

One Myth & Two Truths: Nurturing Competent Communicators

by Andrew Pudewa

“Good readers *will* become good writers!” A mantra frequently heard in the lecture halls of academia, echoing along the corridors of Junior High Schools, and boldly preached from the homeschool conference lectern, most often out of the mouths of the more wizened and experienced parents and educators, this statement strives to be a truism. But it cannot be such, because it isn’t true. At least not always. Certainly, it does happen that good readers *can* become good writers, but to extrapolate from that fact that good readers will automatically, naturally and inevitably become good writers is to warp a truth into an untruth, which when preached long and hard, becomes—if you will—a myth, an unfounded belief.

Further damage is done when this error becomes a basis for a teaching methodology. If encouraging children to read a great deal—combined with opportunity to write creatively—becomes the primary method of instruction in composition, few students will reach the level of success hoped for, and many will fall short of their need. How do we know this truism to be a myth? Look around. In any family, classroom, or group of kids, count the number of “good” readers; now check the percentage and see how many can be considered “good” writers. Half? One-quarter? Not a majority, for sure. Undoubtedly, the “good” writers in the group are likely to also be “good” readers, but why does one not follow from the other as we have been told? How do we understand and deal with the good reader/poor writer enigma? An astute teacher must ask these questions.

First of all, let us consider the definition of a “good” writer. Competence in composition should mean being able to communicate ideas in understandable, reliably correct, appropriately sophisticated language patterns. Brilliance, creativity and originality are nice ideals, but exist far above and beyond “competence.” Competence means having baseline skills necessary for success in the academic, business or professional world. Greatly lacking nationwide, competence must now—more than ever before—be the primary goal for teacher and parent. By definition, competent writers are able to use language properly and effectively.

One simple and immutable fact about the human brain is that you can’t get something out of it that isn’t there to start with. Supernatural inspiration notwithstanding, human beings in general—and children in particular—really can’t produce thoughts or concepts that they haven’t first experienced and stored. In other words, we cannot think a thought we don’t have to begin with. Even the most unique, creative and extraordinary ideas can only exist as a combination and permutation of previously learned bits of information. What does this mean for the writing teacher who desires to nurture competence? If what we need is a student who is able to produce “understandable, reliably correct, and appropriately sophisticated language patterns,” then what we must put into the brain are those same reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns. Ah, then reading should do it, right?

Not always. In fact, it’s an interesting observation, but many children who become early readers, independent readers—good readers, often do not store complete and correct language patterns in their brains. Good readers read quickly, silently and aggressively. They don’t audiate (hear internally) each word or even complete sentences. Generally, comprehension increases with speed, but speed decreases language pattern audiation because good readers will skip words, phrases and even complete sections of books that might hold them back. And to the extent that children don’t *hear*—frequently—a multitude of complete, reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns, such patterns are not going to be effectively stored in their brains.

So, what activity will allow children to store these complete, reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns in their brains? Probably the two most important and but least practiced of all “school” activities: Listening (being read to out loud) and Memorization. These two are perhaps the most traditional of all language acquisition activities, and yet in our modern educational culture, they have become the orphan children of the progressive parents of psychology and pedagogy.

One of the biggest mistakes we make as parents and teachers is to stop reading out loud to our children when they reach the age of reading faster independently. In doing so, not only do we deprive them of the opportunity to hear these all-important reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns, we lose the chance to read to them above their level, stretching and expanding their vocabulary, interests and understanding. We begin to lose the chance to discuss words and their nuance, idioms, cultural expressions and historical connotations. And they lose something far more valuable than even the linguistic enrichment that oral reading provides; they lose the opportunity to develop attentiveness, the chance to experience the dramatic feeling that a good reader can inject, and even the habit of asking questions about what they’ve heard. Tragically, because of our hectic, entertainment-saturated, individualistic, test-obsessed, and overscheduled lives, few of us take sufficient time to read out loud to our students, even into their early teens—a sensitive period when understanding of language and understanding of life are woven together and sealed into the intellect.

Because linguistic information is best stored in the brain auditorily, children who have had read to them reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns for many years are much more likely to develop competence in written (and verbal) communication skills. However, there is another no-so-secret weapon in the sagacious teacher’s arsenal: Memorized Poetry.

There is perhaps no greater tool than memorization to seal language patterns into a human brain, and there is perhaps nothing more effective than poetry to provide exactly what we want: reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns. Although rote memorization and recitation went out of vogue when the great god of Creativity began to dominate ideology in the Schools of Education, it has stood for centuries, even millennia, as the most powerful way to teach, to learn, to develop skills and to preserve knowledge. By memorizing and reciting, you practically fuse neurons into permanent language storage patterns. Those patterns are then ready to be used, combined, adapted and applied to express ideas in a myriad of ways. Additionally, because of the nature of poetry, poets are often compelled to stretch our vocabulary, utilizing words and expressions in uniquely sophisticated—but almost always correct—language patterns. A child with a rich repertoire of memorized poetry will inevitably demonstrate superior linguistic skills, both written and spoken, because of those patterns which are so deeply ingrained in the brain.

What’s even more gratifying, however, is that children love to recite poems they have learned. Seeds of creativity are planted. Language emerges. Poems give words wings. And, if you do have your students memorize a poem, don’t ever let them forget it! Say it once a day, or once a week, or once a month—whatever is necessary—to make it a permanently stored piece of art. Start with the funny ones; move on to the dramatic. Start short; gradually lengthen. Have fun and be proud of their accomplishments. If you can do that, the drudgery of “rote” learning will disappear, and a great joy of language will emerge.

So then, the one myth is that good readers will automatically become good writers. Not true. Many things about writing can be taught directly, but two timeless truths—the two most powerful ways to nurture competent writers—are that we must read to them, out loud, a lot, even when they could read it themselves, and to have them memorize great gobs of poetry, thus storing in their brain for life a glorious critical mass of reliably correct and appropriately sophisticated language patterns.