

ELLs and Writing Instruction

Fitzgerald (2001) summarized the current research on ELLs' writing development. The first question she pursued was – Is the development of ELLs' writing similar to first language development? In her exploration, she found that most studies documented similar trajectories. There was one study that provided interesting information about spelling development in Spanish-English. Davis, Carlisle, and Beeman (1999) found that for Spanish students learning English, they had extensive growth in English spelling in first and second grade. Later in third grade, they made greater advances in Spanish spelling.

A second question that Fitzgerald pursued was - Is there a transfer of knowledge from first language writing to second language writing? She indicated that when reviewing studies focused on transfer, the results supported transfer of skills from one language to another.

In a third question focused on phonemic awareness and spelling, she did find differences for ELLs. Similar to children whose home language is English, phonological processing was related to writing and spelling for ELLs (Arab-Moghadam & Senechal, 2001). However, Fitzgerald reported contradictory findings in other research where Cantonese, Mandarin, Gujarati, Urdu, and Punjabi speakers had less developed phonemic awareness, but performed better in spelling (Wade-Woolley & Siegel, 1997). Further complicating this research is a third study (Jackson, Holm, & Dodd, 1998) that reported that bilingual Cantonese children performed equivalently to English preschoolers in phonological awareness and spelling. Although once these children moved to first grade, monolingual children outperformed them in spelling less familiar words and in complicated phonemic tasks.

Edelsky (1982) discovered that children kept separations between their home language and English when writing. For instance, when writing in Spanish, children used accents and tildes, but not when writing in English. She also discovered that children wrote more complex text in their home language, while English lagged behind. It required further oral language development before similar complexity showed up in English writing.

The importance of the research on ELLs' writing is that writing should be encouraged for ELLs even before they have rich oral vocabularies in their new language – English (Hudelson, 1989; Urzua, 1987). Writing provides opportunities for ELLs to learn about writing, practice phonemic awareness in English, develop reading skills and knowledge, and reflect on learning. Through writing, children, including ELLs, have the opportunity to explore words as they remain fixed and allow for scrutiny. They develop understanding of marks, letters, and how they represent words and ideas. They make comparisons between oral language and its written representations, thus sharpening their knowledge of both. Most important for young children, the main source of learning about letter/sound correspondences, word separation, grammar, and idea representation is through writing.

Samway (2006) recommends the following experiences to create supportive classroom environments.

1. ELLs need to write from the very first days of school. They need to write often for a variety of purposes.
2. ELLs need instruction as well as opportunities to write.
3. ELLs need time to talk, think, and read to become successful writers.

4. ELLs will model the kinds of writing that their teachers find important. If the focus is correct spelling and grammar on first drafts, this is the kind of writing that will be produced – correct but limited in content.
5. Writing in a home language values the home language as children learn to write in English.

While Samway provides some general expectations for the classroom, I now offer some specific strategies that support ELLs as writers.

- *Personal Readers*. Personal readers are collections of dictated stories or simple rhymes that children learn to read independently (Bear, Caserta-Henry, & Venner, (2004). They work well with young children as there is limited text that they can read or write.
- *Digital Language Experience Activity*. Labbo et al. (2006) offers a version of a typical language experience dictation. She recommends taking digital photos of students as they engage in various classroom activities and placing them in PowerPoint. Then the teacher shares the photos with students and engages them in discussion.
- *Interactive Writing*. Interactive writing is another form of language experience where the teacher and students share the pen during writing (Button, Johnson, & Furgerson, 1996; Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994).
- *Wall Text Support*. As teachers engage students in reading or writing activities, they create charts that students can refer to later.
- *Writing Centers and Journals*. ELLs need multiple, and consistent opportunities to write. Young students come to know writing through more contextual settings like play centers where writing is expected (e.g., a pretend store where they write bills or inventory).

Writing centers also allow routine exposure to writing. The center might have paper, pencils, erasers, and so on.

Finding time for writing is a challenge even in the classrooms of our youngest students. However, creative teachers find ways to embed writing in almost all of classroom activities from writing in centers to writing workshop time. They also find ways for children to explore multiple genres in writing. Writing is often a very successful way of supporting ELLs as they learn about the structures of English through writing. Writing often serves as the medium for oral language and other learning.

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