

# Introduction

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Writing became a passion of mine to teach when a teacher in high school told me that I wasn't a good writer. Initially, when I was in school I found writing to be pretty easy and I actually thought I was good at it: until my advanced placement (AP) American history teacher showed me otherwise. I failed my first history essay for the class. My teacher, Mrs. Witcop, explained that I had no thesis, my supporting paragraphs were disorganized, and I presented a weak conclusion. I was shocked! I had been writing formally in school for 10 years and no one ever told me I was doing anything wrong. I felt embarrassed. Here I was in an AP course and I didn't even know how to write a thesis statement. For the entire semester, Mrs. Witcop worked with me after class teaching me what a persuasive, literary essay was supposed to look like. We started with learning how to develop a thesis. Once she approved my thesis statement she guided me through the structure of the essay. I was so grateful for her help. I had learned the basic structure for academic writing. She taught me the foundation that guided my writing development through graduate school. The process Mrs. Witcop shared with me, analyzing the elements and structure of a type of writing, has inspired my work with writers to date.

For the past ten years, I have been learning how to teach writing. Specifically, I have worked alongside English learners (ELs) as we navigate through the complexities of written English. My instruction begins with understanding my students as second language writers. This was what Mrs. Witcop did for me. For teachers of ELs, this includes learning what your students are able to do as writers in both their first and second language. Knowing where you are starting from can lead to better instructional decisions.

My first year teaching I was fortunate to have worked directly with staff developers from the Lucy Calkins Reading and Writing Project in New York City. This experience opened my eyes to what children can do as writers. I began to read books on writing, one of my favorites being Katie Wood Ray's *Wondrous Words: Writers and Writing in the Elementary Classroom*. This book along with others helped me begin to understand what is involved in developing writers. I implemented a Writer's Workshop model in my classroom and engaged my students in author studies and multiple writing celebrations. At the time, I was teaching a first grade, dual-language class and my students learned to write in both English and Spanish. My students were amazing writers. My principal would often compliment our work posted in the hallways, and I was encouraged to submit my students' work for publication. I often regret that I never made copies of their writing to keep as a memoir of my first endeavors as a teacher of writing. A year later, I decided to take a risk and move on to middle school.

Knowing I would be working with adolescents I turned to another mentor author for help. Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* and *Lessons That Change Writers* gave me so many ideas of how to approach writing with adolescents. And in

teaching sixth, seventh, and eighth grades I began to understand that any great lesson I read about in books is contingent upon the students. I learned to make adjustments based on what my students were able to do in language and literacy. I learned a great deal about the struggles of teaching writing; struggles that at times were disheartening but necessary to truly understand what it meant to develop great, individual writers. These challenges made me better as a teacher, and my students became writers. For the first time, I felt successful as a writing teacher. I had developed a strong conceptual framework for teaching writing that I thought would work in any classroom. This was true until I hit a major roadblock when I moved back home to Los Angeles, California.

When I moved back to Los Angeles, I began teaching a bilingual first grade class. Fifteen of my students were to receive English instruction while the remaining five signed waivers to receive Spanish instruction. This was just after the passage of Proposition 227 in California, calling for structured English immersion (SEI) for all students. Structured English immersion requires all students to be instructed in English with modifications and instructional strategies implemented to meet the language needs of students, including but not limited to specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies. These strategies help make content comprehensible to students so that learning may occur. My class was the last of the first grade bilingual classes remaining at the school. More specific, the five “waiver” students were the last to receive bilingual education at the school to date. The challenges with teaching writing that I faced were not from my “waiver” students. Actually my five “waivers” achieved the highest levels in Spanish and English literacy on all schoolwide and statewide assessments that year. This was similar to my experience with my first graders in New York. Because they were taught in a dual-language model, they were able to develop their primary language literacy skills, which transferred effectively to their English language and literacy development.

My struggles were in teaching written English to the other fifteen ELs receiving all-English instruction. I used all of the writing methods and strategies I learned and practiced in New York, but they were not as effective. I began to think about how I could implement the same rich writing program in ways that would meet the language needs of my ELs. I had many conversations with a friend of mine who at the time worked as a staff developer for Lucy Calkins. We talked about her work with ELs in New York and mine with Spanish-speaking ELs in California. These conversations led to us writing a book, *Balanced Literacy for English Language Learners* (Chen & Mora-Flores, 2006), that addresses the language and literacy needs of ELs within a balanced literacy program. One chapter in the book, “Writer’s Workshop,” encapsulates the conversations we had around writing with ELs. The chapter provides an overview of Writer’s Workshop and how to accommodate ELs during each component of workshop. This book, *Writing Instruction for English Learners*, goes further with writing. It attempts to address “what” students are writing and “how” to support ELs when writing various types of text in English. Its purpose is to *show* students how written English is organized for different purposes. It is the result of my struggles and successes working with ELs to develop their written English skills.

When I was learning to write with my history teacher, she showed me “what” a persuasive literary essay looked like. She highlighted the elements of a persuasive argument and broke down the parts of the essay. I had not taken time to really analyze and understand the type of writing I was asked to complete. To date, whenever I am asked to write a certain “type” of writing for a particular purpose, I begin by analyzing models. I look at how the text is typically organized and what kind of information is included. I make my doctoral students do the same when preparing to write their dissertations. They begin by reading dissertations and analyzing the different chapters. This helps guide their writing. The same is true for our youngest writers as well. All students need to be exposed to various types of writing and their genres. If students read wide and often, then this exposure comes easy. However, while students engage in these vicarious learning opportunities, when teaching ELs at different levels of second language acquisition, teachers must explicitly teach students to *see* writing.

To facilitate second language writing development for ELs I employ a constructivist approach to teaching writing. This includes providing the scaffolds and supports that ELs need to develop written English in a collaborative setting. Based on what my students are able to do as writers, I work toward taking them further in their writing development. Lev Vygotsky (1962) in his theories of learning explained that learning occurs best within a student’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). A student’s ZPD is their learning curve; it accounts for what they are able to do independently and what they can do with the support of a more knowledgeable other. This support, also referred to as **scaffolds**, involves the means by which a teacher provides the help (or mediates the help) students need based on their actual, current development. In the case of writing, scaffolds can include looking closely at the elements of written text, working alongside peers, and learning from models. Each type of text, narrative, expository, persuasive, and poetry, is analyzed for its elements and structure. An emphasis on the scaffolds students need to be successful within and across each type of text is presented throughout this book. It is through these scaffolds that my English learners have been successful in their development of written English.

Chapter 1, “Writing Instruction for English Learners,” provides an overview of my understanding of how to teach writing to ELs. It includes a look at the development of second language writers in language-rich contexts. In addition, you will have a better understanding of how I approach written and literary genres. Each chapter thereafter will take you deeper into written text and genres.

Chapters 2 through 4 follow a similar format. Each chapter focuses on a type of writing, narrative, expository, and persuasive. You learn about the elements of selected written genres with each type of text. A detailed instructional sequence is then presented to show “how” to scaffold the writing for English learners. You will also find some fun ideas for publishing writing that I hope will motivate your students to want to write.

Chapter 5 on poetry has a bit of a different structure. Because there is no one general structure for writing poetry, I provide a variety of poetic forms. What makes poetry fun for ELs is the exploration of language. They get a

chance to play with words and syntactic structures. In addition, the forms of poetry provide clear directions of how to craft a variety of poems.

What you will notice as you move from one chapter to the next is the focus on understanding the elements of written genres. I believe that as teachers, the more we know and understand about written English, the better we are at teaching writing. I strongly believe that the work of this book is just a starting point for developing writers. The discourse structure presented for each type of text is just a framework for ELs. As they continue to read in English and are exposed to a variety of written text, they will develop their own style and structure. I encourage students to experiment as writers with ideas, grammar, structure, and words. However, for ELs, they are just beginning to understand how written English works. For this reason, I carefully scaffold every step of the development of their written texts. But these scaffolds are presented with a great deal of choice and personal investment by the students. They will always use their own language to write their stories and will always be given a choice in what to write about.

Throughout the book I refer to student's English language development by the following second language acquisition (SLA) levels:

- **Level 1: Preproduction or Silent Stage:** at this stage ELs are active listeners, trying to understand their new language and surroundings. They will typically communicate through gestures, pointing, drawing, or nodding. As writers, ELs will often draw or sketch their stories.
- **Level 2: The Early Production Stage:** at this stage ELs are able to understand more oral and written English. "During this stage students are understanding more oral language and can usually speak and write in one or two word phrases and simple sentences related to social, everyday events" (Chen & Mora-Flores, 2006, p. 26). As writers, students will usually continue to draw but will begin to add text to support their illustrations by labeling, using simple words and phrases, and using phonetic spelling.
- **Level 3: The Speech Emergence Stage:** at this stage ELs can engage in dialogue and conversations. They can write multiple sentences and can understand abstract concepts. Since they are still developing their oral and written fluency, frequent corrections are not encouraged at this stage.
- **Level 4: The Intermediate Fluency Stage:** at this stage students can express their abstract thoughts and feelings in oral and written English. They can create multiple paragraph essays and have a command of English around social and familiar contexts.
- **Level 5: Native-Like Fluency:** at this stage ELs have a strong command of oral and written English. They are continuing to develop abstract, content-rich, academic language. "Students are able to produce oral and written language using a variety of grammatical structures and vocabulary comparable to their English-only peers" (Chen & Mora-Flores, 2006, p. 29). As writers, students are working toward developing a personal craft and style as writers across genres.

These levels are not meant to be static. Students can move across these levels at different rates and may exhibit different language capabilities within any one of the levels. In addition, they do not present the cognitive capabilities of the students. Meaning, all ELs possess a strong level of primary language acquisition, including both formal and informal language and knowledge. The SLA levels are intended to demonstrate what an EL is able to produce in a *second* language. In many cases, ELs will be able to think, write, and talk at levels much higher than what is explained, but in their first language. For example, students may be able to write craftily and creatively in their primary language but may still be at an “early production” level of SLA. This means they do not possess enough English language, yet, to express their thoughts orally or written *in English*. Through the book I will consistently present students’ SLA levels to help you understand where the students are in their English writing development. This does not include what the students are able to produce in their primary language.

This book can be helpful when teaching writing to students in second through eighth grades. Though the work can be modified to work with younger students, I focus on second through eighth grades because students have developed strong literacy skills and can engage in the evaluative and analytic work of looking at written discourse. In addition, many of the lessons require a great deal of independence appropriate for these grade levels. Further, starting in second grade we see a greater emphasis in the standards on process writing, including revision and editing. It is here that we start to see students held accountable for writing across and within a variety of written genres.

This book is not intended to be a text on second language writing development, but a guide for teachers to understand written and literary genres. If teachers can look analytically at the way in which the English language is written for different purposes, we can do a better job of guiding ELs to write in English.