

Writing is not Copying but Expressing Yourself

By [Simran Sadh](#) | Sep 13, 2019

During my interaction with the primary, elementary and secondary classes of my internship school, I found that children (majority of them) deemed themselves as unable to express their thoughts in writing. During the initial days, it came to them as a surprise when they were asked to write without having anything to 'copy' from. This is the reality of majority of our state-run and privately-run schools. Writing to them is nothing but 'copying down' whatever the teacher has to say. The content as well as structure of the 'writing' must come through the teachers only. Language classes, instead of enabling children to express their thoughts and ideas, make them believe that they are incapable of independent writing.

As Graves (Break The Welfare Cycle: Let Writers Choose Their Topics; 1982) talks about how this perception of teachers towards students' abilities create a 'Welfare Cycle'. Children's writing's content, structure as well as topic being dictated by the teacher and thus students come to believe that writing has nothing to do with their voice and is as much disconnected from their personal experiences as possible(Graves;1982).

During our B.EL.ED internship in middle school, while assigning writing tasks, we chose topics for the students and attempts were made to ensure that the topics selected were interesting for the students and as much related to their context as possible and even though the content of the writing came through the students, the bottom line remains- the topics were again assigned by the teacher only. As Kate Johnson(1991;Voices;The Teacher) also states that students who come to believe that what they have to say and think is not good as the teacher and thus they keep on depending upon the teacher for the topic, similar dependency was felt amongst students during language classes with the government teachers and with the interns as well.

Various studies, researches as well as language teachers emphasize on the various important aspects and benefits of students self-selecting their topics, they undergo a 'writing process' (Graves: drafting, revising, editing, sharing/ publishing (as stated by Tompkins; 1990). They understand 'writing' as more than 'penmanship' (Johnson;1991) and 'beautiful letters' and more as a medium to express thoughts and communicate with each other (Children Can Write Authentically If We Help Them ; 1993). Murray (as cited in Rowlands ;Is It Something In The Water; 2012) further says that 'writing generates more writing' and 'when writers know that the choice of topics of writing is theirs, (and when they engage in regular writing) they think about their topics even when they are not writing' (Graves; 1982)

When children are involved in selecting their own learning materials and topics, it positively impacts their willingness to learn and further improve their writing process (Moss and Hendershot ;2002 as cited in 'Perception Of Students Towards Self- Selected and Teacher Assigned Topics in EFL writing; 2014). Buchanan(2001) states through her study that student-selected topics encourage them to be responsible, autonomous and social culture of the classroom is changed as interaction among teacher and students increases.

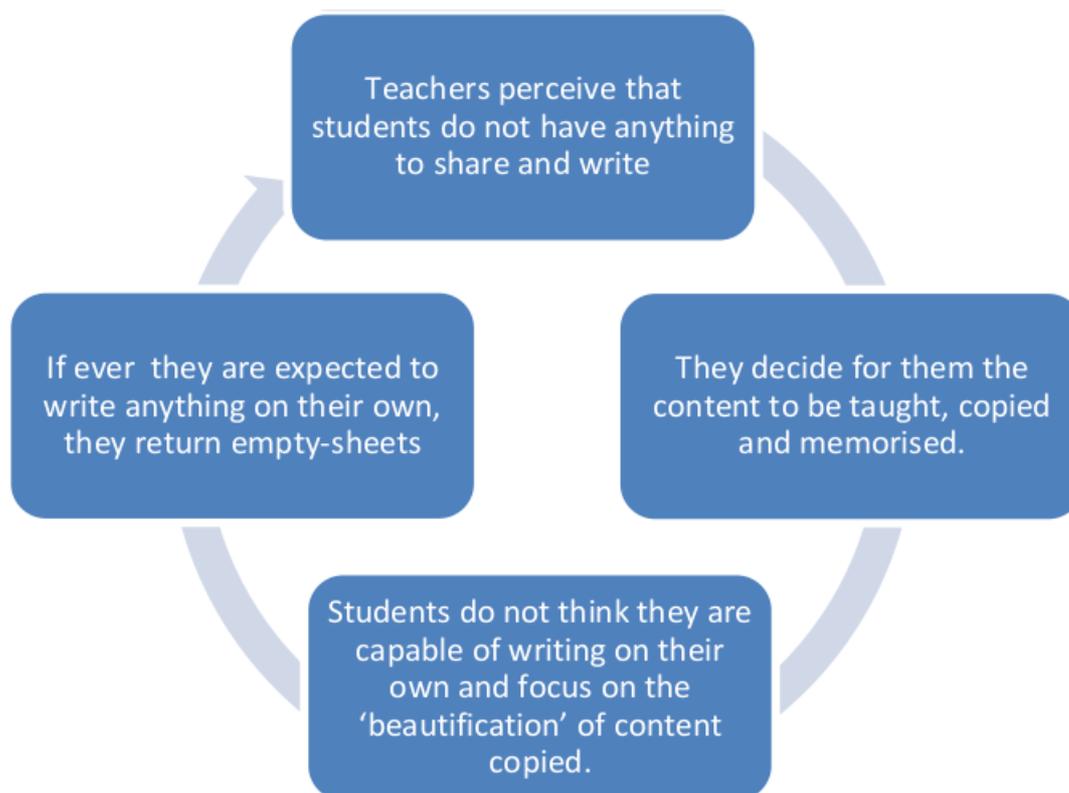
Benefits of self-selected topics:

- Autonomous learning
- Writing influences more reading and writing
- Authentic and organised expression of thoughts
- Increase in engagement and interest in students
- Children think more for the content and the topic to write
- Students feel the need to communicate
- Language becomes functional and not isolated.

WRITING-WELFARE IN OUR CLASSROOMS

As Nidhi Kunwar (Writing In Classrooms: Missing Voices And Reflections;2013) reflects on the dismal state of our classrooms, that how teachers in a traditional classroom setup understand writing as copy and a mechanic drill, the same observations were made during our internship period, starting right from primary level and leading upto the state where students were found cramming texts for their board examinations. The functional use of language is absent from our classrooms in line with this observation, English language teaching is taken up in the same manner. Students regularly copy the content from virtual guide-books (smart- boards) that has no contextual linkages with the students'.

Welfare-cycle



While reading about writing-welfare, I realized that there was not much difference between the "writing process" (if teacher- assigned writing tasks could be called that) that the children engaged before and during our internship period as the authenticity of thoughts and ideas were still somehow amiss. At times, it was felt that students fabricated experiences so as to show something to the teacher and the initial enthusiasm they showed during pre-writing discussions got dried out during the later stage of our internship period. Students were found engaged in 'writing' because they 'had to' not because they 'wanted to'. However, it was also realised that sudden exposure of students to independent writing after years of 'dependent and copied writing' will only confuse and frustrate them more and thus gradually and eventually they were exposed to self-selected writing. The teacher-assigned writing tasks helped develop a connection with the students as it assured them that they can express their thoughts without the fear of being judged for the mechanical aspects of writing and thus build the base for a 'safe- space' in the classroom. Trust counts as an important aspect for the sharing of thoughts and feelings and now that students were exposed to the idea of independent writing, they could now move on to select their own topics for writings. When engaged with writing on 'self- selected topics', a major difference was noticed in their interests and motivation during the writing classes.

Students' response to self-selected topics

When students were asked to write on their self-selected topics and share authentic thoughts , they all were seen as engaging in a 'pre-writing' process as they choose the topic for themselves and its content. During their initial encounters with self-selected independent writing, some students insisted that they write in Hindi or switch between Hindi and English ,they were allowed to do so, as the purpose was that they self-select their topics.

Students came up with topic such as:

Receipe for chocolate cake, My grandfather's death, Shifting from the school, My village, Bike burnt, My Sunday, My family, My hobby, My favourite actor , Favourite dish , My cat etc.

Students choose to write on topics that affected them and were close to them. One of the students also used sketches to tell about his favourite fast cars. The motivation in students and increased interest in the task was clearly visible and felt on day 1 itself. One student stayed back even after the school ended for 15 minutes to finish his writing and the others were very eager to get feedback on their writing the next day and they even responded back on the feedback which was initially uncommon in the teacher-selected topics.

As Johnson (1991) notes that students' confidence in writing increases when they self-select their topic, similar observations were made during the language class as well. It was felt in my class as well that earlier students considered the writing as a task to get done with but the student responded positively and excitedly when asked on how they like to choose their own topics. Students replied very enthusiastically that they felt very good while writing on their own choice of topics. Some of the students' samples have been attached where they engaged in self-selected topics' writing as well as the my feedbacks on it.

It was realized that at first students wrote much about their immediate surroundings but as they will engage in writing regularly, they will think of more topics to write on and will start looking for topics around them (Graves,1982)

Sample A

Date 9/2/18
Page No.

My Topic

My favourite Sweet Milk cake is very yummy and Tasty and flavour very chocolaty and Milky and Sugary. Sweet and Silvery. colour pinkish Sweet and My father every day give My Sister and me ~~my~~ My family ~~to~~ two boxes and any festival all Sweet father comy My have finish My lines.

Dear Jasmine, I am glad that you shared your favourite sweet dish - 'Milk cake' with me. I am very happy that you shared ~~you~~ about your family with me and that milk cake is famous in your house. How many boxes of milk cake can you eat in one hour?

You are a very interesting writer, keep writing :)! !!

Chin
of Feb 2018

Sample B

11/2/18

FRIDAY

(My Life time)

Page
Date

I love teacher. I like you simonmam simonmam you very beautiful and cute. Simonmam my thoughts ~~I am like~~ in my future I am teacher. I like singing I am singing my house. My birthday is come Feb 14 February. My greatest and best friend is My ~~sis~~ sis. mam I am ~~go~~ ^{study from} school and house. mam I am sad. I am not go left school. My best friend is Riya

Thankyou Chinjali, I am glad that you shared your thoughts with me. In your future, you want to be a teacher? That's a very good thing. What kinds of song do you like to sing?

You told me so many things about yourself - your birthday, your best friends, your hobbies.

Why are you to leave your school and house? will you like to talk about it?

You wrote very well chinjali! :)

Everything

Today i write about my favourite place
My favourite place is Wondersom this is a
Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Rajiv Gandhi Foundation is a
office building in this building's first floor in
wondersom in the wondersom 5000, 6000 many
interesting book. They there we doing 3 activity
First is drama, second fun science, third Aan and Clap
1) In drama we doing all type of drama clown
show, comedy show, laugh show, and Mide day show.
I Every show in library we doing abas pda club
In abas pda club in one month we doing
a psacic and drama and the last day we perform
the drama in odeta odetarium. Our drama teacher
name is Rajnish best sir is a director the
drama drama Hum to khetanga in all go song write
by Rajnish best sir did not like to be not
come attend the abas pda club. All week in
wondersom i there time is come in wondersom
and they doing our activities with us. I talk about
fun science we make a small model about
science. Fun science teacher name is ashvani sir
hi was stayed many subject. I talk about art

Great

and craft in art and craft we make paper and
activity kirigami, origami. Our Pratul sir is a
very great person hi was speak very great hindi
sanskrit, shudh hindi, and hi was sarishy. And my
favourite teacher is Anju mam shi have not baby
but shi ~~mother~~ helps us own baby
child. Shi was love us and shi dont Anger.
I love wondersom and Teacher Rashi Neelam
mam is so great lady laedi shi make disipint
these. I talk all Teacher then Neelam mam,
Anju mam, Vineta mam, Rajnish sir,

Uroo Riya! You shared so many
things with me, am very happy.
Its wonderful that you go to
the library 'wonderoom', library is
my favourite place too. The smell of
so many books is so magical,
right?

Its great that you and Harish get
to work under Rajnish sir, he sounds
great I will like to meet him some
day. I have also done theatre in
my college and prepared some
street plays as well. We ~~are~~ practiced
"Theatre in the oppressed" and prepared a
play called "ab' buss". Its a great feeling
to perform in an auditorium. Have
you been any play being performed?
It makes me very happy that you take
out time to engage in theatre activities
even saturday and that you enjoy it
too. Can i come with you some day
as well? You are a very great
writer and can express yourself very
well. Thankyou for sharing about this
with me.

- Simran

;) All the best!



my Thoughts

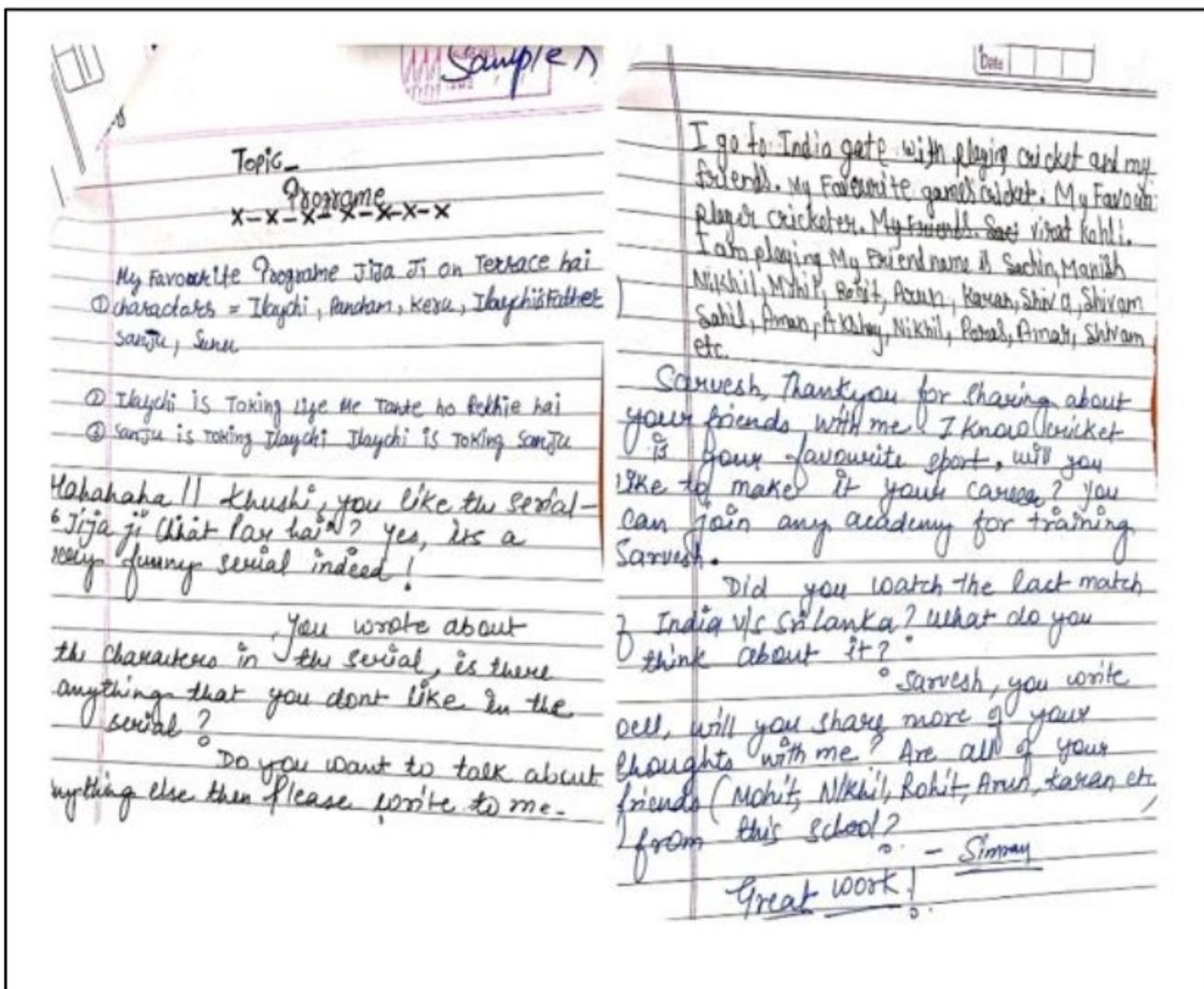
~~Thank you~~ - you're very good
 Reading and you're from a good
 school. Read some very-very good books.
 Thank you very much.

~~you~~ you're very good

Thank you so much Manoj, that was
 really beautiful thing you wrote.

I am glad that you shared
 your thoughts with me. I feel
 very good when you take stories
 from the class library to read.
 I have seen you also try to talk
 to your friends in English. You have
 performed very well in
 class. Is there anything that you
 will like to tell me?

Harish, you made some amazing sketches,
 very impressive. Even Suja and Deekshi
 really loved them. You are very talented.
 I am glad that you shared your thoughts
 with me, that you like fast cars & bikes.
 Sir Harish, you know that they are also



Conclusion

"Children won't learn if we think for them" (Graves;1982). There can be no arguing the fact that Indian English language teaching classrooms need to shift their entire focus from the mechanical aspects of writing (Handwriting, Grammar, Alignment with line, Standardised vocabulary etc.) to giving space to children's voices (NCF 2005; learning to read and write; language). Writing does not stand alone from the other language learning skills and as Teale and Sulzby (1986) talks about the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of skills of reading, speaking and writing for a meaningful and holistic language development, the same needs to be inculcated by the teacher while teaching students English. Children need to be provided with a rich and engaging language learning environment to develop as thinkers, readers, writers and speakers. We do not need them to develop as passive recipient of unrelated and isolated information but as independent thinkers and independent writers and independence will come when they will choose their topics (Graves;1982).

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Category: Teacher Development

Subject: Language

Board: All boards

Grade/Standard: Early Childhood Education

Class 1-2

Class 3-5

Class 6-8

Class 9-10

Class 11-12

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