Research Article

THE WRITING SKILLS OF THE NEXT GRADUATES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Current social contexts demand significant changes in the teaching approaches. Basic education seeks to develop skills that allow students to act and solve problems in their everyday life, putting practical and theoretical knowledge into practice. Because of its relevance for communication and learning, writing has become one of the priorities of the educative system. Therefore, the curricula establish that students, upon finishing primary school, should be able to produce texts that enable them to communicate effectively.This research analyzes the writing skills of 90 sixth graders in order to observe if their narratives achieve clear and accurate linguistic interaction. For this study, children's narratives have been revised based on Cassany's (2011) review guide. This author proposes to analyze ten aspects in a text: focus, information, structure, paragraphs, phrases, words, punctuation, level of formality, rhetorical resources and presentation. These aspects will allow to assess student's writing in comparison with the standards indicated in the graduation profile of Basic Education.

INTRODUCTION

School has always placed special emphasis on literacy learning. Knowing how to read and write allows human communication at different levels; because of this, it is considered a necessary tool to educate for life. Arnáez Muga (2009) notes that writing and reading are two of the fundamental pillars to build linguistic and social knowledge. Although these two communicative processes are interrelated, they imply different competences in the use of language and information management. For this reason, this work is focused exclusively on the writing of sixth grade Mexican students.

Writing skills are critical to language development in elementary education, because they allow students to establish social interactions based on written communication.Our study seeks to evaluate the characteristics of the texts produced by school children, who are about to finish primary school. This research was focused on three groups of sixth grade in the school "Rafael Ramírez", an elementary school located in Jardines del Nilo, a middle-class suburb of Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. The participating students were a total of 90 children between 11 and 13 years old, 47 men and 43 women. The reviewed writings were narratives prepared at the end of three classes. These sessions allowed to monitor the performance of the students, as well as give them indications about the structure and extension of their texts. However, each one's writing methods were respected, because it was not our intention to give them techniques, but to analyze their writing processes.

Theoretical-Methodological Approach

Current educational approaches require the development of life skills and critical thinking. According to the Integral Reform of Basic Education (Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica - RIEB), competency-based education constitutes a specific reference of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that students develop throughout fifteen years of Basic Education (SEP, 2011a). In this way, learning not only implies the accumulation of knowledge but also its implementation.

The teaching of the language in elementary school has a communicative purpose, that will allow the student to interact with other people, by expressing their thoughts orally and in writing. This perspective of the teaching-learning process responds to a need to link the classroom`s dynamics with the social reality of the pupils. Student-centered learning considers knowledge as a praxis; hence, the main objective of language is the expression and exchange of ideas.

Writing does not consist in the right line of words or in copying sentences, but to use their abilities to develop their own productions with a specific communicative purpose. Camps explains (2003: 10) that the aim of teaching the uses of oral and written language is "to know how the teaching and learning activities enable students construct their linguistic and

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communicative knowledge"[1], as well as to acquire the necessary skills to speak and write in a functional communicative way.

Arnáez Muga (2009: 290) considers that writing must appropriate procedural conceptualization, in order to "break the stigma that associates it with the stroke of letters and the transcription of the oral sentences"[2]. From this approach, the rescue of previous knowledge and the follow-up of learning is fundamental to appropriate basic knowledge in a communicative interaction. Before preschool, children have their first approaches with written language. Little by little, as their academic preparation begins and advances, they start to write more and more complex documents.

In early grades of elementary education, student's tasks consist of brief writings; in subsequent years, children are introduced to a variety of texts: news, reports, fiction, poetry, narrative, historical documents, among others. Thus, to conclude the sixth grade, pupils have elaborated informal texts, academic writings and even some literary work. Bruner (2011: 77) affirms that "one of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication is narrative. Narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression". Due to the importance of this genre and its familiarity to children, this research has studied narrative texts produced by sixth graders. The graduation profile for the primary education student establishes that, at the end of the sixth grade, pupils will be able to use their mother language to communicate clearly and fluently, both orally and in writing, as well as interact in different social and cultural contexts (SEP, 2011a). About the development of writing skills, the curricula states that the expression of ideas and arguments will allow the creation of clear and precise texts, suitable to the reader and consistent with the context of use. According to this, the curriculum standards define eleven features that pupils will show in the production of written texts (SEP, 2011b):

1. They communicate knowledge and ideas in writing, establishing an order and making explicit the cause and effect relationships of the text.
2. They produce wide range of texts with different communicative purposes for specific audiences.
3. They distinguish formal and informal language, and use them properly when writing different types of texts
4. They consult information from two or three sources, without any help.
5. They describe and explain different phenomena using an impersonal writing style.
6. They organize their texts in structured paragraphs, using punctuation in a conventional manner.
7. They manage various linguistic and literary resources in sentences and in their written essays.
8. They take notes to recover central ideas, when reviewing written texts or listening to oral presentations of previously studied topics.
9. They correct their own productions in order to ensure their communicative purpose.
10. They practice conventional spelling when writing.
11. They use various sources of consultation to verify the correct spelling (dictionaries, glossaries and other books)

The National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación - INEE) has developed a study comparing the writing expertise in students about to finish primary and secondary school. The results showed that only 30% of sixth graders and 38% of junior high students reach the minimum acceptable level according to the parameters established by the Integral Reform of Basic Education (Backh off Escudero *et al.*, 2006). These results concern because writing is essential for children to build and understand their "personal, social, cultural, political, scientific reality ..., and to communicate to others their own fantasies and illusions, anguish, feelings, emotions"[3] (Ramos, 2009: 55).

This research is a study conducted to analyzestudents' writing productions, in order to evaluate the skills of sixth graders at the Rafael Ramírez Elementary School. This school was chosen to work, because it is a large institution that houses three groups of each grade, which allowed to have a sufficient sample (90 pupils). In addition, the school community has varied characteristics. Of the children that constitute the sample, 52 belong to middle class families dedicated to commercial activity and employees; 17 to families of professionals, also of middle or upper middle class; and 21 to families of lower middle class, two of which have strong economic problems.

The purpose of this research is to assess the writing skills of the next graduates of primary education; for this, the analysis follows the guidelines proposed by Cassany (2011) in *La cocina de la escritura (The Kitchen of Writing)*. This author proposes ten aspects to evaluate in a text: focus, information, structure, paragraphs, phrases, words, punctuation, level of formality, rhetorical resources and presentation. These general features will allow us to review the written productions of the students in terms of their formal, communicative and organizational aspects.

Writing, from the perspective of this author, constitutes a linguistic system, with specific organization, functions and rules. To express ideas clearly and precisely, students need to develop skills that enable them to follow the structure, form and substance of written language, as well as take advantage of the tools used in different types of texts.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

As it was pointed out, the texts produced by the students were evaluated based on the guidelines proposed by Cassany (2011). Next, this paper describes the data found about the elements assessed, in order to review the results of our analysis.

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[1] El objetivo de la enseñanza de los usos del lenguaje oral y escrito es saber de qué forma las actividades de enseñanza y aprendizaje permiten a los aprendices construir su conocimiento lingüístico-comunicativo, entendido como la capacidad de llevar a cabo actividades lingüístico-comunicativas significativas y, a la vez conocer de qué modo las actividades comunicativas dan sentido a los conocimientos explícitos que son necesarios para progresar en su dominio (Camps, 2003: 10).
[2] La escritura debe romper con el estigma que la asocia a la graficación de letras o a la transcripción de lo oral y apropiarse de la conceptuación procesal (Arnáez Muga, 2009: 290).

[3] La preocupación por estos resultados se debe a la importancia de la escritura para la construcción e interpretación de la "realidad personal, social, cultural, política, científica…, y para comunicar a los demás sus propias fantasías e ilusiones, angustias, sentimientos, emociones" (Ramos, 2009: 55).

Focus of the written

The selected approach reveals if a text is suitable for the communicative situation and fulfills its purpose. For this reason, it allows to observe if the writer develops clearly and precisely a thesis with a specific purpose and motivation. The analysis reveal that all the participants use a written language with traits of orality. This situation is evident due to the use of anoral language syntax, as well as phonetic constructions that mimic colloquial speech.

The usage of structures and oral forms in written expression shows a deficient domain of these types of languages. In fact, some of the problems found can be explained by this transposition of the oral and written codes. Tuson Valls (1991: 15) states that the "errors" detected in texts produced by students are mostly "marks or interferences of the pragmatic and cognitive characteristics of orality, which result in the elaboration of pragmatically inadequate texts"[4].

In the reviewed tasks, the influence of context and mass communication-such as the Internet, cinema or television–was noticeable. An example of this can be the constant references to other languages; 40% of students used names of people or institutions in English, regardless they wrote their texts in Spanish. With this, the students "placed" their stories in the spaces they have seen in different media and imitated familiar narrative forms.

Ideas and information

This aspect considers the sufficiency, accuracy and ownership of the information exposed, as well as if proper information was selected. The narratives reveal that the students do not follow a writing process. Although they were given time to think and organize their stories, most of the texts were elaborated in an improvised manner. In fact, only 20% of the students proposes a central thesis that serves as the axis to elaborate their writing.

Being able to organize the ideas in a logical and coherent manner is an important element related to the use of information. However, 20% of the stories does not have a logical and coherent sequence, especially due to poor organization in the ideas; for this reason, they start with a premise that they do not build. This lack of order and sequence can also be observed in loose ideas without developing or in outcomes that do not correspond with the managed events.

Cassany (2011) also proposes to consider the balance between theory and practice to evaluate academic texts, as well as to confirm if arguments, data, explanations and opinions are presented with a method that allow the reader to develop clear ideas. Because the students produced creative texts, it was not possible to assess this aspect; nevertheless, only half of the written productions show actions consistent with the characters and the plot.

Structure

A proper structure contributes to the readability of the text, since it allows to hierarchize the information, highlight the most important data, specify the point of view of the author and the sequence of his ideas. The basic structure of a writing,

whether academic or creative, distinguishes four elements: title, start, development and closure. The participating pupils received a format to prepare their narratives, which contained a space for each of these elements. In spite of this, the third part of them could not elaborate a text that matches each one of the aspects; it is to say, the beginning stretched to the knot of the plot, or the ending started from the climax of the story.

The disparity between the content and what was requested in the exercise was due to the fact that the writing was not prepared considering the sections of the format (title, beginning, development or closure), but based on the extension of each table. So, the students wrote as far as they can regardless of the content. In addition to this phenomenon, it should be noted that there were two stories with very short start and ending. One of them began with "once upon a time there was Rafael" (habia una ves Rafael); and the other one finish with "they lived happily ever after and the end" (bivieron felices para siempre y fin).

At the moment of planning the work and materials to be used in the sessions, the relevance of giving students a format for writing their text was pondered. The main concern was how this could affect the structure of the products. In the end, a scheme was delivered in order to help them organize their texts, as well as to motivate them to write at least one full page. When reviewing the stories, it became evident that the format's influence was minimal, since the correspondence between the content and the section was not respected. Another element that also reveals the lack of attention to the designated structure was the fact that 23% of the children forgot to put the title, even though it was also indicated on the sheet.

Paragraphs

Each paragraph exposes a specific aspect of the topic, so it is recommended to state an initial phrase or thesis that the writer must develop. According to Cassany (2011), to evaluate this aspect, the analysis should consider the thematic unit, the extension, as well as the number of phrases that are included. The narratives elaborated by the students showed that this feature constitutes one of the biggest problems in the children's writing.

The monothematic paragraphs organized around an explicit idea were not present in any of the stories of the participants. By contrast, in 97% of the texts, there was no separation of paragraphs; the only spaces in the narrative were the frames marked in the delivered format. However, as it was mentioned, the contents of the schemes did not match the requested information in the third part of the texts, so they also did not have a thematic unit.

The absence of punctuation affected readability, length and structure of paragraphs in 48% of narratives. As a logical consequence, the paragraphs of these writings are made up of a single big sentence, which makes reading and understanding very difficult. The section 7 focus deeper into the problem of punctuation.

Phrases

The guide of Cassany (2011) suggests avoiding the abuse of subordinate, negative, passive or too long phrases. As for extension, the author recommends the use of sentences of different lengths to give fluidity to the narration. Reviewed

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[4]Los "errores" de los textos escritos por nuestros estudiantes se pueden explicar como marcas o interferencias de las características pragmáticas y cognitivas de la oralidad, que tienen como resultado la elaboración de textos pragmáticamente inadecuado (Tucson, 1991: 15)

stories showed that all the participants formulate simple sentences, without subordinations, with the basic structure of the Spanish language (subject - verb - complements). Nevertheless, the texts are not very readable and are difficult to understand, due to the lack of a correct punctuation.

The use of short and simple sentences in the writing of pupils strongly called attention, because in researches done previously with university students, the opposite phenomenon was observed. Their essays are characterized by the abuse of subordinate phrases that hinder the comprehension of the text (Margarito and Quezada: 2017). This contrast could be the result of the different degrees of conceptualization of written language that kids and adults have. The university students produce their texts with distinctive structures from those of their daily speech, while the schoolchildren do not manage to establish a precise differentiation between orality and writing. Cassany (2011) proposes to observe whether the text reveals any drafting tic, that is, complete sentences or fragments of phrases that are repeated frequently. The author also recommends not to abuse of the subsections or enumerations. Since the students' writing consisted of a narrative of a creative nature, the work did not lend itself to the use of vignettes and no child used them.

The development of writing skills is not consistent in elementary schools. The comments during the session and the subsequent feedback revealed that creative writing is not a frequent exercise for students. Their tasks, in general, have a more academic character, with elements of transcription and are usually guided by their teachers. Perhaps because of this situation, the children have not developed noticeable tics; the only relevant repetition was the use of fixed phrases in 78% of the texts, especially to start or end their stories.

Words

Reviewing words shows if the text has used clichés, buzzwords or excessive repetition. The analysis proves that students use the same words over and over without any control, especially nouns. This situation is the result of using oral features while writing. None of the participants try synonyms as a strategy against the abuse of certain terms.

Besides the nouns, there was also another kind of words in which schoolchildren used many repetitions: the nexuses. The third part of the texts uses only the conjunction "and" as a connector.As a consequence, the narrative seems like a sequence of actions, one after another. Some stories also indicate the order of the text, with nexuses such as "then", "finally", "at last". The cause-consequence connectors were the least used; only two students incorporate them.

Checking the words also help to assess if the appropriate terms have been used. About 53% of the writings has errors in the correct use of words; example of this, are the following phenomena:

- Vowel switching; like "pasiar" (pasear - ride), "copear" (copiar - copy), "mensajió"(mensajeó - texted)
- Contraction of words; like "derrepente" (de repente - suddenly), "ala" (a la – to the)
- Omission of contractions; like "de el" (del – of the)
- All texts have problems with the conventional spelling. Misspellings do not reveal a systematic confusion of the correct use of a word, as in the same text there were correct and incorrect forms.

- The use of h: either the omission of the silent h, or its substitution by other letters in the cases that it has a sound; like "ola" (hola – hello) o "gueso" (hueso – bone).
- The exchange of consonants with similar phonemes in Spanish: b-v; s-c; g-j; y-i; y-ll; ge-gue; z-s; ñ-ll. Due to this exchange of letters, there are some incorrect uses of homophones, such as when they write "valla" (fence) instead of "vaya" (go).
- 85% of the stories does not have any tildes (accent marks). These orthographic signs are necessary for the correct spelling in Spanish, however there are several missing in all the texts. The most common marks placed by school children correspond to the interrogative pronouns, the ending "-ía" of the imperfect in Spanish, as well as acute words ending with the vowel "n". For this last case, sometimes students accentuated words that did not require it, as in "fuerón" (fueron – they went). The accent marks that participants forgot more frequently were those of the past tense verbs in the third person of the singular.
- Students frequently omit the umlaut; almost 50% of the words that required it did not have it.
- The use of capital letters constitutes another strong problem. 85% capitalized names of people and places; however, in 30% of the writings, they forgot to capitalize the first letter of each paragraph. In summary, 85% of the students omitted some capital letters.
- In Spanish, a hyphen is used when the word does not fit in one line and must be continued in the next. The orthographic rule indicates that this separation must be done according to the syllables of the words. 90% of the students does not follow this rule; instead they wrote the letters that fit, regardless of whether they broke a syllable or not.
- 15% of schoolchildren tends to omit letters
- 8% conjugates irregular verbs incorrectly.
- The influence of non-academic writings is evident in 15% of the stories, such as the forms used in social networks. For example, the unconventional "abbreviations", such as "k" instead of "que" (that) or the initial letter instead of the complete name ("R."-"Raúl").

Not all spelling problems are a consequence of a poor assimilation of the rules; sometimes they happen because students write mimicking their way of speaking. This explains the changes of letters or mistakes in verbal conjugations. Some other errors are due to the fact that children lack the habit of reviewing their work; for this reason, there are omissions of simple letters or oversights.

Punctuation

Punctuation is a necessary tool to understand writing language. For this reason, the location and proportion of punctuation marks must be reviewed. All texts produced by the participant students have errors using these marks. Some mistakes are due to a bad placing; but, most are a consequence of their absence. In fact, half of the stories do not have any punctuation mark. In addition, the writings that do have them do not present a systematic use of them. Thus, there was no conventional use of the grammar rules in any of the texts.

As it was already stated, no punctuation marks cause the lack of separation between sentences or between paragraphs. The mixture of writing forms is also explained by this absence. A quarter of the students combined storytelling and dialogue without using markers to make the transition. For example, a girl wrote: "se leacerco a el muchacho y le pregunto su nombre i era Ismael mucho gusto soy ana" (She approached the boy and asked his name and it was Ismael glad to meet you I'm Ana").

Some signs are more familiar and more used by students than others. The comma and the period were used in all the writings that included punctuation marks. On the other hand, the semicolon does not appear in any story. Hyphens to indicate a conversation and question marks were also very common. Spanish requires two question marks: one at the begging of the question (¿); another, at the end (?). Despite of this, a third of the children who used them, only placed the last one as an influence of the English language. Exclamation marks, quotes and parentheses were used only in two or three writings.

Level of formality

The level of formality consists of recognizing the relationship between the reader and the writer, to ensure all words and sentences are appropriate for the communicative situation. Cassany (2011) suggests pondering if the text contains some fancy, strange or excessively complex expression; or if, on the contrary, there are expressions too informal, vulgar or offensive.

The propriety of the lexicon allows to assess whether the forms are pertinent or not. It is advisable to avoid the exaggerated abstractions or very complex sentences, which are common in the writing of university students' texts (Margarito y Quezada, 2017). In the case of students who are about to graduate from primary school, the opposite phenomenon occurs; instead of using too many abstract words, some school children use very familiar terms. 12% of the narrations includes words like "compas" (compadres–"godfathers" can be used in Mexico as a synonym for friends), "buena onda" (cool) or "face" (apocope of facebook). This percentage rises to more than half, when adding the mistakes in the proper use of words, either due to the influence of orality or the lack of knowledge of the orthographic rules.

The lexical selection reveals up to what level the students have appropriated the accurate usages of writing. The lack of formality found in children's texts leads to conclude that they have a poor training in written language, either in academic essays or in creative texts.

Rhetorical resources

The rhetorical and literary resources help to attract the interest of the reader, at the same time as they give the text its own style. However, their abuse can produce over-elaborated narratives; so, it is necessary to assess their relevance and use. Since school children have a basic level of writing, it is understandable that none of the students have systematically used rhetorical and literary resources to enrich their work. In fact, 92% of the narratives do not have any rhetorical resource; the remaining 8% used them only for descriptions.

Despite their little experience in written creation, the participants have already read, heard and seen a lot of stories; thus, some aspects of literary language, especially those of children's literature, are familiar to them. Therefore, when they were requested to create a story, they imitated the forms they already knew. Consequently, half of the students started and ended their stories with set phrases. It seems that children sought to validate their texts through the use of these fixed syntagma; so, they included them even when they were not consistent or coherent to the plot. Most pupils wrote "había una vez" or "érase una vez" (once upon a time) to begin; and "vivieron felices" (they lived happily) "vivieron felices para siempre" (they lived happily ever after) and "fin" (the end) to finish their narratives.

The end of their stories reveals the literary background and preferences of the children. The plots show the influence of popular culture, specifically Mexican melodramas; for this reason, constantly they resorted to simple happy endings to solve any problem. Only 8% of the participants tried alternative endings to conclude their narrations.

Presentation

The presentation of a text also contributes to the readability of a writing. Different typographic styles, schemes, graphs, charts can facilitate the reader's experience. Although this is a merely formal aspect, it reveals the willingness of school children towards the writing task, as well as their academic habits and their ability to highlight the important elements of their texts.

62% of the stories made by the participants has an inadequate presentation for an academic product. Regardless of the handwriting of the students, the readability of these texts is complicated, mostly because they are many words crossed out, taints and overuse of correction fluid. This situation reveals the poor planning and organization of their writings.

The first two sessions with the pupils were the preamble to create a narrative. There were activities to build their characters and the plot, so that the children could devise the general actions of their stories. Nevertheless, during the last sessions, almost half of the participants started their stories with new ideas that they could not develop afterwards. For this reason, their texts are full of blots, which result in a poor presentation of the final work.

School children have not developed the habit of doing a final reading to correct their texts. Although they were insisted and reminded that it was necessary to review their writings before turning them, their tasks do not reveal any kind of spelling or grammar verification. There are simple errors, such as the omission of some letter, which could have been easily solved with a second reading.

School dynamics also affected the performance of students in this aspect. Kids are used to turning in their assignments as soon as possible. They strive to finish before the rest of their classmates. For this reason, although they were asked to verify their texts, the majority preferred not to do so, in order to finish sooner.

Because the activity was done in the classroom, pupils only had accessed to their school supplies to make their texts. Hence, they could not use different types of materials to give a better presentation to their final products. Despite this, some students tried to deliver a nice page to the reader. 48% of the students used different colors of inks, borders, small drawings, different typographic styles, capitalized words, to decorate their stories. For this, it is appropriate to state that, even if their

papers were not clean, 25% of the students was concerned about giving a good presentation to their writings.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of schoolchildren's writing skills revealed that, although they are about to conclude their primary education, they have not yet reached the curricular standards stablished by the Integral Reform of Basic Education. The review guide proposed by Cassany (2011) allowed to observe frequent conflict situations in children's texts. The analysis leads to determine three general problems: a) lack of expertise in the conventional use of Spanish grammar; b) poor organization of written texts; and c) a limited proficiency of different types of language.

The proper expertise of the grammar can be verified in written texts through the correct use of Spanish language rules. Among the identified difficulties, spelling and punctuation stand out because they are a generalized problem for all students; as noted, no work was exempt from spelling or punctuation mistakes. This situation shows that school children have little knowledge of the Spanish norm.

Spelling and punctuation are not learned by memorizing a rule, but children construct the grammar of the language inductively in their everyday use (Nakai, 1997). Since students must learn the formal aspects of Spanish through the exercise of writing and reading as such, spelling errors and absence of adequate punctuation marks expose a deeper problem, regarding the development of communicative skills in basic education. Students graduate from primary school without acquiring a systematization of the language, which constitutes a basic knowledge to achieve the learning proposed in the curricula.

The organization of the writing is another strong problematic, because affects the overall content of the text. The approach, the structure and the information have a close link with the way the students have previously planned their work. The order and correlation between ideas, as well as some misspelling are evidence of the lack of a methodical writing process. More than half of the texts have little legibility due to their poor planning and reviewing techniques.

The lack of organization in student's narratives leads to question their willingness to make writing exercises. Students do not perceive the importance of writing for their daily life, even though the curricula indicate that the development of linguistic skills is part of social practices of language. The educational approaches for elementary school indicate that the knowledge acquired will allow students to learn for life. Though, children have little clarity about the purpose of developing their language skills and, therefore, they have few interest in participating in activities to strengthen their training in the field of written language.

The reviewed students' texts constitute an example of the difficulty for children to differentiate and implement the formal aspects of writing. Most of the stories contain elements of oral language, namely, some words or syntactic structures that show a discursive transposition. This study has shown that sixth graders do not systematically produce texts in their classroom routines, since there is no proficiency in their use of written language.

Linguistic skills are a priority for basic education, due to its importance for developing metacognitive skills in students. Since knowledge is not only of a theoretical nature but also practical and formative, school instruction provides tools to learn to learn. In this context, writing skills assume a fundamental role for the achievement of the educational purposes of the primary school.

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