Early development in written language: Children's emergent knowledge of genre-specific characteristics

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ABSTRACT: This investigation explored the emergent knowledge of genre-specific characteristics of twenty kindergartners and twenty first graders, who were invited to compose three types of genre stories, personal letters, and shopping lists at three different times during the school year. Both groups responded to the request to write different types of genre by applying a variety of writing forms. At both grade levels, stories and personal letters were associated with more conventional writing systems than the list. Shopping lists were more consistently associated with less-conventional writing systems within children's repertoires of writing forms. Genre characteristics are suspected to have determined, at least partially, those patterns of association. The children's readings of their own compositions provided substantial information about their developing knowledge of communicative function and form. It was the list and not the narrative that was the best-known genre among children in both groups. Intermediary compositional forms for the story and the personal letter were composed by children at both grade levels as the school year progressed. The findings highlight the flexible nature of young writers' emergent composing process and the importance of genre as an influential factor on that process. It also highlights the limitations of assessing the young authors' knowledge of written language solely on the basis of their written products. Results of the study also raise questions about the preconceived notion of the primacy of the narrative genre over other types of genre during the early years and the implicit notion guiding many writing curricula that graphic aspects of writing should precede compositional undertakings.

KEY WORDS: Emergent writing, Genre, Grade one, Kindergarten

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, heavily influenced by the new theories of learning and the renewed interest in language acquisition and pragmatics, many researchers have approached the study of early literacy behaviors from a new and different perspective (Harste, Woodward & Burke 1984; Litowitz 1986; Teale & Sulzby 1986). This new theoretical framework emphasized the importance of looking at the child *as an informant* and at language development in its social-psycholinguistic context. It focused on processes as opposed to products and on language-in-use as opposed to final conventional forms. Language learning was looked at as a hypothesis-testing, meaning-constructive process. Literacy was redefined as the ability to use reading and writing for communicative purposes according to the traditions of different cultural groups (Scribner & Cole 1981). Researchers began to study the relationship between oral and written language, and between reading and writing. The process of

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becoming literate was now conceived as 'social, psycholinguistic, conceptual, and developmental in nature' (Teale & Sulzby 1986: xxi). The new interest in children's emergent literacy behaviors resulted in a vast number of studies that investigated development in specific areas within reading and writing during the early years that have yielded important implications for educational practices.

The complexity of written language

Writers, novices and experts need to orchestrate numerous variables in order to communicate successfully. Dyson (1982, 1985) emphasizes the importance of considering the complexity of the medium when trying to understand the task that young learners face as they try to gain control over 'the written language kaleidoscope' (Dyson 1985: 118). The aspects of written language which young writers need to master can be grouped into three major categories (Dyson 1985):

1. *Perceptual aspects*: graphic aspects.
2. *Symbolic aspects*: the relationship between speech and print as well as the similarities/differences between written language and other symbol systems as modes of representation.
3. *Psycho-social aspects*: characteristics of different kinds of discourse (e.g., written/oral) including text-specific characteristics; knowledge of genre, typical content, function, and audience.

Initially, the majority of studies in emergent writing focused on early knowledge that young writers possess about the perceptual and symbolic aspects of writing. A review of these investigations indicates that certain general developmental trends can now be described (Clay 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky 1982). Less is known about young writers' emergent knowledge of the psychosocial characteristics of specific genres and the intermediary forms that young authors' texts might take as children master this aspect of written language.

Perceptual aspects of written language

Young writers test different working hypotheses (or tentative principles) as they experiment with the visual-perceptual features of print. They use a wide variety of writing forms which evidence their growing awareness about directionality, letter formation, characteristic letter patterns of their language, and other graphic variables (Clay 1975; Dyson 1985; Ferreiro & Gómez Palacio 1982; Ferreiro & Teberosky 1982; Sulzby, Barnhart & Hieshima 1989). As with other types of representational systems (Gardner & Wolf 1983), children seem to grasp first the generalities or global aspects of the code (e.g., scribbles that resemble writing globally) to focus later on its specific characteristics (e.g., specific letter forms). Some researchers have called atten-

tion to the fact that the visual-perceptual aspects that early written products take can be a misleading indicator of children's true level of conceptualization about written language (Sulzby 1985b; Zecker 1991).

Symbolic aspects of written language

Children's emergent knowledge of written language as a symbol system has been studied in two different aspects. Some investigators have looked at children's growing awareness of the differentiation between writing and other symbol systems, such as drawing and oral language (Dyson 1985; Gundlach 1982). Other studies have focused specifically on children's developing knowledge about the inner-working of writing, that is, the discovery of the rules and logic of the grapho-phonemic representational system.

The investigations that have studied children's realization of the similarities and differences between written language and other symbolic media (Dyson 1985; Gundlach 1982) conclude that, initially, writing often serves the same functions that other symbol systems fulfill. Young writers rely upon other symbol systems such as play, speech, and drawing to help them make the transition into the new form of communication. This explains why many children attempt a perceptual correspondence between writing and the referent (e.g., big objects should be represented by long letter strings), or why the oral and the written parts of the message are so intimately intertwined in some early written products (Dyson 1985). Using other, more familiar symbol systems as 'bridges' into the new system, children discover the unique characteristics of written language (Gundlach 1982).

Studies of children's abilities to recognize the inner-workings of the speech-print relation indicate that initially it is common for children to hypothesize that writing only fulfills a labeling symbolic function (i.e., only objects or nouns are represented in print). Later, children realize that a correspondence is to be found between speech and print. As they master the alphabetic and morpho-phonemic principles that rule the orthography in many languages, they discover, apply, and rework different hypotheses about various aspects of this correspondence (e.g., initially each letter represents a syllable; later, letters represent specific phonemes) (Ferreiro & Teberosky 1982).

The nature of development of such conceptualizations about the representational nature of written language is yet to be fully understood (Zecker 1991). Some researchers claim that literacy development in this area is best characterized as an orderly progression through a series of stages during which an underlying conceptualization about written language dominates children's encounters with print (Ferreiro 1990). Others (Sulzby 1985b) propose a repertoire-like theory according to which, at any given time, children possess and simultaneously apply multiple hypotheses about written language.

Psycho-social aspects of written language

There are two areas of structural knowledge that need to be addressed when discussing emergent development in written language. First, children need to differentiate oral and written discourse structure. Second, children need to master the specific structures and content that characterize different types of text (e.g., story, letter, poem). Structure and content are intimately related since the structure of a written text is in great part determined by its topic, purpose, and audience, as well as by the individual characteristics of its author (Temple, Nathan & Burris 1982). All these psycho-social aspects of written language interplay differently in different genres, depending on the authors' intentions, their relation and distance to the audience, and the content of their messages (Dyson 1985).

Many researchers have investigated the similarities and differences between oral and written language as modes of communication. While some investigators (Tannen 1987) conclude that the degree of literacy or orality of any message is more dependent on the purpose and context of communication than on its mode (i.e., oral or written), there are certain lexical and syntactical patterns that are more characteristic of one form of discourse than of the other. Written language has been described as being more integrated or compact, more resistant to change, more decontextualized and, thus, more semantically explicit than oral language (Chafe 1982, 1985; Ochs 1979). The rapid pace of oral discourse forces the speaker to monitor its flow on-line, and, as a result, ideas are presented in a more fragmented fashion, with less subordination than in written discourse. Oral discourse assumes a higher degree of involvement of the speaker with both the audience and the information communicated. All these characteristics result in, and are marked by, a series of lexical, semantic, and grammatical features that are more typically oral- or written-language like (Chafe 1985).

In an attempt to study young authors' knowledge of written/oral language differences, Sulzby has compared their told and dictated stories, as well as their early reading attempts of favorite storybooks and own compositions (Sulzby 1985a,b, 1986). Her investigations demonstrate that children possess knowledge about the differentiating characteristics of oral and written language from a very early age. Children's emergent literacy knowledge includes notions about the linguistic structures as well as about the paralinguistic features that characterize written discourse. Sulzby 1985b; Sulzby et al. 1989 has observed that even when some children utilize nonconventional writing systems when asked to write a story, they then read their writing in a form that shows high levels of conceptualization about the characteristics of written discourse. For example, they might read their scribbles with wording and intonation characteristic of written language.

However, discovering the general characteristics that differentiate written from oral language is not enough to master written language. Children also have to become aware of the specific structural conventions (e.g., content,

form, purpose) that characterize specific types of texts or genres. From a developmental perspective, the type of genre that has been researched in greatest depth is the narrative or story. Much less is known about emergent knowledge of other types of text.

Most of the available information about children's developmental knowledge about stories has been gained through analyses of their oral narratives, either spontaneous or recalled. Results of these different investigations show that children follow a clear developmental progression in their abilities to use conventional narrative structures (King & Rentel 1981). With time, their narratives become better organized, more complete, and more complex. They include formal story beginnings and endings; theme, climax, morals, and goals are better defined; connections between different episodes within the narratives become more sophisticated (Applebee 1978; Peterson & McCabe 1983).

Until recently, the investigators that had studied the characteristics of written narratives produced by young elementary students (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1982; King & Rentel 1981; Scardamalia & Bereiter 1986), rather than reporting on the occurrence of what has been described as the typical structure of the narrative genre (e.g., story grammar), had concentrated almost exclusively on describing specific measures of textualization (i.e., linguistic patterns characteristic of written discourse) such as syntactic maturity and grammatical complexity, measuring written-language-like constructions. In most cases, the writing samples were produced in highly structured experimental situations. Furthermore, the products of preschool and first-grade writers did not conform to the experimenters' criteria for what constituted text in terms of either mechanics, length, and/or genre (e.g., criteria of what constitutes a story or biography). For instance, King & Rentel (1981) had originally planned to include first graders' stories in their analyses but found that many of the children in their sample were not writing in the conventional sense by the end of first grade.

A somewhat different perspective on the analysis of elementary student's writing was proposed first by Moffet (1968) and later refined by Britton and his colleagues (Britton 1982; Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod & Rosen 1975). These investigators described a series of discourse categories which, rather than focusing on discrete syntactic and grammatical features of text, take a more encompassing view of composition and consider the function of the text as well as the relationship between the writer and the audience. Briefly, they claim that early written products are: (1) undifferentiated in function, and (2) predominantly narrative. Over time, children begin to consider audience as well as the content and structure that characterize different forms of discourse.

Recently, researchers have started to investigate how knowledge of narratives developed among young writers even when, more often than not, their written products were not conventional from an adult writer's perspective (Sulzby 1985b). These researchers partially agree with Britton's (1982) obser-

vations about the fact that many early texts include some oral-language-like characteristics and resemble interpersonal oral communication to a certain extent, as they often include dialogue and rely on immediate context (Newkirk 1989). Young authors frequently assume the audience's interest in their opinions, feelings, and ideas without being able to fully consider the reader's needs (Temple et al. 1982). However, most researchers in emergent literacy have challenged Britton's claims about the undifferentiated functional and predominantly narrative nature of all early writing products (Dyson 1983; Newkirk 1984, 1989; Sulzby 1985a, b). They claim that young authors not only display growing knowledge about the general differences between oral and written language from an early age but also know about the forms and functions of different genres. From early on in their literacy development, children seem capable of differentiating and producing texts that differ in topic, audience, and purposes.

Through a series of case studies, Newkirk (1989) has posed the strongest arguments to support the ideas above. He recognizes that many of young children's early writing attempts do not fulfill adult genre standard and that they only include some of the features of conventional compositions, thus constituting, *approximations* to them. Newkirk calls these approximations 'intermediary forms' (1989: 72) and highlights the importance of understanding their role as roots of literacy development. Research in early writing is yet to unveil how young children's emergent knowledge for specific types of genre develops.

Kindergartners' and first-graders' emergent knowledge of genre-specific characteristics

The study was designed to explore kindergartners' and first graders' emergent knowledge of the various aspects of written language (e.g., perceptual, symbolic, structural) across different genres that vary in their forms and functions. The questions guiding the investigation focused on: (1) the kinds of writing systems that children applied across different genres, (2) how these writing systems changed over time and, more importantly, varied as a function of genre, and (3) the discrepancies observed between children's mastery of the perceptual and symbolic aspects of writing (as evident in their written products) and their knowledge of certain psycho-social structural characteristics of specific genres.

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Twenty kindergartners and twenty first graders (white, native English speakers from a middle SES) at a suburban Midwestern public school participated in the study. They were asked to write three different types of texts at three different times during the school year. At each data collection date (Fall,

Winter, and Spring), the investigator visited the classrooms and asked the children to write a story, a personal letter, and a shopping list. These particular genres were selected because they presented children with purposeful written-communication events that have been observed to take place in their cultural and socio-economic environment. Lists, personal letters, and stories have also been documented to be among young writers' favorite spontaneous writing products (Bissex 1980; Harste et al. 1984; Newkirk 1989). Writing sessions were conducted in the classrooms and blended into the children's Language Arts curriculum and school routines.

Different categorization systems were applied to score the different aspects of the writing samples collected from the children.

a. *Writing systems*: All writing samples were scored following a modified version of Sulzby's Categories of Writing Systems (Sulzby et al. 1989): (1) Drawing, (2) Scribbling/letter-like forms, (3) Letter strings, (4) Copying, (5) Invented spelling, (6) Invented spelling/conventional mix, (7) Conventional writing, and (8) Other. A new category, Written List-like, was added to Sulzby's Categories of Writing Systems to obtain additional information about the format or spatial organization of the text in shopping lists. For complete descriptions of these categories see Appendix A.

b. *Forms of reading*: After children had finished writing, they were asked to read* their products to the investigator, who audiotaped their readings. The transcribed readings were scored following a modified version of the Forms of Rereading categorization devised by Sulzby et al. (1989), which includes a wide range of early reading behaviors, from describing pictures, to later paying attention to print, and, finally, conventional reading: (1) Labeling and commenting, (2) Dialogue, (3) Oral monologue, (4) Written monologue, (5) Naming letters, (6) Aspectual/strategic reading, (7) Conventional, (8) Other. A new category, List-like Reading was added to Sulzby's Categories of Rereading to accommodate additional information about special characteristics of the text in shopping lists. For complete descriptions of these system see Appendix B.

c. *Genre characteristics*: Finally, data in each genre type were categorized according to specific genre characteristics. For stories a modified version of an already existing categorization was applied and modified (Sowers 1985). For personal letters and shopping lists, categories were developed during the course of the investigation.

Stories were classified into (1) Narratives and (2) All-about (expository) following Sowers's (1985) classification of early texts. Additional categories (Mixed text, One word/Sentence, and Other) were developed to better classify the range of characteristics of the data collected in the present study.

Personal letters were classified as Personal Letters if they contained a message directed to a specific audience as indicated in the text by the inclu-

* It should be noted that children were not expected to read conventionally and were encouraged to 'pretend' to read if they questioned the examiner's request.

sion of reference/s to an addressee and/or sender. As with the stories, the One Word/Sentence, Mixed, and Other categories were also applied to the classification of the personal letters. Analyses of the personal letters indicated that some children composed narratives or All-About texts in response to the personal letter request. Those texts were labeled as such.

Shopping lists were classified as List-like if they included a series of semantically organized items, an inventory of semantically related words. As with the personal letters, some children wrote narratives or all-about texts in response to the shopping-list request.

Inter-rater agreement was determined after two trained independent judges scored the complete body of data collected during the Fall and a third of the data collected during the Winter and Spring for each text type. Agreement across the three data collection dates and categorization systems was greater than 95%. Final agreement was achieved through discussion.

RESULTS

Association between writing systems and different genres. Specific genre/writing-system patterns of association emerged when the performance of kindergarten and first-grade children at each data collection date was observed. Namely, contrary to expectations, the list was systematically associated with less conventional writing systems than the other two text types. The difference between the level of complexity of the writing systems used for personal letters and stories was less marked. However, in general, personal letters were associated more consistently with more conventional writing forms. This was, in fact, an expected finding given the types of words (i.e., high frequency) and formulaic phrases included in typical personal letter messages.

To exemplify the comments above, Figure 1 shows the genre/writing systems associations present among kindergartners' writing in the Fall. As can be observed, the list was mainly associated with drawing, drawing + first initial, and scribble while the other two genres showed more 'conventional' writing systems. Example 2 in Appendix C shows how Abby's almost conventional writing in the personal letter is quite different from, and less sophisticated to the adult's eye than the drawing + first-initial system that she used when composing a shopping list (see example 1).

Figure 2 shows pattern of writing system/genre association amongst first graders in the winter. As can be observed, the list was the genre associated with the least conventional writing systems in most students' repertoires.

These writing task/writing systems associations were typical of the findings observed across grade levels and data collection dates. The trends described above became stronger as the school year progressed, even as children displayed more knowledge about the conventional writing system on the other two types of text. In the kindergarten, the personal letter was predominantly associated with the more conventional writing forms displayed by each subject

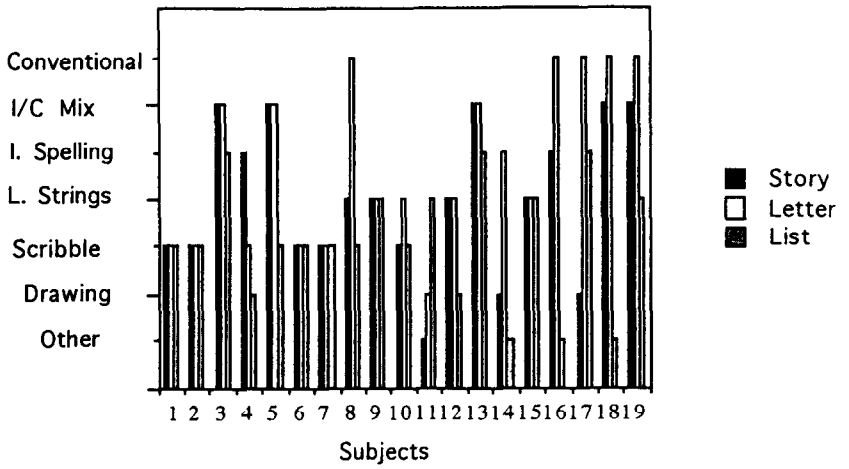


Figure 1. Writing system/genre association in the Fall among Kindergartners. Note: Fall data for one K subject missing.

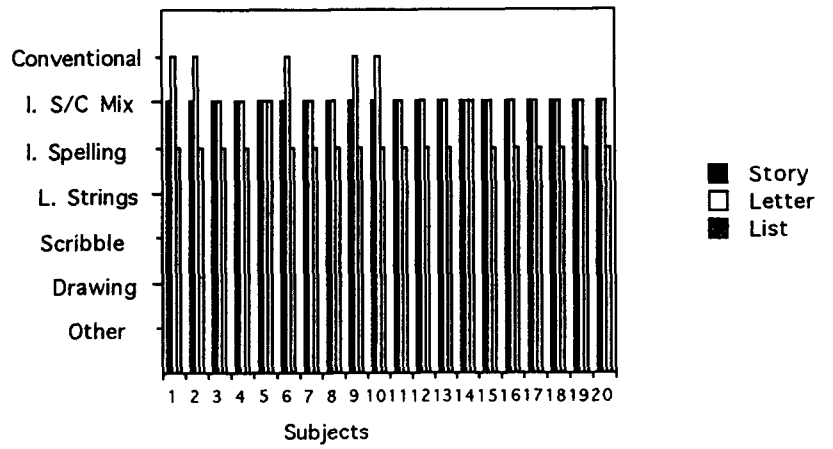


Figure 2. Writing system/genre association in the Winter among First graders.

at any given time during the school year. Among first-graders, the personal letter elicited writing systems of comparable degree of conventionality to those appearing in the stories, although in general, personal letters contained more conventional spellings. This can be observed in Alec's personal letter and story, shown in examples 3 and 4 of Appendix C.

Knowledge of specific text characteristics. In the preceding section information was provided about the degree of conventionality that children's products attained at different times of the year. The actual written samples were judged to be more or less conventional mainly on the basis of what the children had

put on paper. As expected, first-graders used more conventional writing systems than kindergartners, and both groups progressed towards more conventional writing systems during the course of the year. On the other hand, the children's readings of their own products provided the investigator with information about the subjects' knowledge of the typical form and content of the different kinds of texts that they wrote.

The differentiation between degree of conventionality of the products (as shown by its graphic/visual aspect) and knowledge about genre (as judged by text graphic/visual aspects *in conjunction* with the reading that its author offers) is an important one. While related to each other, the degree of conventionality of writing samples is circumscribed by the authors' ability to display their knowledge about the perceptual and symbolic aspects of the written language system, that is, the conventional orthographic system and format. That knowledge is different from knowledge of what typically constitutes the content and style of a particular genre, its meaning, intention, and/or function. It could be argued that content knowledge is more text specific, and that it is closely related to the understanding of the different communicative functions that different types of texts fulfill. It would be erroneous to judge young authors' knowledge of the specific characteristics of texts based solely on the perceptual aspects of their products. Kurtis's writing (examples 1, 2, and 3 in Appendix D) illustrates this point. His writing, all scribble or scribble with illustrations, did not indicate the presence of sophisticated knowledge about written language from an adult perspective. His readings, on the other hand, demonstrated that he possessed a considerable amount of knowledge about general written discourse as well as genre-specific structural characteristics. Observe in the transcribed reading how his story develops, his personal letter has a definite message for an intended recipient, and his list enumerates a series of items.

Genre-specific knowledge. In order to explore this difference between degree of conventionality of the written products and the young authors' true knowledge of specific genre psycho-social characteristics, a series of analyses were carried out to consider the written texts in conjunction with the subjects' readings of their own writing. When the writing systems applied by the subjects to the different texts were not decidable by adult standards (e.g., Scribble; Letter Strings), the readings performed by the subjects became the only window to their conceptualization of the content characteristics for each text type.

The results reported in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that, as the year progressed, kindergartners and first graders showed improved knowledge of specific genre characteristics. As would be expected, this genre-specific knowledge was better defined for first graders than for kindergartners at the beginning of the school year.

Kindergartners showed growing knowledge about the specific characteristic of stories and personal letters. The first-grade subjects' stories also

Table 1. Distribution of kindergartners' and first-graders' texts in each category in the story writing task (in %)

		Story				
Group	Period	Narrative	All-about	Mixed	One/w-s.	Other
Kindergarten	Fall	58	26	0	0	16
	Winter	70	20	0	10	0
	Spring	85	5	0	5	5
First grade	Fall	55	30	5	5	5
	Winter	75	20	5	0	0
	Spring	50	50	0	0	0

Table 2. Distribution of kindergartners' and first-graders' texts in each category in the personal letter writing task (in %)

		Personal letter				
Group	Period	PL	Narrative	All-about	Mixed	Other
Kindergarten	Fall	68	5	11	5	11
	Winter	80	5	5	10	0
	Spring	85	10	5	0	0
First grade	Fall	95	0	0	0	5
	Winter	100	0	0	0	0
	Spring	100	0	0	0	0

showed increasing knowledge of genre characteristics from the Fall to the Winter. The only divergence from this pattern appeared to be contextually influenced. In the Spring, the trend reverted and an equal number of Narrative and All-about texts was observed, probably due to the fact that the first graders in this study had just completed an All-about book the day before the Spring story was collected. Knowledge of personal letters characteristics was well established for first graders from the beginning of the school year.

Finally, and most interestingly, the shopping-list genre was the best defined genre for kindergartners and first graders from the beginning of the school year. During the Fall data collection, 90% of the kindergartners composed List-like texts, 5% produced Narratives, and 5% produced One word/Sentence texts. In the Winter all kindergartners produced lists and in the Spring, 95% of them composed List-like texts and 5% produced One word/Sentence texts. All first graders composed shopping lists when asked to do so at each data collection period.

Results of the analyses just reported indicate that, even when the list was more consistently associated with the less conventional writing systems, as discussed earlier, their readings showed that it was the *best known* genre

among kindergartners and first graders from the beginning of the school year. It is worth mentioning that, as the year progressed, subjects in both groups tended to incorporate introductory statements into their lists, indicating a growing awareness of the need to decontextualize and expand written language for audience purpose. For example, Aaron started his list in the Spring by writing: 'This is what I will buy', he listed several ingredients for his sandwich and ended it with 'These are all the things I would need'. It can be hypothesized that, as in other aspects of language learning in which children overapply a newly learned rule to instances of language already mastered, the subjects in this study overgeneralized their new knowledge of this trait of written language (i.e., the need to construct referential frames for the audience) to their lists.

Emergent knowledge of written language and its different dimensions. The results presented above indicate that children varied the writing systems that they applied to the writing of different kinds of genre. Certain writing-system/genre patterns of association emerged in the data. The results also indicated that there was a considerable mismatch between the knowledge of the perceptual/symbolic aspects of written language observable in these young writer's products and their knowledge of psycho-social aspects, as judged by the text-specific characteristics that they included in the readings of their own compositions.

The variation in the writing-system/genre associations observed in this investigation can be explained, at least in part, as a function of specific text characteristics. As explained before, the shopping list was associated with less conventional writing systems than the personal letter and the story. This finding might seem contradictory since the list genre is often thought of as a simpler, more primitive, less demanding text type. Other investigations (Barnhart 1986) have found that children apply more conventional writing systems when writing a list of words than when writing stories. However, the difference in findings could be explained at least partially in terms of orthographic complexity since this study imposed a semantic organization on the subjects' lists (e.g., ingredients for a salad or a sandwich) which did not allow them to write well-known words of their choice, as had been the case in other investigations. For the most part, the terms likely to be included on such lists cannot be considered to be common or highly familiar words (in terms of their spelling) to kindergartners and first graders. While the shopping list task did not impose the highest compositional demand on the subjects when compared to the other two tasks, it can be hypothesized that it posed the more complex orthographic challenge.

As the year progressed, many kindergartners who initially used Scribble started using Drawing or Drawing + first initial when asked to make shopping lists. It is possible that as they Drawing or Drawing + first initial when asked to write shopping lists. It is possible that as they became more aware of the symbolic principles governing written language, when facing a hard ortho-

graphic task, kindergartners resorted to other symbol systems to bridge the gap between what they knew and the demands that the task imposed on them (for a complete discussion, see Zecker 1991). It is also possible that the list triggered the use of drawing simply because of its content characteristics. The list as a genre can be thought of as being more conducive than the other two types of texts to representation by drawing since it is simpler to represent a series of objects than to communicate the more complex meanings usually included in a story or personal letter (e.g., plot development, characters' action, personal feelings, etc.). A combination of both factors, orthographic complexity and viability of representation, might also explain the association of shopping lists with less conventional writing systems.

Observations of the association between writing systems and the other two genres (story and personal letter) show that, for the most part, the letter and the story were associated with more conventional writing systems than the list. Both types of text typically include numerous words that can be considered highly familiar to the young writer: DEAR, LOVE, the author's name, the name of the author's good friend or family member, *the, to, a, I, my*, etc. Because authors need a greater variety of words to compose a story, there were more instances of Invented Spelling and Invented Spelling-Conventional Mix types of writing in stories than in letters.

While the different writing systems produced by young children cannot and should not be considered to be frank optimal windows to their hypotheses about written language, it is important to emphasize that when faced with the request to write different types of texts, the kindergartners and first graders participating in this investigation responded by using a repertoire of writing forms. The findings support the claim that young children's written responses vary and are, at least in part, task-dependent (Sulzby 1985b; Sulzby et al. 1989). These findings present a view of young writers as flexible and resourceful symbol-system users who, in the process of becoming conventional written-language users, adapt to the different demands of the tasks they face by applying a variety of hypotheses that they have available.

The literacy behaviors of the children in this study support the claims that young children possess early knowledge about a variety of text types (Gundlach, McLean, Stott & McNamee 1985; Newkirk 1989). They also provide support to the position that challenges the notion that most early writing is basically narrative in nature, or that the narrative is the most adequate – or primary-type of genre when working with beginning readers and writers (Newkirk 1989; Pappas 1990). In fact, these findings seem to indicate that, from the text types included in this study, the narrative, as defined conventionally, was the one that appeared to be the least *natural* among the kindergartners and first graders.

As the year progressed, more kindergartners and first graders abandoned intermediary forms, and the style of their texts became more clear. Just as intermediate graphic forms develop into the conventional writing code, the intermediate forms that children's compositions took constitute evidence of

growing emergent knowledge of text-specific characteristics. With time, their knowledge of text-specific form and content became more fine tuned, evidencing, in that sense, a developmental progression towards conventional forms. Importantly, however, in this investigation, the subjects' knowledge of text-specific characteristics seemed to be better developed and more stable than their knowledge about the graphic and symbolic aspects of written language. In fact, their knowledge of genre showed less fluctuation than their application of writing systems. As the results of other investigations seem to indicate (Sulzby & Zecker 1990), it is possible that the psycho-social aspects of written language (namely, its discourse format and communicative function) develop more rapidly and are generally more advanced than the mastery of knowledge about its graphic/symbolic characteristics. As proposed by Newkirk (1989), investigations in emergent literacy need to devote more attention to the understanding of such intermediate text forms and the role they play in literacy development. The implications of such research would be very important since, traditionally, instructional techniques and assessment procedures assume that early literacy knowledge of written language graphic forms and phoneme-grapheme correspondence precedes, and is a prerequisite to, the ability to compose connected written language discourse and apply genre-specific knowledge.

Finally, the results of this study indicate that children's early readings or pre-conventional reading behaviors provide valuable information about their emergent knowledge of written language conventions. Often, the writing systems that children applied to the different writing tasks were not conventional or legible from an adult perspective and, as such, did not convey children's text-specific knowledge. However, children's readings of their own compositions demonstrated that these young writers had available a wealth of knowledge about written discourse and text-specific characteristics which was not evident in their graphic productions. In fact, the task that was associated with the least conventional writing systems, as judged by the written samples, proved to be the best-known kind of genre in terms of its content and function when the children's readings were considered. The written samples collected and the subjects' readings of their own compositions, considered jointly, provided the investigator with a more comprehensive method of looking at children's growing awareness about the functional aspects of writing. In this way, it was possible to go beyond product to tap into the authors' budding understandings of those psycho-social aspects of written language that are at the core of becoming literate, since knowledge about genre-specific characteristics is intimately linked to knowledge of the communicative functions that different texts serve in a literate society. In that sense, the children's readings were *better windows* to their emergent knowledge of the functional aspects of written language than their written products considered in isolation. These findings, like the ones discussed before, have important implications for instructional and assessment practices in early

literacy since the value of early reading behaviors (as a way to explore emergent literacy knowledge) is often overlooked.

APPENDIX A: CATEGORIES OF WRITING SYSTEMS

Adapted from Sulzby, Barnhart & Hieshima 1989)

1. *Drawing*
2. *Scribbling*
3. *Letter-like forms*: Graphic marks that resemble manuscript or cursive letters
4. *Letter strings*
   a. *Letter patterns*: The child writes with letters that have repeated patterns. These patterns may be of several types.
   b. *Letter random*: The child has included letters that appear to have been generated at random. There is no evidence that the child made any letter sound correspondence between letters he wrote and his oral message. The letters would not appear in the English spelling system.
5. *Copying*: The child copies from any environmental print s/he can see at the time when s/he is asked to write.
6. *Invented spelling*: Writing that results from the child's invention and his assumptions about the way words are spelled, and presents aspects of his implicit categorization of speech sounds.
7. *Invented Spelling/Conventional mix*
8. *Conventional*

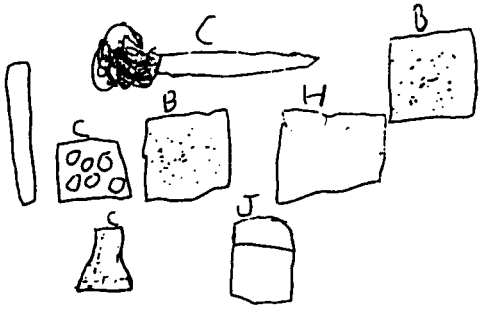
– Special category
Written list-like: Writing consists of a series of well-defined words (or units in the case of scribble and letter strings) presented in columns or organized in such a way that its components can be identified as an inventory of terms and not as part of connected text.

APPENDIX B: CATEGORIES OF FORMS OF READING

(From Sulzby, Barnhart & Hieshima 1989)

1. *Labelling and describing*: The child labels the items (except naming letters) or describes items written or drawn (e.g., 'A sun', 'This is my mom'),
2. *Dialogue*: The child only responds if experimenter asks questions. There is a question/answer response pattern. Also one-clause statements that do not fit the labeling/describing category.
3. *Oral monologue*: Child gives an orally-told story in the intonation and wording of oral language. The intonation will be entertaining and flowing, like that expected in oral story-telling. (There must be at least two sentences or full independent clauses to fit this category.)
4. *Written monologue*: The child recites a story that is worded like written language in intonation. The child may begin with a title and will specify who the people are and what the things in the story are. The intonation may be staccato-like and highly entertaining but sound like an expressive oral reading done by an accomplished reader.
5. *Naming letters*: The child 'reads' by simply naming the letters s/he has written.
6. *Aspectual/strategic reading*: The child may sound out his/her own writing, or may simply read a few words and skip others. S/he may recite the story while looking at print but not tracking accurately. The child is attending to print but not yet reading conventionally.
7. *Conventional*: The child is reading from print, conventionally. S/he may sound like the written monologue category but his/her eyes are on the print.

1. Abby, 1st G.,Winter shopping list



Reading:

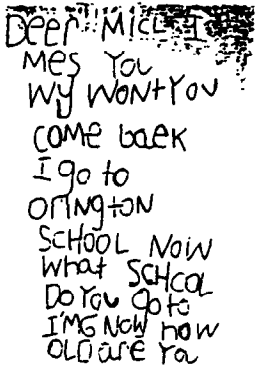
Carrots, bread, ham, jelly, ketchup, cheese, and butter.

2. Abby, 1st G., Fall letter

Reading:
Dear Michael:

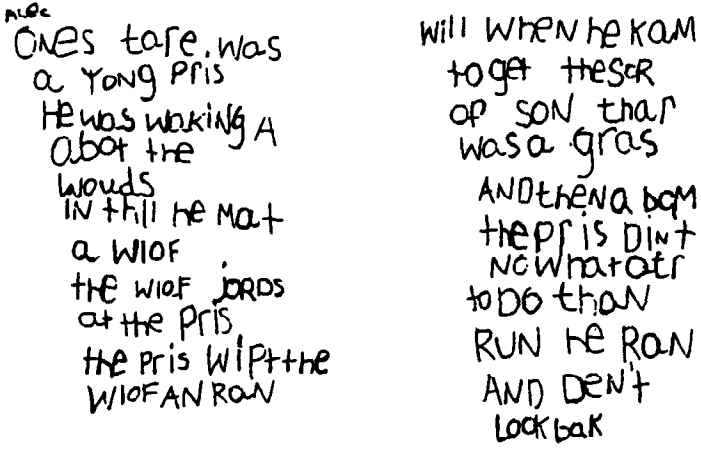
I like you. Love, Abby.

3. Alec, 1st G., Spring letter



Reading:
Dear Michael:
I miss you. Why don't you come back? I go to Orrington school now. What school do you go to now? I'm six now. How old are you?

4. Alec, 1st G., Spring story



Reading:
Once there was a prince. He was walking about the woods. In there he met a wolf. The wolf charged at the prince. The prince whipped the wolf and ran. Well, when he came to get the sword of stone, there was a crash and then a boom but the prince didn't know what to do. Then . . th. . . to do. Then. . . then . . . then he ran and he ran and didn't look back.

APPENDIX D: KURTIS'S WRITING IN THE FALL

1. Kurtis, K , Fall list

Reading:

Salad, apple, lettuce,. . . broccoli. This is, uhmm, banana. . . and corn, carrots,. . . uhmm. . . cookies and [investigator interrupts): Are you. . .] One more line, celery!

2. Kurtis, K, Fall letter

Reading:
Dear Hanz:

I want you to come to my birthday.
If you let me see you, then I will see you tomorrow.
Love, Kur-tis (pointing to the two instances of his name). Love, Kurtis (he repeats)

3. Kurtis, K, Fall story

Reading:

Once there was a little boy. He was very lonesome. His. . . his name was Kurtis. He looked like. . . this. [Indeciph.] someone to play with. He said, "Good-bye." He still was lonesome. Here's what he looked like. Here's what he looked like when. . . when he saw a [indeciph.] And then he found someone to play with. And he said, "I'll play with you." That's the end.

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