

Allison, P., Beard, R. & Willcocks, J. (2002) 'Subordination in Children's Writing', *Language and Education: An International Journal*, 16, 2, 97-111.

### **Abstract**

This paper reports an investigation into the use of subordinate clauses in the writing of a class of seven to nine year old children when attempting five different writing tasks. The investigation was undertaken in part-response to an inspection report on the school by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) which recommended that the school should extend the writing skills of pupils in this age-range. The importance of developing subordination in writing is related to previous research and to evidence from reviews of Ofsted inspection evidence. The different patterns of subordination are discussed, between tasks and pupils and in relation to variation in the writing of individual children when tackling the different tasks. The paper ends by suggesting how similar informal investigations can assist schools in promoting writing development. It also outlines how the teaching approaches outlined in the National Literacy Strategy will provide opportunities for this promotion, particularly by exploiting links between reading and writing.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a small study of some syntactical features of the writing of a sample of children aged 7-9 in a 5-9 first school in the North of England and how these features may be influenced by the task undertaken. The study was undertaken in part-response to a recent report from an inspection of the school by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The Ofsted report had highlighted a particular concern about the development of children's writing in the upper two year groups of the school. The report had noted that, in the younger classes, pupils' standards of writing, handwriting and presentation were consistently high, but that the 'more advanced writing skills' needed at Key Stage 2 (the 7-11 age-range) were less well developed. As will be shown below, this kind of suggestion has been a recurrent feature of reports by both Ofsted and Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) of schools in England and Wales in recent years. The recurrence suggests that there is a need for school-based studies, such as the one reported here, to indicate how development in writing can be identified, beyond such surface indicators as handwriting and spelling, while taking account of the context of the writing and the influence of purpose on writing performance.

## RECURRENT FEATURES OF OFSTED AND HMI REPORTS

The issue of needing to develop 'more advanced writing skills' in primary schools has been a feature of central government reports over the last decade. For instance, in commenting upon literacy teaching in the 1980s, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) report that teachers often expect too little of the more able children in the first two junior years and of older children across the whole ability range (DES, 1990b, p.8).

This report goes on to suggest that desirable practice is ‘not only a matter of continuing that established earlier, but (is) concerned with matching the work to the increasing language abilities of children’ (DES, 1990b, p.18), building on the fact that ‘the majority of children write about personal experiences confidently and competently’ (DES, 1990b, p.18).

A recent report from Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, *Standards and Quality in Education 1993-94* (Ofsted, 1995), expresses concerns about the quality of planning, the level of teacher expectation and in particular with the quality of assessment which planning for progression requires. The report indicates that teachers need better diagnostic skills so that their curriculum planning can be based on a more objective understanding of pupils’ capabilities (Ofsted, 1995, p.7).

The issues raised in such comments seem to imply that an improvement in the standard of writing at Key Stage 2 is likely to be promoted by teachers giving greater attention to their diagnostic and planning work in the teaching of writing. Such diagnosis will need to be informed by an identification of the principal dimensions of writing development, of which syntactical structure is one of the most important. As children learn to write, they learn a ‘tapestry’ of transcription (Smith, 1994) as handwriting skills, the appropriate spelling of words, the conventions of punctuation and so on are integrated into the texts which young writers create. Grammar provides a central structure of organisation for these components as words, phrases and clauses are combined into sentences, according to the rules of the language. Of the two branches of grammar, morphology and syntax, the latter provides a far

greater learning task in English, as the language makes relatively less use of ‘within word’ rules to communicate meaning. For instance, there are fewer than a dozen regular grammatical word endings in English (-s, -ed, -ing, etc.) (Crystal, 1990, p.20). A far more important dimension of children’s writing development is their competence in using the more formal and elaborate ‘between words’ rules which constitute the syntax of written language.

#### THE AIM AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The main aim of this study was to identify some features in the development of children’s writing by analysing their use of different syntactical structures when tackling different tasks. The study concentrates on the development of writing through the first half of Key Stage 2, i.e. 7-9 year olds.

In fact, specific reference to grammatical structure appears to be relatively neglected in the central government reports referred to above. Instead, the emphasis is on such things as handwriting, spelling, punctuation, purposes and audiences for writing. At the same time, grammatical structure is now a central element of the revised National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 2 (DFE, 1995):

- ‘Pupils should be given opportunities to develop their understanding of the grammar of complex sentences, including clauses and phrases’ (Standard English and Language Study Programme of Study).

- ‘Sequences of sentences extend ideas logically . . . The basic grammatical structure of sentences is usually correct’ (Level 3 Description)
- ‘..beginning to use grammatically complex sentences, extending meaning’ (Level 4 Description )

Such emphases imply that grammatical structure can be used as an indicator of writing development and, in particular, in progression from KS1 to KS2. Such implications can also be found in a number of earlier studies of children’s writing, particularly the substantial investigations undertaken by William Harpin (1976) and Katharine Perera (1984). Although these were published some time ago, there have been few comparable studies since then and their findings and insights remain highly relevant to this paper.

## TWO EARLIER STUDIES

William Harpin’s book *The Second R* describes research to trace the development of the writing of some 300 9-10 year old children over a period of two years. The research attempted to explain observed differences, and estimate the effect of teacher and task influences, in order eventually to inform classroom practice. The data were collected over six terms. Writing tasks were provided by teachers along two dimensions; distinctions were drawn between ‘creative’ and ‘factual’ tasks and ‘full’ and ‘minimum’ verbal preparation provided by the teacher.

Harpin does go to great lengths to point out the difficulties in trying to describe or analyse language development in general terms, emphasising the need to view each child as an individual: ‘Children progress in their uniquely individual ways, at their own speeds, in

mastering first the physical skill of writing and then in exploring its potentialities' (Harpin, 1976, p.50).

But he also argues that, in order to explain and discuss what happens when children write and to be able to follow development, there is a need for a method of systematically describing the writing. Among several indices, the research used a selection of 'language structures' which would be likely to 'prove most significant in showing how children move towards mastery of their native language'. (Harpin, 1976, p57). Six items were chosen: average sentence length; average clause length; an index of subordination (subordinate clauses as a proportion of all clauses); a weighted index of subordination (the Loban index); the ratio of 'uncommon' subordinate clauses to all subordinate clauses; and a personal pronoun index. These six items were applied to the writing samples and tables were drawn up to show results according to the age of the children.

Harpin emphasises that such tables should be used with precautions and that such analyses do not provide direct indices of writing quality. The figures simply offer a guide to placing a writer's work on a series of scales of language maturity (Harpin, 1976, p.63). However, there do seem to be distinctive patterns of syntactical development in children's writing. One of the most significant features in this development appears to be the use of *subordinate clauses*. Harpin describes how the use of 'and' as a universal co-ordinator in the speech of young children is transferred to their writing in its early stages. He notes that, by the time children come to write, it is a powerful habit and it gives way only slowly and reluctantly to the very large number of different joining methods provided for in English (Harpin, 1976,

p.68). He indicates the value of investigating the kinds of subordinate clauses used by children and of tracing their attempts to use less familiar kinds, such as relative clauses (which he refers to as 'adjectival' clauses). He shows how studying such attempts can help provide a 'portrait of the developing child writer extending the range and assurance of his/her mastery in realising meanings through subordination' (Harpin, 1976, p.73).

In her book *Children's Writing and Reading*, Katharine Perera also concentrates on the linguistic features in children's writing and stresses that learning to write entails mastering not only the physical forms of letters, spellings and punctuation, but also the structural and organisational patterns that characterise written language (Perera, 1984, p.207). One of her main interests is the interrelationship between speech and writing and Perera refers to the four phases outlined by Barry Kroll (1981) : preparation, consolidation, differentiation and integration. At the stage of *preparation* children are learning the basic mechanics of handwriting and spelling; at the *consolidation* stage children are able to express in writing what they can already say; at the *differentiation* stage composing is becoming automatic and writing begins to diverge from speech, taking on its own distinctive functions, syntactic structures and patterns of organisation. By the stage of *integration* children have such control of both oral and written language that they are able to make appropriate linguistic choices.

Assigning chronological ages to these phases is not easy, but Perera does suggest that, bearing in mind the work of researchers such as Harpin, it is possible to say that the consolidation stage begins at about 6 or 7 years and that the differentiation stage begins at about 9 or 10 years. She points out that many studies have found that grammatical structures rarely found in speech begin to appear in children's writing during the third and fourth years

of the junior school (National Curriculum Years 5 and 6) and this provides evidence of differentiation between speech and writing. Like Harpin, Perera is careful to emphasise that studies of this nature concentrate on children's developing ability to handle the structures of written language and that this is only one aspect of learning to be a writer.

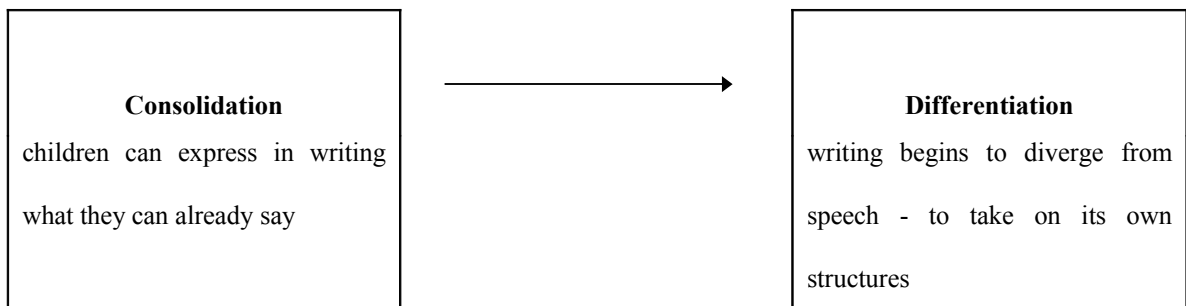
Perera discusses the use of compound sentences in children's writing and points out that 'and' can be used in different ways to express chronological sequence, causality and other relationships. She notes that children gradually lose their dependence on co-ordination as a means of joining clauses and develop a range of other ways of connecting their ideas. She shows how writing development can be related to an increasing use of subordinate clauses, and of a wider variety of clause types.

Putting together the evidence from three studies, Perera charts a comparison of the rate of occurrence of finite subordinate clauses in children's speech and writing and then the proportions of different clause types used in children's writing. From this she describes a broad picture of development based on the suggestions that nominal and adverbial clauses occur extensively from ages 7 to 17; relative clauses are initially infrequent, but their occurrence increases significantly during the school years. She relates the use of nominal clauses to the type of writing rather than to developmental level, as such clauses appear more in personal narratives and little in descriptive writing. Adverbial clauses of time occur early and often in children's writing and Perera identifies the use of a variety of adverbial clause types, such as place, manner and concession clauses, as a sign of linguistic



maturity. She also notes that the occurrence of relative clauses in writing doubles between the ages of seven and ten.

In the light of the work of Harpin and Perera in particular, it was decided to analyse the use of different syntactical structures in children's writing when tackling different tasks and then to consider the implications for curriculum provision. In Kroll's terms, it is concerned with progress from 'consolidation' to 'differentiation':



### SAMPLE AND TASKS

The children whose writing was studied comprised a group of 22 seven to nine year olds whose attainment was judged to be between National Curriculum Levels 2/3. The circumstances for the writing tasks were carefully arranged so that each child's experience was as similar as could be organised, thus providing a common basis for comparison. The writing was undertaken in the children's own classrooms and was completed in silence, so that the children's writing would give an indication of what they were individually capable of. The tasks were set in exactly the same way each time, with identical input and instructions. The children were assured that, although they were expected to do their best work, the teacher was more interested in what their writing actually said than in the details of their spelling and handwriting. No help was given with spelling and the pieces were not

edited in any way when finished, unless the individual children decided to do this themselves. The tasks were given at intervals over a period of six weeks during the Spring Term.

The detailed description of tasks set for the Crediton Project (Wilkinson et al., 1980) was used as a basis for writing which the children were asked to do and Tasks 1 and 4 were drawn directly from the report of this project. Although the Crediton research was very different in focus, its tasks seemed more appropriate for the purposes of this investigation than the mere collection of samples, being quite prescriptive and offering each child a very similar experience. The tasks were chosen in order to provide a broad sample of writing whilst being still similar in demand to the kind of tasks regularly set by the class teachers.

**Task 1 - The saddest / happiest day of my life:** an autobiographical narrative.

**Task 2 - The Day of the Storm:** a re-telling of a version of the Bible story of Jesus calming the storm

**Task 3 - I found a hole yesterday:** the continuation of a 'story starter' provided by a picture and the first few lines of a story.

**Task 4 - The Bike Ride:** The children were given a 'story map' which depicted a child starting out on a bike ride. The task involved choosing a route for the bike ride and to write an account of what happened along the way.

**Task 5 - How to Play:** an account of how to play a game well-known to the child, for someone who had never played it before. As this was a kind of explanatory writing of which

they had had little experience, this task was given more introduction than the others.(e.g. suggesting that the children imagined themselves playing the game as they wrote).

After the tasks were completed, the children's writing was typed out and spelling mistakes were corrected so that attention could be 'focused on the structure of the language and not on its sometimes bizarre surface appearance' (Perera, 1984, p.211). Punctuation and sentence structure were left in the original forms and no other changes were made to the writing. The total number of clauses per text ranged from seven to 80, with a median of 17.

#### INDEX OF SUBORDINATION

The texts were first analysed for the number of clauses. A clause was taken to be a unit of language which contains one (and only one) finite verb or verb phrase, regardless of the actual sentence structure, i.e. the presence of full stops or other punctuation.

Example (clauses contained in square brackets; finite verbs underlined) :

[One day it was my birthday] [and my cousin came] [and I was poorly] [and I couldn't cut my cake]. [My nana cut my cake] [and my mum opened my presents]  
[I did not eat anything]

(7 clauses)

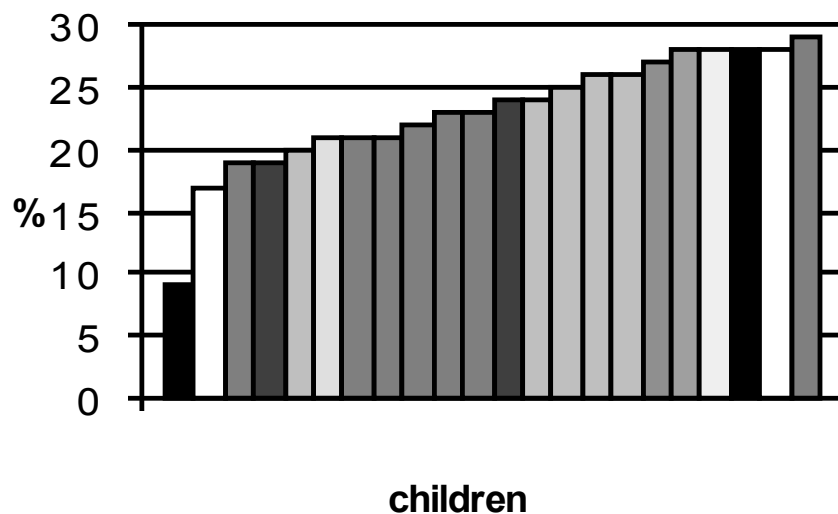
Then a division was made into co-ordinate and subordinate clauses. Co-ordinate clauses are independent; subordinate clauses are dependent on a main clause.

Example (subordinate clauses contained in round brackets) :

[Then the next morning she died] [and we was all crying all day.] [We couldn't come to school] (because we went to the funeral for my grandma) [and her big girl was crying] [she is called Dawn.]

(6 clauses; 1 subordinate clause)

An index of subordination (subordinate clauses as a proportion of all clauses) was found for each child based on an analysis of all samples of writing for that particular child and expressed as a percentage (Figure 1). It is recognised that percentages for raw scores of under a hundred need to be treated with care, but the use of percentages here may add a helpful means of comparison.

Figure 1 *Index of subordination (as a percentage)*

There was an mean index of subordination of 23%, higher than that found by Harpin, who quotes 12% -16% for Year 3 and 16% -19% for Year 4 children, according to type of writing undertaken. However, the graph illustrates the wide range within the group whose writing is reported in this paper, from 9% to 29%. All children used subordinate clauses, although not all of them used subordination in each of the five pieces of writing reported here. Co-ordination was still the most prevalent means of joining ideas, with some children almost

totally dependent on the conjunction 'and'. One child used only eight subordinate clauses out of a total 93 clauses in the five texts. No child stood out as having a consistently much higher proportion of subordination than any other, but some children were scoring very highly for their age compared with the findings from other research.

#### TYPES OF SUBORDINATE CLAUSE

The subordinate clauses used were classified into three types: adverbial, nominal, relative.

Examples :

*(When she got to her gran's )* [she was soaking wet.]

(Adverbial clause of time)

[she was thinking] *(how to get across)*

(Nominal clause acting as object)

[I saw a tree] *(that someone had pulled out of the green grass.)*

(Relative clause modifying the noun 'tree')

Figure 2 shows the proportion of subordinate clause types used in all the writing of each individual child, with the raw scores in adjacent brackets).

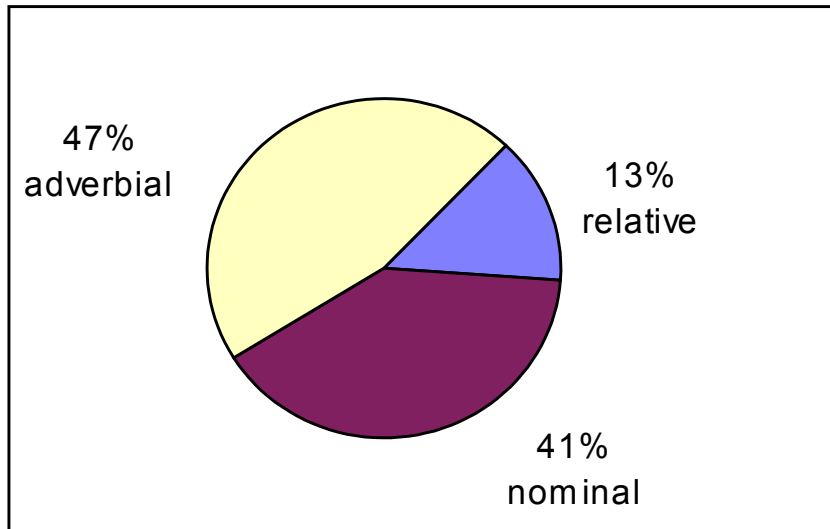
Figure 2 *Kinds of subordinate clauses used by each child, as a percentage of all subordinate clauses (raw totals in brackets)*

	<b>adverbial clauses</b>	<b>nominal clauses</b>	<b>relative clauses</b>
Stephen	58 (19/23)	36 (12/33)	6 (2/33)
Sarah	64 (18/28)	29 (9/28)	7 (2/28)
Christina	81 (9/11)	9 (1/11)	9 (1/11)
Gemma	37 (3/8)	50 (4/8)	13 (1/8)
Carly	46 (14/30)	46 (14/30)	7 (2/30)
Samantha	24 (6/25)	72 (18/25)	4 (1/25)
Richard	43 (6/14)	57 (8/14)	0 (0/14)
Daniel	57 (9/21)	43 (12/21)	0 (0/21)
Robert	43 (9/21)	19 (4/21)	57 (8/21)
Natalie	57 (8/14)	36 (5/14)	7 (1/14)
Scott	53 (10/19)	21 (4/19)	26 (5/19)
Stacey	29 (4/14)	64 (9/14)	7 (1/14)
Gary	44 (8/18)	50 (9/18)	6 (1/18)
Nicola	50 (12/24)	33 (8/24)	17 (4/24)
Claire	45 (10/22)	32 (7/32)	23 (5/22)
Laura	48 (20/28)	43 (18/42)	10 (4/42)
Stephanie	46 (13/28)	46 (13/28)	7 (2/28)
Mark	39 (11/28)	57 (16/28)	4 (1/28)
Kayleigh	43 (12/28)	39 (11/28)	18 (5/28)
Jonathan	38 (8/21)	57 (12/21)	5 (1/21)
Kirsty	50 (14/28)	36 (10/28)	14 (4/28)
Susan	34 (10/29)	31 (9/29)	34 (10/29)
<b>Mean %</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Median %</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>

(all calculations rounded to the nearest whole)

The average overall for each clause type is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 *Mean use of each type of subordinate clause*



(all calculations rounded to the nearest whole)

These figures are comparable with Harpin's results, whose findings were: Nominal 38 - 46%; Adjective (relative) 11 - 16%; and Adverbial 43 - 46%. Again there was a wide range within the group, as illustrated in Figures 4, 5 and 6. Significant differences were found when the raw score totals of both adverbial and nominal clauses in the present study were compared with the raw score totals of relative clauses. **[John to add in]**

The *Adverbial clause* is obviously prevalent, as other research has also found. Every child used adverbial clauses at some stage and many used them in each piece of writing. Adverbial clauses of time (when, after), reason (because) were most common, but condition clauses were used quite regularly in the 'How to play..' task.

*Nominal clauses* were used most frequently in direct speech and this accounts for the high score in some individual children's narrative samples. But nominal clauses were also used



after such words as ‘thought’, ‘mentions’, ‘decide’, ‘hope’ indicating the influence of the move from the use of direct to the use of indirect speech identified by Harpin.

Figure 4 *Use of adverbial clauses, as a percentage of all subordinate clauses, by individual children*

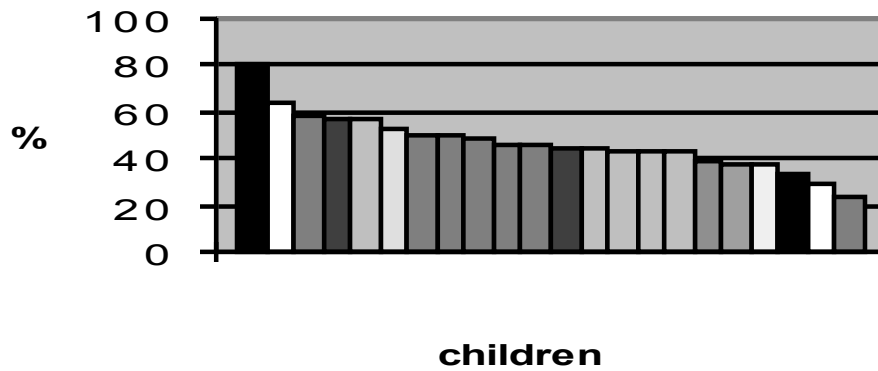


Figure 5 *Use of nominal clauses, as a percentage of all subordinate clauses, by individual children*

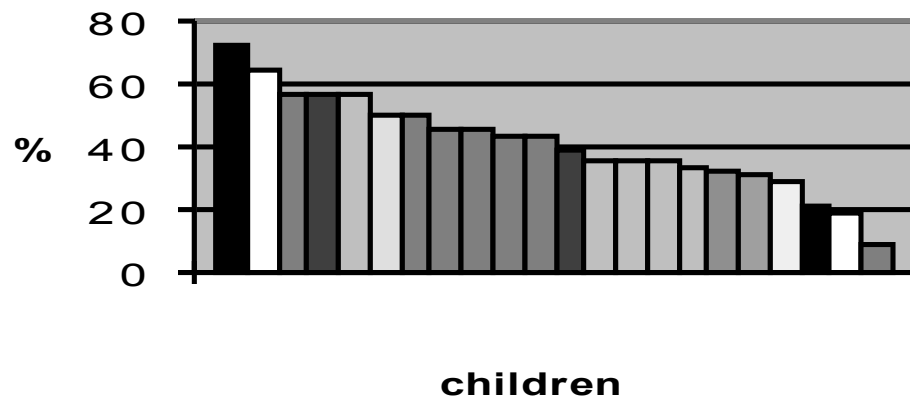
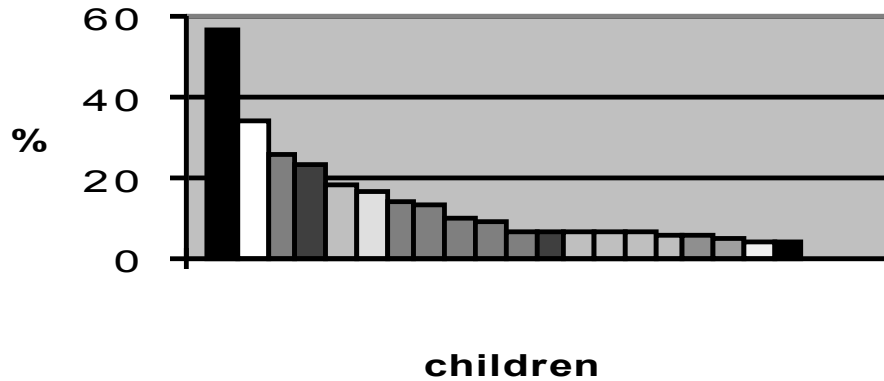


Figure 6 *Use of relative clauses, as a percentage of all subordinate clauses, by individual children*



According to previous research, Figure 6 may reflect the fact that many of the children were only just beginning to use relative clauses in their writing. This would account for the generally lower frequency of relative clauses compared with adverbial and nominal clauses. This possibility is further supported by Figure 7, which shows the numbers of children using a total number of relative clauses of between zero and ten. As can be seen, over half the group (13) used a total of two relative clauses or fewer.

Figure 7 *Number of relative clauses used in all five texts*

number of relative clauses used	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
number of children	2	7	4	0	3	4	0	0	0	1	1

It is significant that the two children at the top of the scale used relative clauses in most of their writing but the same two children, whilst scoring highly in subordination generally (24% / 28%), used relatively fewer nominal clauses compared with other children. This further reflects Harpin's finding that, as children move through the junior school (Key Stage 2), they use subordination increasingly freely but, in so doing, they reduce the emphasis on noun clauses and compensate for this by employing relative clauses more often.

#### SUBORDINATION WITHIN WRITING TASKS

The frequency of use of subordination within each writing task was analysed (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 *Index of subordination (as a percentage) - writing tasks compared*

	<b>Game</b>	<b>Day</b>	<b>Storm</b>	<b>Hole</b>	<b>Ride</b>
Stephen	43	14	32	15	25
Sarah	31	40	17	36	18
Christina	27	6	23	20	13
Gemma	23	0	14	3	8
Carly	23	46	19	15	36
Samantha	20	15	28	14	29
Richard	13	25	17	38	10
Daniel	13	38	37	18	4
Robert	39	38	0	35	14
Natalie	27	15	22	37	20
Scott	41	40	29	4	0

Stacey	14	31	32	13	6
Gary	31	14	29	17	20
Nicola	42	28	25	12	22
Claire	33	9	13	41	31
Laura	43	24	31	14	24
Stephanie	17	23	20	19	17
Mark	33	42	14	9	29
Kayleigh	32	15	18	26	18
Jonathan	30	33	29	26	53
Kirsty	40	15	24	25	12
Susan	50	19	13	9	25
<b>Mean %</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Median %</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>S.D.</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>

(all calculations rounded to the nearest whole)

The high level of subordination used in the piece of writing ‘How to play . . .’ may reflect the challenge of the task for most children and the way it encouraged them to use greater amounts of subordination in order to cope with the linguistic demands which it presented. This finding echoes that from other research which has found evidence for a higher level of linguistic skill being required and used for non-narrative writing (Harris and Wilkinson, 1986, p.31). The lowest mean scores were in the writing undertaken for the two ‘story projection’ tasks, one involving a continuation of a story starter and the other a projected recount based on a story map. The relatively small sample size limited the possibilities of statistical analysis but the emerging difference between the use of subordination in the explanation, the two recounts and the two projected stories may repay further investigation in larger-scale studies. This study provided some indication that the type of task had an influence on the way children used subordination and this issue will now be taken up in the profiles of individual children.

## SOME INDIVIDUAL PROFILES

The following section draws upon an analysis of the work of some individual children. It represents the beginning of a response to the suggestion of Harpin that ‘A detailed study of the steps by which children move from the relatively clumsy joining devices of their early language explorations towards the power and sophistication of the adult system would be extremely rewarding’ (Harpin, 1976, p.69). The analysis is concerned with children’s use of three kinds of subordinate clause (adverbial, nominal and relative) and excerpts from the writing of different children is used as illustration.

### ADVERBIAL CLAUSES

Some children appeared to need more help with connecting ideas using simple adverbial clauses. Gary, for instance, in ‘The Bike Ride’, used 20 clauses, only three of which were subordinate: one nominal after said; and two adverbial connected by ‘because’ and ‘when’. ‘Then’ was used eight times and ‘so’ five times. ‘So’ could perhaps be seen as introducing subordinate clauses, but the relationships between clause was generally vague between temporal and causal relationships ( e.g. ‘...so I went on. So I went down...’. The only exception to this was used in ‘I saw some sheep (so I went all the way back home to get my dog)’. Many clauses are almost subordinated, but Gary was not able to give sufficient attention to how ideas are connected and his writing appeared rather disjointed. He appeared to need more help with connecting ideas using simple adverbial clauses.

Laura, on the other hand was more confident in using common adverbial clauses especially those introduced by ‘because’ and ‘when’. In her piece on ‘The day of the Storm’ she

experimented with an adverbial clause of result using the connective ‘so . . . that’. Having used the structure once :

I was so tired (*that I laid down on a pillow . . .*)

she soon repeated it in a different context :

My friend Carly was so frightened (*that she went down the steps . . .*)

It might be significant that the story which was read aloud as part of the task uses the same structure three times. Laura seemed to have taken note of the structure and begun to make more use of it herself.

Other children seemed to respond to the opportunities provided by a specific task by beginning to experiment in using common adverbial clauses in different ways. In his piece on ‘The saddest day’ Mark used ‘when’ to introduce a subordinate clause of time six times but not always in the same way. He showed he was able to put the subordinate clause at the beginning of a sentence:

(*When Sarah heard about Fella dying*) she was very sad.

and used this construction several times elsewhere in the text. But he also embedded the same clause in the main clause :

but (*when we got in the car*) I cried.

This was a very personal piece of writing and its 42% level of subordination may have reflected how hard Mark had worked to express his feelings, as none of his other pieces of writing had anything like this proportion of subordination.

The subordination of other children seemed to be respond to the demands of a particular task Scott , for instance, in ‘How to play’ seemed very confident in using subordinate clauses and used an adverbial clause of condition three times with the connective ‘if’. He does not always do this, as will be seen later. He also showed he is able to embed this structure in a main clause :

or (*if it is the other way round*) you turn the black over

### NOMINAL CLAUSES

Most children were using nominal clauses for direct speech, leading to the high percentage in some pieces of writing.

Samantha : The Bike Ride

. . . [Then Sarah saw a man.] [The man said to Sarah] (*“My name is Joe.”*) [What’s yours.”] [Sarah said] (*“My name is Sarah.”*) (*“Would you like to come home with me”*) [said Joe.] [“Yes please.” said Sarah.] (*“We can go in my tractor”*) [said Joe.] [“What about my bike” said Sarah.] (*“You could ride it”*) said Joe.] (*“Yes I will”*) [said Sarah.] Joe took Sarah to his house . . .

Direct speech seemed to be a feature of much of Samantha’s writing and this is accurately punctuated. Although this piece began with a narrative, she took the first opportunity to revert to speech. Some children in the group were beginning to make the transition from direct to indirect speech and used different words to introduce nominal clauses.

Robert used :

I didn’t know (what heaven was)

I thought (she went on holiday)

I wish (there wasn't a word called dead)

Carly used nominal clauses for direct and indirect speech :

i) direct speech : Her Mum said (*why don't you take some food?*)

ii) transition from direct to indirect speech :

She said to her mum (*that it was quite a long way.*)

iii) indirect speech :

Rachel asked her mum (*if she could go and sleep at her friend's house.*)

Only a few children were using nominal clauses not connected with speech :

Natalie : So they found out (*what it was*) a mouse

Stephanie uses the relatively formal structure with nominal clause as subject :

(*Whoever has the biggest score*) wins.

## RELATIVE CLAUSES

Children appeared to vary considerably in their confidence in using relative clauses. There were a few examples of children beginning to use them, but they often remained 'speech-related', in that the clauses followed a non-standard form.:

- and then there was this wall (*what you had to touch*)



- The number (*what you get*) you take that number.
- the road (*what I took*)

Some children were able to use relative clauses in more complex structures :

- At the end (*who wins*) is the one (*who have all their counters in the other place.*)
- I told her all the things (*that had happened*) and all the things (*I saw.*)

Susan was one of the few children who appeared very confident in the use of relative clauses. She used them in each piece of writing :

- they [sic] was a brown bear (*that sat down*)
- the little house (*where mother washed up*)
- the man (*who was driving a tractor along the road*)

In her piece of writing, ‘How to Play Monopoly’, she was able to use relative clauses in different ways in order to help her with the explanation :

You have to get a person to be a banker. A banker is a person (*who gives you money*) (*and who you give money to*). You have to roll the dice if you land on a square it might say roller coaster and there will be a price underneath. If you want to go on the roller coaster you pay the price (*it says on the bottom.*) You have some little houses and if you do not want to go on the roller coaster you put a house on the square (*that says roller coaster.*) . .

From these examples it can be seen that the children’s writing showed a variety of features which indicated their varying grasp of different grammatical structures. From the very

simple connection of ideas, they were progressing to more precise expression and beginning to experiment with different structures. At first the structures may be closely related to those of speech and may not be expressed in standard forms, but there were signs of a general move towards a more literary style as the children began to transfer structures they had read or heard read to their own writing.

### SOME CONCLUSIONS

The original intention in this study was to attempt to identify some aspects of the development of children's writing by analysing samples of written work. In order to obtain a broad indication of the children's performance, a range of tasks was set and it is important to relate the discussion of grammatical development to the nature of these tasks. This is by no means a new concern. Both the substantial studies referred to earlier, Harpin (1976) and Perera (1984) draw attention to the central importance of context and task in writing, particularly purpose and audience.

Harpin, for instance, discusses the different contexts for writing and emphasises the need for purpose. He sees writing as an integral part of the learning process : Writing constitutes the act of perceiving the shape of experience *and* of reshaping it (Harpin, 1976, p.92). Perera emphasises much more the effects of particular demands that a writing task makes on the process of writing and what linguistic difficulties are likely to be associated with different types of writing.

In the study of individual children's writing reported in this paper, it was possible to sense some aspects of the process children were going through as they put ideas into words. Indications of 'task involvement' provide helpful support in planning appropriate tasks for children to tackle in writing. The level of involvement is the important factor, as the writing of Mark and Robert illustrates. Robert produced a very complex piece of writing on the subject of grandparents dying (38% subordination); in his story about the bike ride he used only two subordinate clauses (14% subordination). The nature of the tasks clearly had an effect on the development of writing, but it is also important to avoid any kind of formulaic analysis. Indications of growth and development have to be set against the sense of authenticity in a piece of writing, as a child weaves the tapestry of vocabulary and grammar in ways which seem best to meet a particular communicative need at a particular time.

This paper has shown that, in the area of grammatical structure, it is possible to trace certain general lines of development in children's writing. Children seem to 'follow a common path, though at different speeds and with some variations in what is gathered along the way.' (Harpin, 1976, p.130). This 'common path' does not necessarily relate directly to the logic of grammatical structure, but is more to do with the ability to use acquired skills in order to express more complex ideas in writing than may have been tackled in the past. This is illustrated in the individual's struggle to express more precisely what they have to say. Examples of this struggle have been seen especially in the 'How to play. . .' pieces of writing.

Harpin poses the question : Is it enough to offer a wide range of language experiences and an encouragement to experiment . . . ?' (Harpin, 1976, p.130). The examples of 'coasting', such as in Scott's stories, where little progress was evident, provides support for arguments for 'some form of direct interventions whose absence HMI have been critical in the context of English in Key Stages 1 and 2' (Ofsted, 1995, p.28).

The National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), with its provision of a daily literacy hour in primary schools and its framework of text, sentence and word level teaching, encourages teachers to make such interventions and to link them to whole class and group teaching on a daily basis. In fact, it is interesting to note that the literacy hour includes a number of elements which have been suggested in publications over several years, including: a sequence of planned language activities, regular opportunities for pupils to review and reflect upon their writing, the exploitation of reading-writing links, the discussion of distinctive textual features and the provision of differentiated work in writing development.

For example, Ofsted has called for more teaching which 'involves *a highly organised sequence* of planned language activities'. (Ofsted, 1994, Part 4, p.26, our italics). But, the case is for teaching *in context*, for Ofsted has criticised the over-use of limited worksheets the result of which was 'that children acquired skills out of context and did not learn to apply these by writing independently' (Ofsted, 1993, p.17). In the children studied here, for example, Gemma is not likely to be helped to develop a more fluent style by being given exercises in using 'better connectives'. Teacher intervention needs to be within the context of children's writing during the actual process, rather than in the form of exercises carried

out in isolation with the vague hope that children will hone skills which will improve their writing generally.

Another long-standing suggestion has come from Perera who has argued that 'the teacher's aim.....in seeking to foster more complex (writing) constructions, should be to ensure that pupils have a wide range of linguistic resources and can select from them appropriately as the occasion demands' (Perera, 1984, p.246). The daily literacy hour can regularly provide for this in differentiated group work which encourages pupils to reflect on what they have written. Such group work can allow them regularly to use their growing 'language awareness' to review their writing and to consider how the text might be further improved.

A major means of developing language awareness and thus the resources with which to reflect upon one's own writing is through reading. Perera (1986) has pointed to this factor: As children generally do not use many of the more typically written constructions in their speech, it follows that they need to learn them by reading extensively (Perera, 1986, p.107). It is no co-incidence that two of the most fluent writers in the sample; the ones who were seen to be most confident in trying out new language structures, Carly and Stephen, are also the two most fluent and avid readers.

In a later paper, Perera seems to anticipate the group reading aspect of the literacy hour by stressing that provision must also be made for the weaker readers by the teacher reading aloud to the class 'because, in this way, children are able to absorb structures of sentence and

discourse organisation from written material that would be too difficult for them to read themselves' (Perera, 1986, p.107).

Roger Beard (1991) also seems to envisage some elements of the literacy hour framework in a discussion of the influences which reading can have on the development of children's writing in the primary and middle years, including encouraging children to 'read like a writer'. He suggests that children are likely to benefit from having their attention drawn to examples of texts which illustrate the potential of written language to fulfil different purposes and to be structured in different modes and genres (Beard, 1991, p.22).

An example of how reading texts aloud may have an influence on children's own writing has been cited in the 'Storm' task. This had a more direct influence than may usually be the case but nevertheless is an indication of the kind of learning that conscious attention to reading-writing links can promote.

Perhaps the most important issue which is raised from the analysis of children's writing discussed in this paper is that of the need for differentiation, of individual needs being met. Again this links to the literacy hour framework and the extended writing (undertaken elsewhere in the curriculum) which can inform. If children are only provided with opportunities to practise writing and whole classes are being given the same task, with the only differentiation being by outcome, children are only going to progress by chance. Many of the children confirmed the earlier finding that 'the majority of children write about personal experiences confidently and competently' (DES, 1990b, p.18).

For example the 'Bike Ride' task seemed especially appropriate for Gemma, who was at the early stages of being able to structure stories and was obviously helped to grow in confidence by the context of the task. She did not have to think too much about what she was writing and could concentrate on getting the story on paper. On the other hand, the same task seemed rather limiting for Scott, who was capable of structuring his own story and did not need the prop the map was providing. He is likely to benefit from tasks in which he has to think about what he is trying to write. In his case a relatively undemanding task seemed not to promote growth or development.

The data from this investigation seemed to point for the need for *differentiation by task set*. The tasks themselves, although a little arbitrary in terms of time-scale, may have had considerable potential for promoting different kinds of writing, as Andrew Wilkinson and his Crediton project colleagues found. A more important question is how such tasks are used. The 'How to play' task seemed to be making the right demand on Scott, allowing him to develop his skills, but was inappropriate for Gemma, as it was too difficult and led to frustration.

In providing contexts for writing thought has to be given to what demands are inherent in the task and whether these are appropriate for particular children at the stage of their development. As Harpin reminds us, 'Writing skill will grow with practice, but if there are no guiding principles informing the setting and the response, any growth will depend for its

speed and strength on the uncertain operations of our intentions as teachers' (Harpin, 1976, p.155).

This investigation has charted some features of children's growth in writing but, in analysing individual children's development, it has also shown that they develop at different rates. It has indicated how this development is affected by the type of task provided and the demands being made. The implications are that teachers can have a very profound effect on the rate and quality of individual development through levels of expectation, the careful provision of tasks and the quality of intervention; they cannot just rely on 'skills growing with practice'. The other indications are that schools are likely to benefit from the 'guiding principles' outlined in school policies and practices which ensure that children's learning does not continue to be dependent on what Harpin (ibid.) calls 'the uncertain operations of our intentions as teachers'.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beard, R. (1991) 'Learning to Read Like a Writer' *Educational Review* 43, 1, 17-24.

Crystal, D. (1990) *The English Language*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

DES (Department of Education and Science) (1990a) *Standards in Education 1988-89*. London: DES.

DES (1990b) (Department of Education and Science) *The Teaching of Language and Literacy*. London: HMSO.



- DFE (Department for Education) (1995) *English in the National Curriculum*. London: HMSO.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (1998) *The National Literacy Strategy*. London: HMSO.
- Harpin, W (1976) *The Second 'R' : Writing Development in the Junior School*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Harris, J. and Wilkinson, J. (1986) *Reading Children's Writing: A Linguistic View*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) (1993) *Access and Achievement in Urban Education*. London: HMSO.
- Ofsted (1994) *Handbook for the Inspection of Schools*. London: HMSO.
- Ofsted (1995) *Standards and Quality in Education 1993-94*. London: HMSO.
- Perera, K. (1984) *Children's Writing and Reading: Analysing Classroom Language*. London: Blackwell.
- Perera, K. (1986) 'Grammatical differentiation between speech and writing in children aged 8 to 12'. in Wilkinson, A. (Ed.) *The Writing of Writing*. Milton Keynes; Open University Press.
- Smith, F. (1984) *Writing and the Writer (Second Edition)*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wilkinson, A. et al (1980) *Assessing Language Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.