

## *Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **How Children Learn to Write Words**

by Rebecca Treiman and Brett Kessler

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, 395 pages

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### **Reviewed by**

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In our current educational climate, as rapid cultural change woos education more and more into a digital world, it is noted that skills and direct instruction for language acquisition have often gone by the wayside. Educators and the general public appear to be giving less attention to the instruction of written and oral language, and how children learn to make meaning from both. As the authors note in their final comments, technology provides us with an opportunity of need in how we engage language (p. 317). Where the emphasis in teaching has been based on reading, they suggest the need to pay more deliberate attention to writing.

Using a solid approach of research based practice, Rebecca Treiman and Brett Kessler craft *How Children Learn to Write Words* as a progressive journey into examining how children use and understand writing systems. The highlight of this book is their Integration of Multiple Patterns (IMP) method for writing acquisition. This method integrates strengths proven to be effective in writing and reading processes across writing systems, demonstrating that having a broader context in understanding how children learn is foundational to good teaching methodology. This results in a well written resource that has an academic approach which requires careful and thoughtful analysis. Its pages contain a wealth of information, both current and historical, across multiple aspects significant to

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the formation and acquisition of language. The authors frame the book within 13 chapters that present key themes that intersect and build throughout the book. Every chapter has a concluding section, which is very helpful to readers new to the topics presented.

Chapter 1 provides a detailed overview that explores the purpose and process within writing systems. It is here that the authors introduce their introduction of IMP, which is further explained and explored further in Chapter 4 of the text. This method is the highlight and kingpin of the text, and holds all facets together.

The central portion of the text, Chapters 5 to 12 reviews research on how children learn about language, and considers the theoretical and methodological impact of teaching writing systems to children. This section would be very helpful to teachers. In discussing meaning-making processes within symbolic shape and function, within sound and symbol relationships, the authors link areas of erroneous or weak explorations of teaching and learning to reasons for their IMP theory. Chapters 11 to 13 restate the overall purpose of the text in discussing influencers and influences in the teaching and learning of writing systems.

This text will be very helpful to those who teach university candidates in education degrees. These chapters relate succinctly to what newly graduated teachers will need as background understanding about language and flows well into exemplars to build upon this understanding. Individual chapters would make helpful reading across a variety of language courses in a university setting; for example, Chapter 8 would be a helpful addition to media literacy.

Personally, I had great interest in reading this text. As an educator, it is easy to recognize the former debates that have plagued literacy understanding across the decades. Pros and cons of various approaches to teaching such as the historical and ever re-occurring debates around whole language and phonics, are clearly noted in the first two chapters. The precept in Chapter 1 (p. 1), referencing Daniels (1996) that civilizations are defined not by language but by writing, was key to the text. However, overall little in the book connects much to the act of writing to civilization and current culture in ways that expand this thought. The text portrays writing in the context of technical and historical aspects of writing as a communication system. Hence, the system world of language is represented much more than the life world connections that Daniels may have had in mind. The final words of the text stress that living in a digital age puts more emphasis on writing than on reading, and our focus in teaching should change due to this fact. But

perhaps this is a reversal in emphasis from reading to writing in the long run, rather than in a robust approach across all language arts: reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing. I would love to have heard more heart and reason for this engagement beyond the fall out of digitalization and its current needs or vacuum. How does this also better equip learners for a life of language use, for example, and why does writing matter so much? However, I understand the focus of the text is on the systems of writing, more than to inspire a love for written language, which is a missing link to the authors' desired ends in the act of teaching and learning. This is still something not well told in the education of the young.

A drawback of the text is it can read as a dry and dense manual rather than to inspire by leaving a footprint to define civilization through writing. The omission of the aspect of writing as a form of storytelling removes a large body of work relating to the aspect of writing as being formative to civilization expressed in Chapter 1. If the act of teaching writing systems is essential, this aspect of story as a means to engage that could be more helpfully noted. While this makes the text appear impersonal, the information within is deep and inclusive, well presented and helpful.

I wish Treiman and Kessler, in their ending chapter, had extended their reference to a digital world somewhat into what their method of IMP could add to the gaps that may be evident now. Current writers in the discipline of technology are also focusing on the link between spoken language and memory in relation to being fully literate, (Carr, 2010; Turkle, 2011; 2016) which will contribute to a merge of reflection upon all of the language arts. Language is embodied in people. Considering this may stimulate further questions where the philosophy and science of language meet, offering the reader a great deal more to think about.

### *References*

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