

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.

b) Connecting to daily life and the fantasy world of the students, motivating writing assignments

The topics of writing assignments should be closely connected with the students' living environment, as well as to their desires, dreams and fantasies. In order to establish this connection requires first and foremost appropriately motivating writing assignments. The following teaching suggestions offer a wealth of examples, from simple low-level writing tasks to larger projects. Secondly, it is necessary to prepare the students mentally for the task. This initial preparation is generally mostly oral and includes clear and unequivocal guidelines, expectations and criteria on which students can orient themselves. The accurate planning of writing assignments in terms of topic and intended reader reference is unquestionably part of the professionalism of today's instructors.

c) Expanded concept of text types, media and function of writing

Whereas in earlier times the writing tasks in the schools consisted mostly of experience essays or renarrations, today's students are being prepared for a much broader range of text types, consistent with real contemporary life. Depending on the situation, this may involve the writing of reports, forms, sms, letters, posters, simple poems, applications, fantasy texts, picture stories, etc. This should also include using new media, such as a computer or hand-held devices with all their applications (word processing, e-mail, sms, blogs, chats). This applies to regular classroom instruction as well and leads to a large variety of exciting writing projects, as described in the teaching suggestions in the practice section.

d) Directed ("guided") and free ("inspired") writing

Meaningful assignments should include directed and free writing opportunities, consistent with an effective writing promotion.

The main emphasis of directed writing is building and expanding linguistic partial competences (e.g. vocabulary, sentence beginnings, different syntactical patterns, textual structures). In focusing on each of these areas, students receive more detailed guidelines and objectives to implement. A particularly highly didactic form is so-called scaffolding, whereby students rely closely on a prescribed structure in writing their own content and thus expand their text competence with a new facet. Example: the variation of a letter by way of a new recipient, "parallel stories", where a figure, a place, or an object has been changed relative to the template. In light of the value of this approach, particularly for weaker heritage language students, chapter 4 offers further details; see also various practical suggestions in Part III.

Free or inspired writing signifies such writing occasions where students are prepared for a particular topic or writing project (e.g. through an oral warm-up for a fantastical theme or through a preliminary discussion in case of a non-fiction text), without having to follow a prescribed model. Clearly communicated expectations and possible criteria are also part of this type of writing. Totally free writing projects without prior preparations ("you have now half an hour to write something") tends to overwhelm many students. It is important to recognize that free writing encourages students to write in their own language even outside of the school setting (e.g. letters, diary, mails, etc.).

e) Process orientation and explicit mediation of writing strategies

If students only think about the required final product, many of them may feel overwhelmed. It is therefore useful to focus on the process instead. The students should learn strategies about how to subdivide a writing process into manageable steps and how to solve them in a logical sequence. Some of these important steps are: finding ideas, activating previous knowledge – planning and setting up of the text structure -writing the text – revising the text -presenting the text. In order for students to acquire and use these writing strategies efficiently and sustainably, the mediation of these strategies must be followed explicitly. The techniques and learning strategies in part II facilitate this goal. The two worksheets that summarize the most important points are intended for students from about the 4th grade on.

4. Additional observations concerning text writing in the heritage language

One of the characteristics of heritage language teaching is the students' heterogeneity and the fact that many of them experience considerable difficulty with the more demanding literacy aspects of their first language. The challenges for writing in the heritage language that arise from this are reflected in the following observations.

a) Introduction to the writing system of the first language

The students who learned the alphabet in the immigration country instead of their country of origin, must first be carefully introduced to the phonemes and graphemes of their first language. For the languages that are based on the Latin writing system, this involves primarily those letters that do not exist in their school language (e.g. ð, ç, ı). Thus, many teachers only introduce these letters at the end of the first or the beginning of the second grade, in order to