

Research Findings about K-8 ESL Writing

Prepared by Melissa Latham for: Encouraging Collaboration: English Language Learners Looking at Reading and Writing. A professional development event sponsored by MATSOL, MABE, and MRA**

General Findings

From: Lenski, S., & Verbruggen, F. (2010). Writing instruction and assessment for English language learners K-8. New York: The Guilford Press.

“[W]aiting until ELLs know the language before having them write stories hinders their potential development (Hadaway & Young, 2002). Research indicates that ELLs can write in English long before they have complete command of the oral and written systems of their new language (Peyton, 1990)” (p. 87).

-“According to Anthony (2008), the output of ELLs is as important as language input...When ELLs are producing language in output activities, they are accessing their knowledge of words, syntax (word order), and morphology (word forms). They are also ‘testing’ how words go together through trial and error. Just participating in output activities, such as speaking and writing, help ELLs practice ways to use English in different contexts” (pp. 47-48).

-“When students have developed strategies for manipulating language and for expressing themselves in an articulate manner, those skills tend to transfer from the first language to English...Therefore, older students and those who have received an education in their home country will often develop English writing proficiency more quickly than younger students or those who have had few opportunities to go to school” (p. 15)

-Reading and writing have a reciprocal relationship, but “[s]tudies suggest that reading proficiency transfers from the first language to the second language more readily than does writing proficiency (Abu-Akel, 1997; Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, & Kuehn, 1990)” (p. 17)

-“Writing performance in English does not always reflect oral English skills, and writing skills may exceed oral language skills” (p. 16).

-“Leki (1992) found that even after 10 or more years of studying English in classrooms abroad, ELLs may still have trouble writing effectively in English, even though they are able to explain the most complex grammar rules...[M]any ELLs who have had writing instruction have spent more time on grammar drills than actually communicating through the written word” (p. 118).

-“Structured writing seem to be more beneficial to ELLs than freewriting (Gomez, Parker, & Lara-Alecio, 1996)” (p.18). The following alterations are recommended:

- have students write nonfiction as a model for learning to write
- minimize freewriting until they have mastered the writing process
- give ample time to prewrite
- have teacher-controlled conferences
- sentence-combining activities aid in comprehension and improve student writing

The Writing Process

From: Peregoy, S. F., & Boyle, O. F. (2008). Reading, writing, and learning in ESL: A resource book for K-12 educators. Boston: Pearson.

-The process approach to writing is helpful for ESL students because it breaks writing into manageable parts, which they can focus on one at a time, allows them to experience the value of feedback, and gives them an opportunity to write from their own experiences and share their stories with classmates.

-The writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, publishing) is similar for first and second language writers. They create texts with audience in mind and for different purposes, just like first language writers

(Ammon, 1985; Edelsky, 1981a; Edelsky 1981b), and beginning writers in both cases support their writing with illustrations (Hudelson, 1986; Peregoy & Boyle, 1990a).

Letter Formation and Spelling

From: Peregoy, S. F., & Boyle, O. F. (2008). *Reading, writing, and learning in ESL: A resource book for K-12 educators*. Boston: Pearson.

-ESL writers with little experience in reading or being read to in English may not have a sense of how English translates into written form.

-"[F]irst language letter formation and spelling strategies will transfer partially to English writing" (p. 231)

From: Lenski, S., & Verbruggen, F. (2010). *Writing instruction and assessment for English language learners K-8*. New York: The Guilford Press.

-“If a student must stop composing in order to figure out how to form difficult or unfamiliar letters, the student’s train of thought can be easily disrupted...In primary level writers, handwriting is related to written expression...For ELLs, handwriting skills are an essential part of the process of learning to write effectively. Because they are working with two languages, the cognitive demands in composing are greater for ELLs than for native English speakers” (pp. 10-12).

Vocabulary and Syntax

From: Peregoy, S. F., & Boyle, O. F. (2008). *Reading, writing, and learning in ESL: A resource book for K-12 educators*. Boston: Pearson.

-“Students new to English are apt to experience some limitations in expressive abilities in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and idiomatic expressions” (p. 230).

From: Lenski, S., & Verbruggen, F. (2010). *Writing instruction and assessment for English language learners K-8*. New York: The Guilford Press.

-“When teachers elicit specific words in compositions and explicitly explain the words, when students are exposed to vocabulary in multimodal contexts (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), and when there is opportunity to discuss and negotiate word meanings, teachers provide the scaffolding that students need in order to use targeted vocabulary more frequently in their compositions. The use of writing frames, interactive elicitation of vocabulary words, and explicit instructions to use the vocabulary all contribute to students’ use of targeted words in compositions (Lee & Muncie, 2006)” (p. 13).

-[W]riters...who can compose sentences quickly can use a higher percentage of their cognitive capacity to achieve higher-order tasks, such as organizing thoughts and choosing words” (p. 48).

-In writing, transition words are used to help the reader understand what is coming up, but transition words are not used as often or in the same way in speaking and as in writing. ELLs need explicit instruction in transition words (p. 75).

-“Many ELLs don’t realize that their writing should be a formal version of their own voice. ELLs’ writing can reflect their tendency to grow in conversational vocabulary more quickly than academic vocabulary, and they need to be reminded to write more formally (Fisher et al, 2009). Teachers can ameliorate this problem by teaching students word connotations and synonyms to expand their word choices” (p. 85).

-“ELLs learn vocabulary and sentence structure from hearing stories. They also learn how stories are organized” (p. 73).

Writing and Culture

From: Lenski, S., & Verbruggen, F. (2010). *Writing instruction and assessment for English language learners K-8*. New York: The Guilford Press.

-“According to Perry (2008), storytelling is an important cultural practice for many marginalized communities in the United States, and using storytelling in the classroom can influence students’ literacy practices” (p. 57).

-Translating stories from the native language to English has been shown to “help students value their home culture’ (Dworin, 2006)” (p. 58).

-“Many ELLs follow a different discourse pattern that is less linear than English. Although the directionality of English is easy for teachers to understand, Kaplan (2005) found that ELLs tend to view their own discourse pattern as linear, even when it does not seem so to English ears. ELLs who are unfamiliar with English stories need to be explicitly taught the discourse patterns of English” (pp. 70-71).

Research Findings about 9-12 ESL Writing

From: Harklau, L, & Pinnow, R. (2009). *Adolescent second-language writing*. In L. Christenbury, R. Bomer, & P. Smagorinsky (Eds.). *Handbook of adolescent literacy research* (pp. 126-139). New York: Guilford Press.

General Findings

-“L2 text formulation is more laborious and generates greater cognitive load than writing in L1, leading adolescent writers to give significantly more of their attention to solving problems with structure and vocabulary than to generating text (Roca de Larios et al., 2001)” (p. 129).

-“Although scholars (see, e.g., Meltzer & Hamann, 2004, 2005; Meltzer & Okashige, 2001) have argued that the principles of effective literacy instruction for all adolescents are quite similar to the principles of teaching English learners, empirical reports suggest that English learners in mainstream classrooms may not receive high-quality writing instruction (Duff, 2001; Harklau, 1994, 2001; Valdés, 1999), especially when they are placed in low-track classes where opportunities for extended writing tend to be most limited (Harklau, 1994; Townsend & Fu, 2001)” (p. 131).

The Writing Process

-“Adolescent L2 writers may use L1 to diminish cognitive demands, manage the L2 writing task, negotiate meaning, and focus on form” (p. 131). Prewriting and planning may be parts of the writing process for which more proficient second-language writers, who are able to generate text in L2, continue to use L1 (p. 130).

Vocabulary and Syntax

-“texts of English L2 learners display far less informational density than texts of English-proficient students” (p. 128).

-L2 learners use less lexical diversity than bilingual students. Compared to monolingual English speakers of the same age, “[b]ilingual students tend to have smaller, more colloquial, less academic vocabularies in L2” (p. 128).

-“Lee (2003) suggests that systematic vocabulary instruction can have positive effects on the variety of vocabulary used by adolescents in compositions as well as on the frequency of sophisticated, infrequent vocabulary items” (p. 128).

Writing and Culture

-It is important to link classroom literacy tasks to L2 students’ homes, communities and out-of-school literacy

practices (p. 132).

- "L2 learners may favor a narrative mode of development across topics" (p. 128)

- "Some writing genres, particularly summaries, may be more linguistically demanding for adolescent L2 writers to produce than others (de Courcey, 2002)" (p. 128).

- "Studies of adolescent writers show differing L1 and L2 conventions for length of the text, length of sentences, and conjunction use: linear organization or deviations from the main idea; stringing together ideas through adding or explaining, as opposed to enumerating; the extent of writers' responsibility for conveying in meaning versus readers' responsibility for text interpretation; the extent to which texts serve as self-actualization for writers; and the extent to which texts focus on sensory description and detail, plot line, or thesis (Dyer & Friedrich, 2002; Montano-Harmon, 1991)" (p. 128).

Research Skills

- "adolescent L2 writers benefit from training in using libraries and finding appropriate source materials (Villalva, 2006; Werner & Stone, 1993), evaluating the validity and utility of sources (Clankie, 2000), and representing conflicting opinions and information (Villalva, 2006)" (p. 132).

Use of Technology to Develop Writing

- "even...relatively simple uses of technology increase students' motivation and forge stronger social relationships among peers. They increase student involvement in cross-cultural peer response by making possible the rapid and easy exchange of information (Fedderholdt, 2001; Strasser, 1995). Young (2003), in a study of Taiwanese high school students, found that MOOs, chat rooms, and e-mail provided adolescents with ample time to compose and respond in the L2" (p. 133).

Feedback on Writing

From: Beach, R. & Friedrich, T. (2006). Response to writing. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 222-234). New York: Guildford Press.

- Native English-speaking students generally prefer comments on content (Storch & Tapper, 2000); however, ELL students may appreciate feedback on both content and language issues (Ferris, 1995, 1997).

- College ELL students showed substantial revision in response to marginal notes, requests for clarification and comments on grammar (Ferris, 1997).

- Studies of ELL college students suggest that describing or naming a grammatical error is not as effective as underlining the error for self-correction or correcting the error (Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), although students prefer teacher correction for its efficiency (Ferris, 2003).

- Giving content and form-editing feedback simultaneously to ELL students proved to be just as effective as giving each separately (Fathman & Walley, 1990).

- In a study of ELL students, it was more important for students to understand *why* they were receiving different kinds of feedback than that they received these different kinds in a particular order (Ferris, 1997, 2003).

- Some students may come from cultural backgrounds that perceive the teacher as authority and may not regard peer feedback as highly (Nelson & Murphy, 1993), though a number of studies have showed that ELL students find peer feedback useful (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000).

-Some focus on grammar, syntax and vocabulary is important for ELL students (Connor, 1996; Ferris, 2003; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999), but too much may be counterproductive and discouraging (Connors & Lunsford, 1988; Hull, 1985).