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EARLY WRITING AMONG TIGAK CHILDREN

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One of the goals of writing instruction in elementary grades of Papua New Guinea is to teach children the skills of reading and writing in their home language so that they may be ready for higher level learning in English—a second language. Although the developmental writing process may begin as early as 12 months, emergent writing skills can be traced along with age related changes in young children’s development. Basic stages of writing development include (1) marks on a piece of paper; (2) scribbling; (3) letter like forms; (4) random letters; (5) invented spelling; and (6) conventional writing. The purpose of this study was to observe emergent writing of 6 to 9 year old students at Kaselok Elementary School in New Ireland Province and compare the findings with examples of early writing stages described in current research. Instructional writing activities in predominantly Tigak classes include letter formation, spelling, word building, sentence building and story writing. Samples of student writing were collected at three grade levels—preparatory, Grades 1 and 2. In this case study, writing samples from six students (two from each elementary grade level) were collected over a period of three months, analyzed, and discussed. In conclusion, recommendations for teaching practice, teacher training and comparative research on emergent reading and writing in rural elementary schools are suggested.

Key words: early writing, elementary, writing skills

INTRODUCTION

Early writing develops concurrently and interrelatedly with literacy in young children as they learn about written language (Schickedanz, 1999). Schickedanz comments that children who have had frequent opportunities to write and read at home are more likely to become confident, risk-taking readers and writers. This case study explores the emergent writing of six Tigak students aged 6 to 12 years at Kaselok Elementary School in New Ireland Province. What do these stages of writing look like for Tigak children? Tigak is an Austronesian language spoken by over 6,000 people (1991 census (SIL International, 2016). Elementary schools were first established in the Tigak language community in the mid 1990s. Kaselok Elementary School is located about 15 kilometers southeast of Kavieng Town but it may be considered a suburban school because of its close proximity to town. In addition to 23 Tigak speaking children, children of government workers from around the country attend the school—requiring classroom instruction in Tok Pisin, Tigak and English. It is a multilingual school with children speaking seven languages including Tigak. 102 students attend Kaselok Elementary and only 14 students are fluent Tigak speakers. Other Tigak children speak Tok Pisin at home therefore instruction is given in Tigak, Tok Pisin and English. I chose Kaselok Elementary because the school is accessible, teachers are committed, innovative, and experienced vernacular instructors. They are perfecting their pedagogical skills in teaching the Creative

Phonics Method in New Ireland Province. The three teachers at Kaselok report that children exhibit reading and writing skills in English and Tigak upon graduation from Kaselok Elementary School. The question that comes to my mind is whether they are actually reading and writing with comprehension. The purpose of this study was to observe emergent writing of six Tigak students at Kaselok Elementary School in New Ireland Province, to compare the findings with examples of early writing stages described in current research, and make recommendations for improving writing instruction in Tigak elementary classrooms. Observations were made of instructional writing activities in elementary classes including drawing, letter formation, spelling, word building, sentence building and story writing.

One of the goals of writing instruction in elementary grades of New Ireland Province is to teach children the skills of reading and writing in their home language so that they may be ready for higher level learning in English—a second or third language for Tigak students. The developmental writing process may begin as soon as a child is able to grasp something with which to make marks on a surface and these emergent writing skills in children can be traced along with age related changes in young children's development. I have observed these stages in children from related language groups and I suspect that writing development in young Tigak children between 3 and 6 would demonstrate stages of writing development including marks on a sheet of paper and scribbling but how are these stages manifested in Tigak children ages 6 to 12 years?

Theoretical Framework of Early Writing and Tigak Culture and Practice

National Curriculum standards in Papua New Guinea seek to apply these theories in elementary and primary education. Mackenzie summarizes five driving theories which support emergent writing in the following information—behaviorist, developmental, socioconstructivist, critical literacy, and multiliteracy (MacKenzie, 2014). She summarizes them as follows: Behaviorist theories indicate that children develop increasing proficiency over time in subskills of writing—handwriting, spelling, and punctuation. Developmental theories specify that children should be encouraged to be active, constructive learners engaged in discovery learning and child centered teaching. Classroom practices should include language experiences and process writing. Socioconstructivist theories imply that children learn with others as they construct stories. Learning in groups is a common practice among Tigak students as it is also a cultural Tigak behavior but teachers have minimal training in process writing. After learning in a group setting children apply skills and strategies independently. Teachers should provide shared, guided and independent approaches to teaching writing. Traditionally, writing development in formal education moves at a slower pace with a focus on English language acquisition in early grades. Following the behaviorist pattern, Tigak elementary instruction includes handwriting, spelling, and punctuation but with teacher centered instruction in English. Tigak students have the benefit of instruction in Tigak and teaching Tigak language as a subject in the preparatory grade. Tigak teachers report not being accustomed to or trained to provide shared, guided, or independent approaches to writing. MacKenzie adds two other theories, critical literacy and multi-literacy which are implied as elementary teachers master application of the first three theories. Critical literacy theories indicate that students are encouraged to analyze texts and use writing to address social

inequities. MacKenzie advises that teachers of critical literacy should employ genre approaches to teaching writing (including fiction, non-fiction, prose, poetry, science, etc.). Multiliteracy theories imply that children develop awareness of and competence in using a range of text forms to create meaning such as lists, poetry, chants, songs, stories, and so forth. Lists, songs, and stories exist in the Tigak language but need to be written, published and made available to Tigak children at home or in their classrooms. MacKenzie offers that if different text forms are available children could use digital technology to produce texts (MacKenzie, 2014). It would be more likely that Tigak teachers and students would handwrite such texts as Tigak Elementary schools and households have the little or no capacity to produce digital texts.

Kaselok elementary school classrooms

Kaselok elementary classrooms are taught by three teachers at three grade levels: Preparatory (aged 6 to 8 years, Grade 1 (aged 8 to 10 years) and Grade 2 (aged 11 to 12 years). I observed a total 26 students in the Elementary Preparatory class, and Grades 1 and 2 had 30 students each. It appears that students were added to the classes in the middle of the year raising the total number of students to 102. Two of the teachers taught non-formal preparatory classes in vernacular prior to 1995 elementary reforms which mandated vernacular instruction in the first three grades of formal education. Each teacher is required to teach all three grade levels when one or two of the teachers are absent. Two teachers received initial training in vernacular instruction through SIL Papua New Guinea, a non-government organization and all three received modular training in class administration, Language Arts, Math, Culture and Community strands through the PNG Education Institute. All three teachers speak Tigak as a first language, Tok Pisin as a second language and English as a third language. They are Grade 10 graduates. The head teacher has two years of university education in a non-education field.

Class schedules require language instruction (in English and home language), Math and Culture and Community. Languages of instruction include Tok Pisin, Tigak and English. Tok Pisin is used to explain to children whose home language is Tok Pisin. Tigak is used with Tigak speakers and English is used with English classroom activities. Formal Tigak instruction in early writing begins with a bottom-up process of seeing, hearing, saying, and finally writing each phonogram in the language.

Teaching Method

The Creative Phonics Method teaches initial writing as an integrated skill for meaning-based learning (Hynum, 2013). According to the Creative Phonics Method, each phonogram is introduced on Mondays followed by reading and writing activities. Students should begin to learn to write meaningful words once they recognize the most productive phonograms. In the New Ireland application of the method, the first four most productive phonograms are taught during the first two weeks of Term 1 of the preparatory year. Emphasis should be placed on reading and writing the phonogram, spelling, and word-building activities. In the following weeks of Term 1 and all remaining terms, the teacher should continue to introduce phonograms and extend instruction to reading and writing whole words, sentences and stories over the school week. On each Friday, the teacher should engage the students in a familiar experience

from their home culture to introduce story writing. After discussing the experience, the teacher leads a shared writing activity with the children. The teacher provides instruction in writing a story about the experience and models writing the story on the chalk board while students dictate sentences of the story. Shared writing activities should continue throughout the elementary prep school year until students are able to write their own stories.

Research Procedure

In this case study, writing samples from six students (two from each elementary grade level) were collected over a period of three months, analyzed, and discussed. Permission was granted by the Provincial Elementary Coordinator to study six students of Kaselok Elementary School. Children were observed during usual classroom instruction as well as during special exercises to observe specific writing activities. Also, student exercise books from Elementary Preparatory and Elementary Grade 1 were examined to observe the weekly flow of writing activities over two 10-week school terms.

Data Collection

All three teachers agreed to participate in the study by collecting samples of student writing from Preparatory, Grades 1 and 2 classes. At first teachers agreed to take pictures using their phone cameras of spelling, shared writing and creative activities in their classes in Terms 1 and 2 in March and April of 2016 but these photos taken by the Grade 1 and 2 teachers were unclear. The Elementary Prep teacher collected hard copies of samples from two preparatory students in Terms 1 and 2 (a male and a female). Since the first effort to get photo samples for Grades 1 and 2 yielded hazy photos, I resorted to classroom observations and collected hard copies of children's work and my own photos with an Apple I-Phone 4 camera. Grade 1 samples were taken from two males and samples were taken from two seven year olds –a male and female in Grade 2. Daily entries by the students in their exercise books provided more samples of student writing. The Preparatory teacher had students do some writing activities on A3 paper and provided these samples for study. Photographs were taken of preparatory students writing on slates and later analyzed. Elementary Grades 1 and 2 exercise books (used to write in all subject areas) were reviewed, photographed and returned to the teacher. Observation of exercise books included examination of student writing in Tigak, Tok Pisin, and English languages in the subjects of language arts and math. Student work from Community Living and Environment strands were not available to observe in the exercise books provided.

Observation of Writing Samples

I observed early writing of two age 7 students (male and female) in Elementary Preparatory Grade. The female will be referred to as JRB and the male as RL.

Preliterate: Drawing



Figures 1 and 2. Two Preliterate drawings by RL, male, age 7 years

In Week 1 of Term 1 RL drew a picture of a vehicle with wheels, including a T, S, X, and A. Other markings could be attempts at writing letters. During Week 4 of Term 2, in what the teacher calls a ‘free draw’ lesson, RL, the male student drew a group of pictures on one page. RL drew the letter R and the number 7 (or an axe or a flag) along with his pictures. This group of pictures in his drawing do not seem to be related. A discussion with him at the time would have confirmed whether he could read the picture as if it had writing on it. They were drawn, outlined, and colored with a colored pencil. Perhaps a discussion with the student would reveal his thoughts about what he drew. Does his drawing stand for writing or is it just a picture? Does the student believe his drawing is communicating a message? Since the drawings are detailed and reflected aspects of the local culture, they may have been prompted by the teachers.



Figure 3. Preliterate Drawing by JRB, female, age 7 years

In a free draw lesson, JRB drew this group of pictures during Week 1 of Term 2 which depicts a description of a Tigak household. The main house for sleeping is built on stilts with a path to the separate house for cooking. Pictures she drew reflect the socio-cultural context of a Tigak community. There is a water tank next to the house indicating a corrugated iron roof. JRB would see lots of vehicles passing her house on the main road. Whether she copied them or not, JRB drew and colored her pictures staying within the pencil outline of the picture. Steps to the main house were one-dimensional like a ladder. I did not talk with the student but the teacher confirms that the pictures are original drawings of JRB depicting her home and community.



Figures 4 and 5. Preliterate: Letter-like forms written by RL

RL wrote the capital letter A upside down along with what appears to be a large X and one wonders if he turned his paper while writing or perhaps he was experiencing an early stage

of writing. JRB did not scribble with her drawings. Classroom observations revealed that she and RL held their pencils properly like adults.



Figure 6. Word-like string of letters by JRB

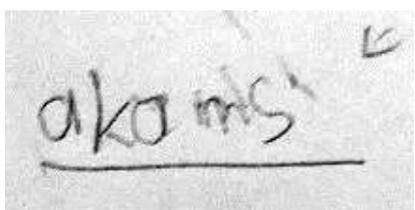


Figure 7. Invented spelling by JRB

JRB wrote each letter clearly with spacing at first but seemed to crowd them at the end of each string of letters. Most letters were recognizable. At first I thought she wrote random letter strings with the letters *akamis*. But the teacher confirmed that *akamis* is actually the student inventing spelling in an attempt to write a meaningful phrase *kalak akamusi* – drawing finished. The teacher confirmed that *okr...e* was not recognizable as a word is possibly just a string of letters in random order.



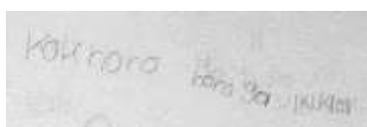
Figure 8. Random letters and letter like forms done by RL

RL wrote random letters and letter like forms in his drawing. This helps to confirm that he may have started writing only when he started school.

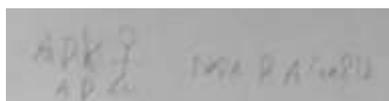
Table 1. Observations of Elementary Preparatory Early Writing



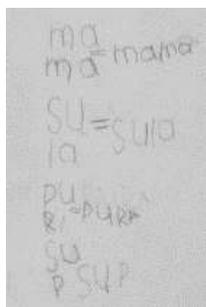
Words overlay by RL



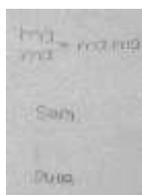
Spacing between letters and words by JRB



Spacing between letters and words by RL



Fluency: Conventional
Spelling by JRB



Fluency: Conventional
Spelling by RL

RB and RL show effort in spacing between letter and words but are not yet consistent in spacing letters in words and between words.

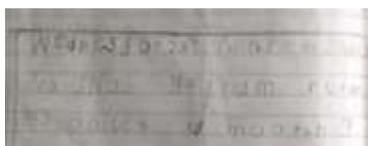
Observations from Elementary Grade 1

Two male students were observed from Grade 1, designated as SL and FW. Exercise books of SL and FW revealed copied information in a multigrade classroom. The teacher pointed out that she taught the same concept in Tigak and English. She further explained that to teach weight concepts, she used three sticks for the prep students; three stones for Grade 1. She wrote the Tigak words on word cards for Preparatory and Grade 1 but the students did not copy those words: *tiptip* (heavy), *tiptip alakliak*, (heavier), *tiptip ewul* (heaviest). She drew pictures of the three water tanks on the board for Grade 2. SL and FW were able to read the Tigak but they could not read the English words on their own. She wrote the text in English on the chalkboard for Grade 2. That explains why both students have written the exact same sentences which were introduced on Wednesday and apparently reviewed on Thursday. Neither student included punctuation but they capitalized the first word of the sentences and proper names. In the first activity, students learned the concept of weight measurement by drawing slightly bigger items.

Table 2. Elementary Grade 1 Observations



Conventional writing Term 1 by SL



Conventional writing Term 1 by FW

Example 1: Language Experience Story and Shared Writing

Na Ilias ga i num rurum. (Ilias drank water)

Ga aaisok lo maatang. (He works in the garden)

In the Language Arts lesson, the teacher explained the sentences in Tigak so they knew what was written. Their handwriting indicates well-spaced words. SL and FW write the letter g completely above the line but the Tigak words are spelled correctly. FW has allowed extra spaces between letters and words in his sentences. No stories are written in their exercise books except for short sentences indicating that they have received no instruction in process writing or language experience in any language. The teacher explained that while she did language experience and shared writing with the students, she did not leave time for creative writing in any of the three grades.

Observations from Elementary Grade 2

Writing exercises observed in the classroom were written on A3, A4 and half A4 papers. No exercise books were included in the Grade 2 observations. At the end of Grade 2, National standards require children to read and write simple sentences and stories in English (National Department of Education, 2015). Writing activities of a male student, referred to as N, and a female student, referred to as K, were observed in Term 2. K is aged 8 years and N is aged 9 years. English, Tigak and Tok Pisin are the languages of instruction but I observed English lessons only on the Grade 2 chalkboard. The students are learning to speak English and to complete writing exercises in English. Their handwriting, that is letter formation, resembled that of conventional writing in English word dictation and story writing. K spelled four of eight words correctly during word dictation and N spelled one out of eight words correctly.

I did not see any stories that the Grade 2 students wrote so I requested permission to do a short creative writing exercise with the students. In her creative writing K wrote a short story with four sentences. Discourse level words are missing but it is clearly a story about yams. I used a scaffolding strategy to help K complete her story. I discussed the topic with her and asked questions such as, “What is your story about?” or “Who eats yams in your family?” I asked who likes yams in the family, and so forth. K wrote full but simple sentences minus the punctuation. K presents an opportunity for the teacher to help her with spelling, tense, and subject-verb agreement. See K’s story below.

The yams is very sweet.

I can eaT lots of yams

my maTher cook the yams
my brather and sister eat the yams To

I followed a similar process with N. He wrote a story about yams in English. At first it appears that N was struggling to write a simple sentence but on second glance N is trying to add more content to his sentence. He needs instruction on writing action words and spelling. There is no 'h' in Tigak so he writes 'i' for the pronoun 'he'. It appears that N is in part writing phonetically as he would in Tigak. As his vocabulary increases he will learn function words and pronouns. He wrote:

The boy is eat The yam en i fat
he isi eat The yam en fat fish
Nevets he like to eat the yam en fat fish
en he ful

In other writing activities in Elementary Prep and Grade 1, the Tigak teacher feedback was a simple tick in the student exercise book without much verbal feedback on the writing process. The Grade 2 teacher stated that she discouraged scribbling and did not recognize emergent writing skills in her students. Once I watched her do a language experience story and I noticed that she did not write a story dictated by the students. She wrote a story she had prepared on the chalkboard and the children copied this story. Skipping the process writing activity with the students and not instructing the students to write their own story may be an indication that the teacher is uncomfortable with writing stories in English and the reason why the teacher did not assign creative writing activities to the students.

Discussion and Analysis of Observations

In review, Gomez at Houston Independent School District in the USA offers six overlapping stages of writing development (Gomez, 2005). They are: (1) preliterate drawing, (2) preliterate scribble, (3) early emergent letter like forms, (4) emergent random letters or letter strings, (5) transitional writing and invented spelling, and (6) fluency with conventional spelling. These stages listed above reflect the research findings among pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children in the USA but ages of Tigak children appears to be older while they go through the similar stages in writing Tigak and English. The stages offered by Gomez may provide researchers and teachers a point of reference to emergence of early writing among Tigak children. The socioeconomic and educational context of Tigak children differs from that of native English speaking children in Houston schools. Tigak children in general, do not have access to formal education earlier than age 6 and it would take another study to explore emergent writing in children younger than six years old.

The idea of overlapping stages of writing at different ages appears to be the case among Tigak children as they enter formal education around age 6 years. The two preparatory students in this study are even older at 7 years old. They further cite that emergent reading and writing, begins at birth and continues through the preschool years (Roth, 2006). This is on the premise that children see and interact with printed materials in everyday situations before they start elementary school under the instruction of well-trained teachers. This is true, in a limited sense,

in the case of Tigak children who live in villages on the outskirts of Kavieng Town—a small urban center. These children are likely to see letters of the English alphabet on food packaging and such labels; otherwise, their homes generally have no more than few books including a Bible and copy of a newspaper. Local newspapers and Bibles may be in *English* or *Tok Pisin*. *Tigak*, like other language communities in the province, is very much an oral language in a society where local people place much value on the spoken word rather than written documents. Although Tigak has an orthography, there is very little written in Tigak and schools generally have no more than what the teachers produce by hand or by occasional desk top publishing done at the primary school or outside the village. This problem is not insurmountable as computer technology is accessible to the Tigak community.

Another issue arises with the storage of written materials. Village houses are open to insects and rodents —enemies of printed books and paper. These issues may be resolved with increased community involvement preserving the written language. Regardless of the issues, emergent writing skills for Tigak children begin at home as the child watches others use writing instruments and begins to mimic their behavior. Based upon my observations in the classroom, Tigak children at Kaselok Elementary school continue developing literacy skills in formal education around the age of six years old.

Learning experience activities with shared writing should take place at Kaselok but I have not observed them in either of the three grades. I observed a tendency for teachers to revert back to a more traditional approach to teaching the mechanics of handwriting, copying words, pictures, and sentences rather than teaching students to write meaningful texts. This practice is done in all three subject areas (including Language Arts, Culture and Community, and Math) by all three teachers. Usually, the Tigak Elementary Preparatory teacher writes all instructions and learning activities on a large chalkboard and the children are required to copy this information onto slates, in exercise books or follow verbal instructions given by the teacher. Copied information includes letters, words, pictures and sentences. The chalkboard seems to be crowded with such information each time I visited. Kaselok students exhibit the finer motor skills for drawing detailed pictures perhaps from copying pictures from the chalkboard. The two students show mastery of the preliterate drawing stage by age 7. They can draw the pictures as prompted by the teacher. They get lots of practice with letter formation by copying from the board but they are unable to compose sentences and stories on their own because they are not given instruction in the writing process.

Scribbling is not looked upon favorably by the teachers and students seem ashamed to show any of their work except what mirrors what the teacher has modelled. I did not observe scribbling or earliest stages of writing among the elementary preparatory students. In developed countries, these earlier stages would be observed in the home with pre-kindergarten children. The Grade 2 teacher admitted to not recognizing the stages of early writing in her students. Lack of teacher recognition of the stages of early writing may explain in part why children are delayed in writing their own texts in the preparatory grade. Copying information from the chalkboard reinforces letter formation but without further instruction in reading what they write, children tend not to learn how to decode letters, syllables, or words they have written in

any of the languages used in the classroom. Teachers provide positive reinforcement when students attempt to write words, disregarding mistakes but at some point students need to be made aware of how to spell words correctly. Teacher student conferences or other writing strategies would be helpful if they were utilized effectively. Children 'write' complete sentences but find it difficult to read the sentences they copy from the chalkboard. The purpose of learning early writing skills is to promote writing of meaningful texts which can be read by the student and which communicate meaningful messages to others.

Conclusion

Early writing among Tigak elementary students seems to begin at a later age than that of children who come from developed countries like the USA but the stages of development appear evident in Tigak elementary students. At age 6 years, Tigak children should receive formal instruction in writing including a daily time for students to write and practice what they have learned. Writing for Tigak students is limited to mimicking what the teacher models with a minimum of creativity expressed in art lessons. Early writing in Tigak preparatory student efforts showed (1) initial letter like forms; (2) random letters; (3) invented spelling; and finally (4) conventional (or standard) writing and students learned letter formation and phonogram recognition. What seems to be lacking is the skill and confidence in spelling words and making meaningful sentences when they were asked to write a story on their own in Tigak or English. Perhaps this is because teachers do not understand the purpose and importance of the learning experience and shared writing activities. Without practice in writing sentences and stories on their own, students do not gain confidence in creating their own stories. Creativity is hindered because invented spelling is discouraged when students attempt to write sentences, and short stories on their own. If one divorces reading and understanding of the meaning of written text, students achieve skill in copying from the chalkboard without the benefit of knowing how to decode what they or others have written.

Early writing in Tigak preparatory student efforts showed early writing development similar to early writing stages in other countries. Preliterate drawing, letter-word representations, invented spelling, conventional or standard writing and the potential for independent and creative writing of meaningful texts. As teachers learn that emergent writing is a learned skill that is achieved as children move through a series of predictable stages in their writing experience, they will teach writing more effectively. Teachers must understand that the first two stages of initial letter like forms and random letters are accomplished as the child is exposed to written texts and tries to write what he or she sees. Then the teacher must be clear that invented spelling is a healthy stage of writing that all children go through, therefore they should not be discouraged from inventing spelling as they seek to make words. These may be corrected as the child masters all the phonograms of the language. Conventional writing is not merely letter formation and copying of words and sentences from the chalkboard. Teachers should not only help children learn to write words, they must help children distinguish different parts of speech to make meaningful sentences. Instruction in language experience activities and creative writing will gradually, help the child realize that what is written can also be understood

and read (decoded) by others. Recommendations follow which may help improve writing instruction in Tigak classrooms.

Recommendations

Graham (Graham, 2012) offers four recommendations to teach elementary students to be effective writers: In summary, Graham recommended: 1. Provide daily time for students to write to help them gain confidence in their writing abilities; 2. Teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes including strategies for different parts of the writing process; 3. Teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction so that they may focus more on developing and communicating their ideas; and 4. Teachers should establish a supportive environment in their classroom to foster a community of young writers who are motivated to write well.

All of these recommendations have implications for elementary school teachers but they are offered on the premise that the teachers have received adequate training in the writing process and how to engage students. The following recommendations are specific applications for Tigak and other language minority teachers who may not have received adequate training.

1. The teacher must know the writing process. That is, she or he must know how to plan, draft, share, evaluate, revise and edit a story in order to provide instruction.
2. The Tigak elementary teacher must first learn how use writing strategies, techniques, and skills in order to pass this instruction on to students. The teacher must be aware of how these strategies may be integrated into elementary subject areas. One strategy suggested for first and second grade by Graham is the POW strategy (Pick ideas, Organize their notes, Write and say more) (Graham, 2012). The POW strategy is a good next step after learning experience, shared writing and creative writing activities in the preparatory grade.
3. In order to carry out Graham's Recommendation 3, the teacher must be proficient in spelling words correctly in Tigak as well as English.
4. Teachers need practice in constructing different kinds of sentence structures so that they can encourage students to consider the meaning and syntax of the sentences they develop.
5. Graham's Recommendation 4 has implications for shared writing activities. Tigak teachers must know how to provide relevant topic choices for students and teach students to collaborate with other students in the writing process.
6. Tigak teachers must know how to hold teacher student conferences and give guidelines for participating in giving and receiving feedback in the writing process.

If Tigak elementary teachers receive adequate training in these areas they will be able to implement the Creative Phonics Method or any effective phonics method for teaching children to write well. As a result, Tigak children will be helped to not only maintain the viability of their home language but they will be enabled to transfer writing skills learned in the home language to writing in English.

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