
- The presentation of individually read texts in the classroom and their evaluation (by ticking smileys, first across the board, then increasingly differentiated according to various criteria, even later in the form of freely formulated reviews) serve to reflect what has been read and can arouse the interest of other children.
- Children have the opportunity to read their own texts and those of others in public after they have been able to prepare themselves specifically for the presentation.
- „Reading passports" and later „reading diaries" can document the development of the individual reading biography comprehensibly for outsiders.
- Digital media can meaningfully support and supplement the handling of print media if their special audiovisual possibilities are utilized properly (e. g. by highlighing printed word that are read aloud by the computer voice).

Parallel to establishing such a „reading culture", the technical structure of written language and reading strategies are repeatedly made the common theme of work in the classroom. Even the independent writing of the childen's „own words" (see below) supports the development when the word to be spelled has to be read over and over again from the beginning while searching for the next letter. In order to link this reading with the content-oriented expectation of meaning, tasks such as the "word bag" or the "reading crocodile" are recommended, in which written words are made visible grapheme-wise step-by-step, the corresponding sound is named and the children then think about the meaning: "*which word can this (still) become*". In order for children to take on the effort of meaningful reading, a broad range of interesting and at the same time easy-to-read texts have to be accessible.

Criteria for books for beginning readers

- many pictures, so that the children can already guess what the text is about - then the even more arduous reading is easier;
- limited amount of text - at first single words or a short sentence per page, a clear, sans-serif font (at least 18 points, initially CAPITAL letters) that facilitates the recognition of the individual letters;
- short words that contain as few consonant clusters and complex orthographic patterns as possible (so that the texts do not become too boring by exclusively simple

words, the meaning of essential content-bearing complex words can be made accessible over a (picture – word) legend in the book).

Developing orthographic competence through invented spelling

From the beginning, the children are encouraged and supported to write about what is important to them: first single words, then simple sentences and finally small texts. This free writing has three important advantages:
- The children can experience and use written language as a powerful instrument to record and share their personal ideas and experiences and thus gain a high motivation to face up to the efforts of learning to read and write.
- Through the continuous analysis and synthesis of sounds and letters, they understand the alphabetical structure as an essential principle of our written language and consolidate the individual phonetic-letter relationships (implicit phonics training).
- Spelling the words at the respective level of ability enables independent and precise individualisation „from below" despite the developmental differences of up to three years at the beginning of school.
As they write, the children speak the words to themselves and increasingly spell the phonetic sequence so precisely that a third person can read them again. Central help is a picture-sound-table on which the letters are assigned to images with the corresponding initials. At first, the children only note particularly noticeable sounds (for example TMT for „tomato"). With an increasingly complete representation of the sounds, correct spellings often succeed: MOM, DAD, CAT. More complex words remain incomplete at first, because they are only written in phonetic format, e.g. FITE for „fight" or DIFRINT for „different". But this phonetic writing is the basis necessary for the acquisition of orthographic patterns.

Empirical evidence on the effects of invented spelling

In the meantime, there are solid empirical findings from German and international research which prove the particular advantages of phonetic transcription as an approach to spelling development (cf. Brügelmann 1989; 1993; 1998; Hecker et al. 2018).
- Pre-school children who start writing without instruction write words first according to their pronunciation, as has been found in different countries – regardless of their mother tongue.
- In the development of spelling, children of all ability groups first perfect the phonetic writing of words before increasingly using spelling patterns. This also applies

outside of the vocabulary practiced at school and even when they have undergone intensive, orthographically focused spelling lessons right from the start.
- Studies on pupils with weak spelling show that they often - as is normal for beginners at first - do not even manage the auditory rough structuring of words, at least they still have difficulties with consistent transcription of sounds. The same problem can be seen in adolescent and adult illiterates.
- Orthographically oriented spelling support is of real benefit to children with spelling difficulties only if they are have mastered the alphabetic transcription stage.
- In the alphabetical phase false spellings are not „engraved" in memory, because the children construct even frequently used words afresh again and again;
and also the strategies of the children do not solidify, as:
- Already in first class there is a very close correlation between the phonetic transcription of non- or pseudo-words and the correct spelling of real words (.80).
- Moreover, German and Anglo-Saxon longitudinal studies find a high correlation (around .60) between the level of early phonetic transcription of words and later correct spelling.

"Book writing" as the goal

Although we respect the invented spellings writing of the children as a way of writing according to their stage of development, the standard of "adult writing" is made clear to them from the beginning and it is exemplified to the children through concrete models for spelling peculiarities. The following didactic formats have proved their worth in practice (see the contributions in Brinkmann 2015, pp. 44ff. and pp. 227ff. for more detailed explanations and specific methods):

- Already the first words written by children are „translated" into orthographically correct "book writing" by the teacher or another experienced writer and placed next to or under the children's writing attempts "*because this makes your text easier to read for others*".

- As soon as the children spell words in a (phonetically) readable form, their attention can increasingly be drawn to the correct spelling. To do this, they are asked to put dots in the "book-writing translation" under the letters which they have written already correctly in their own spelling of these words.

- When children start writing small texts on topics of their choice, they need certain words over and over again. From each text they then select two to four such (for them personally) "important words" and transfer them in book-writing form onto index cards or into their personal ABC booklet. In addition, the most common two hundred

(functional) words - provided they contain spelling peculiarities - are gradually added for all children. This - partly individual, partly common - basic vocabulary then is the subject of repeated self- or partner dictations, with the individual child practicing only those words with which he or she really has difficulties. When practicing, the child follows the following five steps:

- *Take a good look at the word and pay attention to its special features.*
- *Cover the word or turn it around.*
- *Write it down from memory.*
- *Compare it to the original.*
- *If there are mistakes: Correct your spelling.*

Increasingly, the children themselves are given responsibility for the revision of their texts - with assignments that are oriented to their respective stage of development:
- Basic jobs such as: "p*ay attention to spaces between words*", "*set closing signs at the end of sentences*", "*check capitalization at the beginning of sentences*", and (in German) "*capitalize all nouns*" are already suitable for children's first own texts.
- Critical orthographical features are marked by the teacher in two to three selected words that the child should think about and correct him/herself, with the help of others or a dictionary.
- Later on the teacher will mark three to five incorrect words (not the concrete mistakes) that the child should correct.
- Finally, she marks only the lines, or gives just a general reference to the number of errors in the text.
Only after the children have tried to correct the text on their own, the teacher checks and corrects it, initially as a complete translation into „book spelling".

At the same time, spelling conversations are held two to three times a week in class about the "hard word of the day", where the procedure is always the same:
- The teacher names a word with increasingly demanding spelling peculiarities.
 - First individually, then in a partner or table conversation and finally together with the teacher the children consider reasons for the respective spelling and copy the the correctly written word.
- Strategies and rules of thumb are worked out together and - with a view to a summarizing poster - repeatedly addressed anew in the discussions, for example: *Do you know any other words „from the same family"? Do you know a rule of thumb that usually helps* (e.g. how to mark a short vowel in spelling).
- Exceptions to rules of thumb - for example concerning the marking of words with a long vowel - the children gradually collect on the corresponding page of their booklet for "memorable words" as clusters.

Spelling discussions in primary school

Spelling conversations are a format of work in which students regularly reflect together on the spelling of complex words. In these conversations it should be clarified step by step why the word in question has to be written like this and not differently in orthography.

In the course of the current evaluation of these spelling conversations in our project in Bremen (cf. Brinkmann/Brügelmann 2018), almost 600 children in 34 third grades took part in one to three such conversations per week over half a school year. A poster with (thumb) rules for spelling was used to clarify and explain common spellings. Before and after the project phase, the children's spelling performance was measured with the Hamburg Writing Test for Third Grades (HSP3), whose standard sample served as a virtual comparison group. A summary of the most important results:

- With a jump from an average of 160 to 171 of 191 correct graphemes between autumn 2017 and spring 2018, the classes improved far above average compared to the HSP3 standard sample:
- The average increase in correct graphemic of + 6 percentage points and an effect size of 1.1 means a twice as high learning gain of the experimental group compared to a group of the HSP3 standardization sample comparable in orthographic comptence at the beginning.
- Especially children in the lower performance ranges profited from the spelling conversations: Within six months, this group made progress that would normally only have been expected after more than one school year, given this low starting level. Other more complex support programmes, which (a) were used in addition to class lessons, (b) with more time and (c) in smaller groups, generally do not achieve a higher increase.

Final remark

Teaching according to the language experience approach does not mean letting children write "as they like" - but *how they can*. Above all the children are not left "alone", but experience reading and writing in a stimulating literacy environment with diverse challenges and concrete support where needed.

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