

The neglected role of expertise

There was a time when valued qualities of writing included elegance in addition to content. Gradually a view gained precedence that creativity and self-expression might be hindered by a teacher emphasis upon form. So, teachers-in-training are exhorted to put away the red pen to avoid threatening students' self-esteem and their subsequent preparedness to commit their thoughts to paper.

Future teachers report being informed that sophisticated expression will be evinced through the practice of writing rather than through teacher instruction. Access to an array of interesting language activities is thought to ensure that students will increasingly develop mastery over grammatical forms. Sometimes described as the naturalist theory of language learning, it is a theory that also influences a popular approach to the teaching of reading - in which children are believed to learn to read by engaging in reading (or hearing parents read). Naturalist theory is acknowledged as an appropriate explanation for the development of speech (for which we appear as a species to be evolved), but not so for the artificial codes involved in our alphabetic reading and writing system. The belief that speech, reading, and writing are equivalent language processes is unsupported by research evidence. For example, neuroimaging studies have shown that different parts of the brain are involved in reading as compared to speaking.

Teachers are trained to value emotive and creative expression more than clarity of writing. Even some bright post-graduate students lack the traditional grammar needed to write a competent essay or thesis at the University level - a deficit that embarrasses them considerably. In discussion, numerous students report that they were never formally taught these aspects of written language. This missing capacity would make it difficult for them as teachers to teach formal grammar to the next generation of students, even if state education policies were supportive of that direction. An examination of Australian education documents reveals no such direction. There is much written about how students will develop a strong sense of the structure of our written language, but no indication that educators should actively teach it. So, osmosis is evoked yet again.