



The Write Stuff

Three essential practices bolster English language learners' writing skills.




**Carol Booth Olson, Robin Scarcella,
and Tina Matuchniak**

The statistic is alarming. A mere one percent of 12th grade English language learners (ELLs) scored proficient or above in writing on the most recent administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2011 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

It's no wonder. The language demands associated with writing and the many constraints adolescent ELLs must juggle are formidable. These students face not only cognitive, communicative, and contextual challenges common to all writers, but also linguistic, cultural, and affective constraints unique to language learners.

In the current era of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS-ELA), students are expected to master high-level literacy skills, including reading closely to make logical inferences and writing to support claims using valid reasoning and appropriate evidence (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Placing such a premium on the ability to interpret texts and to write extensively about those texts using academic discourse sets a high bar for all students, and especially for ELLs.





What does it take to help ELLs undertake such challenging writing tasks? To answer this question, we offer three research-based instructional practices that promote ELLs' development of academic literacy, as well as two activities to support each practice. First, and most important, we consider culturally responsive curriculum and the significance of motivation. Second, we look at teaching students strategies, one of the most effective practices for literacy development for all students, including ELLs. And finally, because researchers generally reject the notion that academic language spontaneously develops, we explore explicit instruction that models appropriate language use.

The ability to write well is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.

1. Create a culturally relevant writing community.

The National Council of Teachers of English (2007) notes that "motivation can determine whether adolescents engage or disengage from literacy learning" and that the number of students who are not engaged grows at every level, "reaching epidemic proportions in high school" (p. 4). ELLs, in particular, may feel like outsiders in mainstream classrooms because of their diverse cultural backgrounds and limited English proficiency.

Meltzer and Hamann (2005) propose three fundamental ways to support ELLs emotionally and to increase motivation: (1) Develop strong ties to students—their histories and cultures—consequently linking what they are learning to their background knowledge; (2) Create classrooms that welcome students' voices, giving them an element of choice in learning tasks;

and (3) Engage students in meaningful and collaborative reading and writing activities.

In classrooms that follow these guidelines, teachers create a community of writers and actively promote collaboration to develop students' ownership of their learning. Student work hangs on the classroom walls, showing that student voices are valued. The following

two activities can help to develop such a writing community.

My Name

Sandra Cisneros's vignette "My Name" from the 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street* is an especially rich mentor text. The speaker, Esperanza, struggles with how her name is pronounced



in English "as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" rather than the softer sounds "like silver" of her name in Spanish.

Have students read the text and analyze the way Esperanza explores the meaning of her name (which translates to *hope*), comparing it to an emotion, an object, a color, and so forth. To follow up, invite writers to fill in sentence frames like the models below, first using Esperanza's name and then their own name.

If Esperanza's name were a plant, it would be a *cactus* because *with a little watering, she hopes to be capable of producing a beautiful bloom.*

If my name were a plant, it would be a *dandelion* because *I'm strong and persistent.*

If Esperanza's name were an animal, it would be a *blue bird* because *she could soar high into the sky and reach all of her goals.*

If my name were an animal, it would be a *cat* because *I'm curious and affectionate but also independent.*



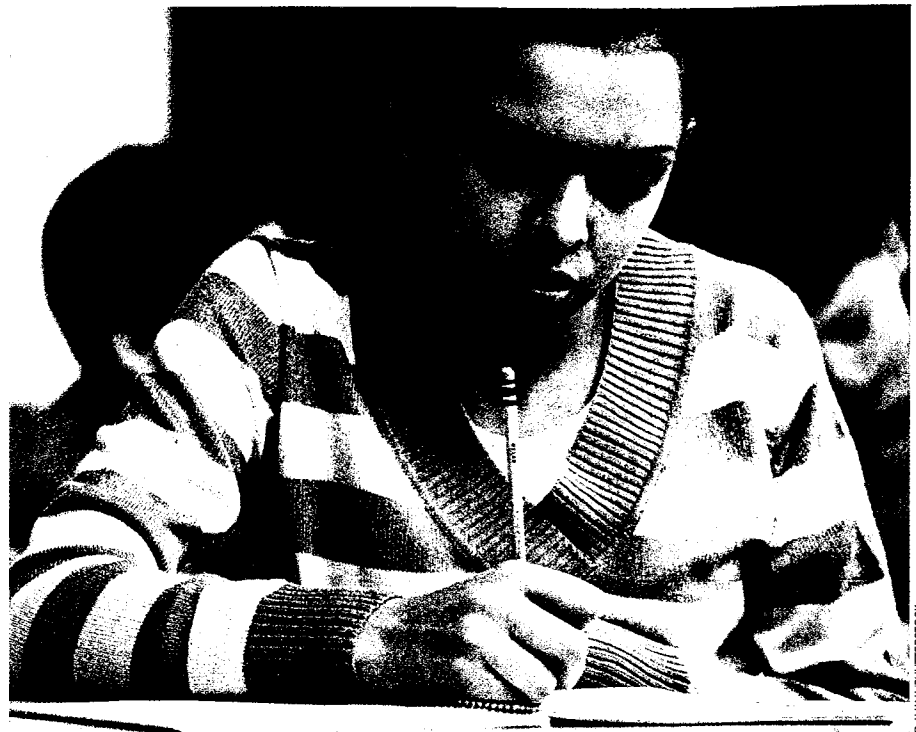
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On the basis of their sentence frames, students can create a coat of arms (see fig. 1) and then write a paragraph about their names. These pieces of writing provide the class with an opportunity to learn about one another and to value other cultural backgrounds.

Biopoem

The biopoem is another getting-to-know-you activity that builds community. Bookended by students' first and last names, the poem enables students to share personal information about their likes and dislikes, hopes, and dreams (see fig. 2). Students simply complete the template. Afterward, they can share their poems with the class, or you may choose to display the finished products with students' photographs.

After students are familiar with the format, they might write biopoems in the voice of a character from a work of literature. This activity helps ELLs to establish agency as writers; it also develops their academic writing by teaching them how to use parallel structures and relative clauses.



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2. Provide solid strategy instruction.

Strategy instruction has been identified as one of the most effective approaches to improving the academic reading and writing skills of students and in advancing English language

development for ELLs (Conley, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Teaching strategies to students helps to make texts comprehensible and provides them with a clear focus on language. It affords students opportunities to affirm or correct their understanding and use of language, helps them retrieve new language features and use these features for academic purposes, and provides them with the means of learning language on their own, outside of class.

Although the Common Core standards acknowledge the importance of strategy instruction, the standards do not define the full range of metacognitive strategies that might be useful to students nor do they delineate the support ELLs might need to master such strategies. It's up to teachers to decide which pedagogical approaches will help their ELLs become strategic readers and writers. Let's look at two specific ideas.

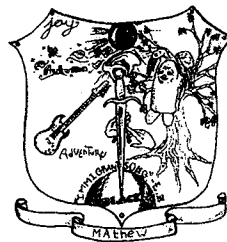
FIGURE 1. Coat of Arms

If my name were an animal, it would be **sloth** because **I am very lethargic.**

If my name were a plant, it would be **maple tree** because **of my reminiscence of childhood in Canada.**

If my name were a song, it would be **immigrant song** because **of how the song describes the distant lands like all the unknown that I fear.**

Mathew Loayza



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Cognitive Strategies Bookmarks

Cognitive strategies are the acts of mind or “thinking tools” that readers and writers use to make sense of what we read and write. Explain to students that just as a craftsman reaches into a tool kit to build something like a skateboard ramp, we reach into our mental tool kits to construct meaning with words.

Pass out bookmarks like those in Figure 3 for students to use when they’re tasked with writing about their reading. Demonstrate how to use the sentence starters. For the prompt “*If this were a movie,*” students would describe what they visualize as they read. If a student were reading Edgar Allan Poe’s “A Tell-Tale Heart,” for example, he or she might say, “*If this were a movie,* the camera would focus on the horrified look on the man’s face. We would hear the pounding of a heart in the background.”

The cognitive strategies sentence starters can also help students plan essays and set writing goals. A student might say, “*My purpose is to identify one key survival skill that helped the author of Into Thin Air overcome the obstacles he faced on Mount Everest.*” Because these bookmarks can be used during both the reading and writing processes, students may want to store them in their ELA notebooks to refer to as needed.

Do/What Chart

Many struggling students and ELLs fall back on retelling or summarizing instead of presenting high-level interpretations called for in the CCSS-ELA. Rather than carefully examining what a writing prompt is asking them to do, students simply plunge in, writing whatever they can recall about a topic. The Do/What chart focuses students’ attention on the specific requirements of an assignment.

FIGURE 2. Biopoem

(First name) –
(Four adjectives that describe the person)
Son or Daughter of (your parents’ names)
Lover of (three different things that the person loves)
Who feels (three different feelings and when or where they are felt)
Who gives (three different things the person gives)
Who fears (three different fears the person has)
Who would like to see (three different things the person would like to see)
Who lives (a brief description of where the person lives)
– (last name)

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First, tell students to deconstruct a prompt by circling the verbs that ask them to *do* something. Keep in mind that some ELLs may not understand terms such as *make inferences*, *analyze*, *cite*, and *reflect*. These terms, and the acts of mind they entail, must be taught and modeled using student-friendly definitions and practical examples. After identifying the verbs, students should underline the task words that tell them *what* to do (for example, *do*: write; *what*: an essay).

Figure 4 includes a marked-up prompt. Underneath the prompt, students can create a T-chart (the *Do*

words in the left column and the *What* words in the right) to serve as clear road map for composing.

3. Explicitly teach academic language.

Without a doubt, ELLs must gain enough command of academic language to write well and reach the Common Core’s rigorous standards. English language learners cannot acquire academic language merely through their interactions with others and their reading. Even when they interact with skillful speakers of English, these conversations are unlikely to include academic language. Moreover, many of these students do not receive much exposure to academic language in their reading, because their reading is limited by their language proficiency.

Instead, ELLs need daily, explicit instruction in academic English to develop an academic style of writing. Below, we describe two activities to enhance students’ use of academic language.

FIGURE 3. Cognitive Strategies Bookmark

**Cognitive Strategies
Sentence Starters**

Planning and Goal Setting

- My purpose is . . .
- My top priority is . . .
- I will accomplish my goal by . . .

Tapping Prior Knowledge

- I already know that . . .
- This reminds me of . . .
- This relates to . . .

Asking Questions

- I wonder why . . .
- What if . . .
- How come . . .

Making Predictions

- I'll bet that . . .
- I think . . .
- If _____, then . . .

Visualizing

- I can picture . . .
- In my mind I see . . .
- If this were a movie . . .

Making Connections

- This reminds me of . . .
- I experienced this once when . . .
- I can relate to this because . . .

Summarizing

- The basic gist is . . .
- The key information is . . .
- In a nutshell, this says that . . .

Adopting an Alignment

- The character I most identify with is . . .
- I really got into the story when . . .
- I can relate to this author because . . .

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**Cognitive Strategies
Sentence Starters**

Forming Interpretations

- What this means to me is . . .
- I think this represents . . .
- The idea I'm getting at is . . .

Monitoring

- I got lost here because . . .
- I need to reread the part where . . .
- I know I'm on the right track because . . .

Clarifying

- To understand better, I need to know more about . . .
- Something that is still not clear is . . .
- I'm guessing that this means _____, but I need to . . .

Revising Meaning

- At first I thought _____, but now I . . .
- My latest thought about this is . . .
- I'm getting a different picture here because . . .

Analyzing the Author's Craft

- A golden line for me is . . .
- This word/phrase stands out for me because . . .
- I like how the author uses _____ to show . . .

Reflecting and Relating

- So, the big idea is . . .
- A conclusion I'm drawing is . . .
- This is relevant to my life because . . .

Evaluating

- I like/don't like _____ because . . .
- My opinion is _____ because . . .
- The most important message is _____ because . . .

Comparing Informal Language with Formal Academic English

In our analyses of student writing, ELLs' most frequent mistakes in formal essays involve using slang and colloquial vocabulary, deleting word endings, and writing incomplete sentences. To explicitly teach these skills, provide side-by-side models of paragraphs written in informal English and more formal academic English. For instance, one paragraph may begin with the following sentence: "Ms. Georgia Reid was my teacher. She motivate and change students." The more formal sentence would read: "Ms. Georgia Reid, my 4th grade teacher, inspired her students and changed their lives."

Students should make a two-column chart listing the language features of both samples. In the "informal" column, students may write "slang," "incomplete sentences," and "sentences beginning with the word *and*." In the "formal academic" column, students might write "academic terms," "complete sentences," and "transition words like *nevertheless* and *moreover*."

Afterward, students can revise the informal paragraph to make it more academic; although the finished product may be similar to the original formal paragraph you provided, the deliberate repetition and practice will help students internalize these new skills. Students can then incorporate what they learned into their own formal academic essays about their favorite teacher.

Acknowledging and Refuting Counterarguments

Argumentative writing poses special challenges for ELLs, even those with moderate to strong levels of English proficiency. Many have not had much experience with this genre and may need explicit instruction in how to

FIGURE 4. Do/What Chart

Write an essay in which you take a stand about whether we should give money to homeless people. Support your argument with facts, reasons, details, and/or examples. Be sure to cite at least two nonfiction articles that discuss this issue and agree or disagree with the authors. Convince the reader that your point of view is best. Use logical reasons and persuasive language to make a compelling case.

DO	WHAT
Write	an essay
Take	a stand
Support	your argument
Cite	two nonfiction articles
Agree or disagree	with the authors
Convince	the reader
Use	logical reasons and persuasive language
Make	a compelling case

announce their topics and engage their readers, write strong thesis statements, link paragraphs with smooth transitions, and especially acknowledge and refute counterarguments. Sentence frames, such as the ones below, may be particularly useful to ELLs for this last skill:

- Some people might say that _____ . However, _____ .
- Although it is true that _____ , it does not necessarily follow that _____ .
- Some might assume that _____ , but what they fail to consider is that _____ .

To start, allow students to use these frames to orally debate accessible topics, such as whether McDonald's or Burger King makes better French fries. For example, a student might say, "Some people might argue that McDonald's makes better French fries than Burger King. However, McDonald's fries lose their taste when they get cold, whereas Burger King's fries are delicious even when cold

because of the secret seasoning." Later, students can tackle more complex academic tasks with the support of these frames—for instance, analyzing a controversial position statement and then writing an argument agreeing or disagreeing with the author.



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Writing: An Essential Skill for the Many

Demographers estimate that by 2020, one in four children enrolled in America's public schools will be Latino (Maxwell, 2012). Further, ELLs in grades 7–12 are the fastest growing segment of the K–12 student population (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). Now more than ever, teachers must be well-prepared to meet the needs of ELLs and have a diverse repertoire of strategies to help these students succeed as academic writers. Because writing is a gatekeeper for college admission and a key criterion for hiring and promoting salaried workers, the ability to write well is “not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many” (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2003). ■

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Carol Booth Olson (cboolson@uci.edu) is an associate professor in the School of Education at UC Irvine and director of the UCI Site of the National Writing Project. **Robin Scarcella** (rcscarce@uci.edu) is a professor in the School of Humanities at UC Irvine and Director of the Program in Academic English. **Tina Matuchniak** (tina.m@uci.edu) is the director of research at the UC Irvine Writing Project and a lecturer in the English department at California State University, Long Beach. They are the coauthors of *Helping English Learners to Write: Meeting Common Core Standards, Grades 6–12* (Teachers College Press, 2015).

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