



# Design of literacy activities to promote writing with children: An experience with second graders\*

Nubia Cecilia Ruíz C.

## Abstract

In this paper, I would like to share my experience as a kidwatcher in a private school in Bogotá, Colombia while designing and implementing a variety of literacy activities to promote writing in English in an EFL context for second grade students. It highlights the importance of understanding writing as a dynamic process as well as the role kidwatching had in helping me become a teacher who understood, respected, supported, learnt, enjoyed and loved the active manner in which children construct knowledge of the written language. At the same time, I gained insights about children's thoughts, feelings, and concerns about the world they live in. I hope, from this experience teachers are encouraged to explore their classroom contexts and make the best decisions that contribute to the development of their students as writers.

**Key words:** writing, kidwatcher, kidwatching, possibilities as readers and writers, children as writers.

## Resumen

En este artículo, deseo compartir mi experiencia como observadora de niños en un colegio privado en Bogotá, Colombia al diseñar e implementar para los estudiantes de segundo grado de primaria, una variedad de actividades de lecto-escritura para promover la escritura en Inglés en un contexto extranjero. Este artículo resalta la importancia de entender la habilidad de escribir como un proceso dinámico y valorar la observación, como herramienta útil en la enseñanza, la cual me permitió en llegar a ser la maestra que entendió, respeto, apoyo, aprendió, amo y disfrutó la manera activa como los niños construían el conocimiento de la lengua escrita. A su vez, fui privilegiada al tener un conocimiento mas preciso acerca de las ideas, sentimientos e inquietudes del mundo que rodea a mis estudiantes. Espero que esta experiencia anime a los maestros (as) a explorar los contextos de sus aulas escolares y tomen las mejores decisiones para que contribuyan al desarrollo de sus estudiantes como escritores.

**Palabras Claves:** escritura, observación de estudiantes, inglés como lengua extranjera, posibilidades como lectores y escritores, y niños como escritores. Introduction

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## Introduction

This article aims to share my experiences while promoting writing in English among children from a private school in Bogotá, Colombia. It focuses on the variety of literacy activities I designed and implemented to enable second graders to enjoy themselves while writing their world.

My experience with second graders is the result of taking into account new perspectives that consider writing as a dynamic process, the incorporation of kidwatching in my daily teaching practice, and experiences I have learnt from with children who were engaged in a pedagogy of writing that focused solely on mechanics.

First, I will concentrate on the literature review that supports this experience. Second, I will present a brief description of the literacy activities I designed and implemented. Finally, I will state some pedagogical implications.

## Understanding What Writing Is

Learning a language becomes easier when it is understood as an instrument of communication that mediates both personal and social learning among human beings. (Goodman, 1996; Cole & Griffin, 1983; Nieto, 2002; Vygotsky 1978). From this perspective special attention is given to social interaction because it offers human beings the opportunity to read and write about their worlds, experiencing the social conventions that oral and written language imply.

Examining reading and writing development in first, second and foreign language contexts Goodman (1996), Hudelson (1994) and Clavijo, (2001) share ideas and define writing as a dynamic and creative process that occurs in a context giving writers the opportunity to express their perception about their world and what happens around them. Therefore, writing needs to be taught in a rich and authentic environment that engages children in the exploration of language actively. It also needs to consider a lot of input and support from others (peers, teachers, and parents). In other words, children reflect how written language works as they are immersed in meaningful writing experiences.

As children are immersed in an environment with lots of authentic, meaningful and appealing literacy experiences, as well as lots of support and trust, children gain valuable information about written language that allows them to develop control over orthography, phonology and punctuation. (Goodman,



2002). Children's development of orthography and phonology are revealed as they use their invented spellings to convey meaning.

Understanding invented spelling as personal creations children use to move to conventional language provides them with confidence for writing in terms of expressing meaning by using the knowledge they have of the relationship of phonology and orthography. Cramer (2001), defines invented spelling as "children's first efforts to spell words that they not have yet mastered" (p.82).

From my point of view, invented spelling might be compared with what Rodari (1999: 49-50) called "errores". That is, "Muchos de los llamados "errores" de los niños, además son otra cosa: son creaciones autónomas, de las cuales hacen uso para asimilar una realidad desconocida". TRANSLATION: "Much of what is termed as the errors of children are really something else: they are independent creations which children use to assimilate an unknown reality." Additionally, I strongly believe that reading development cannot occur without miscues as written language cannot occur without invented spelling. In my particular case, I noticed that second graders took into account the knowledge of the written and sound system of their mother tongue when writing in English.

Regarding the importance the mother tongue has in learning a foreign language Vygotsky (1978), highlights the essential role it plays. Following the same line, Hudelson (1994) states that it is vital considering the use of the mother tongue when making decisions about how written language works. In this respect, Rodari (1999:88) states that: "El niño usa el lenguaje construyendo su sistema lingüístico según la sintaxis y la gramática de su lengua materna". TRANSLATION: "The child uses the language, constructing his/her linguistic system according to the syntax and grammar of his/her mother tongue."

Bearing in mind how important understanding writing as a dynamic and creative process is when providing children with literacy activities the role of the teacher as kidwatcher as well as the children's interests, feelings and concerns must be considered. That is, children need to be involved in meaningful and appealing literacy experiences that give them the possibility to write about their own worlds and transform them.

"... the logic by which we teach is not always the logic by which children



learn." Glenda Bissex.

## The why of being a kidwatcher

My interpretation of Bissex is closely related to the importance of watching in teaching. By incorporating watching and listening in our daily teaching practice, we, the teachers, become able to bridge the gap that exists between our perspectives and understandings as adults and their thinking as children. That is, teachers as kidwatchers benefit from what the children have learnt by understanding and supporting what they know and how they learn.

Goodman's and Owocki's (2002) beliefs about teaching and learning are revealed by defining a kidwatcher as someone "who is committed to discovering what each of my students knows, cares about, and can do... who knows that there are multiple paths to literacy, and who teaches along each child's path... who believes that each child can teach me about teaching, language, and learning...who supports children in writing". From my experience, a kidwatcher is the teacher who delights in learning from his/her students, and who makes day-to-day decisions closely related to their insights into discovering and understanding how they construct knowledge. Additionally, a kidwatcher is who provides children with plenty of authentic and meaningful experiences. In other words, being a kidwatcher benefits both the nature of teaching and the nature of learning.

For Goodman (1996), kidwatching is the conscious process that takes place when teachers carefully watch and interact with their kids with the main purpose of discovering and understanding how they learn, what they are interested in, what motivates them, and how they perform a task. Similarly, Short & Harste with Burke (1996), regarding the involvement of young children in literacy, state that kidwatching is looking beyond the text to find deep meaning.

In order to contextualize the role of teachers as kidwatchers when promoting reading and writing, Cooper (1993: 572), proposes literacy activities such as: a) Listening to students when they read aloud; b). Watching students give a play; c). Reading and noting how a student has written a response to a story; d). Analyzing students' written report; e). Listening to and studying what students say as they give oral reports and, f). Listening to a dialogue between



two students waiting in line for lunch.

Even though meaningful literacy activities are required in engaging children in writing, I also consider it vital that teachers learn to observe and nourish the performance itself of a task as well as the way the student felt doing that particular task. Therefore, teachers need to talk with students about their progress or aspects of their writings in order to expand ideas, ask for clarification of meaning, discover and understand students' feelings and celebrate their written production. In the words of Cooper (1993) these interactions are defined teacher-student conferences.

From my point of view, being a kidwatcher provides teachers with a new lens to value, respect and understand their children's voices. Once teachers identify "what is there" and make decisions to provide children with the right to be involved in a meaningful and authentic environment of learning possibilities, children might conclude: that teachers give special attention to "the difference between planning with children and planning for children" (O'Keefe, 1996:69).

### **Creation of possibilities for children as readers and writers.**

New perspectives about writing as well as my reflections upon teaching practice when engaging children in writing became significant for me in making thoughtful decisions on letting children live, love and enjoy the experience of writing in an EFL context. In this manner, they, as active transformers, had the chance to construct hypotheses of how language works in conveying meaning. That is, to create possibilities for children as readers and writers.

In order to put into practice the ideas I mentioned above, in April 2002, I selected a group of 26 second graders from a private school in Bogotá, Colombia to work with. I selected this group because as the English and homeroom teacher of these specific second graders I would spend a lot of time with them and would have the opportunity to know more about them. They were two females and twenty four males between 8 and 9 years of age. Additionally, they received 6 hours of English instruction per week.

As kidwatcher of second graders, I gained insights into understanding how children learn a language. For instance, I realized that some of the possibilities that encourage children in developing their language incorporate story



reading, creation of stories and hyper-stories, and listening to and valuing their own voices.

Neuman (1998) and Doake (1988) state that, by using story reading as a curriculum activity, it nourishes children's literacy process by giving them the opportunity to understand how print works, learn language patterns and make sense of the reality. Similarly, Spreadbury (1994) points out the significant role story reading plays in providing children a rich literate environment that supports their literacy development.

In the words of Baghban (1984), Doake (1988), Teale (1984), and Wright (1997) reading stories to children lets them enjoy and become familiar with new language as well as understand the world they live in. In my case, I realized that second graders enjoyed and loved when I read to them the variety of stories they had selected for reading. Furthermore, children usually included language from the stories I read to them when talking and writing their own stories or when having formal and informal talks.

Taking into account the children's positive attitude when reading and their love for stories, I considered familiarizing them with hyper-stories. Lumbreras and Sánchez (1996) state that hyper-stories are "historias que ocurren en un ambiente virtual hipermedial... que favorecen la interactividad y participación activa del aprendiz." (p.123). For Takayoshi (1996), hypertexts are those texts that do not follow the straight line that includes the beginning, the middle and the end.

As I mentioned above, the term hyper-stories implies the use of hyper-media. That is, the use of text, hypertext, graphics, audio and video. From my point of view, although second graders did not include graphics, audio and video in their stories, children revealed their ability to organize, develop and represent their thoughts in a nonlinear way. Additionally, they incorporated their own illustrations that best fit their texts.

This means that, hyper-stories promoted active participation among children because of their experience in becoming writers and readers. As writers, they needed to organize and develop their ideas and events coherently and to expand the thematics of the story by including more events and characters. As readers, they became the protagonist of the stories and the ones who made decisions in choosing the best end according to their point of view, interests



and feelings. The following excerpts illustrated what hyper-stories meant for children:

- S1: “In these stories, I think more action, places and sus-penso...muchas cosas pueden pasar en una sola story”.<sup>1</sup>
- S2: “I think that the hyper-stories son mas chéveres que las tradicionales porque nos dan mas ideas para crear otras cosas. Son mejores que las otras y hay diferentes maneras de salir como: túneles, puertas, etc”.<sup>2</sup>

The third possibility I considered in encouraging children as readers and writers was listening to and valuing their ideas. By providing children with the opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and concerns they reveal to teachers what they know, how they learn and what their expectations are. In other words children’s thoughts reveal to us, the teachers, the invisible curriculum. That is, “what happens to each learner” (Goodman, 2002). Regarding the importance of listening to children’s voices, Avery (2002) states that by listening carefully to the students teachers become able to discover, appreciate, and respond to the diversity of ideas and points of view that reveal students’ rationale, thoughtfulness, and creativity.

The literacy activities I designed for second graders were based on my outlook on writing, listening to children’s thoughts, feelings and concerns and from observing how they learn. It means that I was able to discover and explore how children construct knowledge, to identify both the topics they liked the most and the background knowledge they had brought to school, to know when to make time to work in groups or pairs and to appreciate and respond to what each child does orally or in a written form.

The quotes below from an interview highlight the importance second graders placed on having someone listen to them.

- S1: “Nice, because tu me escuchas y eso me ayuda a hacer mejor mis

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1 “In these stories I think about more action, places and suspense ...many things can happen in a single story”.

2 “I think that hyper-stories are nicer than linear stories because they give us more ideas than traditional (linear) ones to create things. They are better than linear ones and there are different ways to go out such as tunnels, doors etc”.



stories. Bien, muy bien hablar de lo que uno piensa”.<sup>3</sup>

S2: “ ... Me parece chévere because... bueno , tú me haces questions sobre lo que yo opino y que pienso de mis stories y así. Me siento feliz because así yo puedo aprender también sólo. Tú siempre me dices que bien! Y también me siento feliz because yo soy capaz de hacer muchas cosas más”.<sup>4</sup>

S3: “ Teacher es una persona que nos listen, nos entiende, que comparte con nosotros y es una amigo o amiga”.<sup>5</sup>

S4: “ Bien, because me gusta que me cuenten lo que yo hago. Me parece bien que tu me digas y les digas a los demás niños como se han sentido en todo lo que hacen. Así, uno es mejor, va mejorando. Y es importante en la educación de un niño”.<sup>6</sup>

The chance to express themselves orally and in writing provided the students with the opportunity to become “real authors” in terms of expressing what they want and how to write it. (Dyson, 1993). In what follows, I deal with the literacy activities as a context to promote writing.

## Literacy activities as a context in promoting writing among children.

Watching second graders inside and outside of the classroom, bearing in mind my reflections registered in my teacher’s journal, and valuing children’s efforts, active participation and positive attitude in their English class became vital for me in looking for, designing, and implementing a wide variety of literacy experiences aimed at promoting children’s writing. These experiences included oral and written activities that were required to be authentic, meaningful and

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3 “ Nice, because you listen to me and it helps me in doing my stories much better. It is good, very good to talk about what I think”.

4 “ ... I think that it is nice because ... well you asked me questions about my opinions and what I think about my stories and so on  
... I feel happy because in that way, I think I  
... I am allowed to learn by myself. You always say: it is great! And I also feel happy because I feel I am able to do many things more”.

5 “ Teacher is a person, who listens to, understands, shares with us and who is a friend”.

6 “ Good, because I like you tell me what I do. I think it is good that you say me and other children how they feel doing all things they do. Thus, each one is better, one is going to be much better. And this is the important thing along the education of a child”.





appealing to children. In this manner, they had the possibility of linking life at school with their background as well as their needs, interests, feelings and concerns about the world they are growing up in.

The literacy activities implemented as a context in promoting writing among children are as follows: (see figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

- A Wonderful Journey into our Experiences as Writers.  
Literacy Activities.
- \* Giving a title to the story.
  - \* Making predictions related to the story. (Brainstorming)
  - \* Reading aloud
  - \* Drawing my favorite part of the story and ...
  - \* Making a storybook.
  - \* Writing messages.
  - \* Drawing and decorating cards.
  - \* Asking how to say and write.
  - \* Writing stories & hyper-stories.
  - \* Presenting and reading my stories.
  - \* Interviewing authors.
  - \* I think that...
  - \* Retelling and acting out the story.
  - \* My writings using the computer.
  - \* The true story told by...
  - \* Declaring the rights of the reader and the writer.

Figure 1. Literacy Activities

The wonderful journey into our experiences as writers which I refer to in the figure above is the set of literacy activities children were involved in when engaging in writing. From my point of view this name was appealing for second graders and provided them with expectations in terms of exploring language. In this way, children discovered how language works when making and refining their hypotheses. At the beginning, I told my children that enjoyment, love, collaboration, curiosity, taking risks, perseverance and creativity need to be paid particular attention to in order to live and love writing as a fantastic experience. Additionally, I told them that each one of them has the potential to grow as writer.

In order to give the reader a general idea of the literacy experiences I

7 Part of the above activities were mentioned in Ruiz, N (2003). Kidwatching and the Development of Children as Writers. Profile Journal. No 4 p. 54



provided children with I present a brief description of each one of them. (see appendix 1). Additionally, I classified them into two main groups: Oral activities and Written activities. As oral activities are: “describing the cover, making predictions related to the story, reading aloud, asking how to say and write, presenting and reading my stories, I think that, retelling and acting out the story and interviewing authors “. On the other hand, the written activities were classified into three groups: stories, hyper-stories and messages.

This journey began by involving children in many oral literacy activities in order to support the written ones. Considering story reading as a possibility in providing children with the chance to become familiar with expressions, words and patterns of English let children break the ice and incorporate them into their daily language. For instance, second graders usually used “Once upon a time...” as the magic words to start our English class or during it with the main purpose of sharing what they had heard, learnt, felt or done. The ideas I mentioned above are illustrated as follows:

“Once upon a time había una miss y unos childrens in a beautiful school, or Once upon a time the children write stories or play in the classroom”.<sup>8</sup>

From my experience, letting children participate and valuing that participation by using

“Once upon a time... “ was beneficial for children in terms of being confident when expressing their thoughts and feelings in English. In this respect Maley (1995) states that:

“Once upon a time...: magic words which open the door into new worlds where anything is possible because the normal rules of logic do not apply; worlds where children (of all ages) can let their imaginations loose in a framework of safe familiarity” (Wright, 1995, p.4).

This journey continues by considering second graders’ likes, interests and concerns. For that reason, I gave them the opportunity to select the stories they want for reading. The majority of the times these stories dealt with topics such as family, friends, love, solidarity, responsibility, animals and pets. ( see figure 2 ). After reading the story selected by the children I involved

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8 “Once upon a time there was a teacher a some children in a beautiful classroom, or once upon a time the children wrote stories or played in the classroom

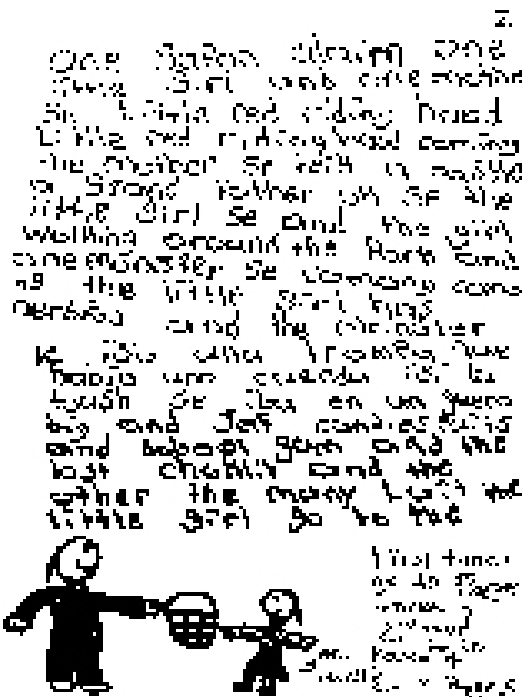


them in the oral activities I men-tioned before in order to explore and consolidate both the language and the content of it.

Once children gained confi-dence in using English language orally, I engaged them in a wide range of writ-ten activities. The first activ-ity I involved them in was focused on writing messages to one of the characters of the stories, to one of their family members, or some of their friends. Although, the environment I created highlighted an atmosphere of trust, I noticed that some children were afraid when writing because of their lack of use of conventional spell-ing. For this reason, I made the decision to compare writing to a bike by saying: “riding a bike provides you with expectations, it requires lots of support from others and perseverance from you. So, never give up”.

From my experience, to create an environment where children live and enjoy writing it is necessary to value and respect children’s use of their mother tongue when they consider necessary to express and convey meaning. It is also essential to celebrate and to respond to children’s writings. In my case, I realized that the activities I designed and implemented for second graders (see appendix 1) contributed to the children’s improvement in the area of writing in terms of good development of ideas, length and incorporation of different aspects of the language. I also realized that children liked and enjoyed the teacher-student conferences because they had the chance to talk about and explore their writings as well as to incorporate conventional language.

Two final important aspects that I would like to share are related to



children's self-image as writers. The first one deals with the rights of the writer. (see figure 3) and the second one with their pseudonyms as authors. Taking into account the ideas second grade students presented when asked to express ( orally and in written form ) the rights an author should have it is evident that writing about their own interests is extremely significant for them. For instance, children always wrote about topics that dealt with their own interests, feeling and concerns, and with people such as their family and friends. Additionally, it was also important for children to be tolerant by respecting each other's thoughts.

Rights of the writer  
 Right to write.  
 Right to respect the ideas.  
 Right to Ser Libre.  
 Right to respect your oponens and  
 the oponets respect to my.  
 Republicate 9 editions of  
 book  
 has got a Right of ators  
 Derech to read your written in cualquiered  
 part.  
 What the autor Puedo leer stories  
 story.  
 with of Comercialisar the book

The second aspect I refer to is the artistic names children used to be identified as writers when talking, reading and presenting their stories and hyper-stories in front of their peers, as an audience, and when being interviewed as authors. Some of these names were: Michael Douglas, Tom Cruz, Johan Breen, Michael Peter Hamtaro, Elvis Presley, Homero, and the Chavo.

In order to give the reader, a general and clear idea about what it meant to design and implement literacy activities to promote writing, I proposed the figure below. (see figure 4). incorporates key aspects such as children's interests, needs, knowledge and learning pace. It also illustrates what a kidwatcher needs to consider in order to discover, explore, understand and nourish the way children learn and what their interests are. In this manner, teachers become able to provide children with a meaningful, authentic and appealing environment to further their knowledge of language.



Figure 4 What did it imply to adapt literacy activities? (Ruiz, 2004).



## Pedagogical Implications

Taking into consideration the benefits of this experience with second graders while promoting writing in an EFL context, I would like to share some of the pedagogical implications that would be useful in different teaching settings.

Some of the pedagogical implications of this experience are related to the transformations observed in second graders' attitudes and perceptions towards writing in my class. Their changes in attitudes when writing in English informed me about the type of environment, literacy experiences and relationships necessary to promote writing. From my point of view, teachers need to carefully watch their contexts and make decisions about "what is there". Additionally, teachers need to be supportive and respectful of their students' thoughts, feelings, and pace of learning. That is, teachers need to become kidwatchers.

Another important implication of this experience deals with valuing the children's mother language as a supportive tool in the construction of knowledge of a foreign or second language, or when conveying and expressing meaning.

To sum up, living this experience as a kidwatcher with second graders was beneficial for children as well as for me. It was valuable for them because they had the chance to be children, to play, and to express themselves spontaneously when exposed to a meaningful and supportive environment in which children are empowered. For me, because by valuing children as active constructors of knowledge and by understanding writing as a dynamic process my teaching practice has been enriched with a new lens and it is currently a daily wonderful adventure. In the words of Rodari (1999:98) this implication might be: "reeducarme a partir de los niños".

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#### THE AUTHOR

**Nubia Cecilia Ruíz C.** Masters Program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL. Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas.

E-mail: [nruiz27@hotmail.com](mailto:nruiz27@hotmail.com)



## Appendix 1 Description of the literacy activities implemented to promote writing with children.

ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
	The purpose of each one of the following activities was to invite second graders to:
Giving a title to the story.	propose a new title of a story, considering the illustrations that appear in the front cover. (the teacher covered the original title with a piece of paper).
Making predictions related to the story.	express written, or orally what the story might be about (Based on the illustrations of the cover). Later on, children wrote their own predictions taking account of the story teacher read.
Reading aloud	read stories they selected for reading. It included, the stories written by children. (Initially, it was done by the teacher).
Drawing my favorite part of the story and...	draw the part of the story they liked the most. Then, write a sentence related to it.
Making a storybook.	write and illustrate their own stories using a variety of material such as crayons, pens, colors, markers, cardboard, different types of paper, and strings of paper. Then, children stapled them into a book form.
Writing messages.	think of one of the characters of the story teacher read, one of their family members, or friends and write a message to them. Children were allowed to use their mother tongue when they considered it necessary to convey meaning.
Drawing and decorating cards.	draw and decorate cards to one of the characters of a story, or one of their friends. Then, children included a message. These cards showed children's creativity in terms of giving them different physical forms, or in using non traditional materials such as transparencies or CD-ROMs.
Asking how to say or write.	ask their teacher or their partners how to say, or write a word or expression in English. Sometimes, children put into a box their questions and later their teacher or the class answered them. For writing a word, the teacher or the class modeled it or used spelling.
Writing stories & hyper-stories.	write individually or in groups their own stories & hyper-stories. Most of these texts showed children's interests and concerns related to their lives. Additionally, in these texts children used their mother tongue to construct meaning. At the beginning, the most important thing was let the ideas flow. Then, children polished their texts considering their teacher's and partners' feedback.
Presenting and reading my stories.	present and read in front of an audience, their partners, their stories or hyper-stories. Children used the overhead projector.
Interviewing authors.	interview the author (the child), who wrote the story. The interview was focused on the topic, content, on the non-conventional spelling, and on how they felt writing it.
I think that...	express orally or in a written form, their opinions of their own stories in terms of meaning, presentation, creativity and use of English.
Retelling and acting out the story.	retell and act out the story teacher read.
My writings using the computer.	type their own stories or hyper-stories by using the computer.
The true story told by...	think about the true version of a story based on a non-traditional. Then, write it by groups. For example, the true story of Little Red Riding Hood told by the Wolf.
Dedaring the rights of the readers and the writers.	think about what the rights of the readers and the writers are. Children expressed their ideas in an oral or written form. For children, respect as well as having the opportunity to write, and express their feelings, ideas and concerns freely were the rights that had a strong importance.

