
Writing Instruction for English Learners 1



Photo by Eugenia Mora-Flores.

All students possess the key ingredient for writing: ideas. Writing is grounded in the lived experiences of children. Our work as teachers of writing is to help students put these experiences down on paper in creative and articulate ways. “Currently, there is agreement (at least among researchers) that writing is a socially-constructed, meaning-making process. That is, writing is influenced and supported by writers’ social and cultural experiences” (Davies-Samway, 2006, p. 17). We need to help students see the value of their lived experiences as the foundation for becoming great writers.

For English learners (ELs), the challenge lies in transferring their experiences into writing in a second language. As writers, ELs are rich with ideas and writing abilities from their first language. Through exposure to written text and formal instruction in their primary language, ELs are highly knowledgeable about how to write and write well. What makes it difficult for ELs is finding the medium and structure in English to express themselves effectively. As teachers we need to begin by understanding the process for developing writing in a second language as well as the instructional practices that best support that process.

PROCESS VERSUS PRODUCT

Our goal as teachers of writing is to develop the writer (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, Reffitt, & Raphael-Bogaert, 2007). We want students to understand what it means to be a writer—what it means to take an idea and, through careful planning and ongoing decision-making, turn it into a story, a poem, an essay, or a text. For the past thirty years, this idea of the importance of sharing with children the process of writing has helped teachers find more effective ways of developing writers. “Beginning in the 1970s, a focus on the cognitive processes involved in writing began to replace a focus on product and methodology” (Davies-Samway, 2006, p. 3). With this came the understanding that we need to teach children how to write, not just what to write.

Prior to the focus on process writing, writing instruction focused heavily on the perfection of a final piece of writing. Too often, teachers were the ones doing all of the hard work, while students sat back and just fixed the corrections suggested by the teacher. Writing instruction often followed a format similar to this: children were given a prompt, wrote a draft, teachers revised and edited the draft, students simply changed what the teacher said to change and resubmitted. If it wasn't good enough the teacher would edit again, and the student would copy the corrections until the final draft met the teacher's expectations. This practice failed to develop writers. When students received corrections from their teachers, they simply fixed the mistakes, often failing to notice the types of mistakes they were making. Teachers spent countless hours reading drafts and went through packs of red ink pens practicing their editing skills. In the end what mattered most was whether the child was able to recopy a perfect piece of writing.

I was guilty of this practice when I first started teaching middle school. I taught a sixth grade humanities class where history and language arts were integrated. As part of the course students wrote various texts, including historical fiction, poetry, and simulated autobiographies. After students submitted a first draft I would spend hours at home editing their papers. I wrote ideas in the margin of what they could add and corrected grammar and spelling. I would give my students their papers back, and in draft after draft they were only making the changes I fixed. From one writing sample to the next I saw the same mistakes being made over and over again. I realized that I was not teaching writing strategies and skills to develop writers. I was simply fixing the writing.

I needed to show students how to make decisions around content, style, and grammar for themselves.

With process writing, teachers SHOW children how to find mistakes, how to improve their writing, and how to make decisions about style and structure. English learners are given a chance to experiment with language and feel safe making mistakes along the way. Process writing helps us see how our ELs are developing their written English. We can see their learning through the errors they make. In the end the final draft shows us what the child is able to do as a writer. It may not be perfect, but it shows thought and their development of written English. In addition, ELs feel successful as writers because we celebrate the progress they have made as writers.

WRITING PROCESS

A popular teaching practice in schools to facilitate an understanding of how writing works is taking children through the five stages of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Often children are exposed to the five stages as a linear process whereby a writer goes from one step to the next without coming back to previous steps as a piece of writing is developed. Charts that display the writing process often create a visual of this linear concept for children because they will begin with prewriting and end with publishing (see Figure 1.1). When I read a book by Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi titled *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*, they talked about writing being a cyclical process. As writers we very rarely proceed through a piece in such a finite, linear fashion. We jump around from drafting, to revising, then back to drafting, then edit a bit, going back to revision, stopping along the way to ask for help from friends or family. This iterative process and the role of others along the way is often absent in the linear process model. What I would propose, stemming from the work of Fletcher and Portalupi, is to present children the realities of writing as a cyclical process.

I created a classroom chart to produce a visual that represents this process (see Figure 1.2). Children need to understand that writing will take many decisions and many processes before arriving to a point where they are ready to share it with the world (publish). Many, many pieces will never even see the published stage because as writers we experiment with writing, we try out new things, and we practice. English learners will need lots of opportunities to do this, to practice their oral and written language as they work toward a piece they will want to share. In addition, they need ample opportunities to talk with classmates along the way at every stage of the process.

I don't want to mislead you into thinking that we should not teach children the five stages of the writing process; we will absolutely do so. But what I am suggesting is that they be taught as steps that will be taken over and over again, often with only one piece of writing. "Students grow as writers as they draft and redraft—as they tackle and solve revision problems" (Peitzman, 1992, p. 202). They will plan, draft, revise, and edit more than once on their way toward publication.

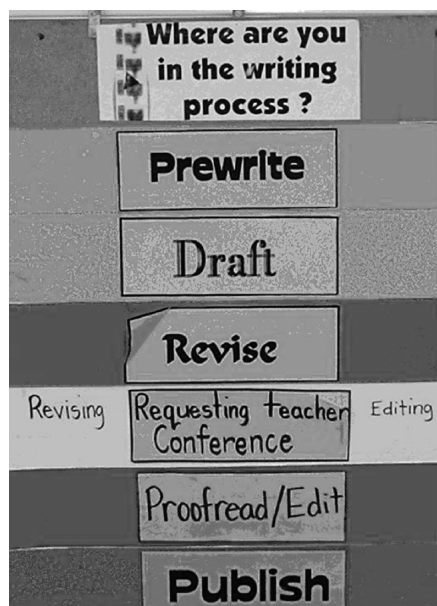


Figure 1.1 Linear Process Chart

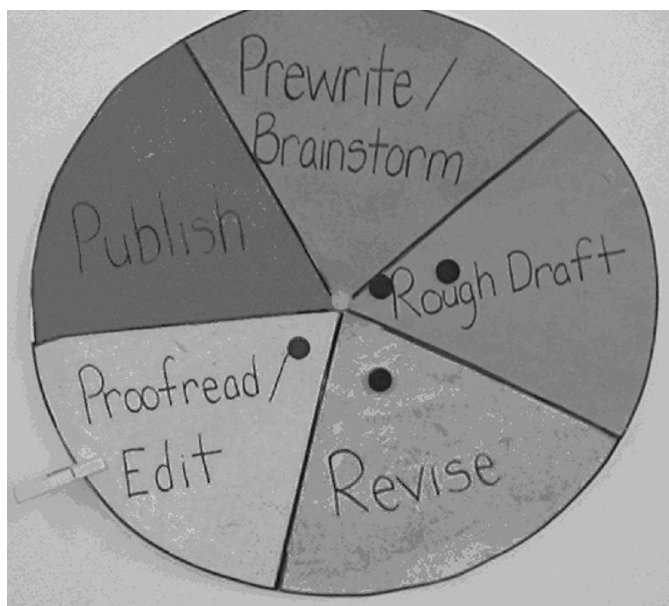


Figure 1.2 Cyclical Process Chart

Source: Figures 1.1 and 1.2 used with permission from Angelica Mora-Machado.

Figure 1.3, Stages of the Writing Process, explains my perspective on what can be taught at different stages of the writing process.

We take ELs through the process of writing with ongoing support from their teachers and peers. At every stage in the process students can respond to each others' ideas, style, and mechanics. This helps ELs feel supported as they try out written English in creative ways. If we wait until the end to engage in peer revision and editing, ELs might experience writing anxiety. They may feel isolated and alone in the process, causing apprehension for fear of writing incorrectly. Writing has been shown to cause second language learning anxiety (Kempf, 1995). Language development is negatively affected if students experience anxiety. Stephen Krashen (1981) explained in his *affective filter* hypotheses that in high anxiety, high stress learning environments ELs cannot effectively develop their second language. The language is not received by the learner, and so learning does not occur. For this reason it is critical to support ELs throughout the writing process by providing numerous opportunities to work alongside their peers. This support creates a sense of community and interdependence in a positive learning environment.

THE ROLE OF TALK

Though independent writing time is a private time to think and make personal decisions as writers, talk can foster language development and a supportive learning environment. "As they grow, writers still need opportunities to talk about what they are writing about, to rehearse the language of their upcoming

<p>Prewriting</p>	<p>Generating ideas Selecting topics Quickwrite “mini-drafts” about personal experiences Draw or sketch an experience Setting a purpose for writing Identifying audience Identifying genre and its elements Organizing ideas (graphic organizers) Revising ideas on graphic organizers Exploring mentor texts to generate ideas for writing Exploring mentor texts to analyze discourse and text structure Notetaking Researching and collecting information</p>
<p>Drafting</p>	<p>Free-flow of ideas: trying out written language Identifying structure and purpose as you write: Scaffold the draft to understand the structure one paragraph at a time Peer discussion: reading for clarity along the way Peer discussion: crafting leads and conclusions along the way Applying elements of genre</p>
<p>Revising</p>	<p>Revisiting ideas for purpose, clarity, and effectiveness Adding information (details, examples, dialogue, facts) Adding descriptors (adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases) Adding sensory details Deleting repetition of ideas, words, phrases Substituting words (adjectives, repetitive function words, adverbs, pronouns, proper nouns, synonyms) Rearranging ideas with a focus on clarity and discourse (sequence, order of ideas, order of sentences, order of paragraphs) Adding an introduction, subheadings, closings/conclusion The language of genres: transition words, cue words, forms of language</p>
<p>Editing</p>	<p>Spelling Verb tenses Sentence structure Grammar, usage, and mechanics</p>
<p>Publishing</p>	<p>How will you share your writing with the world? Selecting a medium for publishing</p>

Figure 1.3 Stages of the Writing Process

texts and run ideas by trusted colleagues before taking the risk of committing words to paper” (Writing Study Group of the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2004). English learners need to try out their English in a low-risk setting such as talking with a partner or small group. The exposure to academic talk, in this case around written English, facilitates language acquisition. Allowing opportunities for talk can happen at various times during writing instruction.

Before the students write independently they might discuss what they have been working on and gather suggestions from classmates on how to move forward with their writing. They can share ideas for future writing pieces or discuss their understanding of the mini-lesson of the day and how they might incorporate it into their own writing. *During* writing, students can talk with one another about choices they are making while they write. They might ask their neighbor their opinion about how something sounds, word choice, or ideas for character names or personalities. They can check their clarity by sharing what they have written and asking their neighbor to tell them what they understood and what suggestions they may have. *After* independent writing time children can talk about what they did that day as writers—what new strategies they tried out, what new words they learned and used, or simply share their writing. If students are asked to share their writing after independent writing time for peer feedback, I would suggest providing a short amount of time (two to three minutes) to note suggestions made by their partner. This notetaking can be done directly on their paper or on a sticky note to attend to the next day. This piece is important because ELs need time to process the feedback they received and make decisions about how to use it. If they don’t have time to go back to their writing and make those decisions, they may forget what was suggested or forget to incorporate the feedback altogether. For this reason I strongly suggest that when giving children an opportunity to talk as writers, if the intention for talk is for feedback to improve a piece of writing, then it should be done *during* writing to provide opportunities for processing the feedback. Figure 1.4, *The Role of Talk in Writing*, gives an overview of the various ways in which teachers can engage students in talk during writing instruction.

As a teacher, you will decide at what point during writing you will allow children to talk. Though I always encourage them to help each other out during independent writing time, I remind students that their neighbors as well as themselves need time to write. We want to spend most of our time writing and, when necessary, we can interrupt our writing to ask our neighbors for help. If you feel that your students need more structure for “talk,” I have also provided mini-lessons on how to engage in a dialogue around writing. I’ll even direct students when they are allowed to talk. If they have questions prior to “talk time,” they can tag them (with a small sticky note), and when it’s time to talk, they can get right to their questions. Or, it may be that you mix it up. Some days you give students freedom to talk as needed, and other days you guide “talk time.” It is a decision that will come from knowing your class. But, in any case, ELs need time to talk to facilitate language development as well as improve their writing skills.

It is often easier and more comfortable as a new speaker of a language to talk with a partner than to have to ask your questions out loud in front of the entire class. We want to give ELs the kind of learning environment and

<i>When</i>	<i>Why (Purpose)</i>	<i>How</i>
Before	Plan for writing	Share ideas for what to write about Share what they will work on as a writer that day Discuss the mini-lesson of the day and its application to their writing
During	Making decisions as writers	Stop and check for comprehension and clarity (Does this sound OK to you?) Discuss word choice, share vocabulary Elicit ideas for structure (Does this sound right here, or should I move it?) Help with spelling and mechanics
After	Sharing your work as a writer	Read your text to your partner Share any new strategies, words, ideas, or techniques you used this day Reflect on your day as a writer Provide feedback on the application of the day's mini-lesson to the writing Provide suggestions for improvement

Figure 1.4 The Role of Talk in Writing

opportunities where they can feel comfortable. They need to feel safe making mistakes and admitting that they “don’t know” and need help. Stephen Krashen (1981) explains that in order for input (in this case language, both oral and written) to be understood and learned by an EL, it must be presented in a low-anxiety, comfortable environment for risk taking. He explains that a child’s *affective filter* must remain low so that learning will occur.

DEVELOPING WRITTEN ENGLISH

Initially what ELs will rely on when writing is their development of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1984). This is the social language that children “pick up” as they talk with friends and are exposed to English. This language of social contexts is what transfers to students’ writing. They utilize their BICS and their experiences to get them started writing in English. Then as they learn language in school through reading and across subject areas, they begin to develop their cognitive academic language proficiencies (CALP) (Cummins, 1984). Part of students’ CALP is the language of written English. Students need explicit instruction on how written English is organized for a variety of purposes. This includes knowledge of the structure and elements of written and literary genres in English. In addition, the vocabulary, transition words, and language cues associated with different writing genres must further be taught and learned. And though CALP may take from seven to ten years to develop (Collier, 1987; Collier & Thomas, 1988), research

shows that ELs can write very craftily and strategically prior to developing high levels of English language proficiency (Davies-Samway, 2006). We want to help ELs explore written English and provide opportunities for them to work through the stages of writing development in a second language. We need to provide the outlet for ELs to share ideas in a written form appropriate for their English language development level.

Stages of Written Output for English Learners

As ELs continue to develop their oral language skills, their writing will improve. Figure 1.5, Written Output Development for English Learners, is an example of how we can think about the development of second language writers. It shares examples of how ELs can express themselves in written form. However, it is necessary to note that these stages do not mean children are learning to write for the first time. They are examples of how ELs are transferring their experiences and knowledge about writing from a first language to a second language.

<i>Written Output</i>	<i>Foundational Knowledge, Skills, Strategies, and Application</i>
Drawing	Expressing ideas through images Using prior experiences and background knowledge from a primary language (L1) to express their ideas in written form, pictures, and images
Labeling/creative spelling	Applying content words (vocabulary) to drawings Applying their knowledge of L1 written forms to secondary language (L2) written forms to attempt to spell English words—transferring their knowledge of letters and sounds from one language to another As children read and are exposed to function words, they will apply them where applicable
Sentences	Apply their knowledge of simple English syntax to express complex ideas and experiences in simple sentences They can include multiple sentences, but they will be written in connected simple sentences
Multiple complex sentences	Apply their knowledge of English syntax to express and connect complex ideas and experiences in multiple sentences This will include an increase in the use of academic language, transition words, and the use of complex, compound sentences Apply their knowledge of paragraph structure
Stories/texts	Apply their knowledge of English syntax and discourse to organize longer stretches of text Use their knowledge and familiarity with stories and text from their primary language to guide them when writing in English Use their knowledge of genre, story grammar, and discourse

Figure 1.5 Written Output Development for English Learners

These stages are not based on any grade level. They represent how ELs can represent their ideas in English based on their second language development. These methods of written output are not representative of what students can do with writing in a primary language. Ideally, whenever possible we should always continue to develop students' primary language writing abilities because their cognitive proficiencies around writing will transfer to their work in written English. Jim Cummins (1984) refers to this as a students' common underlying proficiency (CUP). For example, if students learn about narratives and how to write a narrative in their primary language, they will not have to relearn the purpose and concept of narrative writing. They will, however, have to learn how it is typically structured in English and the words to use to represent their ideas in English. It is not about relearning a concept, but understanding how they are orchestrated in different languages.

Written Syntax and Discourse

All languages have common characteristics. They all possess a uniform, socially constructed manner in which the language is organized and expressed. These characteristics, often called components, include phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse (see Figure 1.6, Components of a Language). Though ELs will need to be exposed to, learn, and practice all components of the English language, when writing it is often the syntax and discourse of the English language that they struggle with the most. Researcher and linguist Noam Chomsky (1972) believes that as humans, we are predisposed to language—that within our psyche we contain a language acquisition device (LAD), which codes for the proper structure of our developing language. More important, Chomsky believes that the development of language is a natural process that develops quickly in children through mere exposure. An infant is often exposed to very simple, often poorly structured pieces of language and yet is able to develop highly sophisticated language at an early age. For example, if a parent says to a child, “Bring me your shoes,” the child, having been exposed to the English construction of this sentence, can naturally identify the English syntax (how the sentence is organized) to create new sentences using the same construct. He might say, “Mommy, bring me my book,” or, “Daddy, bring mommy her purse.” The child is using his knowledge of syntax with his knowledge of words to create many new and original sentences.

Chomsky believes that this process happens naturally as children are exposed to the language. And part of this process involves making mistakes. He explains that children will make mistakes as they overgeneralize rules (syntax). However, through further exposure and with the help of school, they will learn to develop highly complex, English syntax. When we hear a child say, “I goed to the bathroom,” Chomsky would say it is a natural part of the acquisition process where we see evidence that a child has taken his knowledge about the use of past tense -ed endings to express a past event. English learners experience the same tendencies when learning English language syntax (rules of grammar) in school. They will overgeneralize the rule until they have been exposed to the exceptions, to new English syntax to regulate their incorrect tendencies. English learners will need exposure to the English language in a variety

of contexts. They need to see the similarities and differences of English syntax within and across types of text. It is through this exposure that ELs will learn when and how to use words and generate sentences properly.

In addition, ELs need direct instruction on the written discourse structures of school. Throughout their educational careers, students are required to read and write a variety of written and literary genres. From narrative stories to persuasive essays, students need to learn the differences in the discourse structure from one type of text to another. “The degree to which discourse is planned reflects the extent to which the speaker or writer is able to consider, reflect on, organize, and revise the meanings to be conveyed. Forethought is the critical element” (Kucer, 2005, p. 49). Pauline Gibbons (1993), in her book *Learning to Learn in a Second Language*, further explains the importance of bridging the connection between oral and written English through a close look at the written discourse and syntactic structures of written genres. “The way that genres are organized is not the results of arbitrary rules, but a reflection of the way that a particular language is organized to fulfill specific purposes . . . each type of text or genre has its own particular language features which a writer must understand” (p. 105). For example, ELs will learn that when writing a narrative, they would typically begin by introducing the setting and characters, followed by the development of a plot, and ending with a resolution—all of which must be exposed to ELs through literature and taught directly through mini-lessons and modeled writing.

Keith Stanovich (1986) and Stephen Krashen (2004) have written at great lengths about the impact of reading on the development of language and literacy. When children read, often they are exposed to diverse ways in which language is organized and expressed. Through reading, children see how vocabulary is used, how authors chose to organize their ideas, and how the

<i>Component</i>	<i>Concept/Definition</i>
Phonology	The sound system of a language. How letters and sounds are articulated to form spoken language and generate meaning.
Orthography	The written system of a language. In English it is the alphabet.
Syntax	The structure of a language. How sentences are constructed to form coherent, logical sentences.
Semantics	The meaning system of a language. The denotations and connotations of words in social and cultural contexts.
Morphology	The smallest unit of meaning. How words are put together to form meaning. Includes roots, base words, prefixes, and suffixes.
Pragmatics	How language is understood and used in varying contexts.
Discourse	How longer stretches of written and oral language are organized. Includes the discourse of conversations as well as knowledge of genre.

Figure 1.6 Components of a Language

English language works when written, including syntax and discourse. Along with free-voluntary reading, teachers need to teach children how to read with attention to the discourse structure and craft of a piece of written text.

Lucy McCormick-Calkins (1994) talks about a writer's craft using a seamstress analogy. For example, when you or I go into a store to buy clothes, we may often simply look at how an item of clothing looks aesthetically—is it a good color for me, does it fit, is it my style? However, a seamstress may look at the same piece of clothing very differently. The seamstress may pay more attention to how it is put together, what stitching was used, do the colors selected and material go together, will it hold up wash after wash? This attention to the craft, how the article of clothing was put together, how ideas and decisions were made when creating the piece, is how one looks craftily at something. The same can be said about writing. When we read a book there are a variety of ways to read it. We might read for pleasure, for information, or to get ideas for writing. When writers read, they pay attention to how the text is written. They see new ways of thinking about writing, new ways of crafting their ideas to express themselves with more clarity and purpose.

Teachers need to demonstrate for children how to read like a writer. Through modeled writing and read-alouds, teachers can show children *how* authors write. In addition, ELs need to see how texts are organized in English for a variety of purposes. For example, they need to know how narrative writing is organized and how it is structured to convey meaning. The same is true for all genres of writing in English. Because the development of a writer involves knowledge of syntax and discourse to express ideas clearly in writing it will be the responsibility of the teacher to show them how to read with an eye toward syntax and discourse.

Understanding Genre

Throughout the book I will follow an understanding of genre based on the book *Dimensions of Literacy* by Stephen Kucer. Kucer explains that written text can be classified by type, genre, and structure. Types are the broader categories of written text, including narrative, expository, persuasive, and poetic. Within each text type there are genres that fit within the context and construct of each type. A genre is a kind of literary work using a particular form or technique. Meaning, each genre has a familiar organizational structure and common elements that help define the genre. Figure 1.7 is representative of some types of literary and written genres children are expected to read and write from second through eighth grade.

Figure 1.7 is not meant to be an exhaustive list. It presents a variety of written and literary genres that children write within and across. Some of those presented in the table will be further explained and developed in the chapters that follow. Each text type and genre will be presented with attention to its general characteristics and more specifically how it is organized (structure and discourse). Gibbons (1991) defines these general characteristics as language features that include “the overall structure or organization, the order of parts, and the specific grammatical features” (p. 105).

<i>Type</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Literary Genres</i>
Narrative	Stories: can be fiction or nonfiction	Personal narratives Autobiographies Fairy tales Fables Folktales Fantasy stories Mysteries Myths Diaries
Expository	Provides Information	How-to texts Biographies Reports Articles
Persuasive	To inform, explain, convince, present a position, evaluate, or persuade	Letters Editorials Advertisements Essays/compositions Literary essay
Poetry	To express ideas both fictional and nonfictional in creative, often nonstandard ways	Free verse Pattern poems Haiku Acrostic poems Cinquain Diamante Limericks

Figure 1.7 Literary and Written Genres

CONCLUSION

Writing is a process by which we transfer our thinking, our ideas, and our experiences into written form. For ELs, their experiences and knowledge of the English language will serve as building blocks for writing. Teachers will in turn supply the context, the support, and the knowledge about how written English is structured and organized. As part of their knowledge of written English, teachers can further facilitate the development of academic language through explicit instruction on different types of written forms (e.g., narrative, expository, persuasive, and poetic) and their subsequent genres, all of which can be learned in a language-rich environment where students are given varied opportunities to talk about writing. Establishing a community of writers where students feel safe trying out language and making errors along the way is necessary for second language development. With careful attention to the role of structure and talk when writing, coupled with a cyclical approach to teaching writing, teachers will be better equipped to address the needs of their ELs.