Better
Evidence-based Education

LANGUAGE ARTS
Grammar's role in the writing classroom
Using multimedia to model the writing process
Which words should we teach?

The University of York
Institute for Effective Education

Johns Hopkins University
School of Education
Center for Research and Reform in Education
Editorial

DEVELOPING THE SKILLS OF YOUNG READERS and writers is a vitally important objective within school. Helping children to become capable and confident users of English is an essential life skill. It enables them to do well in other aspects of the curriculum and in the future. Indeed, an ability to read and write "properly" is still seen as one of the most visible signs of the success, or otherwise, of our education system.

In this issue of Better, some of the world's leading researchers review the evidence of what works in teaching language arts. The articles cover a range of issues, including the importance of vocabulary, the best ways of teaching writing, and the importance of grammar. There are also features on the use of multimedia to support the teaching of writing and the additional help that is needed for English-language learners.

Throughout this issue you will find plenty of practical advice that you can use in the classroom. I hope that it helps you to improve outcomes for your students.

Robert Slavin
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Teaching writing to ELLs in high schools

For English-language learners, writing poses the greatest challenge. Margarita Calderón explains how best to support them.

AS WE VISITED 2ND GRADE CLASSROOMS with large numbers of English-language learners (ELLs), we looked at students' writing posted around the walls and read examples such as: I like my pet. I like the ears. I like the nose. As we visited 9th grade classrooms, we read examples such as: I like photosynthesis. I like analyses. I like procedures.

Writing is the most difficult area for ELLs and their high school teachers, and can be particularly overwhelming in certain subjects. For example, the writing demands in math, history, and science lessons vary from those of English lessons, as does the nature of the teaching. High school teachers and administrators report that their greatest concern is students' low writing skills. Nevertheless, it is the least researched area in education.

An integrated approach
In our five-year studies on teaching ELLs in high schools, we found that learning to write in a second language can best be accomplished through an integrated sequence of explicit instruction in the core content areas: vocabulary — reading — vocabulary — writing. Writing should not be taught only as "a writing unit" or a "writing workshop," but must be built on what students read and the words and grammatical structures learned across all subject areas. If ELLs are going to succeed in high school, all teachers need to integrate language and literacy into their subject teaching.

Words in a second language are mastered when students are given the time to apply them during peer discourse, reading, and writing all day long. After having been presented with a set of practical words and phrases, students need to read small sections of good models of an author's craft — whether science or geography texts, a memoir, or a math problem. Effective writing teaching gives ELLs frequent opportunities to write, accompanied with feedback and opportunities to revise and edit, along with guidance in how to do so, instead of worksheets, dictations, short answer activities, and other similar tasks that limit writing practice.

Techniques that work
The Graham and Gillespie method SRSD (Self-Regulated Strategy Development), mentioned in this issue, is an approach that can be expanded for ELLs by integrating cooperative writing, the study of models, and goals, in addition to scaffolding strategies, as follows:

1. Pre-teach key vocabulary. Select key words that students will need to understand and use for writing assignments.
2. Develop background knowledge. Students from different cultures approach writing differently and they also have different schooling experiences. Develop background knowledge or explanations of unfamiliar concepts and mechanics for writing.

3. Describe it. Discuss and present the strategy, its purpose, benefits, and goals, and the grading rules of finished products. Consider differentiated grading scales for ELLs, depending on their level of English proficiency.

4. Model it. Show the writing you want them to emulate. Model each phase of the strategy.

5. Memorize it. Ensure that students memorize the language and steps of the strategy.

6. Support it. Support or scaffold the student's use of the strategy until he/she can apply it with few or no supports. Model self-regulated learning and the use of mnemonic devices.

7. Ample use of student interaction. Model and implement collaborative/cooperative writing strategies to plan, draft, revise, and edit compositions.

For ELLs, vocabulary knowledge, reading, and writing are connected and must be practiced across the disciplines.

8. Differentiated assessment. Assess the point of entry for writing (not just oral production) and continue measuring the learning progression of writing as the oral, reading, and writing proficiencies of ELLs vary dramatically. Some newcomers to the country may have good writing skills in their primary language. A student who has been in U.S. schools since kindergarten may have oral fluency but no literacy skills in either the first or second language.

Scaffolding
Teachers scaffold instruction by making sure that ELLs understand all the elements and processes from building background to providing instructions and discussions on models for the writing tasks. This is done by making the task comprehensible:
- Teaching vocabulary before, during, and after writing;
- Highlighting grammatical features to use;
- Providing language tools for each objective; and,
- Allocating ample time for peer interaction.

Teaching vocabulary before, during, and after writing
Teachers begin by preteaching key vocabulary, focusing on subject specific words and words that nest those target words. Interactive whiteboards can bring words and explanations to life by adding pictures, video clips, and quick graphic organizers.

Highlighting grammatical structures to use
ELLs need explicit instruction and examples from the core content text such as: compound sentences, connectors, prepositional phrases, figurative language, idioms, passive voice structures, variation in tense, and less familiar text structures. Less advanced students will benefit from reading easier books with shorter sentences. Initially, their writing can consist of three or four sentences. More proficient students can read books with compound sentences, passive voice, and clauses. ELLs can begin by using connectors such as and, but, and because, then proceed to in addition, however, and due to. For example, when writing a summary, sentence starters such as these can help:
- The author is writing about
- The author is comparing ... with ...
- Three facts I learned are (1) ... (2) ... (3) ...
- First of all,
- One important thing is
- We read about ... and discovered

Student interaction
Peer interaction, through collaborative writing or cooperative writing, is a great tool for ELLs! Planning, drafting, writing, and editing in pairs or teams of four helps enrich language and ideas. Computers also facilitate cooperative writing. The use of computer word-processing software will help ELLs see their writing. It is easy to add, delete, use spell-check, look up words in dictionaries, and/or add pictures where they lack words. PowerPoint slides tend to be popular because they can be used to write quick quips.

Some cautionary notes
Graphic organizers may not be the best way to start writing. ELLs need substantial guidance for understanding graphing ideas.

When brainstorming requires rapid responses, ELLs are at a disadvantage because they need additional time to pull thoughts together into sentences. By then, the class or the group has moved on to another topic.

Getting off to a good start
During a student's initial writing phases in English, it is important to:
- Focus on ideas the student has, rather than the ones he/she lacks.
- Teach the vocabulary or key words you want the student to use.
- Provide opportunities to interact with peers; allow joint authorship.
- Set high but flexible standards.
- Develop separate rubrics and criteria for each individual student and increase in complexity every three weeks or so.

Moving forward and assessing progress
Allow ELLs to work on one or two skills per week, focusing on proofreading and editing skills. A rule of thumb might be to let the student write only one paragraph and use three or four new vocabulary words. The student and teacher will increasingly target other skills to assess. Samples of work can be included in personal portfolios to track growth.

About the author
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Further reading