

Teaching Writing to Children in Indigenous Languages: Instructional Practices from Global Contexts edited by Ari Sherris and Joy Kreeft Peyton. Routledge Research in Education, Routledge: New York / Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 2019, 312 pages, ISBN 978-1-138-48535-8 (hardcover A\$201), ISBN 978-0-367-66175-5 (paperback A\$62), ISBN 978-1-351-04967-2 (e-book A\$56)

— Reviewed by Craig Alan Volker (James Cook University)

This collection of reports and analyses of teaching writing to children in indigenous languages in various countries and regions (Hawai‘i, Pakistan, Ghana, Papua New Guinea, Mexico, the mainland United States, South Africa, Panama, and Scandinavia) is a welcome addition to the field of teaching writing, which, as several of the book’s authors mention, is dominated by research into first language writing in the dominant national languages of wealthy countries, and where very little attention is paid to the specific issues facing teachers of indigenous languages. The book begins with an introduction by the editors and ends with concluding remarks by Kendall King, who discusses the roles of orthography, appropriate pedagogy, and the ecology of literacy outside of school in the teaching of writing. In between are 13 chapters, each examining a different educational environment, all of which are situated in nations in which the indigenous language in question is spoken by a minority of its citizens. Three of these are in Papua New Guinea, whose over-representation is justified by the editors on the basis of the great number of its languages. In some of the linguistic ecologies that are featured, the indigenous language is the main language of the community. In others, it is spoken by few children at home and is being revived through a school program. All the discussions are based on classroom observations as well as relevant descriptions of the use (or non-use) of official curricula. Most, but not all, of the studies focus on the writing of younger children who are just learning how to write.

Each chapter follows the same pattern:

1. Introduction
2. Literature review and guiding theories
3. History of the group, language, and culture being described
4. A summary of the structure of the language and, in some chapters, of its orthography
5. A description of the language revitalisation efforts
6. A description of the school and / or school system
7. A description of instructional practices, especially related to the teaching of writing
8. A description of the children’s writing development
9. Thoughts about promising future directions

The first chapter by Candace Kaleimamoowahinekapu Galla and William H. ‘Pila’ Wilson describes the early writing instruction among three to five year-olds in the Hawaiian immersion school system that now goes from preschool to postgraduate studies. They emphasise the importance of structuring classroom practices around traditional Hawaiian social values. They point out that the phonological structure of Hawaiian lends itself to teaching the Latin orthography of Hawaiian as a syllabary rather than a representation of individual phonemes, which results in children acquiring basic literacy more quickly in Hawaiian than they would in English.

The second chapter by Zubair Torwali describes writing in the schools the author established in the Torwali-speaking region of Pakistan. In common with many other contributors to this volume, Zubair Torwali mentions problems caused by a lack of materials and teacher training. This chapter

emphasises the relationship of the community and programs at the school, which became more supported by parents when its governing NGO organised community cultural events and bilingual Torwali-Urdu literacy classes for mothers.

The third chapter by Ari Sherris describes a school in Ghana where teachers decided to use the local Safaliba language rather than one of the nine other indigenous languages chosen by the government as the medium of primary school education. This is part of a political movement for recognition of Safaliba chieftaincy and associated land ownership rights and a rejection of the imposition of another unrelated indigenous language on this relatively small language community. This chapter shows that in some environments, power struggles between different indigenous languages can be more decisive than those between indigenous and imposed colonial languages.

The fourth chapter by Gertrude Nicholas describes the teaching of writing in early education in a Notsi-speaking village in New Ireland. She emphasises problems that are common to the use of local languages in schools in many parts of PNG, including negative community attitudes to using languages other than English, a lack of native-authored books for children, and poor training for teachers. She points out that although the official curriculum offers a variety of child-centred methods for teaching writing, teachers rely on rote learning, which does not encourage children to generate their own writing. Schools also suffer because English writing is introduced before children can communicate in writing in their own language. As a result, by grade three, when the medium of education is supposed to change completely to English, Notsi children are unable to write well in any language.

The fifth chapter by Samuel Saleng and Gertrude Nicholas is based on a single visit to a remote school in Morobe Province where children begin their education in the Numanggang language. The authors mention that although the current standards-based curriculum is based on child-centred theories, teachers have not received enough training to be able to implement these theories and rely on rote learning with the same problems as discussed in Nicholas' previous chapter on Notsi education.

The sixth chapter by Katherine Riestenberg and Raquel Cruz Manzano describes an after-school program teaching the Zapotec language in Oaxaca, Mexico to indigenous children who now use Spanish at home and at school. The methodology used is task-based, with children writing down both traditional practices and modern uses of Zapotec, such as making up cheerleader chants to support their school's basketball team.

The seventh chapter by Lizette Peter, Tarcy Hirata-Edds, and Ryan Wahde Mackey looks at the teaching of Cherokee at different levels in an immersion elementary school in Oklahoma. Few of the children use Cherokee at home. They describe both the symbolic importance of the Cherokee syllabary and the emergence of translanguaging as difficulties with Cherokee verbal affixation mean even advanced students use English-like wording in their writing. While grammatically correct, these constructions result in writing that appears awkward to elder L1 speakers of Cherokee.

The eighth chapter by Tinswalo Manyike and Nkidi Phatudi describes the teaching of writing in Xitsonga, one of the official languages of post-apartheid South Africa. Although schools are supposed to teach in an indigenous language in the first three grades, they report that especially in urban areas, many schools actually teach in English because of a lack of materials and poor teacher

training, particularly in the methodology for teaching higher level writing skills. In common with the chapters about Papua New Guinea, they report that this results in a lack of language proficiency in either Xitsonga or English by grade four, when the medium of education changes to English. More than any other chapter in this collection, this chapter offers a good guide to steps in teaching particular writing skills, in this case, in using process writing starting with the reading of folktales to help students to retell those folktales in their own words.

The ninth chapter by Hanna Sarvasy & Eni Ögate describes the teaching of writing in a rural school in Morobe Province where at the time the chapter was written, early education was provided in Nungon, which is called Yau in *Ethnologue* (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020). They point out that because of poor attendance and a lack of teacher awareness of different L1 discourse types, by the end of their three years of Nungon education, children are still at stage of writing single sentences, not narratives, in Nungon.

The tenth chapter by Kate Bellamy and Cynthia Groff describes writing in two schools in Michoacán, Mexico that have gone beyond symbolic bilingual education to the actual use of the P'urhepecha language as a medium of instruction. At these schools, children change to using Spanish in grade four. Teachers report that students do not yet have a good grasp of P'urhepecha writing and feel that the popular revitalisation program should be continued to secondary and tertiary levels. This chapter describes the very successful L1 literacy program in the 1930s and 1940s, in which adults were able to become literate in their own language in 30 to 45 days. This program was discontinued so that the current program has had to start from scratch in an environment where a majority of children now use Spanish as a home language, emphasising the importance of longterm viability of programs such as these.

The eleventh chapter by Ginés Alberto Sánchez Arias, Manola Miranda (Tido Bangama) and Mary Jill Brody analyses the development of writing of three children at a school in a Ngäbere-speaking community in western Panama. This school was started by a local religious movement that rejects colonial influences and views the locally developed orthography as an important vehicle for resistance against the legacy of colonialism. The integration of community members and observation of community practices into everyday classes are important in this school, but its association with a particular religious ideology limits its acceptance by all members of the community.

The twelfth chapter by Kirk Sullivan, Kristina Belancic, Eva Lindgen, Hanna Outakoski, and Mikael Vinka looks at the writing of teenagers in Sami-speaking schools in northern Scandinavia, with a focus on those in Sweden. They point out that the much greater availability of digital reading material in English and its use as an international language make this a more attractive language for teenagers to develop writing skills in than either Sami or a national language such as Swedish. As a result, teenagers' higher level writing competency in Sami is actually less than in English, a foreign language in Scandinavia.

The thirteenth chapter by Christine Sims looks at the question of literacy in five Pueblo languages in the Southwest United States. She makes the point that, in contrast to the other communities described in this book, there is opposition to written literacy in Pueblo languages for fear that putting traditions down in writing will expose knowledge preserved ("kept underground") over the centuries of Spanish, Mexican, and American colonialism. These communities view orality as primary and view written literacy as a foreign imposition. She argues the point that indigenous

languages need to be taught in traditional oral environments and learned “in appropriate styles and contexts for real functions” that will “lead to ‘higher level’ thinking”. She objects to fitting indigenous language education “in service to English-based” national curricula based on written literacy.

This provocative criticism of the concept of literacy and of the assumption that written literacy is a positive addition to an indigenous culture is in direct contrast to the feeling reported for the Zapotec-speaking community in Mexico that languages are “only important if written”. These different community reactions to indigenous writing and the place of indigenous language writing in their children’s education is, unfortunately, not dealt with in the concluding chapter by Kendall King.

Other issues not covered in either his concluding chapter or the introduction are the definitions of indigenous and language revitalisation, two terms used throughout the chapters of the book. “Indigenous” and “indigeneity” do have legal definitions in international treaties (see Sarivaara, Erika, Kaarina Maatta & Satu Uusiautti. 2013), but the simple definitions of these treaties do not differentiate and define the diversity of social environments covered in this book. Some languages are spoken by small minorities such as Hawaiians, Samis, and the indigenous people of the Americas who to a great extent no longer use their ancestral language at home. Others are Papua New Guinean languages spoken by small indigenous communities now joined together with other indigenous people in a multilingual postcolonial nation-state which they jointly govern. Still others are indigenous languages spoken by small communities in Pakistan and Ghana that are threatened by other indigenous languages spoken by larger and more powerful communities, while one is an indigenous South African language overshadowed by languages spoken by a still-powerful non-indigenous minority. The challenges to education in local languages in these diverse circumstances are quite different, but these differences are not explicitly explored in the book. One of the strengths of this book lies in its inclusion of these very different socio-political realities and different types of indigenous experiences, but an examination and explanation of this diversity would have helped a reader, unfamiliar with the politics underlying indigenous education, to understand the explanations better.

The lack of a definition of what is meant by language revitalisation is more problematic. This term is used to describe the remarkable rescue of Hawaiian from near extinction to the present-day situation where it is taught as a second language and is used as the language of education from pre-school to post-graduate studies and which Galla and Wilson report is among the top 15 languages studied at university level in the United States. But it is also used to describe the situation in the Numanggang-speaking community in rural Morobe Province, where, as Saleng and Nicholas report, the language is used by almost everyone in the community, including children. If a language is already in active use in a community and is learned by all its children, one wonders what is meant by revitalisation, particularly when, as the authors report, the term is used to describe the expansion of the use of the language as a written language even though this does not have many practical applications outside of school in this primarily oral society.

The volume has been proofread well and is clearly presented. Examples are given for languages written with non-Latin orthographies, including Ngäbere in Panama, for which there is no standardised digital font. Most of the chapters have photos of samples of students’ writing.

Overall, the fact that all the chapters except the introduction and conclusion follow the same format helps the reader make comparisons and will facilitate the use of the book in classroom and policy-making discussions. In most chapters, however, the inclusion of a summary of the structure of the language, was forced and tended to break the flow of the discussion. Often information was included in this section that was not relevant to the discussion of teaching of writing that followed it. The chapter on Numanggang in Morobe Province, for example, discusses the verb chains and switch reference that are typical in many Papuan languages. These are not mentioned in the following analysis of student writing, which focuses more on phonological issues and on problems with introducing English writing before the students have a grasp of oral English. The relevant characteristics of individual languages were much better explained as part of discussions in the context of actual students' writing, such as in the discussion of spelling problems caused by the use of <a> and <aa> for two vowel phonemes in the Notsi language of New Ireland or the influence of English grammatical patterns on the L2 writing of advanced students at a Cherokee immersion school.

Nevertheless, overall this volume has much practical information to offer teachers in schools using indigenous languages or government and NGO bodies planning such programs. Its high cost does mean that few teachers or planning bodies will be able to afford making use of the insights it offers, and its circulation will be largely limited to universities in wealthy countries whose library budgets can stretch to pay so much for a single book. It is unfortunate that the editors did not choose to publish this collection in an online open access format that would be easily accessible to language activists in the type of indigenous communities it describes.

References

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