

Introduction

1. Writing in the native language: not easy, but important

To write in their first language or mother tongue is very difficult or even impossible for many children and adolescents whose parents or grandparents have emigrated. If these writing skills are not developed in school, the children concerned remain illiterate in their first language. While speaking in their heritage language only in a broken, mostly dialectal form, they lose the connection with their written culture. This increases the danger that, sooner or later, they might lose their first language altogether – and with it, an important special competence and an integral part of their bicultural identity. Furthering the biliteral competences (the ability to read and write in one's own first language) is therefore a significant concern also in the sense of a balanced integral development of the bicultural-bilingual identity.

Heritage language education (in Switzerland: HSK courses) can make a decisive contribution to the development of these competences. For children from educationally disadvantaged families, it represents the only opportunity to also learn their native language in its standard form and written version, and to acquire an integral bilingualism that includes the written culture as well.

2. Goals and structure of this publication

This publication supports the teachers and students of heritage language education in developing writing competences in the first language in an educationally current, enjoyable and motivating manner. The introduction to didactic key aspects of writing texts is followed by an abundance of specific teaching proposals and suggestions.

This current volume begins with a collection of simple, playful forms of developing the motivation to write at all age levels while recognizing that many students experience significant blockages, at least initially. Pursuant to the insight that strategic knowledge is as important as knowledge of facts, part II offers techniques and strategies to help students in the various phases of the writing process. Part III comprises numerous concrete suggestions of partial aspects, such as vocabulary development, developing text structure, or style. The last part includes an array of suggestions and ideas that are thematically particularly appropriate for the context of heritage language education and cooperation with regular classroom instruction or artistic-creative projects.

For quick orientation, each suggestion lists a recommendation about the arrangement (from individual work to class work), about the age-appropriate level for this exercise (e.g. 3rd – 7th grade) and for the approximate time requirement. Each suggestion also describes the goals and the specific approach, clearly and comprehensibly formulated. All of the teaching suggestions were critically examined and, for the most part, practically tested by different heritage language instructors.

3. Key aspects of current didactics of writing texts

The following remarks pertain to the current writing didactics in the German-speaking areas, but naturally also reflect international developments. The new conception of the last 30 years is already evident in the term "Didactics of writing texts", which replaces the former term "essay writing instruction". This includes a broader understanding of the term that goes beyond the classic school essay. Among the key aspects of contemporary didactics of writing (which may differ from what many heritage language teachers acquired in their own training) are the following five points. These will be discussed below in the context of heritage language education, and complemented in chapter 4 with additional relevant points for this kind of instruction.

a) Writing as a social activity: clarify for whom and for what purpose you write!

Writing is essentially a communicative process, with a few exceptions (e.g. a diary, shopping list), by means of which one addresses other persons in order to communicate or to achieve something. Therefore, the students must consciously experience writing as a social practice and activity. In other words, if students are asked to write something, they should know from the beginning for whom and why they are writing, i.e., what is going to happen with the texts after they are written. To write just for the instructors and their red pens is definitely not sufficient in terms of an intended reader reference. Instead, the instructors (perhaps with the students) need to determine for each writing event what the text will be used for (reading out loud or displayed in class, bound in a book, used as a form of correspondence, etc.). Ideas for target audiences can be found in chapter 12. These can, of course, be applied to a wide variety of writing situations and events.