Writing Is Still the Best Tool for Teaching Literacy

Writing by hand can help people learn to read and write more effectively than typing text or viewing videos.

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Many people may think that pens, pencils and writing by hand have become obsolete in the age of computers. But recent study findings published in the journal Psychological Science show that using these old-fashioned learning tools is still the most efficient way for people to learn and master language, reports SciTechDaily.com.

For the small study, researchers divided 42 individuals who were learning the Arabic alphabet into three categories: video watchers, typists and writers. First, all participants watched videos showing each letter of the alphabet being written as its name and sound were spoken.

Next, researchers flashed the video watchers a picture of a letter onscreen and asked them to confirm whether the image was the letter they had previously seen. People in the typing group were instructed to locate the letter on a keyboard. Last, those in the writing group were asked to reproduce the letter using pen and paper.

After at least six rounds of this learning exercise, all participants correctly identified the letters of the alphabet and made few mistakes when tested. However, those in the writing group mastered became proficient much more quickly than either video watchers or typists, and some did so in as few as two sessions.

“The main lesson is that even though they were all good at recognizing letters, the writing training was the best at every other measure,” said Robert Wiley, PhD, an assistant professor in the department of psychology at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and the lead author of the study. “And they required less time to get there.”

In addition, those in the writing group developed more authoritative adult-level reading and spelling skills. The additional benefits associated with writing by hand is why children should practice handwriting, added Brenda Rapp, a professor of cognitive science at Johns Hopkins University and the study’s senior author.

Wiley and Rapp stress that writing by hand supports learning by making the shape, sound and

physical writing of letters a sticky process in the brain.

“With writing, you’re getting a stronger representation in your mind that lets you scaffold toward these other types of tasks that don’t in any way involve handwriting,” Wiley explained.

Researchers expect to see similar results in children. Indeed, Wiley said he bought his nieces and nephew fingerpaint and told them, “Let’s do letters.”

To learn more about different ways for adults to help kids learn, read “For Concerned Parents” and “Reading Minds.”

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