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RESEARCH REPORT

Investigating difficulties in elementary school students' writing¹

*Investigando las dificultades
de la expresión escrita en
estudiantes de primaria*

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<p>This article presents the results of a qualitative action research study about the possible causes of the difficulties in the written expression of fifth grade students of a bilingual school in Barranquilla. The study was conducted only on its ethnographic stage, which involved investigating the problem, analyzing data, and interpreting results for a further design of an action plan that contributes to the solution of this problem. The design of this action plan will be subject of a future investigation.</p> <p>This study included six 5th grade students, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades Language teachers, and the elementary school academic coordinator. The techniques applied were observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis (students' written production, teachers' protocols, writing class activities, students' evaluation samples, lesson plans, and the 5th grade writing scope and sequence). Triangulation was used as the technique for analyzing the data obtained with the different instruments.</p> <p>For a better management of the results, they were classified into categories addressing the students, the teachers, and the school. These results suggest that the students' difficulties in writing come from different sources, which were examined separately for a better management of the information.</p> <p>KEY WORDS: difficulties, written expression, bilingual school, skills, strategies.</p>	<p>ABSTRACT</p> <p>RESUMEN</p>	<p>Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio cualitativo de tipo investigación-acción sobre las posibles causas de las dificultades en la expresión escrita de estudiantes de quinto grado de básica primaria en un colegio bilingüe de Barranquilla. El estudio fue realizado sólo en su etapa etnográfica, es decir, se investigó el problema, se analizaron los datos arrojados por la investigación y se hizo una interpretación de los mismos para a futuro diseñar un plan de acción que contribuya a dar solución a este problema. El diseño de este plan de acción será motivo de una futura investigación.</p> <p>El estudio incluyó a seis estudiantes de 5 grado, profesores de inglés de 3, 4, y 5 grado y la coordinadora académica de la básica primaria. Las técnicas de investigación empleadas fueron observaciones de clase, entrevistas semi-estructuradas y análisis de documentos (producción escrita de los estudiantes, protocolos de los profesores, actividades realizadas en las clases de expresión escrita, resultados de evaluaciones, planes de estudio de quinto grado y el currículo de escritura de elemental). Se empleó el método de triangulación para el análisis de los datos.</p> <p>Para el mejor manejo de los resultados obtenidos, estos fueron clasificados en categorías referentes a los estudiantes, los profesores, y la institución. Estos resultados sugieren que los problemas en la expresión escrita de los estudiantes de quinto grado de esta institución tienen diferentes causas, las cuales fueron examinadas separadamente para un mejor manejo de la información.</p> <p>PALABRAS CLAVES: dificultades, expresión escrita, colegio bilingüe, habilidades, estrategias.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Developing literacy in students is the goal of elementary school language teachers in most bilingual schools in Colombia. However, the ability to read fluently and communicate ideas accurately both orally and in writing, especially the latter, does not seem to develop smoothly in certain children who, though cognitively able and smart, reach the upper elementary school levels with serious difficulties to communicate in writing as fluently as they do orally. In addition, many of these children reach the upper elementary and high school levels with such poor writing skills that they find it very hard to show their understanding in the different subjects, which in many cases results in frustration, lack of motivation, and attitudinal problems leading to failure, as described in studies conducted by Manjarres, May, et al (1994), Gardner (1985), Dörnyei (2001), Lambert and Gardner (1972), Mijaljevic (2006), Diab (2006), and Yan (2005), among others. Besides, writing difficulties may become so serious that most of these students end up receiving tutorial sessions at home, which keep them away from sports and other leisure activities also important to strengthen their personalities and foster an integral development.

According to Gibbons (1991:5), elementary school students from bilingual contexts may develop a series of writing difficulties that can eventually affect their learning process. Among the most common difficulties, which can be a rationale for the relevance of this study are:

- ▶ Have generally poor written language skills, especially in subject areas.
- ▶ Can write sentences but have difficulty writing paragraphs or sequencing paragraphs.
- ▶ Write only in an informal, "chatty style".
- ▶ Use limited vocabulary which lack descriptive words.

- ▶ Use simple sentence structures only.
- ▶ Make grammatical errors not typical of a native speaker –for example, in word order, word endings, tense, or prepositions.
- ▶ Spelling is poor.
- ▶ Lack confidence to write at length.

This was the case at a prestigious bilingual school in Barranquilla - Colombia, the context chosen for this investigation. Language teachers observed serious problems in the 5th grade students' written expression, which affected both their academic performance and their attitude toward learning. For this reason, the researcher, a 5th grade language teacher at this school, decided to analyze the difficulties most commonly observed in her students' written expression and explore the possible reasons for this difficulties in order to devise an action plan to help them.

Difficulties in nonnative elementary school students' written expression may be triggered by different factors, such as emotional, contextual, methodological, and cognitive, among others. Referring to this, Abu Rass states:

Writing is especially difficult for nonnative speakers because they are expected to create written products that demonstrate mastery of content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics in a new language. In addition, writing has been taught for many years as a product rather than a process. Therefore, teachers emphasize grammar and punctuation rather than decisions about the content and the organization of ideas (2006, p. 30).

The above suggests the great importance of considering the factors influencing children's writing acquisition in order to help them cope with the challenges that the writing activity brings with it. For this reason, the most relevant factors considered in this investigation will be described afterward.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERACY: READING-WRITING RELATIONSHIP

There is an intimate relationship between reading and writing that needs to be considered when teaching writing in elementary school. As stated by Kroll (1995, p. 35), "meaningful writing instruction is literacy instruction and one cannot successfully teach writing without also simultaneously teaching reading." Reading provides students with meaningful models of writing in context. Therefore, following Carrell, Devine and Eskey (1988), writing cannot and should not be isolated as a cognitive or academic activity because it fundamentally depends on writer's purposeful interactions with print, with fellow readers and writers, and with literate communities of practice.

According to Zuñiga (2006, p.1), literacy has traditionally been conceived as the "ability to read and write". However, at present times literacy refers to the competence "to carry out complex tasks using reading and writing related to the world of work and to life outside school" (Zuñiga, 1989, p. 36 in Zuñiga, 2006). Hence, it is an increasing need that language teachers, especially in elementary levels, raise awareness on the importance of developing in their students reading skills that allow them not only to decoding and understanding information from texts but also to have access to models for appropriate written expression.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

As it is known, a piece of writing is a compendium of rhetorical, lexical and other linguistic devices which, together, make up a unit that communicates and develops an idea. However, in order to be able to express their ideas accurately in writing, language learners need to manage basic skills and strategies. Following Grabe and Kaplan (1996),

"Writing requires the manipulation of many complex structural and rhetorical dimensions," among which they distinguish the following:

1. Syntactic structures.
2. Semantic senses and mappings.
3. Cohesion signaling.
4. Genre and organizational structuring to support coherence and interpretations.
5. Lexical forms and relations.
6. Stylistic and register dimensions of text structure.
7. Non-linguistic knowledge bases, including "world knowledge"

(Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p.62)

Each dimension involves a series of skills whose acquisition requires the application of strategies. According to Grabe & Kaplan (1996), this is an important and compulsory part of second language teaching and learning that needs to be carefully regarded by teachers. This means teachers should have a clear idea of which writing skills their students need to learn, when they need to learn them, how they need to learn them, and which strategies will help them to become proficient writers. Understanding writing instruction in this way implies getting to know students' writing needs beforehand and tracking them throughout the process in order to have a more meaningful and productive writing teaching and learning process.

THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY

The role of grammar and vocabulary in second and foreign language learning, and the importance they should be given when teaching writing have been highly discussed in second language education. Discussions around which one is more

important or which one should be emphasized in language teaching have aroused much controversy. According to Sheehan (2004), vocabulary receives little attention in language teaching in comparison to the emphasis placed on grammar. Grauberg (1997) highlights the need of vocabulary in second language learning as a means of conveying meaning. He states: "It is meaning we want to communicate, and meaning is stated above all through vocabulary" (p. 15). Therefore, students need to learn robust vocabulary to be able to understand and communicate in a second language. Nevertheless, grammar plays a critical role in language learning and development since much of the basis of language relies on it. According to Grauberg (1997), very little can be conveyed in a language without grammar; in order to understand and communicate ideas in a language one needs to know some grammar.

Therefore, these two skills should be seen as complementary rather than opposed, so an emphasis on grammar over vocabulary or opposite may have a negative effect on students' written communicative competence. Consequently, as stated by Sheehan (2004), it is communicative competence rather than learning isolated vocabulary and grammar structures what should be pursued when teaching writing to second language learners.

TEACHER'S ROLE IN THE WRITING TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESS

Teachers play a crucial role in the development of students' written expression. For this reason, teaching writing is a task that has to be responsibly and carefully conducted. Byrne (1980) presents the teaching of writing as something more than merely placing symbols on a flat surface; it is a conscious process that involves the communication of ideas with a specific purpose and to a specific audience at a specific context. Because of

that, it has to be an educated process that should point to the development of the necessary skills that allow for the creation of meaningful texts that are understood by different readers (Byrne, 1980, p.8). This makes much sense in elementary school considering that "children learn to write gradually and they progress at different rates even at their beginning attempts to write" (McCormick, 1986 in Lance, 2005). Besides, following Leather (2006), writing at elementary levels should be a process that brings energy and excitement. Teachers should as well create an authentic and purposeful environment that leaves in the communicative element of writing and keep students motivated to write.

In order to do so, teachers need preparation and constant revision of different approaches, methods, and techniques for teaching this skill. Sheehan (2004) emphasizes the imminent need of teachers to update their methodological practices and their "own mental lexicons" in order to help students deal with the challenges brought by second language learning. Similarly, Ferris and Hedgecock (2005) emphasize the value of theoretical knowledge in writing composition training presenting it as a tool for making decisions about pedagogical procedures. According to the writers, "The knowledge of theories, beliefs, and paradigms leads to the development of teaching skills, enables teachers to discover and build their own theories, and helps them become critical and reflect on their own practice" (p. 8). Subsequently, an account of the main approaches to writing and teaching writing techniques will be made.

PROCESS – ORIENTED APPROACHES TO WRITING

Process-oriented approaches to writing conceive writing as a "vehicle for communication and as a

way to influence others" (Lomas, 2006, p. 59). Learners are not seen any more as mechanical beings but as critical thinkers and problem solvers able to communicate their ideas. These approaches have in common the emphasis on the individual writer as a creator of original ideas and the focus on procedures for solving problems, discovering ideas, expressing them in writing, and revising the text (Lomas, 2006). In this view of writing, process is more important than product and high order thinking skills must be developed in order to perform the task of writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2002). Teacher's role has to be supportive and facilitating as well, providing writers with the positive and cooperative environment they need to make their own meanings (Elbow, 1988, cited in Hyland, 2002).

THE WRITING PROCESS

Many teachers tend to assume that writing comes naturally and does not need much instruction. According to Graves (1984, cited in Grabe & Kaplan 1996), "In most schools, writing is given very little time, and students are not encouraged to write... Teachers, for their part, typically do not know how to teach writing and seldom write anything themselves; even less frequently do teachers model writing in the classroom and share the writing with students for their comments and feedback" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 96), thus depriving students from the opportunity to share and reflect upon this process. This may bring negative consequences in elementary school students' writing, which needs to be properly guided for accuracy.

On the other hand, there are teachers who make students write compositions without giving them the time to plan, structure, and improve their writing, which may be counterproductive for the

development of their written expression, especially at elementary school levels. As an alternative, process writing has been proposed as one of the most effective approaches for teaching writing. It is a reflective multi-step method (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) that takes students to plan, direct, revise, and improve their writing before the final correction of their tutors. Grabe & Kaplan (1996, p.98) propose this approach as a "wholly positive innovation allowing teachers and students more meaningful interaction and more purposeful writing".

AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN THE TEACHING/ LEARNING WRITING PROCESS

Attention to affective factors in second language learning has increased in the latest years as the conception of learners in the language learning process has changed. There is a close relationship between affect and learning highlighted by Mihaljevic as follows:

Interest in the affective aspects of learning was prompted, among other things, when it was realized that the whole personality of the learner needs to be involved in education and that learners do not automatically develop emotionally as they may intellectually. Affect came to be considered as a very important contributing factor to success in learning (Mihaljevic, 2006, p.1)

The kind of environment in which students learn the second language and the type of messages teachers convey about the way language is learned will enhance positive or negative feelings in the students. Arnold (1999, p.1) states that "the affective side of learning is not opposed to the cognitive side. When both are used together, the learning process can be constructed on a firmer foundation". In the specific case of the

teaching/learning writing process with kids, this attention on affect is especially important given the grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical difficulties that arise when students are learning to express their ideas in writing. These difficulties may cause anxiety, boredom, and stress to appear, which affects students' capacity to produce effective texts (Arnold, 1999). For this reason, teachers should aim at developing positive emotional factors such as self-esteem, empathy, and/or motivation, which, according to Arnold (1999, p. 2), "can greatly facilitate the language learning process," and the development of writing skills, which is our specific case in this study.

SCAFFOLDING IN THE WRITING TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESS

As mentioned before, there is a great connection between students' affective factors toward writing and the way they are taught, especially when they are young learners. Studies conducted by Vygotsky demonstrated that children learn better in supportive environments where they are guided to learn through permanent inquiry, based on their Zone of Proximal Development—the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance (Vygotsky, quoted by Raymond, 2000, in Van Der Stuyf, 2002).

From the wide range of strategies that teachers may apply to achieve this goal, scaffolding has proved to be one of the most effective ones at this stage. According to Graves and Braaten (1996), cited by Pennil (2002), scaffolding is the process by which an expert provides temporary support to learners to "help bridge the gap between what [the learner] know[s] and can do and

what [he or she] need[s] to accomplish in order to succeed at a particular learning task" (p. 169). On the other hand, Vygotsky cited by Raymonds (2000, p. 176) in Van Der Stuyf (2002), defined scaffolding instruction as the "role of teachers and others in supporting the learner's development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level". Referring specifically about writing, Lawson (2002, p.2) provides Dorn and Soffos' ideas about scaffolding in teaching writing, which are considered important in this investigation:

The nurturing activities of an expert are critical to fostering children through different stages of writing ability, from emergence (writing letters and single words; understanding that we write and read English from left to right) to early writer status (recognizing such patterns as paragraphs and pages) to transitional writer status (mastering the ability to edit and revise an original work)... Children learn how to become writers through meaningful interactions with more knowledgeable people... Moreover, writing is a learned skill that is shaped through practice and constructive feedback. (Dorn & Soffos, 2000, cited by Lawson, 2000, p. 5).

These ideas corroborate once again teachers' significant role in guiding students' writing in a step-by-step process, especially at elementary school levels.

THE ROLE OF EVALUATION IN THE WRITING TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESS

According to Cushing (2003), as second language learners develop their communication skills and begin to make use of the language, the need of evaluating these skills increases either for monitoring of improvement. Thus, "as the role of writing in second-language education increases, there is an ever greater demand for valid and reliable ways to test writing ability" (Cushing

2002, p.3). However, what is evaluated and how students' writing performance is evaluated are important considerations to make.

There are two basic types of evaluation, formative and summative, that need to be carefully differentiated to be appropriately implemented. According to Garrison and Ehringhaus (2009), summative assessment is the type of evaluation given periodically to determine "what students know or do not know" (p.1). Standardized tests, end-of- unit or chapter, and semester tests are types of summative evaluation. This type of evaluation is mostly used at a classroom level to measure students' content knowledge (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009).

On the other hand, Formative assessment, also called ongoing assessment, provides information to both teachers and students about the teaching and learning process they are carrying out and supplies valuable data to "adjust teaching and learning while they are happening" (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009, p.1). Tannenbaum (1996) presents it as a means of gaining a dynamic picture of students' academic and linguistic development (Tannenbaum 1996, cited in Coombe & Barlow, 2004). Similarly, Huerta- Macias (1995) conceives this type of assessment as "particularly relevant to foreign language and second language instruction because it focuses attention on what students can do with the language rather than what they are able to produce or recall" (Huerta-Macias, 1995 cited in Coombe & Barlow, 2004), which suggests an emphasis on application rather than memorization.

These two types of evaluation may harmonize smoothly when assessing students' writing since together they may provide a more complete view of this process. Nevertheless, depending too much on one or the other may confuse the reality

of students' performance (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009, p.1). Moreover, appropriate feedback must follow either type of evaluation provided that it "enables a performer to revise performance to meet high standards" (Wiggins, 1998), thus guiding him/her to improvement and success.

PORTFOLIO-BASED ASSESSMENT

Portfolios are applied as an ongoing evaluation method for assessing students' written performance. According to Tannenbaum (1996), they "are an important means of gaining a dynamic picture of students' academic and linguistic development" (Tannenbaum, 1996 in Coombe & Barlow, 2004). Hyland (2002) presents them as "multiple-writing samples, written over time, purposefully selected from various genres to best represent a student's abilities, progress, and texts production in a particular context; they can include drafts, reflections, readings, and teacher-peer responses as well as a variety of finished texts" (p. 137). On the other hand, Cushing conceives portfolios as "a collection of texts written for different purposes over a period of time... that exhibits (to the students and/or others) the students' efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area" (Cushing, 2002, p.198). Properly conducted, portfolios may provide an accurate picture of the development of students' writing performance.

There are certainly many more aspects to be considered about second language writing teaching and learning in elementary school. However, the ones considered above are the ones guiding this study.

The following section presents an account of the methodology and techniques that were applied to conduct the current research, whose main

objective is to identify and analyze the possible causes of the difficulties on the 5th grade students' written expression of a bilingual school in Barranquilla.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach to classroom research was chosen to conduct this study since "Qualitative research relies on detailed verbal description of the phenomena observed... and can be very useful in classroom settings" (Glanz, 2003, p.10). Besides, this approach allows "Study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena" (Richards, 2003:11).

The type of research applied was Action Research on its ethnographic stage: "reflect, select a focus, collect data, analyze and interpret data" (Glanz, 2003), since the aim was basically the analysis of the problem that had been identified in the studied context, and the interpretation of results for a further design and implementation of an action plan to help solve this problem in the future.

The study was conducted at a prestigious Bilingual School in Barranquilla, Colombia. It is a big and comfortable school, well equipped with technological facilities. Teachers have easy access to a considerable amount of materials for the development of their classes. There is a resource center for teachers and a well suited library. There is also a big and comfortable computer room with computers for every student, aside from the computers at the library. The school has a Wi-Fi connection that allows students to have free access to internet in their classrooms, which makes it possible for teachers to apply technology in their classes. There is an intelligent room in every area (pre-school, elementary school, and

high school) and "intelligent carts" suited with a video beam and other technological facilities for teachers' use in their classes.

Teachers at this institution are highly qualified and speak English fluently. There is a staff developer who supports teachers in curricula and materials design, trains new teachers, and keeps the staff updated with current approaches for language teaching and learning. The school follows an English immersion program; therefore, students are expected to have a fair command of this language by the time they reach elementary school since English is the language of instruction in the majority of the subjects.

DATA GATHERING PROCEDURES

The study was conducted with 6 students and the 2 language teachers from the 5th grade levels, the 3rd and 4th grade language teachers, and the elementary school coordinator. The techniques selected for collecting data in this phase of the study were: non-participant class observations, semi-structured interviews, and a fifth grade teacher's protocol analysis. Besides, the following documents were studied: samples of the students' written production, writing activities, samples of writing tests, 5th grade level subject plans and department plan, and elementary school's writing scope and sequence.

A total of six interviews were done during this study. Each student was interviewed separately rather than in focal groups in order to prevent distractions that might have affected the course of the interview. These interviews were conducted in Spanish in order to give students confidence and avoid misunderstandings. Questions in these interviews aimed at identifying the skills and

strategies applied by students' when writing, the most common difficulties they face during writing activities, the affective factors influencing their writing process, and the type of mediations applied by teachers in writing activities.

The interviews with the 3rd and one of the 5th grade teachers were conducted in English due to their native speakers' condition. The other teachers were interviewed in Spanish. The questions asked aimed at finding out teacher's view of teaching writing, their beliefs about teaching, their methodology to teach writing, students' attitude and motivation for writing, school expectations about writing, and their attitude toward these expectations. Questions in the interview with the academic coordinator pointed to determine the school's beliefs about writing and the teaching of this skill, the school's expectations for students' written performance, and the way writing should be taught in the fifth grade level.

Three language classes were observed in blocks of two hours, one in the fourth grade and two in the fifth grade. Six class hours of fifty minutes each were observed in all. The data was gathered both by recording and taking notes of all the events that were observed in the classes. The data gathered in the researcher's classes were obtained through the analysis of students' documents and four protocols that the teacher wrote after writing classes, as recommended by Byrne (1980). Triangulation was used as the technique for analyzing the data obtained with the different instruments.

FINDINGS

Following Hoepfl (1997), the results of this study were classified into the following categories for a better management: 1. Categories addressing the

students, 2. Categories addressing the teachers, and 3. Categories addressing the school. The examples presented as support of the findings were taken from the original study; therefore, reference of the instruments where this information can be found will be provided in parenthesis.

1. CATEGORIES ADDRESSING THE STUDENTS

- a) Poor Management of Basic Skills: grammar, spelling, vocabulary, structure, coherence, cohesion

Most of the students show critical weaknesses in the command of basic writing skills (grammar structures, spelling, vocabulary, coherence, and cohesion). There are problems in the students' management of content, text structure, and command of language, which is evident in their written production (see Appendix 1). Students' interviews also provide insights of the difficulties they encounter in these aspects:

Interviewer: tu siempre encuentras los errores en (esta) etapa de edición?

Student: A veces me salto algunos porque cuando me revisan lo que escribí me los tachan malos. O sea, que no los encuentro bien.

Interviewer: ¿Y qué crees que pasa, por qué no los encuentras todos?

Student: Ah, porque a veces yo no los veo como errores, yo los veo bien porque a mí me suenan bien.

Interviewer: ¿Qué te cuesta más trabajo cuando escribes un texto en inglés, la gramática, la ortografía, el tema, cual de todas?

Student: Poner las oraciones bien compuestas, con los verbos, si estás usando el verbo correcto, pasado, presente, eh...

This example evidences a poor management of rules and conventions, which may be a source of confusion and inaccuracy in fifth grade. According to Lance (2005, p.3), 5th grade students are expected to have internalized basic skills and strategies that allow them to be more independent writers and express more freely and accurately.

Interviews with teachers and elementary school coordinator show their awareness of students' difficulties in these aspects, which they associate with students' negative attitude toward writing.

1. Interviewer: Do you think your students like to write in English?

Teacher: Not really

Interviewer: Why?

Teacher: Because of the lack of vocabulary. It's hard for them to express themselves the way that they would like, so they find it difficult to be able to write their ideas down, and because of that they are afraid to do so. (5th grade teacher's interview)

2. Many of them start with the supporting sentences; they don't introduce; they don't have a topic sentence. They have good ideas, but they don't have the... "what am I talking about?" the topic...and that's something that has to be stressed. "Where is my main idea, then my supporting sentences?" (Elementary School coordinator's interview).

As stated by Grauberg (1997), deficient grammar and vocabulary skills at this point may bring communication problems, which, according to Arnold (1991) may arouse discouragement and frustration. This may be one of the reasons for the writing difficulties of these students.

b) Gaps From Previous School Years

This category emerged from the interviews with teachers and the academic coordinator, but it could be an explanation for the lack of basic writing skills that students are showing. They seem not having acquired in the previous school levels important vocabulary, grammar, text structure, and mechanics skills that allow them to express ideas properly in writing, which according to Taylor and Doyle (2003), are necessary skills to succeed in middle and high school. Therefore, strategies for improvement in elementary school are needed given the fact that, "in high school and middle school students should no longer be learning to read and write, but reading and writing to learn", so deficiencies on these aspects will severely affect students performance in the upper levels (Taylor & Doyle, 2003).

The following examples, taken from the 3rd, 4th and 5th grade teachers' interviews, evidence the vocabulary gaps students bring from previous years.

Teacher: Well, I believe that in the previous levels they don't receive the necessary amount of vocabulary and enough vocabulary learning strategies to acquire new vocabulary from stories. Besides, they come lacking basic structures like management of verb tenses that make it hard for them to express appropriately. (5th grade teacher interview)

Teacher: Our fourth grade children don't arrive with the basic skills that are necessary to achieve the goals proposed for 4th grade... It's hard for them to express themselves the way that they would like, so they find it difficult to be able to write their ideas down. (4th grade teacher interview)

Teacher: Lack of vocabulary to express what

they are thinking. Most of them, while they are writing, they have a wonderful idea in Spanish, but they don't know how to express themselves in English... They lack basic skills... They usually ask me, "how do you say this in English?"... I believe that in the previous levels they don't receive the necessary amount of vocabulary and enough vocabulary learning strategies to acquire new vocabulary from stories. (3rd grade teacher interview)

On the other hand, students' written production reflects remarkable weaknesses in the management of grammar rules such as verb tenses, conjugation, and application of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns in sentences, as well as the application of spelling, punctuation and capitalization patterns. (See Appendix 1). These aspects result very surprising though, regarding the fact that the studied context is a bilingual setting and most of these students have been educated here since preschool levels. On the other hand, the academic proposal for teaching writing expressed in the curricula from 1st to 5th levels suggests a thorough attention to each of the basic skills in every level. Therefore, the existence of gaps in the fifth grade may suggest inconsistencies in any of the components of the curriculum or in the methodological practices applied to teach writing, aspects that will be explored more deeply in further sections of this analysis.

c) Application of Strategies

● Writing Process

As stated in the school documents (English curricula, Subject Plans, Department Plans) and confirmed in the coordinator's interview, students are supposed to be taught and expected to apply the writing process whenever they write.

Interviewer: Does the school require the writing process in all the grade levels?

Coordinator: Yes, it does. Even in the upper elementary school levels.

However, this practice is not regarded as important and necessary by all the parties involved in the process, especially students, whose actions in the observations and answers in the interviews reflect they do not apply it spontaneously but for teachers' requirement. Besides, it is observed students avoid the application of the writing process because they consider it time consuming and somehow demanding.

Interviewer: ¿Y siempre usas ese método de escribir?

Student: No siempre, solo cuando la miss me dice que lo haga.

Interviewer: ¿Y por qué solo cuando te dicen?

Student: Porque así me demoro mucho. Sale más largo. (students' interview)

According to Grabe & Kaplan (1996), the writing process is a multi-step method that takes students to plan, direct, revise, and improve their writing before the final correction of their tutors. Nevertheless, teachers need to show students these benefits by modeling and consistent use.

The management teachers give to the writing process might be influencing these students' negative attitude toward it. Some observations evidence a weak teacher's support to students during the writing process.

Teacher: Good Morning Kids. Today we will continue the writing process we started last class. Get your brainstorming and start writing your introductions.

Student: May we work in groups?

Teacher: No, remember it is independent work.

Student: Sir, you can give us an example?

Teacher: I already gave you many examples, remember the one in the example I showed you and the one we wrote for the text we did in groups. Do you remember? ... Those who need help come to my place. I will be available whenever you need help.

Observer: The teacher sits at his desk. He turns on the tape recorder. Some students go to his place. Other students talk to each other.

Student: Sir. I don't know how to do this.

Teacher: (from his place): Write a couple of thesis statements to try out. You can say: this character is this...that...bla, bla, bla. Try to follow instructions! (5th grade teacher's observation)

Besides, the interview with the elementary school's coordinator suggests there is both an inadequate methodology for teaching the writing process and insufficient exposure to writing activities during the school year.

1. Yes, they follow the writing process. They do... well... they don't do much... for students that are learning English as a second language and who need to speak and write almost as a native, which probably is our goal; they have to write on a daily basis. And when a teacher has 70 or 80 students it's...my heart goes for them if they need to correct that, and I don't see any purpose in having them write if they are not going to be corrected... I know more writing is required to be able to have good writers, not that weekly writing that they do.

(Elementary School Coordinator's interview)

2. I think that we have to get the students to love the writing process. Some of them are reluctant

to use it or say they don't like it. We feel that once they get to know why this is important, that they are doing a better job in writing because of that; that it is a tool to help them, they will begin liking it. Now, we know that to follow the writing process demands a lot of work from the teachers. We know that some teachers do the complete writing process in one or two occasions a year. The others...they don't follow all the steps, especially the conference. I know it takes a lot of time, but in that one-to-one conference students get to know what they have done wrong and it would be the way to know their learning style in writing, what they are not doing correctly, etc.

Time pressure could also be a cause for students to avoid using the writing process frequently. Data from some interviews shows that students fear not having enough time to hand in their work on time if they follow the writing process steps: Interviewer: ¿Por qué normalmente no sigues el proceso que siguen los otros para escribir, lluvia de ideas, organizador, borrador, etc?

Student: Porque así me demoro más y eso me confunde.

Interviewer: ¿Qué haces para planear lo que vas a escribir?

Student: Bueno, yo escribo las ideas en un papel separado, para escribir enseguida y a la publicación enseguida.

Interviewer: ¿Y por qué no aplicas el writing process a veces?

Student: Porque me demoro más y toca entregar (5th grade students' interviews)

These students seem not to be used to plan, reflect upon, and evaluate their writing, habits which are expected to develop with the application of the writing process and ensure a stronger and more structured written expression.

c) Beliefs About Writing

Young learners' beliefs and attitudes toward writing may be shaped by the experiences that they have when this skill is taught to them. Therefore, students need to be taught the benefits of writing as a way to communicate ideas (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). As presented before, this is apparently a weak issue at the studied context since students see writing as an obligatory academic activity with little or no application outside of the academic settings. Evidence is found in the students' interviews.

Interviewer: ¿Piensas que escribir en inglés te sirve para algo?

Student: Claro, para escribir en el colegio lo que me mandan a escribir. Aquí casi todo lo que escribimos está...es en inglés.

Interviewer: Y fuera del colegio, te sirve para algo?

Student: Realmente no, yo no escribo en inglés afuera del colegio...casi nunca. A menos que vaya a los Estados Unidos. (5th grade students' interview).

This might be due to the way some teachers introduce the writing activity. Observations show little or no attention to guiding students to consider the audience for whom they will write and the possible context where their writing will apply.

AFFECTIVE FACTORS: ANXIETY, BOREDOM, NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD WRITING

The difficulties that students encounter for expressing themselves in writing tend to have a negative influence in their affective factors toward writing. According to Arnold (1999), "The affective side of learning is not opposed to the

cognitive side. When both are used together, the learning process can be constructed on a firmer foundation", not doing it may affect the process in a considerable way.

Different motivational aspects seem to be playing an important role in these students' attitude toward writing, and therefore, in their performance. While there are students who adopt a positive attitude toward writing, there are others who seemed to have little motivation to perform the different writing activities they were given (mostly 5th grade students). Some of them become very anxious, which is observed on the way they bite their nails or pencil, move their legs repeatedly, or tap their feet while writing. Some of them looked absent minded, and others giggled or bothered a classmate while writing. These aspects are reflected in the observations.

Observer: SSS is not writing; he is looking through the window. Only a few ideas are written in his rain of ideas. He looks everywhere as if looking for something, eats his nails repeatedly

Observer: JJJ and PPP stand up and begin to talk. They leave their notebooks on their desks and go to SSS's place to talk. The teacher calls their attention and they go back. They look at each other, giggle, and laugh. (5th grade observations during a writing activity)

Regarding Arnold's (1999) ideas, students' motivation and attitude toward writing might be influenced by either their own difficulties or teacher's attitude, which could keep them from writing their ideas as fluently as they would like to. Observations show teachers' negative attitudes that apparently arise because of students' poor management of skills. Teachers' signs of irritability provoked different reactions in students ranging from anxiety, anger or boredom to a total lack of attention.

St: Sir, what is a request?

Teach: Shhh. Keep copying; I'll erase soon.

St: How?...

Teach: Shhh... one, you have the "what", now you go to the "why". (turns again and continues writing). It gives... (continues writing)

St: Es que yo...

Teach: You have to speak English! We don't have interruptions in this class and show you are an educated boy! (Angry-looking).

(A girl tries to ask when the teacher is talking) And how do we... (The teacher continues talking)

Observer: Some students continue copying from the board. Two students talk to each other and seem not to be paying attention to what the teacher says... At their places, some students copy busily from the board. Some others talk to each other. One is trying to call another's attention by making signals with his face and hands. Juan David approaches the interviewer and says: "miss, estoy aburrido" and stays there. The interviewer sends him back to his place). (5th grade class observation)

On the other hand, students' text type's preferences not always seem to be considered by teachers in the writing tasks. Students express they prefer to write texts that are more appealing to them and to their interests, and seem not to feel attracted by the texts that they are normally asked to write at school, which in many cases they find boring, unattractive, meaningless, and difficult to understand. Data from the study provides evidence of this finding:

I believe they do like writing. What probably they don't like is to write about something that is given to them. Sometimes, they don't like to write because the themes that come with the stories they read are unknown to them or they know very little about

them because those readings are from different contexts from theirs. They might know some things, but they are not part of it, so they don't know what to write about (Elementary School Coordinator's interview).

In addition, they reflect a great preference for cooperative writing, which seems to provide them more confidence and compensate for the lack of skills that they might have at the moment of writing. Most of the students express an interest for a different methodological proposal in the writing class and a more supportive guided practice. Examples:

Student 1: Primero que...nos dieran una guía para escribir... por ejemplo, que tenga un ejemplo de cada tipo, por ejemplo, "vamos a escribir un texto persuasivo"...entonces, traiga un ejemplo de texto persuasivo...¿qué es narrativo?, un ejemplo narrativo, y así.(5th grade student interview)

Student 2: Que nos diera varios ejemplos de cómo se escribe ese texto para tener varias ideas... Luego...tratar de hacer el párrafo... Primero en grupo... Porque así me va guiando mejor antes de hacerlo yo sola. (5th grade student interview)

Regarding the above, it is necessary to analyze teachers' practices at the studied context in order to establish their influence in the students' writing learning process.

2. CATEGORIES ADDRESSING THE LANGUAGE TEACHERS:

a) Methodology

According to Elbow (1988), teachers' role needs to be supportive and facilitating. They are suppo-

sed to stimulate students to discover writing. This is supposed to be considered at this institution, which calls for a student centered approach to teaching, fostering active and meaningful learning:

Following a constructivist approach, the aim of instruction is beyond rote memorization, emphasizing the transfer of knowledge and skills to new situations, as opportunities for active, independent learning are fostered. 5th grade English teachers understand the importance of learner-centered environments in which students are valued as individuals and whose backgrounds and ideas are respected and valued. Therefore, the methodology applied in fifth grade is differentiated instruction. The teacher is a facilitator of students' learning and guides students to construct their own knowledge always fostering self-evaluation and independent learning... Through complex instruction students are constantly challenged to go beyond the basic levels, respecting their learning needs, styles, and pace (School's 5th grade Department Plan)

Nevertheless, observations evidence not all teachers comply with these requirements. There is a great deal of mechanical or monotonous teaching practices such as rote learning and great amount of lecturing (teacher-centered) in which students have little participation in the process. Some students' interviews reflect these practices seem not to be attractive for them and might be influencing their negative attitude toward writing:

Student: Siempre lo mismo, lluvia de ideas, con el organizador...El se pone ahí y dice "bueno, hoy van a escribir. Tienen que hacer tal, tal y tal... Primero que todo, explica qué es persuasivo y se le van ocurriendo historias. Después va el organizador, que es donde ustedes organizan sus ideas...Le tienen que poner eh.. primer borrador, dice que... tienen que ...hacer que las oraciones tengan sentido pero no pueden borrar porque eso se hace a lo último que se...borra y se chequea. Después viene la publicación y nos dice que tenemos que escribirla de nuevo

en un "xxx paper", sin ningún error como...las correcciones... Nos enseña los adjetivos, los verbos que lleva ese texto, cómo se escribe... (5th grade students' interview).

On the other hand, some teachers believe they scaffold their students' learning because they undergo continuous questioning during the class. However, in some cases, the types of questions are focused on conceptual information and do not foster deep thinking.

Example:

Teach: O.k. Today's class is about "persuasive essays". Who knows what a persuasive essay is?

St: To persuade. To convince someone.

(students answer in chorus)

Teach: Yes, a persuasive essay is meant to persuade or to convince someone.

What do we use to convince, to persuade?

St: Words! Sentences! Ideas! (some students answer in chorus)

Teach: Yes, but these sentences make what?

(students don't answer)

What is it that you need to give in order to convince or persuade someone?

(students don't answer)

(Some students look at each other and make "clueless" faces).

Teach: Facts and opinions. In order to convince you need to provide facts and opinions to get what you want. (4th grade observations)

The scaffolds facilitate a student's ability to build on prior knowledge and internalize new information (Olson & Pratt, 2000, cited in Van Der Styuf, 2002). Most important, "One of the most important characteristics of scaffolding practices is

the enhancement of thinking processes to bridge new knowledge. Once students build knowledge and develop skills on their own ... the initial scaffolding is removed altogether; students no longer need it" (Lawson, 2002, p. 2). Based on the above, it is clear that scaffolding is not the strategy applied by these teachers, since students are not challenged to take risks in their own learning given that everything is provided to them.

Teachers' uneven methodological practices at this context might be influenced by a misunderstanding of the new approaches to teaching and learning adopted by the school. Although this institution counts on a staff developer who instructs and keeps teachers updated with curricular and methodological issues, some of them appear to be confused about which methodology they should adopt for teaching writing due to frequent changes in the approach:

Teacher: One year we have to do one thing, and then the other year, you have to change and do another. First, you do centers, then you change to stations. This year you have to do differentiation, stations, tiered activities, and so on. Too many changes. (4th grade teacher's interview)

They end up adapting their practice to what they think should be done, which might be affecting negatively students' view of writing and writing proficiency. This confirms Ferris & Hedgcock's idea about the importance of teacher's knowledge of approaches and paradigms in order to make educated decisions for guiding students' writing. This aspect emerged in the interviews with teachers and the elementary school coordinator.

We have teachers that have been with us for many years and have received all the trainings that our staff developer has given to them. But I think writing has been left behind because of the many new things that have come in education like methodological

aspects... differentiation, etc. so, we have teachers coming up with their own methodology, which is very valid too, but I believe we need to go back to workshops about how to teach writing, and make a consensus with all the English teachers to decide which should be the way to go in teaching writing in our elementary school. But I do believe we have to do a revision in this aspect (Elementary School Coordinator's interview).

b) Different Beliefs About Teaching Writing

Teacher's beliefs about writing are also markedly different in the studied context. In some cases, teachers conceive teaching writing as an integrated process, guided at its initial stages, and that involves the incorporation of skills necessary for students to build up their written expression. These teachers emphasize on the process rather than the product. Examples are taken from the teachers' interviews.

Int.: How do you guide your students in the writing process?

Teach.: I usually ..., when I introduce a new type of writing. I show them one that has been done by another student from previous years. Then, I try to do one by myself, I mean, I writing it with them in front of me. I write it from the beginning. After that, then we write one together as a class. Finally, they would do one on their own. While they are writing, they have many cards of instructional cards that give them hints and help them... lists of what to do... And I walk around and help them. They get lists of what to do and I walk around and help the lower... kids with their writing. When I get them started, then I begin to work with the others. (3rd grade teacher's interview)

On the contrary, other teachers focus writing instruction on form and quantity, filling students up with a great amount of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and mechanics rules in order to get them to apply that knowledge when learning

how to write. Little attention is placed on management of content, purpose for writing, or quality of writing in general. Examples can be found in the interviews.

Interviewer: What does teaching writing mean to you? What does teaching writing involve?

It involves teaching rich vocabulary in order to be able to communicate feelings, likes, wants, etc. and many of them are lacking this. You tell them... "That's a lack of respect", and they think they understand it. You put that word... "Lack" in a sentence or question, and they have no idea of what it is.

Interviewer: So, you believe teaching writing is teaching vocabulary.

Yes, that's the most important. Then structure, but if you don't have vocabulary, structure doesn't matter because you can put a lot of things, structurally beautiful, but it doesn't make any sense to me (5th grade teacher's interview).

These teachers' distinct views of teaching writing clearly influence their teaching practices; therefore, students' view of writing and learning process are influenced as well.

The above findings confirm Byrne (1980) and Leather's (2006) ideas; teacher's mediations in writing instruction may be influenced by their beliefs about teaching, and these as well may have a positive or negative influence in students' learning process. Similarly, the context where this process takes place plays a critical role as well.

3. CATEGORIES ADDRESSING THE SCHOOL

a) High expectations

As stated before, the school in which this study was conducted is a prestigious institution in

which high quality education is pursued. Writing curricula are designed to meet a wide range of competencies in which 5th grade students are expected to:

Apply the writing process (Brainstorming, organization of ideas, first draft, peer conference, revising, editing, proofreading, and final draft or publishing), develop the ability to write narrative, expository, persuasive, and descriptive texts, including fictional texts such as short stories, myths, legends, tall-tales, and poems, and a variety of paragraphs and essays, such as, how-to, compare-and-contrast, cause-and-effect, problem solving, definition, descriptive, opinion, and persuasive, and research papers. Overall understanding of language will be acquired and furthered by 5th graders by using and applying nouns, adjectives, comparative adjectives, adverbs, comparative adverbs, pronouns, pronoun-antecedent agreement in simple, compound, and complex sentences. In doing so, they will monitor the appropriate use of punctuation and mechanics (School's 5th grade Department Plan).

Nevertheless, 5th grade students' production reflects this is not happening (see Appendix 1). Besides, class observations show many students find it very hard to elaborate ideas and write fluently. According to the interviewed teachers and coordinator, these expectations are a little high to achieve at this level, regarding the gaps some students bring from the previous elementary school grades. Examples:

Teacher: I do believe they (expectations) are a little bit high for certain students because they are still not ready to cope with the goals proposed for the year. They don't have clear how to write main ideas, supporting details, closing sentences. They are barely writing a single paragraph. They have too many run-on sentences. They need structure, still, so I can't ask for two paragraphs, which is the goal in 4th grade, when they are hardly making one (4th grade teacher's interview).

However, there seems to be a marked emphasis on structure and form rather than process. In this case, it would be important to analyze the writing standards as well as teachers' practices at previous levels in order to determine to what extent this assumption is well founded. Besides, the school's Differentiated Instruction methodology (according to the school's Department Plan) should provide teachers and students with the mechanisms to tackle these different levels of proficiency in writing. This takes us to the next category.

b) Inconsistencies Between What Is Required By The School And What Is Actually Done

One of the aspects that emerged in the analysis, which might be another reason for 5th students' low performance in writing is the inconsistencies between what the school requires to be done and what is actually happening in the writing class. According to the school's 5th grade Department Plan, the writing process is a main requirement, which has to be taught with all its steps since the first grade in order for the students to organize their writing and have multiple opportunities to reflect on their writing:

Writing instruction emphasizes the implementation of the Writing Process, involving: Brainstorming, organization of ideas, first draft, peer conference, revising, editing, proofreading, and final draft or publishing (5th grade Department Plan).

In fact, the school has a staff developer in charge of training new teachers on the methodology for teaching the writing at this school. Even so, there are teachers who still do not apply these guidelines. Evidence is found in the coordinator's interview:

Interviewer: Did you mean that not all the teachers follow the writing process in elementary school as the school requires?

Coordinator: Yes, I believe so. They have their own arguments, and they are all valid too, and they have their own way of doing it.

Interviewer: So, you believe there is an inconsistency in the way the teaching of writing is being held. Is it so?

Coordinator: Yes, especially in the conference. I believe that the steps are taken care of, but I don't find all teachers doing the conference. I have to accept that not all the teachers do so every day, but having most of the teachers doing so, writing should be in place by 5th grade, at least that's what the school expects.

EVALUATION OF WRITING SKILL

According to the school's Subject Plan and Department Plan, the evaluation of students' writing should be competency based, assessing students' ability to use language, think critically, and monitor their work (See Appendix 2). There should be a smooth balance between formative and summative evaluation in order to have a holistic view of students' writing process. Evaluation is then regarded as an ongoing process that provides daily information about students' written performance from which teachers can build important knowledge to guide them appropriately. Periodical feedback should be provided to students in order to help them reflect on their process and improve. Students are supposed to keep a portfolio in which their writing process is followed up.

Summative evaluations are supposed to serve a two – way purpose in this institution: keeping a

written record of the students' written performance, and preparing them for the standardized tests they will face in their future academic life. Students' success or failure should be determined by the overall process rather than the results of these summative evaluations. Garrison and Ehringhaus (2007) show this balanced evaluation as a positive way to have a whole view of students' performance. Writing evaluations should assess students' ability to use the language in context.

Nevertheless, data shows these requirements are not thoroughly fulfilled by some teachers. Observations evidence a reliance on summative evaluation to assess students' writing performance. Only a few teachers provide feedback to their students after these evaluations. On the other hand, portfolios are used as folders to keep all types of evaluation during the bimester, which are sent home for parents' revision and signature. In very few cases students are required to do corrections at home, but there is no further reflection or feedback following this revision process. Very few teachers as well ask students to select their most valuable work to build up their portfolios, but no reflection is performed about this selection either. This could explain students' constant failure in the same areas since reflection over mistakes would bring with it improvement on the problem areas in language (Cushing, 2000).

CONTRIBUTION OF CONTENT AREAS TO WRITING INSTRUCTION

Finally, another emergent inconsistency is related to the involvement of the content areas such as science, social studies, math, and religion in the Language teaching process. According to the school's Subject Plan and Department Plan, all the content areas must contribute to the deve-

lopment of students' writing competency, which is confirmed by Gibbons (1993) as follows: "The process of writing should occur in all curriculum areas, not only in the language class itself" (p.107). Therefore, writing should be regarded as an important part of the process in the area. Nevertheless, observations evidence little or no attention to the students' writing process in subject areas like social studies, math and science; yet, points are deducted from students' grade because of grammar, spelling, or conventions misuse. Only a few teachers provide feedback to students and get them to reflect upon their work, which according to Lomas (2006) does not favor students' independent writing if it is not a generalized practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The previous analysis of the study results brings up the conclusions that clarify the inquiries posed at the beginning of this investigation. Difficulties in the 5th grade students' writing skills at the studied context come from three different sources: students themselves, teachers, and the institution. It was found that students seem to be exposed to writing skills such as vocabulary, spelling, grammar, mechanics, and text structure since early elementary school levels, but the management of these skills is not appropriate in most of the 5th grade students due to gaps not properly filled on these previous levels. Students also present marked difficulties in the management of spelling and grammar rules such as management of long vowel sounds and diphthongs, sentence word order, usage of parts of speech in sentences, especially nouns, verb conjugation, adverbs and pronouns. Little instruction in grammar in the lower elementary school levels could be a reason for these weaknesses.

Their vocabulary management is very poor even though they have been educated in an immersion environment; this seems to be the product of weak reading comprehension skills that allow them to gain vocabulary through context. Although teachers provide students with great amounts of vocabulary words coming from the stories that they read from their textbooks, the way this vocabulary is put into practice and the infrequent use of these words in real life situations cause that students do not incorporate them to their lexis and forget them.

Difficulties in content management and text structure are also evident in students' production, which is reflected in the lack of coherence and cohesion on their texts. Again, little attention to these aspects in the lower elementary school levels seems to be a reason for students' failure in these areas. It was observed that problems in response to reading appear when students have poor background knowledge of the topic that they are supposed to write about. Besides, it may also happen because the topics do not appeal to them or because they are not acquainted with the type of text they are supposed to produce.

Teachers' mediations in the teaching writing process are varied in the different levels. It seems there is not a unified criterion for teaching students how to write. Some teachers favor the use of the writing process and actually teach it to the students and make them apply it on a regular basis, while others seem not to apply it thoroughly thus having negative consequences on students' written performance. Depending on their beliefs of what the focus in teaching writing should be, teachers will emphasize on different skills; some of the observed teachers adopt a marked structuralist approach emphasizing on teaching vocabulary, spelling, and grammar rules, which

they see as an essential requirement for expressing ideas fluently in writing. This was basically observed in one of the fifth grade levels. Others, on the contrary, adopt a more holistic approach to integrating all these skills while teaching and tackling specific problems as they appear. This lack of unification may be caused by teachers' misunderstanding of the methodological practices they should apply for teaching writing due to periodical changes in the language teaching approach, which does not provide a clear criterion for teaching writing at this school. Other reasons could be school's weak follow up to teachers' practices according to the school's requirements or simply teacher's negligence. This is an aspect that requires further study.

The above suggests a strong contradiction between school's expectations in terms of teachers' methodology and students' performance and the reality observed in some cases. One of these discrepancies is the unequal application of the writing process in the different grade levels, which has caused the uneven management of this skill in the 5th grade students. Another difference lies on the methodological practices and teaching attitudes applied by the teachers in this context, which in many cases seem to be opposite to the one that is expected to be applied at this school (differentiated learning and student-centered approach). This may be another sign of a poor follow up of teachers' practices or teachers' carelessness for school's requirements.

Evaluation in some cases tends to be summative in the form of weekly tests, bimestrial tests, and semester tests, placing more emphasis on students' final product and management of language than on the process followed to produce texts and what they can express by themselves. This aspect, summed to the fact that the reflective benefits

of portfolio assessment are not properly offered to the students, limit the possibilities to both teachers and learners of analyzing the teaching/learning process and make adjustments to it. On the other hand, the responsibility for teaching writing mostly — if not always- relies on the language teachers. Content area teachers seem to give little importance to writing activities, which turns out to be counterproductive for students to develop their writing competence.

All of the above has a strong influence on students' affective factors for writing since their attitude markedly varies from one student to another. Although most of the students taken as research participants in this study seem to have a positive attitude toward writing, they neglect frequent exposure to writing or writing on a daily basis. Their writing preferences with respect to the text types seem to be geared toward meaningful topics that present them a purpose for writing. Traditional methodological practices such as teacher-centered classes with much lecturing

and little participation of the students, as well as teachers' negative attitudes of exasperation and discouragement bring up negative results from the students who adopt attitudes of anxiety, boredom, distraction, and in the worst case, reluctance to learn.

The results of this analysis should be taken with caution considering the condition of the researcher as an active participant of the process at this school, which may have biased the interpretation of some data. Nevertheless, the data collected about the possible causes of the 5th grade students' writing difficulties at this context are expected to provide clues to understand the sources of some of the writing problems that are most commonly observed in elementary school students. These results will be reported to the school's main academic board and socialized with the language teachers in order to devise an action plan that contributes to the improvement of the written communicative competence of the elementary school students from this school.



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APPENDIX 1
STUDENTS' WRITING SAMPLEWriting

Properties are important to us in our daily life. Look, lots say conductivity. It gives us energy to some objects like the wires black in the street or top are some conductors materials that allow energy to flow like copper, tin, iron, gold, and aluminum.

We can use the mass of some things to compare things. Volume is to see how many space like if something is too big like maybe the car not construct a building in the city because it left over too many space or occupies too many space. Density like in some places if you are less dense you have more buoyancy. Weight in the moon if you have no weight maybe you may not go either because your weight is too much less to go to the moon that is why astronauts need to wear that heavy uniform.

APPENDIX 2: ASSESSMENT POLICIES

Assessment processes related to being able to do, in terms of competencies and thinking skills, may take the following forms:

In an assessment, students need to be familiar not only with the language arts content and skills being assessed, but they also need to draw on a range of cognitive skills. Critical, creative, metacognitive, and problem solving skills, are facilitated within the communication competencies, as these are assessed integrated to the literature, including interpretative, argumentative, and propositional skills, within reading, writing, listening, and speaking, with the following specific components:

1. Critical Thinking Questions:

- Compare/Contrast/ Classify,
- Using Models,
- Relating knowledge
- Explaining
- Identification of solution strategies,
- Integrating /Synthesizing,
- Drawing conclusions,
- Evaluating,

2. Creative Thinking/Problem Solving/Research Questions:

- Solve Problems,
- Hypothesizing/Predicting,
- Research -
- Generalizing,

3. Thinking skills related to the Writing Process:

The steps embedded within the Writing Process meet a number of criteria that relate reading to

metacognition and/ or thinking; they make our students independent writers; that is, they enable them to learn how to learn on their own. The criteria they meet are:

- a) They involve strategies spontaneously engaged in by successful writer.
- b) They serve as means of monitoring, critical, and creative thinking.

PLANNING- Pre-writing involves planning, since it usually happens before we write a given text. It is an activity that involves the creative selection of ideas to include in the written piece.

It may also happen several times during the writing process, when the writer anticipates what he/she will be writing next.

MONITORING- During writing, the revision and the editing steps are activities of self-review, which are metacognitive in nature. It is also an activity that involves the critical analysis of the written piece and the creative selection of remedial strategies when necessary.

EVALUATION- after writing, the revision and the editing steps are activities of self-review, which are also metacognitive in nature. In addition, it is also an activity that involves the critical analysis of the written piece and the creative selection of remedial strategies when necessary.