

## **“Copy this down”**

In many cultures, children practice copying in school. The teacher usually writes a lesson on the blackboard, and the child copies this down into a notebook. The child might be asked to copy the alphabet, a list of words or short sentences, and sometimes, longer passages perhaps containing key information from the school book. The act of copy writing may seem like a dull activity. There is however no clear evidence that all copying is passive. It might turn out that some forms of copying promote learning.

Copying is a key characteristic of daily lessons in Asian schools. Children work with material from their text books and this ‘practice’ may continue well past middle school. Indeed, interviews in Asian communities show that adults believe copying down material is a reliable way to teach oneself. They use copy practice to learn new words, and even a new language.

Repetitive writing practice makes intuitive sense when one has to learn complicated symbols. The scripts of languages in Asia are generally more complex visually than say Hebrew or the Latin letters of English and French. Learning in these scripts by repeated copying is similar to practicing the writing of letters ‘g’ or ‘b’ but with more points which are potentially confusing. Knowing how the loops in the symbols connect and the sequence of which strokes to write first are routines that are perhaps learnt best by doing.

Research about the role of copying in literacy learning is in its infancy. We now know that the neatness and accuracy of children’s writing may be important for understanding how well they will learn to read and spell. Cantonese uses symbols with many strokes. Recent research has shown that children learning this script are more skilled at copying unfamiliar symbols than children who learn to write in the simple looking scripts of Hebrew or Spanish. It appears that practicing to write complicated symbols improves children’s overall skills for pattern drawing as well. Working with the visually complex script of Kannada, a language of south India, teachers were asked to identify all the points in a symbol that are confusing – where writing the symbol the wrong way would make it look like nonsense or another symbol altogether. When teachers said a symbol had many more confusable points to write, these were also visually more complex and children made more errors in recognising these symbols. Clearly there is something about learning symbols that is helped by writing practice.

[Much needs to be studied] to understand what it is about copy writing that has made communities in Asia embrace this practice in schools.