



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs

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Teaching Writing to English Language Learners: Best Practices

Strategic Writing with Performance Indicators

English Language Learners (ELLs) struggle with writing, as limited cognitive resources must be divided among aspects of language, topic, content, goals, style and genre to create printed text. Language demands in particular occupy a great deal of an ELL's working memory, resulting in less attention devoted to the other, non language, aspects. This *Bulletin* explains a procedure for targeting an ELL's content writing based on the qualities of *language function, topic, and support* to create performance indicators as strategic writing targeting for ELLs.

STRATEGIC WRITING CRITERIA

ELLs need to be challenged to perform in writing at their developmentally appropriate level of proficiency. The composite writing score level (range 1 to 5) from the *ACCESS for ELLs* test provides the suggested performance goal for engaging ELLs in writing. The criteria are linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control (see *Bulletin* Vol. 12, No.1):

1. Linguistic Complexity - amount of language and its grammatical accuracy and cohesiveness. The range is :

Level 1: Single words, set phrase, or chunks of simple language; varying amounts of

copied language;

Level 2: Phrases and short sentences and adapted amounts of copied text with some original language;

Level 3: Simple and expanded sentences showing emerging complexity used to provide detail;

Level 4: Variety of sentence lengths of varying complexity, with emerging cohesion used to provide detail and clarity; and Level 5: Variety of sentence lengths and complexity, with cohesion and organization.

2. Vocabulary Usage - range of word use, from high frequency to high technical usage. The range is:

Level 1: Usage of highest frequency vocabulary from the school setting and content;

Level 2: Usage of general language related to the content;

Level 3: Usage of general and some specific language related to the content;

Level 4: Usage of specific and some technical language related to the content; and

Level 5: Usage of technical language related to the content area and evident facility with needed vocabulary in general.

3. Language Control - 'Communicability' related to native language writer's usage.

The range is:

Level 1: Generally comprehensible when copied or adapted from a model;
Level 2: Generally comprehensible when adapted but may contain many errors;
Level 3: Generally comprehensible when writing in sentences but comprehensibility may be impeded by errors when attempting to produce original text;
Level 4: Generally comprehensible at all times, and errors do not impede the overall meaning; and
Level 5: Approaching comparability to that of English proficient peers, and errors do not impede comprehensibility.

CREATING ELL WRITING PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Step 1: Obtain the ACCESS for ELLs writing test score. This yearly assessment measure provides the overall writing proficiency level incorporating linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control. For example, an ELL with a writing level 4 score will be able to meet the criteria for that level described above regarding linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control.

Step 2: Examine your content lesson; determine what you want your mainstream learners to write as a part of the lesson; and 'transform' the expectation(s) to meet the criteria stated above in the following manner as a performance:

Language Function + Topic + Support

The **language function** is an action verb describing the cognitive performance in writing; the **topic** is the lesson focus; and the **support** is the necessary scaffolding to assist the ELL according to his/her proficiency level, i.e., what the ELL can do.

EXAMPLES OF WRITING PERFORMANCE

The following are some examples of writing expectations in differing grade clusters and miscellaneous content areas:
LANGUAGE ARTS - GRADES 1 - 2
 Level 2: Describe (**language function**)

people or places in story pictures or wordless picture books (**topic**) in small groups or pairs (**support**).

MATH - GRADES 3 - 5

Level 3: Give step-by-step process (**language function**) of how to solve problems involving fractions from diagrams (**topic**) using a series of related sentences (**support**).

SCIENCE - GRADES 6 - 8

Level 4: Describe procedures (**language function**) related to scientific inquiry involving elements or compounds (**topic**) in displays or exhibits (**support**).

SOCIAL STUDIES - GRADES 9-12

Level 5: Interpret (**language function**) results and pose questions (**topic**) related to survey research (**support**).

WIDA Consortium English Language Proficiency Standards and Resource Guide

(download available at www.WIDA.us) provides over one thousand exemplars with suggested language functions in social/instructional, language arts, math, science and social studies for grades preK - 12, listening, speaking, reading and writing. This guide is an excellent resource for creating lesson-specific performance indicators for ELLs diagnosed at proficiency level 1-5 in writing (mainstreamed ELLs will generally be at levels 3-5).

SOURCES:

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- Thornbury, Scott (2004). How to Teach Writing. New York: Pearson Longman.