



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs

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Issues in Writing for English Language Learners

There are various aspects of language which English Language Learners (ELLs) must master in learning to write in a second language. This *Bulletin* examines each of these in order to assist teachers in making the right decision for *what* to emphasize in helping this population of learners become more accurate, reflective, and strategic in their writing.

LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

ELLs need practice in the command of grammatical and word knowledge. There are four steps to mastering language structure: familiarization with the structure; controlled writing practice; guided writing practice; and free writing practice. Sentence combining and sentence and paragraph writing from substitution tables is a common technique.

A focus on language structure *is* important; however, by itself, it is not enough. With this approach there is a tendency to present language in short fragments, which neglects the importance of whole, authentic texts in the act of writing.

TEXT FUNCTIONS

Here the focus on writing is on *use*, that is, the way language is used to perform certain functions. Thus, modeled texts with

prescribed formulas are presented for students to practice. Examples include description, narrative, classification, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect. "Accordion paragraphing" is a popular technique for eliciting this kind of writing.

Knowing text functions is important for the development of different types of paragraphs, supporting sentences, and transitions. The limitation of this approach is that exclusive use detaches the learners from relating their personal experience in writing.

CREATIVE EXPRESSION

The principal aim of focusing on creative expression is to enable learners to find their own voice and to utilize their personal experiences and opinions as a creative act of self-discovery. In this manner, writing is learned, not taught. Journaling, as an act of discovering meaning and responding to ideas, is a frequently used technique.

A big obstacle in this approach is that it is based on the ideology of individualism. ELLs from strongly collectivistic cultures have difficulty expressing themselves in this manner. Another problem is that it is difficult as well to teach and evaluate

"good writing"; errors may be inadvertently emphasized in this approach.

WRITING PROCESS

The writing process approach acknowledges the writer as an *independent* producer of texts, with an emphasis on planning and defining an issue or problem, and proposing and evaluating solutions. The writing process is recursive, interactive, and simultaneous. Group expression is a common feature of this approach.

The biggest challenge to ELLs in this focus is that there are no clearly defined guidelines on how to construct the different kinds of texts they are called on to write. This ambiguity makes it more difficult for ELLs to understand the role of language and text structure for effective written communication.

CONTENT WRITING

This approach to writing emphasizes what students are *required* to write *about* using themes or topics around a set of ideas in a particular subject matter. It elicits personal knowledge through brainstorming and the development of semantic webs, as well as follow-up research to expand content knowledge and information, known as *schema*. Writing activities center around reactions to ideas and information found in texts. This approach can form the basis for complete content courses.

Extensive reading is a critical component in this writing approach, not only providing information, but also modeling text structure. The potential limitation centers around the student's ability to read texts without becoming overwhelmed by complex language structure and unfamiliar vocabulary.

FOCUS ON GENRE

Genre writing uses language patterns as the starting point to accomplish coherent, purposeful writing various genres. Atten-

tion is drawn to the range of choices for conveying information in context. There are five recognized genres: recount (retelling past events); procedure (how something is done or accomplished); description (an imaginary or factual account); report (classifying factual information and their characteristics); and explanation (giving reasons for a state of affairs or judgment). Genre writing involves modeling with discussion and analyses of the text structure and language; joint construction of similar models followed by independent student construction of text with redrafting; and editing and conferencing.

Genre writing focuses on an awareness of language, rather than experimentation and exploration. It clearly focuses on specific words, phrases, and sentence forms embedded in the content of reading and writing. The inherent tension involved in this process is that it can limit the language choices students have for constructing texts if teachers are not aware of and teach a wide range of choices.

CONCLUSION

From the description of the various writing emphases provided above, it is evident that ELLs, along with all other learners, need to incorporate all of these forms of writing in their schooling. Success in school involves grammatically correct use of language; the ability to write texts which convey specific functions and purposes; creative expression; independently producing texts through peer editing and interaction; reporting content information from extensive reading; and paying careful attention to the language context, patterns, and expression in content writing.

SOURCE:

Hyland, Ken (2003). *Second Language Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.