



Evidence Summary—technical annex:

There is promising evidence that interactive writing can have a positive impact on language and literacy in the early years. We define ‘interactive writing’ as a back-and-forth conversation between the educator and child to build up a message (like a caption, narrative or shopping list), followed by the educator and child writing the message together. The educator may help the child to clarify, sequence and organise their thoughts, and may take on the role of scribe to record the content. As the child gains confidence and proficiency, they gradually take on a larger role in the process.

We found a small evidence base of nine primary studies that explored the effect of interactive writing programmes. We did not find any systematic reviews on the topic of interactive writing.

The interactive writing programmes described in the research typically involved the selection of an interesting topic or text, followed by the educator and child writing together. Children often provided the source material for a composition, inventing a story or developing content. To support them, the educator provided prompts or questions. Collaborative writing tended to start with an educator ‘holding the pen’ and scribing text. Over time, children took on a larger role, writing some letters or short words. Educators often encouraged children to use air-writing, playdough and other materials to create letters and words, and personal whiteboards or paper and pencil to copy out letters or short words. Educators and children also discussed letter-sound correspondence¹, as well as writing genres (such as stories, signs, lists etc), processes (such as drafting and revising) and conventions (such as when to capitalise). Completed compositions were often displayed for children to enjoy.

Research either compared an innovative interactive writing programme to business as usual early years writing teaching or compared an innovative interactive writing programme to ‘writing workshops’. Writing workshops involved educators providing guidance and monitoring progress while children wrote. We summarise evidence on each of these types of comparison in turn.

Seven studies explored whether interactive writing programmes improved children’s outcomes when compared to business as usual early years language and literacy activities. A single study explored whether an interactive writing programme had an effect on children’s narrative comprehension², finding a positive effect (Nicolopoulou et al. (2015). One study examined whether there was an effect on receptive and expressive vocabulary³, also finding a positive effect (Cooper et al., 2007). However, a second study explored whether there was an effect on expressive vocabulary and found no effect (Nicolopoulou et al. 2015). Five studies examined whether interactive writing improved children’s phonological awareness⁴. Of these, three found a positive effect (Borre et al., 2019; Kasten, 1989; Nicolopoulou et al. 2015), one found mixed effects (Hall et al., 2013) and one found no effect (Craig, 2006). One study found evidence that interactive writing improved children’s ability to read words⁵ (Craig, 2006).

There was also some evidence that interactive writing improved children’s print awareness⁶, with three studies finding an effect (Jones, 2014; Kumas, 2021; Nicolopoulou et al. 2015), while Kasten (1989) found an effect for some measures of print awareness, but not others. A few studies also explored whether interactive writing activities improved children’s composition and transcription⁷. Two studies found evidence

¹ The relationship between the letters in the alphabet and the sounds they represent. For example, ‘The letter **“b”** corresponds to the sound /b/, as in the word *bat*.’

² A child’s factual and inferential understanding of a story that has been told to them.

³ Receptive vocabulary refers to the words that a child can understand, including if they are spoken or indicated using pictures. Expressive vocabulary refers to the words that a child can express or produce.

⁴ Children’s awareness of and control over sound units of varying sizes including letters and parts of words.

⁵ Including children’s ability to blend letter sounds together and read words.

⁶ Including children’s understanding of the different genres of writing and books, the difference between pictures and print on the page, and understanding that English print is read from left to right and top to bottom.

⁷ Including children’s ability to write letters, words, basic sentences and punctuation.



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of an effect (Jones, 2014; Kumas, 2021), but another found no effect (Craig, 2006). A final study found an impact on some measures of children’s transcription and composition⁸ but not others (Kasten, 1989). A study by Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) found that interactive writing had a positive effect on some measures of social competence⁹ and self-regulation¹⁰, but not others. Finally, two studies explored whether interactive writing had an impact on children’s school readiness¹¹ (Borre et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2007) and overall attainment¹² (Borre et al., 2019), finding evidence of a positive effect.

Two studies examined whether innovative interactive writing programmes that emphasised sharing the pen, sounding out words, and co-constructing sentences improved children’s outcomes when compared to ‘writing workshops’. In the ‘writing workshops’, educators and children came up with a topic together and educators supported children to create a composition but there was less emphasis on co-construction and sharing the pen. Instead, the educator taught children new writing skills and provided opportunities to discuss and reflect, before or after children wrote independently. Children’s compositions were then read to the wider group of children. The research indicated that interactive writing and writing workshops produced similar outcomes, with neither being better than the other for children’s language and literacy (Jones et al., 2010; Jones, 2014). Jones (2014) also reported that both interactive and writing workshops were more effective than business as usual early years language and literacy activities, such as tasking children with completing starter sentences such as “I like to eat...” by adding related words and pictures. The authors concluded that a range of instructional approaches to writing can improve children’s outcomes and

that interactive writing and writing workshops could be used in combination (Jones et al., 2014).

Researchers discussed a variety of factors that may have affected how successful interactive writing programmes were in improving children’s outcomes. Several mentioned the importance of creating a literacy-rich environment, for example one containing a variety of books and writing materials, as well as displays such as children’s own compositions (Jones, 2014; Kasten, 1989; Kumas, 2021). One study mentioned adopting a variety of activities to practise letter formation or writing – use of playdough, magnetic boards and air writing (Kumas, 2021). Jones (2014) also highlighted the following factors as being important: teaching the writing process (planning, drafting and revising); teacher explanations, thinking aloud and modelling; and creating opportunities for children to talk about writing, including their own.

Overall, there is a promising evidence base to show that interactive writing can improve children’s language and literacy, and a smaller amount of evidence to suggest that it can help develop children’s school readiness, social competence and self-regulation. However, the evidence base is relatively small and so findings about effectiveness should be interpreted cautiously. More evidence is needed to explore more fully the impact of interactive writing on children’s learning. There was also a small amount of evidence to suggest that a writing workshop approach is just as effective as interactive writing. This suggests that other approaches to teaching writing may be equally effective as interactive writing and that multiple approaches could be used in combination.

⁸ Articulating ideas and structuring them in speech.

⁹ Social competence refers to a child’s ability to independently navigate their social world, to interact with peers and adults, to form friendships, and to understand the needs of others.

¹⁰ A child’s developing ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour to enable them to act in positive ways toward a goal.

¹¹ As measured by the Early Screening Inventory (ESI-K) which measures children’s verbal expression, fine and gross motor skills, ability to reproduce figures, ability to remember visual and auditory sequences, and body awareness.

¹² An educator assessment of children’s general performance across academic and non-academic topics.



Behind the summary:

Most of the research we identified for this approach involved research with four and five-year-olds. Fewer than half the studies involved research with children aged three or six. Studies were only included if the majority of children were aged six or under. Most of the evidence we identified for this approach is drawn from the United States, with a single study from Turkey. Evidence indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from educators promoting interactive writing. However, the studies in our evidence did not explore whether they benefit more or less than others.

References:

Included primary studies:

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