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# Struggling to read and write in a second language

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## ABSTRACT

Writing and reading. Reading and writing. Keeping a journal to capture the moments that surround you, incubating ideas (Bomer & Bomer, 2001), and organizing ideas. All this seems fairly simple, that is unless you are an English Language Learner (ELL) or an English as a Second Language (ESL) student. Foreign languages are immensely difficult for most learners and thus, teachers and students must have an understanding of each other. Tools, strategies, compensations, and acknowledgements of strengths and weakness behoove the instructor and student. Chen (2000) cites Zamel (1976) and Jones (1986) in that . . . “students writing in a second language proceed in similar fashion as native speakers” (p. 14). Chen (2000) continues to explain that ELL or ESL students all engage in the process of discovery, the process of determining meaning around self. Therefore: [C]ulturally relevant teachers understand that learning is facilitated when we capitalize on learners’ prior knowledge. Rather than seeing students’ culture as an impediment to learning, it becomes the vehicle through which they can acquire the official knowledge and skills of the school curriculum. However, in order to capitalize on students’ cultures, teachers have to know the students’ cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 99-100).

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## Introduction

Texts are not the only answer to shape and transform the English Language Learner’s written word. There is a strong influence present in the ELL classroom; it is the teacher. The teacher’s criteria for evaluating the students “are shaped, transformed, and determined to a large extent by the historical, social, and cultural forces that are beyond the individual’s control” (Reichelt, 2003, p. 99-100). Chen (2000) concurs that there is a need for a different approach to assess students’ writing performance along with identifying the instructional needs. However, there must be an acknowledgement that “there are factors involved in writing performance ...” (p. 12). Chen (2000) cites Vygotsky (1962) in that thought and language “co-exists interdependently” (p. 12). Through interaction, language grows with language. Writing, imposes such a difficult challenge that it tests a person’s ability to generate ideas as well as to mold those ideas into words. Only through words can the ideas be coded and decoded. In words a reader sees only ideas. But for the writer, those words are the fruits of an interaction between language and thinking (p. 12).

Chen (2000) explains that the two methods, Grammar Translation Method and the Audiolingual Approach, “view teaching and learning English as ESL / EFL (English as a Foreign Language) as a process of practicing carefully sequenced lessons, they naturally follow models or patterns that are correct” (p. 7). Students’ strengths and weaknesses progress in level of proficiency. On the other hand, Chen (2000) postulates that “[t]he Process-oriented Approach treats all language activities as a whole. [...] Therefore, it has been named: Integrated Language Approach or the Whole Language Approach. The Student-centered Approach is a natural byproduct of this approach” (p. 10). Hence, for the English Language Learner, their previous experience and prior language use are important tools to their learning of a second language.

Smith (2003) notes that writing for the English Language Learner is a type of self-discovery. They build on what they already know by socializing and interacting with the new language; as a result, adapting at their own pace. Therefore, writing becomes an essential language-reinforcing skill (Smith, 2003). “This transformation of knowledge takes place in each individual’s mind only, so each student interprets and understands in his/her own unique way” (Chen, 2000, p. 11). Smith (2003) cites Hudelson (1988) in summarizing that “[c]ulture may affect the written view of writing, of the functions or purpose of writing and of themselves as writers” (p. 4).

Consequently, proficiency in oral communicative functions is a crucial linguistic prerequisite essential for participation and project completion. The primary objective of process writing is to promote self-assessment strategies for ELL students --- successful completion of such an academic endeavor is efficiently realized by delivering process writing for ELL students with intermediate proficient levels. Oral activities (e.g., classroom discussions and peer response groups), graphic organizers (e.g., concept maps), literacy tasks (e.g., free writing), writing workshops (e.g., sentence combining), and publishing goals (e.g., school books) will be integrated writing the present self-assessment tool to facilitate and promote the writing skills necessary for academic success (Jenks, 2003, p. 2).

Cotterall & Cohen (2003) explain the scaffold approach for second language learners. “This predetermined essay structure allow[s] the learners to focus their efforts on one section of the essay at a time” (p. 163). A notation was made in Cotterall and Cohen’s (2003) article that “... some may argue that this approach is overly prescriptive” (p. 163). However, when there are many nuanced processes for English Language Learners, scaffolding provides the safety net and something concrete to hold on to during their learning progression.

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Scaffolding is a multifarious teaching approach. Simply put, the teacher must link essay topics to themes to be relevant to learners. Students gain confidence when the learner links specific vocabulary with accurately pronounced key words. Teachers supply assistance in locating appropriate texts and data. With these two features employed, the teacher must set the stage for instruction. Cotterall and Cohen (2003) state to “focus of each session to one section of the essay” (p. 163). This strategy is principally beneficial to the second language learner who is faced with low proficiency and relative lack of literacy exposure in their second language. They “...believe that this staged approach organized the instruction into manageable elements, while usefully focusing attention on the unit of organization itself” (p. 163). Reichelt (2003) states:

Scaffolding involves modeling for students appropriate strategies for grappling with new problems that students can internalize and apply to new situation. Scaffolding often takes the form of well-sequenced questions that help students think through a given writing problem, often eliciting what they know about the topic, what the purpose of their writing is and how they think they can best achieve that purpose (p. 117).

Jenks (2003) supports oral/aural activities within the classroom. These begin the prewriting phase with brainstorming “on an idea, topic, or concept in which a literacy objective will commence the writing task” (p. 2). Throughout the writing process, reflections, measures, or self-assessments are maintained. Jenks furthers:

The process-writing checklist acknowledges the importance of activating background knowledge through the exploratory activities native to the prewriting stage. The drafting, revising, and editing phase of process writing integrates the procedural and structural knowledge critical to successful writing (e.g., the mini-lessons inherent in the revising stage support the mechanics of writing conventions identified in the knowledge of structure maxim). The composition tasks associated with the publishing stage of process writing unite the content, procedural, and structural knowledge central to developing authentic and effective writing assessment activities (p. 5).

Jenks (2003) purports that these forms of self-assessment “empower ELL students with the confidence and skills necessary for literacy development” (p. 5). Chen (2000) cites Cumming (1989) and adds that students who enter the English language world with a firm control of their “native language writing expertise” (p. 15) perform with skill in the process of writing in English. As well as “... all students can find success where they are as we address culture, vocabulary, voice, and characterization in specific contexts” (Gardner, 2003, p. 2).

After the prewriting or brainstorming stage has begun, writers organize and continue the writing process. Boynton (2003) cites Thomas Carnicelli’s suggestion “... that individual conferences are more effective than group instruction because of the focus on the individual’s work and the private nature of this individual interaction” (p. 391).

This is also confirmed by Graves (1994) when he states there is an “...importance of listening to children and learning from them, allowing them to choose their own topics, and the process of writing” (p. xvi). He continues to affirm the importance of conferring with the student since “most of the teaching occurred through the conference” (p. xvi). “The purpose of the writing conference is to help children teach you about what they know so that you can help them more effectively with their writing” (Graves, 1994, p. 59). Therefore

“...a conference is the most productive use of the teacher’s time” (Boynton, 2003, p. 391).

Still, it is important to remember to focus the feedback, whether it is in an oral conference or comments written, to a limited number of elements. “Giving learners feedback on a large number of elements can only confuse them” (Gabrielatos, 2000, p. 11). Boynton (2003) suggests to give “... students a conference behavior handout, listing what they should do and what they should expect” (p. 392). This management technique not only reduces some of the anxiety about what is expected during a conference, but it keeps the conference on task; therefore, maximizing time efficiency. Boynton (2003) continues to advise conference strategies. The location of the student and the teacher should be side by side with the product in the middle. Teachers must listen to their students first. Boynton (2003) refers to Donald Murray on the importance of letting the “student[s] have the first words in any conference. This establishes the instructor as coach instead of all-knowing dictator” (p. 395). Boynton (2003) agrees that “[s]tudents need time to process the answers to the questions we ask. [...] Knowing when to be quiet forces students to make their own decisions about the feedback they receive” (p. 399). Chen (2000) states that “[t]his transformation of knowledge takes place in each individual’s mind only, so each student interprets and understands in his/her own unique way” (p. 11).

Boynton refers to teaching moments as “Fishbowl Conferences.” Beginning early in the instructional year, volunteers are asked to carry out their first conference in front of the whole class. Copies of the short drafts are provided for every student in the class so that each can follow along with what is going on in the conversation. Therefore, apprehensive students, especially the ESL students will be more aware of what is expected during their private conference time. Boynton (2003) continues to offer management tips on the method of setting up conference times with the students. These can be done as “sign-ups.” The student signs him/herself up for a conference time on a particular day; however, the teacher must take special heed to those students who don’t sign up and must provide a mandatory time assigned by the teacher. These sign-up sheets then can be kept as a form of record keeping. Reichelt (2003) advises to converse to the student in an uncomplicated approach, remembering to keep the elements simple and limited. All conferencing does not have to be done oral / aurally. Xiao Li was acknowledged by Reichelt (2003) as saying that “a major part of composition instructor’s work involves enforcing standards of good writing by supplying written feedback to the students about their work” (p. 99).

A suggested method during a conference is a “read aloud.” This is where the student reads his or her work aloud. Boynton (2003) states that this results in one of two outcomes:

Students often hear their own problems and correct them on the spot. Students do not recognize the problem at all, saying, “That sounds good to me.” This lets you offer alternate constructions that the students can then evaluate next to their own chosen words (p. 396).

During conferencing, Boynton (2003) organizes the meeting into manageable sections while looking at a student’s draft. Focusing on only one area of concern at a time maintains the control of time and minimizes the number of elements for the student to work on at once. “When looking at student drafts, it is important to focus on top-down concerns and not address every problem you see” (Boynton, 2003, p. 396). Two separate

sections are devised: High Order Concerns (HOC) and Low Order Concern (LOC) are lists of particular elements that the instructor is looking for; however, they are divided into two sections and only one section is conferenced on at a time (Boynton, 2003).

Process writing forms a cycle: "Awareness-Feedback-Support-Feedback-Practice-Feedback" (Gabrielatos, 2000, p. 8). This framework explicitly takes into account the following:

- 1) What is taught is not necessarily what is learned.
- 2) Recycling is essential for learning.
- 3) Learners need to be involved actively in the learning process.
- 4) The more individuali[z]ed the teaching, the more effective it is (p. 9)

Cotterall and Cohen (2003) also note the importance of feedback from peers and teachers. Peers can be very helpful in assisting the ESL student to express self. The teacher's feedback should focus on limited elements of content and structure that have been discussed during class sessions.

Along with this cyclic formation of process writing, scaffolding for the English Language Learner reduces the learning burden as the student travels through unfamiliar and challenging tasks. Scaffolding helped the students create associations between their beliefs, attitudes, and prior knowledge with the topic they were writing about. "Out of this sense of ownership developed a clear sense of why they were writing, who they were writing for, and what information they needed to include in their texts" (Cotterall, Cohen, 2003, p. 165). In order to briefly describe the writing process, Jenks (2003) states:

The 5-stage sequential pattern of process writing is based on the independent and associative components that measure evidence and evaluation (e.g., comprehensive analysis of linguistic development), enhance instructional procedures (e.g., accurate evaluation of linguistic applications), and provide ELL students with fair and ethical assessment designs (e.g., multiple forms of assessment opportunities in a variety of learning environments). The confidence of knowing ELL students will integrate monitoring strategies during literacy activities distributes instruction time to additional meaningful assessment applications – the efficiency and feasibility of the currently self-assessment checklist allows educators to effortlessly accomplish anecdotal records and assess instructional effectiveness. Evaluating ELL students in authentic and meaningful linguistic interactions (e.g., collaborative work with the absence of test anxiety) are crucial in developing an inclusive awareness for accurate language assessment. (p. 6)

Finally, compounding on their writing skills is the fact that the English Language Learners bring an ethnic identity that involves self-identification. Negy, Shreve, Jensen, & Uddin (2003) cite Phinney (1991) in that the "... attitudes about oneself as a group member, extent of ethnic knowledge and commitments, and ethnic behaviors and practices" provide a climate of continual learning in the classroom (p. 334). "Culturally relevant teachers know enough about the students they are teaching to help students make use of their multiple cultural identities. Those identities may span racial, ethnic, and national boundaries" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 100). Some students may encounter negative experiences; such as teacher bias and / or lack of culturally relevant material. In order to protect their self-esteem, some students may "disidentify with academics" (Cokley, 2002, p. 379). Therefore, leadership awareness of the myriad of cultural influences in the classroom,

on the campus, in the district, and within the community can be positively disseminated through the act of process writing. All factions of the education arena can be positively affected and influenced. Taylor (2002) confirms:

We need to teach multicultural literature to mainstream students, not so that they can taste a little of everything, nor to appeal to some sense of fair play; we need to teach them these other literatures because they are relevant to their lives and, most importantly, because mainstream students, perhaps more than any others, need help seeing that perception is not matter-of-fact, that knowledge is a constructed and dynamic thing, and that meaning arises from implied contexts (p. 11).

Nevertheless, a note of caution must also be heeded as results found in a research study by Negy et al (2003) who cited work by Berry (1984) stating that the multicultural approach would provide positive growth of self and others indicating that there will be a higher level of acceptance toward people from all cultures and compared it with the competing social identity theory (SIT). Taylor (2002) supports this appreciation of varied cultures and honors the differences, as "excellent learning moments for helping students understand the constructed nature of culture and the contextual nature of learning" (p.2). However, the Negy et al (2003) study concluded by primarily supporting the Social identity theory (SIT) which states: "The more White and Hispanic participants embraced their ethnicity, the more negative views they held toward people who did not belong to their respective ethnic group" (p. 341). Therefore, a teacher must consider the fact that the multicultural tactics are only advisable if that teacher is a powerful, unbiased mediator of racial attitudes. As Ladson-Billings (2001) expresses wholeheartedly, the instructor must "understand that culture is a complex concept that affects every aspect of life. Such teachers are able to recognize their own cultural perspectives and biases" (p. 98). Understanding, teaching, and learning amid the myriad of cultures might be especially effective in a classroom where there are many cultures to learn from each other with no recognizable majority. Although it is often uncommon, multicultural collaboration a useful teaching technique. The teacher must know their kids, their school, and their community. Students will learn more effectively and be interested in that which they can take ownership. In other words, students will learn better on topics of interest. This conclusion is apparent through Cotterall and Cohen's (2003) writings of scaffolding second language learners through the writing process. This process not only allows there to be a "form" to provide organization for the second language learner, but it also allows the second language learner to become an expert in a particular area, prompting their use of a second language towards becoming less inhibited in the classroom. Regardless of culture, ethnicity, race, or language, all students have something to offer into the world of education for either themselves or for others. Smith (2003) cites Pfinstag (1984), reflecting that the methods of "expression permit the student to embrace cultural background as they strive to learn a new language" (p. 4).

Working among or through the walls of each student's difference is what maintains the challenge in the field of education and also adds to the depth and greatness of the world in which we reside. In summation, teaching is a continual challenge that presents itself with a never-ending cascade of learning opportunities not only for the students, but for the instructors as well. Process writing and early reading are only two portions of the language learning experience. As instruction

provides a framework, oral/aural brainstorming of ideas, modeling each step of the process by scaffolding, and maintaining continual feedback, the English Language Learner will create their own texts and respond to the world. Mainstreaming the various cultures, the importance offered by the second language learner, and the unending opportunities for the teaching moments that arise unexpectedly will only contribute to the educational advancement of our nation. These concepts are created and maintained in a language rich environment, which is equally bountiful as the language has its opportunity to be expressed in words read and written by a multitude of culturally diverse people.

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