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Playfulness in Writing: A New Way to Reach Reluctant Novice Elementary School Writers

Several elementary school teachers of English language learners (ELLs) have showed me examples of their students' writing and have marveled at how some of their students clearly enjoy writing in English. However, there were children in each of these teachers' classes who were reluctant writers. These children, many of whom were from families where parents were not very literate in either their first language (L1) or their second language (L2), did not like to write even though they knew enough basic words in English. Also, they had a very narrow view of what writing is. The teachers wondered what they could do to help their students become more engaged in writing in English.

I have encountered similar experiences during the past five years when I have worked with second- through fifth-grade teachers who are committed to helping children of minority language backgrounds write in English as a second language (ESL). I have worked with classes where all of the children were second language learners and in classes where ELLs were in the minority. I have recommended and helped implement pen pal journal writing as a way to help novice writers (Lipp, 2001). Pen pal writing, which is a form of interactive writing, is viewed as an effective activity for first and second language students. It is the interactive quality—writing and then receiving a personal response—that distinguishes this task from other writing tasks. This interactive feature appears to help novice writers in particular (Hall, 1994).

In my work in elementary school classes (Lipp, 2001), when children engage in letter writing, they write in notebooks to the same pen pals each week. The children correspond with university students enrolled in my methods of teaching English as a second language classes. When the older pen pals respond to the children, they focus on the meaning of the children's letters, not on error correction. In these projects, children communicate with adult pen pals with whom they have not engaged in shared classroom experiences; therefore, this form of communication is somewhat distinct from dialogue journal writing (e.g., Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Peyton & Staton, 1993; Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988) which involves children corresponding with their teacher, someone knowledgeable about children's daily

activities. Nevertheless, some of the new ideas in this article could be applied to dialogue journal writing as well.

The research shows that children clearly differ in their attitudes toward pen pal writing. The research on children corresponding with adult pen pals shows the youngest children remain enthusiastic about letter writing for a year or longer. This finding occurred with 5-year-old native English speaking (NES) children in the United Kingdom (Hall, Robinson, & Crawford, 2000; Robinson, Crawford, & Hall, 1994) and 6-year-old NES children in the US (Ceprano & Garan, 1998). However, older elementary schoolchildren writing to other children or to adults varied in their ability to sustain an interest in pen pal writing. This finding occurred among NES third-graders writing to other children (Bromley, 1994) and fifth-/sixth-grade Spanish-speaking ELLs writing to university students (Lipp, 2001). These studies have documented that many but not all children have enough interest in corresponding that they continue to write to their pen pals. The most basic evidence of interest in writing, which is a component of motivation, is the act of continuing to write. The motivation to carefully read pen pals' letters before writing a response is also important and cannot be taken for granted when working with novice writers. In this article, I describe some ways to introduce playfulness in writing into pen pal writing so that more children will want to continue to thoughtfully read their pen pals' letters, continue to write to their pen pals, and hence get additional writing practice.

Besides the challenge of maintaining an interest in pen pal correspondence, another difficulty many reluctant novice writers face is that, especially in the first months of correspondence, many of them produce letters that have a narrow purpose and lack variety in vocabulary and sentences. I found that many letters written during the first few months of the pen pal project consisted of letter-opening formulas followed by sentences beginning with basic sentence starters often elaborating on "I" or "you." For example, Yer, Cher Xing, and Guitar, some third-grade Hmong children who I worked with, wrote many sentences beginning with "I like...", "[Do] you like...", "I love...", "What is your favorite...", "I have...", "How many X do you have?", and "Do you have..." Narratives, even brief ones, occurred infrequently. The sentence starters helped these reluctant novice writers participate in the correspondence and establish social bonds with pen pals through discussion of their preferences and their families. However, reluctant novice writers had difficulty achieving a more varied style of writing.

To address these problems, we can begin by identifying published suggestions. They include the following: children can engage in pre-writing in their first language to develop a more favorable attitude toward writing (Garrett, Griffiths, James, & Scholfield, 1994); pen pals can come to visit the children's class (Hall, Robinson, & Crawford, 2000); pen pals can trade photographs of each other, children can go on field trips to visit their pen pals, children can receive colorful stickers attached to their pen pal letters, and the pen pals can visit the children to perform skits based entirely on narratives

taken from children's letters (Lipp, 2001). While these suggestions are helpful, most of them are external to the writing process. This article suggests that interactive writing in general and pen pal letter writing in particular can help reluctant writers especially when this writing can include playfulness. Playfulness is more likely to be incorporated when the writing is not limited to informative and persuasive writing. This article discusses how different forms of playfulness, which appear in elementary schoolchildren's pen pal correspondence, can maintain and/or increase their interest and engagement in pen pal writing, can reinforce new genres of writing, and can add variety and richness to their writing.

What is play? Vygotsky (1978) defines play as a type of activity in which "a child creates an imaginary situation" (p. 93) that is based on rules of behavior (p. 94) and fulfills a child's needs (p. 92). While this imaginary situation feature is central to a definition of play, enjoyment is often but not always present in play (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 92).

What is the relation between play and development, between play and language development, as well as between play and writing development? The premise that play "is a leading factor in development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 101) is recognized by parents and educators and is supported by researchers (Fraser & Wakefield, 1986; Schley & Snow, 1992). The view that play contributes to L2 language learning is also recognized (Cook, 1997, 2000; Peck, 2002; Sullivan, 2000) and is often associated with the sociocultural theory of second language learning and teaching (Lantolf, 2000). However, there seems to be a gap in the teacher-researcher literature when it comes to examining play as a contributor to the development of L2 children's writing. In this article I show that when children experiment through play while writing letters to supportive pen pals, they become more empowered as writers.

In my definition of play, the child may build an imaginary situation alone or with support from his/her pen pal. In this article, the imaginary situation takes the form of a story, song, joke or riddle, or poem. Further, the article notes that cards often create imaginary situations. These playful forms of writing demonstrate a child's knowledge of the world around him and his emerging knowledge of the structure of these genres.

The language play that I examine consists of stories, riddles and jokes, poetry, cards, and words from songs. All of these uses of language play are important forms of human communication and interaction. The examples of playfulness shown in this article appeared naturally in the pen pal projects that I have facilitated or, in one case, in an afterschool interactive journal project (Cortese, 2001). Neither the older pen pals nor the children were asked to use playfulness in their writing by their classroom teacher. Since the examples of stories, jokes, poetry, and songs shown in this article are the work of reluctant novice writers, they range from a few words to a few lines in length. While most of these examples are not fully developed, they show evidence of attempts to produce and to communicate imaginary situations. They also show evidence of sustained communication through writing. To preserve

the authenticity of children's writing, the invented spelling has not been corrected. To help readers understand children's invented spelling, glosses are sometimes provided in brackets.

Collaborative Story Writing

Collaborative story writing is a form of language play, which was initiated by an adult pen pal and continued over several turns. In my pen pal projects the older pen pals were university students preparing to become teachers. The instances of collaborative story writing occurred after a child had corresponded with a university student several times and had already exchanged background information. One story evolved between Yer, an ELL boy, and his older pen pal, Tammy. The collaborative story writing began after Tammy received a handmade Valentine's Day card with a picture of a tree that appeared to be crying. Tammy asked Yer to write a little story about his picture. In reply, Yer wrote, "One day a tree was sad because he have no friend. That why he was sad." As shown in Example 1, Tammy offered Yer help to develop the story.

Example 1. Collaborative Story Writing

A University Student's Pen Pal Letter.

Dear Yer,

Thank you for the Valentine's Day card! I really enjoy your drawings. You draw very nice trees. You should write stories about your trees. I want to know who the girl is by the tree and why the tree is crying inside the card. Would you please write a little story about the pictures in the card for me? What has made the tree so sad?

I hope you had a very nice holiday from school. Please write again soon.

P.S. There are only 5 boys in my class and 11 girls.

The Child's Reply.

Dear Tammy,

I will write a little story about the tree. One day a tree was sad because he have no friend. That why he was sad. Tammy I have tell you a little about the tree if you want me to tell you about the tree write to me and I'll tell you all about the tree. The girl by the tree is you Tammy.

The Correspondence Continues.

Dear Yer,

I like your story about the tree, Yer. Thank you for sharing it with me and for answering all my questions about the Valentine's Day card. Will you please write more about the tree? Why did the tree have no friends? It is a beautiful tree and it looks so lonely. Does the tree stand next to a lake? Do people go fishing there? Write back and let me know.

P.S. Thank you for the new picture! Who is she?

I am sending you a picture about the tree story. Can you tell me a story about this picture? What is going on in this picture?

Dear Tammy,

The picture you give me I am going to tell you the story. Maybe I know the tree is sad. Maybe he have not friend to talk with. How [Who] is the boy fishing in the picture. How [who] is the girl in the picture. You draw very good picture.

Dear Yer,

The boy in the picture is you Yer. The girl in the picture is me. Let's write the story together. Next time, you add more to the story, O.K.?

The tree is sad because he has no friends. A boy named Yer walked by the tree. He started fishing in the lake. A girl is standing by the tree. Can you tell me what the girl says to the boy, Yer? What will the girl say to the tree? Let's make up a good story, Yer!

Dear Tammy,

I will glad to help you write the story. The gril say come and help me make the tree happy the boy will say O.K. So they tell the tree lets be fun [friends]. We are taking a big tast [test] in class.

Tammy provided further scaffolding by combining sections of the story into one cohesive text, which she added in a special card for Yer. She wrote:

The boy in the picture is you Yer. The girl in the picture is me. The tree in the picture is sad because he has no friends. A boy named Yer walked by the tree. He started fishing in the lake. A girl was standing by the tree. The girl said come and help me make the tree happy. The boy said O.K. So they told the tree lets be friends.

Yer was able to contribute the initial topic of the story through his picture and major story elements but needed his adult pen pal's help to pull the story elements together and to create a full draft of their collaborative story.

Example 1 shows several examples of the child's interest in this form of playfulness. He is interested enough in the story writing that he is able to sustain the topic through several letters. Yer asks questions and praises Tammy for producing a good picture. He is polite and offers to help Tammy write the story. He answers many of her questions. He develops important elements of the story, such as the problem and the resolution. Yer also demonstrates his knowledge of discourse by using a common expression to introduce his story: "I will write a little story about the tree." The collaboration between pen pals gives Yer an opportunity to develop a story that is largely based on his view of the world.

Before the collaborative story writing began, Yer's letter writing consisted of sentences using common sentence starters. Once Yer became engaged in the collaborative story writing, the focus was no longer limited to "I" and "you."

Example 1 also shows examples of the adult pen pal's scaffolding strategies. Tammy uses Yer's drawing as an initial prompt for storytelling. Using a child's picture to develop a story is likely to increase the child's motivation to continue to contribute to the story through several letter exchanges because the child's drawing reflects his perspective of the world. Later, Tammy draws a picture that includes some of the characters in the story; these characters are likely to interest Yer since they include him and his pen pal. Besides making use of drawing and making Yer and herself characters in the story, Tammy also asks questions about the story and makes several requests for elaboration (e.g., "Will you please write more about the tree." "Can you tell me a story about this picture?" "Next time, you add more to the story, O.K.?""). When Yer does not create a full text of their collaborative story, Tammy uses Yer's story elements to produce a cohesive story. These adult pen pal-initiated strategies can motivate a child to participate in narrative story writing. Collaborative story writing is a good example of children and their pen pals creating an imaginary experience together.

Additional Story Writing

Although in collaborative story writing a narrative is created by two contributors over several turns, stories or narratives can be written by individual children. A narrative is a complex form of discourse that children generally develop competence in starting at age 5 (Nelson, Aksu-Koc, & Johnson, 2001). Researchers have shown that 5-year-old NES children include stories in their letters (Robinson, Crawford, & Hall, 1994). I have found that ELL children include multisentence narratives consisting of personal narratives or creative stories in pen pal letters (Lipp, 2001). In these letters, a story is set off from the rest of the text by a formula such as, "I am going to tell you a story."

I have found that some children initiate narratives in their letters; others are sometimes invited to write stories by their adult pen pals who write "Tell me a story about..." In response to such invitations, some elementary school ELLs respond with, "I don't know how to write a story," while others attempt to write one. We will examine examples of story writing that occurred in two children's letters.

Examples 2 and 3. Story Writing in Letters

A University Student's Pen Pal Letter Written to a Boy.

Dear Guitar,

How are you doing? Have you ever been camping? I have gone several times. Tell me a story about a trip you have taken. Tell me who you went with and what you did. I want to hear all about a trip you took.

The Boy's Reply.

Dear Darryl

I am find [fine]. The sory [story] is the boy go to the ghost and the boy ran ayaw [away] and the ghost ran after the boy and the boy saw his

dad and his dad kill the ghost and the ghost die can you give me some car sticker.

A University Student's Pen Pal Letter Written to a Boy.

Dear Cher Xing,

Hi, how are you doing? Yes, I do like to play basketball & football. I was playing basketball when I got hurt. I hurt my knee. It hurts a lot. Do you play basketball a lot or a little? Are you good? Tell me a story about you playing basketball or football with your friends? I played football yesterday and we won the other team by a lot of points. I love to play football with my friends because I like to tackle them. We try to be very careful because my friends get hurt. I like to run or catch the football.

The Boy's Reply.

Do you want me to tell you a story about me an my friends play football ok but my friends don't like to play football then I will just tell you a facke [fake] store [story]. When we go home I walk to my friends house and we play football then along time when we go to school we got to do are [our] homework so we don't play football.

In Guitar and Cher Xing's correspondence, we see that children may respond with a creative story when asked to tell a story about what they did. Their stories capture imaginary worlds that are closely tied to their personal experiences. Having adult pen pals request narratives gives children the opportunity to respond with narratives when they are ready to produce them. In the pen pal correspondence, children are not all required to produce narratives at the same time. Therefore, when they voluntarily respond to a pen pal's request for a story with a narrative, the children's affective filter will be lower than if they were required to produce one by their teacher.

When both Guitar and Cher Xing wrote stories in response to their adult pen pals' requests, their writing changed from the "I"- and the "you"-dominated sentence starters, which they widely used in their earlier letters. Hence, the narrative writing led to variety in their use of vocabulary and sentences. Also, in the narratives shown in Examples 2 and 3, both children's writing is coherent in that several sentences focus on a topic. This quality, which is valued in composition, occurred infrequently in the letters that these children wrote before producing the narratives. Writing short narratives in their letters gives children an opportunity to practice using features of writing that are expected of more experienced writers but that occur infrequently in novice writers' letters.

Jokes and Riddles

Jokes are a humorous form of communicative events that entertain the audience (Beeman, 1999). Jokes, like narratives, have distinct organization and, therefore, are viewed as a separate genre. When joke tellers have expert-

ise in this area, they can tell jokes to maintain social relations. Learning to tell jokes appropriately, though not taught in school, is a helpful social skill, which involves practice with an audience. When children include jokes in their letters, they entertain themselves and their pen pals. The jokes also can become topics for commentary in subsequent letters written either by the child or the adult pen pal. Consider the following exchange that occurred at the very beginning of the correspondence between a fifth-grade Mexican boy and his pen pal.

Example 4. Jokes in Letters

A Child's Letter.

Dear friend or friends

My name is Jorge [a pseudonym]

I have one dog and three little puppys, two boys tho girls. Their names are Bobo, Rex, Sherid, and Whitney

I have brown eyes, and dark brown hiar. What is your name? Do you have any pets?

P.S. What did the Valcanoe [volcano] say to the other Valcanoe?

I lava you!

The University Student's Response.

Dear Jorge,

My name is Juanita. I have a Siamese cat. Her name is Bogey. My daughter named the cat after a golfing word.

I have dark brown hair and eyes.

I really enjoyed your joke about the volcanoes! I would really like to have a picture of you and I will send you one of me, and maybe my cat.

P.S. What do ghosts eat for breakfast?

Ghost toasties and Booberry pancakes!

(Post Toasties, blueberry pancakes)

In Example 4, a number of features stand out concerning jokes in letters. Jokes, which can be initiated by children, can be written at the end of letters following a P.S. While in conversation there is turn-taking with the listener expected to respond to the first line of a joke, in letters the punch line is supplied by the joke teller without waiting for a reader's response. Since the joke becomes a shared experience between pen pals, it can become a topic of discussion in letters. For example, the older reader thanked the child for the joke.

I have found that my email correspondence with some of my adult friends has included telling jokes. It is clear that supplying jokes can be a way for writers to maintain social relations while adding humor to correspon-

dence. Reluctant ESL writers also benefit from adding this form of humor to their letter writing because it can help them maintain an interest in the letter-writing process.

Since some children like telling jokes more than others, it is likely that this form of play will interest many but not all children. Also, even though Jorge, a fifth-grader, initiated the riddle without first seeing an older pen pal model joke telling, I assume that younger children would also enjoy writing and receiving jokes. The younger Hmong L2 children discussed in this paper who are reluctant novice writers would benefit from older pen pals' modeling telling a joke or riddle in pen pal correspondence because it did not occur to these children that this form of oral language is appropriate in pen pal writing that is done in school. If reluctant writers receive jokes along with their pen pal letters and enjoy their pen pals' jokes, they will have additional motivation to carefully read their pen pals' letters, not just quickly glance at them. They can also become motivated to continue their correspondence after the initial novelty wears off. Further, receiving jokes and writing down jokes that they have heard or read will lower their affective filter while they write since exchanging jokes can be fun, not hard work.

Poetry and Cards

Poetry is a form of shaping of language. It entails “. . . organization in terms of relations within and among lines” (Hymes, 1999, pp. 191-192). Cards are a form of a gift that can be used to express sentiments in relationships (Jaffe, 1999). They often create imaginary situations. I have found that children include poetry in cards that they prepare for their pen pals. For example, fifth-/sixth-grade children prepared Valentine's Day cards for their pen pals. Each card had a child-crafted poem that was a variation of the well-known children's poem: Roses are red. Violets are blue.... A child wrote, “Roses are red. Violets are blue. I am smart and so are you.” In my pen pal projects, the older pen pals have always kept the cards that children prepared for them, so the cards are not part of my collection of children's letters. Nevertheless, the practice of including poetry in letters or in handmade cards is noteworthy.

My example of poetry and cards consisted of a situation in which the teacher asked everyone in the class to prepare a “Roses are red”-type poem and include it in a card for their pen pals. The adult pen pals were delighted to receive these cards. If children are being encouraged to write other free form or formulaic poems as part of writing instruction, the teacher could have posters in the classroom reminding children of these forms of poetry. Then, when children write to pen pals, the teacher could suggest but not insist that children include poetry along with their pen pal letters.

Songs

Many ELL children enjoy singing songs in their L1 and in English, and they know the words to some of these songs. A teacher told of an incident in

which children were writing to their after-school recreation program leader. One child's first journal entry consisted of the first line of the song "Yankee Doodle Went to Town Riding on a Pony" (Cortese, 2001). This line, which was written in invented spelling, clearly reflected an imaginary experience that was meaningful to the writer. While some teachers may be disappointed that the child had not written something original, I view this incident as an example of a reluctant writer using playfulness to help himself accomplish a writing task. Writing down some of the words of a song that a child knows and enjoys reflects a child's social world. Children can be encouraged to share words of these songs or chants with their pen pals. If reluctant writers are encouraged to use what they know, their pen pal writing task becomes more manageable.

All of these types of playfulness provide insights into how writing about imaginary situations can increase children's interest in maintaining letter exchanges, can reinforce new genres of writing, can make a challenging task manageable for novice writers, and overall can build variety and richness in children's writing. These examples of playfulness also demonstrate how children's playfulness reflects their personal experience and their social worlds.

Application in Classrooms with English Language Learners

1. Pen pal letters can be handwritten in small notebooks that are sent back and forth between two groups or two classes of ELLs in the same school, or as was the case in my work, between elementary school classes and classes of adults learning to become teachers. Letters can also be sent through email. When using email, the pen pals do not need to live in the same city, state, or country.
2. Playfulness in interactive writing should not be viewed as being off task.
3. While this article discusses playfulness in children, the practice of incorporating stories, jokes, poems, songs, and cards in pen pal letters can help older ELLs as well.
4. The poetry and card preparation discussed in this article was teacher-directed. If a teacher wants children to have an option of occasionally including a handmade card and a poem along with the correspondence, art supplies need to be available.
5. All of the other examples of playfulness in this article were initiated by either the child or the adult pen pals without teacher intervention. Some students may self-censor this playfulness. To decrease this tendency, teachers who have introduced pen pal projects in their classes may want to share insights about playfulness in writing with their students. Teachers may show their classes an example of a letter that applies playfulness before anyone in class has spontaneously used it. Besides this approach, teachers can have students share instances of playfulness as they occur naturally in letters. Then children do not need to discover language play on their own. However, the decision as to whether and how frequently students wish to include cards, jokes, narratives, songs, and poems in their letters should rest with the writers.

6. A class of ELLs may benefit from resources such as joke, poetry, and song books. Also helpful would be poetry writing activities including pattern poetry (Holmes & Moulton, 2002; Moulton & Holmes, 1997) and free form poetry. Children can be reminded that when they include songs or poems in journals, they may want to experiment and change some of the words.
7. Teachers may want to visit several of the Web sites on collaborative writing to gather ideas on having their classes engage in collaborative story writing with another class; the Google Directory offers many ideas (Google Directory [...] Collaborative Writing). Further, collaborative story writing through use of mobile phones and computers allows many individual writers to contribute to a story (S-Equal Collaborative Story Chain for Mobile Learning, 2003).
8. Teachers may want to reflect on the effectiveness of modeling these forms of playfulness for the entire class after students have already written to pen pals for a few weeks. With fifth-graders, brief oral comments may be sufficient to encourage students to add jokes. With younger L2 writers and especially with reluctant writers who are new to literacy, brainstorming and modeling may be helpful. Teachers, for example, may brainstorm with the class jokes they know and have the class create posters of a few jokes for posting in the classroom. Teachers can distribute age-appropriate joke books so that each group of students has one. Then, teachers may show children how to incorporate a joke or riddle in their letters using a P.S. and can encourage children to include a joke with their pen pal letters. After children have completed their pen pal writing for the day, the teacher can examine how the reluctant writers in the class fared in their pen pal writing. How many of them incorporated jokes in their new pen pal letters? How many of them copied jokes from the class posters? How many of them referred to joke books? In what way did the joke or riddle writing add variety to their writing? Answers to these questions can offer teachers practical insights about teaching strategies related to playfulness in writing.
9. Teachers may also ask the adult pen pals to include jokes or riddles (or other forms of playfulness) in their pen pal correspondence. When children receive their letters, the teacher may allow the children to read the letters first and then ask how many of the letters contained jokes or riddles. It is possible that some of the children missed the jokes. The teacher could encourage children to reread the letters and see if they can find more jokes. This activity may encourage reluctant writers to read their pen pals' journal entries more carefully.

When teachers offer an environment in which playfulness in interactive writing is valued, children, including reluctant writers, feel empowered to experiment with a variety of enjoyable genres of communication such as stories, jokes and riddles, songs, and poetry along with pen pal letter writing. This use of creativity in writing can motivate reluctant writers to read their pen pals' letters carefully and to continue to participate in

pen pal projects. It can also help young writers realize they have more choices in what and how they write.

Author

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