SIG WRITING INVITED SYMPOSIUM
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Weight of language specific factors in writing development

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The challenges children meet in producing written texts and achieving text products are likely to be influenced by the languages/orthographies in which they learn to talk, read and write. The current state of our knowledge is largely determined by research with English speakers and readers/writers (Share, 2008). However, models of assessment and intervention based on the specific difficulties that English learners meet in writing may have a limited application to other orthographies. An analysis of writing development across languages is thus necessary for a better understanding of both the universal and language-specific features affecting the acquisition of writing skills in children. The focus of this symposium is on the role of transcription skills and language specific factors in writing development across a continuum of orthographic depth. Transcription skills have been identified as the major barrier to written text production in young English writers and current models of writing development represent them as gate-keepers in the development of writing skills (e.g. Berninger & Swanson, 1994). However, to date our understanding of factors affecting transcritpion and the role of transcription skills in more transparent orthographies is still limited (Arfé et al., 2012). The four papers presented in this symposium discuss the contribution of transcription and other language-specific factors in writing development in deep (English), intermediate (Portuguese) and shallow Spanish and Italian) orthographies, from a cross-linguistic perspective.

Spelling skills and their contribution in emerging Italian writers

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University of Padova, Italy Two studies are presented. The first study ascertains the extent to which results of the research and models of spelling development in French and English can be extended to a more transparent orthography, like Italian. One hundred and seventy Italian elementary school children from grade 1 to grade 3 participated. Their spelling skills have been examined through tasks of nonword spelling, word spelling and text dictation and the role of phonological, vocabulary and grammatical skills in accounting for their spelling performance was examined. Results show that also in Italian the development of spelling skills is related to children's mastery of different kinds of knowledge beyond phonology and orthography (including grammatical knowledge). The second study examined the contribution of spelling, lexical and grammatical skills to written text production in Italian beginner writers. Eighty-three 2nd and 3rd grade students participated. Lexical retrieval (picture naming and rapid automatized naming), grammatical skills (receptive grammar and sentence generation), and spelling skills were assessed and children were asked to write a text on a set topic. A factor analysis revealed that two main factors (productivity and quality) explained 60% of the variance in performance of these young Italian writers. Regression analyses revealed that variance in text quality was explained by measures of spelling and grammatical skills while productivity was only explained by the participants' age, where older children wrote more than younger

children. In contrast to results from children learning to write in opaque orthographies, such as English, this study demonstrated that from the initial stages of writing, grammatical skills accounted for a significant proportion of variance in Italian written text production.

Exploring writing products in pupils with Language impairments and ASD

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Studies of pupils with developmental difficulties provide an opportunity to examine the differential impact of transcription skills on written text production. Using written texts from 157 school aged English speaking participants with learning difficulties we examined the predictors of writing fluency grammatical accuracy and text quality. Standardized measures of language, spelling, handwriting and cognition were used to examine relationships between transcription, oral language and cognition and the three dependent measures of written narrative. When transcription scores were significantly impaired this remained the major barrier to accuracy, grammaticality and fluency. However, even moderate improvements in spelling skills revealed the impact of other cognitive processes in writing, even in English. These data indicate that written text products of pupils with developmental difficulties can capture underlying linguistic and cognitive difficulties. The data point to the importance of socio-cognitive skills in the text quality produced by writers but spelling skills for fluency and accuracy.

The Role of Transcription and Self-Regulation in Development of Writing Skills in Spanish Students

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This study explores, from an instructional perspective, the role of transcription and self-regulation in the development of writing skills during the initial years of learning to write, in Spanish language, which has a shallow orthography. 135 Spanish students of 2nd grade of Primary Education (7-8 years old), distributed in six classes at to two schools of a city in the northwest of Spain were randomly assigned to one of the three instructional conditions: the self-regulation condition, where students received a cognitive and self-regulated strategy instruction on planning process; transcription condition, focused on automatization of low-level processes of writing; and the control condition that received an ordinary instruction, under the same writing practice than the other experimental conditions. We followed a design of pre-test, post-test and follow-up. We tested the effects of the interventions through a broad set of measures: handwriting fluency measures through the use of alphabet and copy tasks; spelling measures through dictated and spontaneous spelling; planning measures through the analyses of the draft sheet in two writing narrative tasks. As text generation measures we collected a set of reader and text based measures of quality, structure, coherence and productivity. Besides, we explored the effects of the different conditions in the students' writing process through the analyses of pauses and executions periods in the writing process of the two narrative texts. The study is currently being conducted and the results, including a cross-linguistic comparison with Portuguese students, will be presented at the symposium.