

## English Learners and Writing: Responding to Linguistic Diversity

By Robin Scarcella

Director, English-as-a-Second-Language Program, University of California, Irvine

Increasing numbers of nonnative English-speaking students, here referred to as *English learners*, are enrolling in classes in which full proficiency in English is often assumed.<sup>1</sup> These students have often received special language instruction designed: (1) to help them become proficient in English; (2) to enable them to participate in the core curriculum; and (3) to promote their positive self-image and cross-cultural understanding. However, when they have acquired an advanced level of English proficiency and progress to mainstream instruction, they still need an instructional program to promote their continued development of English-language proficiency. Although writing instruction is only one aspect of that program, it can play an important role since effective writing instruction for English learners can help them gain the academic writing abilities that they need to be admitted to institutions of higher education as well as to succeed in the job market. As is often argued, skill in writing can open the way to success in our society. English learners with effective English writing abilities can succeed in the United States more easily than English learners without those abilities. This article addresses the teaching of writing in the core curriculum to English learners who have acquired advanced levels of English proficiency but who still lack native-like writing skills. It is intended for elementary school and high school teachers.<sup>2</sup>

For all writing instructors whose students speak English as a second language, knowledge about linguistic diversity is not a matter of political liberalism but rather a necessity. What are the most effective ways to teach diverse populations of English learners? In response to that question, this article contains a discussion of some general pedagogical guidelines that can be adapted for teaching writing to English learners and some ways of adapting teaching practices to provide individualized instruction for those students.

### Guidelines for Teaching English Learners

The material that follows contains guidelines for effective ways to teach writing to English learners:

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<sup>1</sup> Many terms have been used to describe these students; for example, English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students, limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, and culturally diverse students. In this paper the term *English learners* is used. They are defined as "children whose language background is other than English."

<sup>2</sup> These issues are discussed further in "Building Bilingual Instruction: Putting the Pieces Together," *BEOUTREACH*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (February, 1992), 6-8. (*BEOUTREACH* is published by the Bilingual Education Office, California Department of Education.)

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## GUIDELINE 1

*Respect students' home languages and cultures.*

Too often, our students feel that their cultures and languages are not valued in their classrooms. The goal in writing programs for English learners is to teach standard English writing, not to replace students' first languages and dialects with standard English. Ideally, we want to build on the students' culturally rich experiences. The goal is not to make students monolingual in standard English; rather, it is to help them acquire standard English in addition to their first language or dialect. To accomplish this goal, we should learn about the students' linguistic and literary traditions and incorporate them into the curriculum. Consider, for instance, the rich literary traditions of Korean students, whose country has a 24-hour *dial-a-poem* telephone service. Young children in Korea are encouraged to keep daily diaries and to enter literary contests. Poetry readings and contests are held during school picnics. Incorporating some of these Korean traditions into the regular curriculum could increase the self-esteem of Korean-American students while simultaneously facilitating their English writing development.

## GUIDELINE 2

*Give students lots of comprehensible English input.*

Stephen Krashen's research indicates that a sufficient quantity of comprehensible English input tailored to the current English proficiency levels of the students aids their overall English-language development. He suggests that a level of English appropriate for the students, one that is neither too difficult nor too easy, facilitates English language acquisition. According to Stephen Krashen, when students receive English input that they do not understand, their English language development does not proceed smoothly.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this outcome explains why one of my nonnative English writing students complained bitterly about his high school English class. This student claimed that he did not understand what was going on in the class because the teacher talked only about *Shake Spear*.

Several ways can be used to increase the amount of comprehensible English that students receive in class. Familiar, predictable input is often the most comprehensible. Preview questions or warm-up activities inform English learners of the topic of the lessons. Visual aids—pictures, diagrams, charts, gestures, and items from the outside world—also aid students' comprehension. Focusing on the students' own experiences helps learners understand the input.

Another way of helping students understand writing lessons is by relating topics and activities to one another throughout the instruction. D. Scott Enright and Mary Lou McCloskey suggest "integrating a series of related topics using speaking, listening, reading and writing activities." In their unit entitled *Rain Makes Applesauce*, designed for second through fifth graders, students participate in a variety of activities, including

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<sup>3</sup>See Stephen Krashen. *Insights and Inquiries*. Hayward, Calif.: Alemany Press, 1985.



science, math, literature, art, field trips, and cooking centered on the theme of apples.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Stephen Krashen encourages teachers to use a series of related topics and activities so that English learners have additional opportunities to understand the input.<sup>5</sup>

Simply talking to students individually provides them with comprehensive spoken English. When teachers interact one-on-one with students, the teachers' English can be tailored to the proficiency levels of the students; and the students' difficulties in understanding the teachers can be determined. Although it is possible for teachers to remind themselves to speak slowly and clearly, teacher-centered lessons almost always prevent instructors from accurately tailoring their language to the students' English proficiency levels. When students can react individually to teachers' comments, using such expressions as "Hm?" and "I don't understand that word," teachers find it easier to know which parts of their conversations students cannot follow.

Because students cannot always be provided with one-on-one interaction, they can be encouraged to converse with one another. Peer tutoring, read-arounds, and cooperative learning activities can provide learners with ideal input for language development since those activities foster the kind of interaction that allows students to use and develop their existing communicative potential as listeners, speakers, readers, and writers.<sup>6</sup> However, teachers need to be aware of the type and quality of language input that students receive when they interact with one another. For example, if during peer editing, revision, or brainstorming sessions, English learners are paired only with other English learners who speak varieties of immigrant English rather than standard English, the sessions may not help them to make significant progress in acquiring standard English writing skills. They may acquire new vocabulary words and structures from their peers, but many of those words and structures may be characteristics of immigrant English varieties rather than of standard English. Students must be helped to develop the conversational skills needed to interact effectively so that they can obtain comprehensible English input. For example, they can be taught such conversational management skills as asking questions when they do not understand and encouraging everyone in their group to contribute.

Often, students understand the teacher's spoken English quite well. One bilingual researcher, Jim Cummins, argues that many English learners acquire conversational skills in their first few years in the United States but fail to acquire the ability to communicate in academic situations. As a result, English learners have greater difficulty using academic English than informal, spoken English and often struggle with the reading materials given to them.

To make sense of the classroom reading material, English learners need to draw on several kinds of culture-specific knowledge. They have not had the same experiences as those of their native English-speaking peers. They need additional information about the reading assignments to understand them. Prereading assignments and explanations (which include the use of pictures and realia and which develop concepts, vocabulary, and structures used in the reading) all help to build students' comprehension of the reading.

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<sup>4</sup>D. Scott Enright and Mary Lou McCloskey, *Integrating English: Developing English Language and Literacy in the Multilingual Classroom*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., 1988, p. 281. Reprinted from Robin Scarcella, *Teaching Language Minority Students in the Multicultural Classroom*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1990, p. 79. Reprinted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc.

<sup>5</sup>See Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell, *The Natural Approach*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1983.

<sup>6</sup>See Spencer S. Kagan, *Cooperative Learning*. San Juan Capistrano, Calif.: Kagan Cooperative Learning, 1992, which contains a discussion of cooperative learning and activities for cooperative learning in the classroom.



Books such as the classics have been abridged and simplified to make them more accessible to English learners. Easy reading for pleasure, including the reading of comic books, seems to ease the path for English learners who later want to read more difficult material. The reduced length, larger print, pictures, and illustrations of easy-to-read materials make them comprehensible to English learners who lack English proficiency.

However, if students are to develop proficiency in academic English, they must be exposed to reading materials that are more difficult to read than simplified readers. Students need to read academic texts—essays, articles, and books—that are not usually simplified for nonnative English speakers. *Narrow reading* helps students to understand such academic material. When students read *narrowly*, that is, read many materials on a related topic or materials written by one author, their English proficiency improves because they are repeatedly exposed to similar vocabulary and grammatical structures. Using this method, students have multiple opportunities to acquire English words and structures.<sup>7</sup>

### GUIDELINE 3

*Check to make sure that the students understand.*

Many ways exist to ensure that students understand the English used in their lessons. Asking students whether they understand the instruction is often ineffective. They are often embarrassed to admit not understanding. Head nods in many Asian countries mean “We are following you,” not “We understand what you say.” No one likes being spotlighted (singled out in front of the classroom and asked to perform before others), least of all English learners who lack English proficiency. Yet many ways exist to get students to display their understanding without embarrassing them. A quick true-or-false quiz may be helpful. Students can also act out a story or perform the actions in the story as they reread it a second time. They can retell, summarize, or analyze the reading material; discuss it with a group; illustrate it; or use it to complete a different task. Students with even very limited English proficiency can be asked to respond chorally or individually to *yes/no* or *either/or* questions or to give one-word answers to general questions. Students with more advanced English proficiency will need to be challenged so that they are encouraged to use their English in more sophisticated ways.

### GUIDELINE 4

*Encourage students to use language purposefully.*

Exposing learners to comprehensible input in the writing classroom is not enough. For example, they can be given the right type of comprehensible reading material; but to get them to learn from it, teachers need to have them interact meaningfully with it and to use it in their writing. Encouraging students to convey real messages (such as an invitation or a complaint) to real audiences (such as peers or political leaders) helps students to understand the significance of writing. When English learners begin to use English to accomplish goals that they themselves see as

<sup>7</sup> Scarcella, *Teaching Language Minority Students*, p. 86.





important, they realize that English is not just a series of word lists or grammar forms but a living language for communication. Moreover, when they are engaged in sustained meaningful communication related to their own personal interests, they feel that their efforts to write are worthwhile. This in turn helps learners to develop positive attitudes about writing.

#### **GUIDELINE 5**

*Provide writing tasks at the appropriate level for English learners.*

The kinds of writing English learners do greatly affect their language and writing development. It is important to provide English writing assignments that are a little beyond the current English proficiency levels of the students.<sup>8</sup> If students are given tasks that are too easy, they are not challenged and do not learn new skills. Yet too often the demands made on students to write beyond their English proficiency levels are too harsh. If students have to use too many new vocabulary words and grammatical structures in an activity, they may spend too much time consciously trying to string sentences together or translating from their first languages. In the end they may become frustrated and even feel themselves driven to plagiarize. For instance, an English learner was asked to write a book report on a sophisticated novel. He knew he did not have the ability to complete the task. So he fabricated the entire report and titled it "Catch Her in the Right."

For many students the alternative to plagiarizing is carrying out a difficult writing assignment in their own garbled, ungrammatical English. If they are given no feedback on their writing, they may come to believe that their poorly formed sentences constitute correct standard academic English. This situation actually happened to one of my own students. Only when I showed him that *firstable* was not in a dictionary was he convinced that *firstable* was not an English word!

A good rule of thumb to follow when deciding on writing tasks is to have the students write what they can comprehend and say. An exact fit between a student's English proficiency level and the writing task is improbable. Both the content and the genre of the material contribute to the difficulty of the task. The easiest content for English learners is related to their everyday activities, such as those with their families and in their neighborhoods. Culturally familiar topics are also easier for students to write about. Students more easily complete tasks that are personally interesting and that they consider irrelevant. For instance, tasks such as ranking which equipment to take camping may interest students who are avid campers but may have little relevance for students who hate camping.

#### **GUIDELINE 6**

*Allow students to choose their own writing topics and tasks.*

This practice enhances the development of students' ability to write in a second language because choice is a critical component of writing. Allowing students to

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<sup>8</sup> See Stephen Krashen, *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. New York: Longman, 1985.



choose topics and tasks in which they are interested motivates them to elaborate on their ideas, clarify their thoughts, revise their texts, and perfect their writing.

English language learners come from distinct cultural backgrounds and have distinct interests and needs. However, to succeed in school, all students need to write in personal genres—including notes, telegrams, postcards, diaries, and informal letters—as well as institutional genres—including summaries, reports, and essays. Students who are at a low level of English proficiency especially benefit from writing about their personal experiences. Tasks focused on the students' personal experiences are the easiest ones for English learners because they can readily relate to them. One of my Latino students was delighted to describe her experiences learning to write Spanish in a public school in Michoacán. After describing her past education, she lamented, "Sometimes I feel my life experiences are not important here in the United States. I'm happy you want to know about me."

### **GUIDELINE 7**

*Provide comprehensible, constructive feedback.*

English learners need more feedback on their written work than do native English writers. English learners need to know alternative ways of using language, vocabulary items, grammatical structures, and specific transition words that increase the cohesion of their essays. Developing students' sense of audience awareness is not enough; English learners need to know how to vary their language appropriately to appeal to diverse audiences. Similarly, those students need to know which level of language to use to display formality and informality. They need to know the rhetorical structures and language associated with different genres such as the narrative, short story, and persuasive essay. Giving English learners the precise language they need to compose entire sections of their writings can be helpful. In general, the more comprehensible, constructive feedback that students receive, the better. This statement does not mean that teachers need to put masses of red ink on the papers of English learners. Comments can be discussed during conferences and editing sessions, and students can be individually coached.

### **GUIDELINE 8**

*Grade fairly.*

In conjunction with this guideline, teachers need to reward and acknowledge students' efforts while simultaneously avoiding culturally biased writing tests that show what students cannot do rather than reveal their strengths. Students need honest information about their progress. To ensure fair grading, teachers can create writing tasks that bias for the best (elicit the best sample of the students' writing).<sup>9</sup> Teachers may need to give intermediate and advanced English learners one grade for grammar and another for content and organization. Students who are just beginning to acquire English will need more encouragement and positive feedback. Although teachers may be tempted to cushion the efforts of English learners, at no time should they be led to

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<sup>9</sup> Scarcella, *Teaching Language Minority Students*, p. 158.



believe that they have acquired perfect standard English when in fact they have not yet acquired a high level of proficiency in standard English.

## **GUIDELINE 9**

*Build a climate of trust in which students feel free to try out new linguistic behaviors.*

Teachers need to lower their students' anxieties by inviting, but not demanding, students' participation and by creating rules of etiquette for the classroom such as "No putdowns," "Help others," and "Listen carefully."

Affect is important in language development. *Affect* refers to the learner's affective characteristics, such as motivation, attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, cooperation, competition, and learning styles and strategies. In the writing classroom, teachers must pay close attention to these characteristics of learners so that activities can be designed and tailored to meet learners' needs. A lack of knowledge about students' affective characteristics may cause writing instruction to fail. Unless learners feel comfortable writing in class, they will not enjoy the experience. To create writing situations that lessen students' anxiety, teachers need to begin with writing tasks at levels appropriate for the students and also occasionally to provide easier tasks that give opportunities for all students to attain success. In this way teachers can help the students enjoy using English to strengthen their positive feelings about the language and to discover new meanings.

### **Individualized Instruction for English Learners**

This section contains a discussion of ways to provide individualized instruction to English learners. An impressive diversity of English learners are enrolled in California classrooms. Among those students are at least three groups:

- Recent immigrants who can read and write well in their first languages (These students have an important advantage over the other two groups; their previous schooling fosters skill development in English.)
- Recent arrivals who find writing in academic contexts painful (These students are illiterate in their first languages and have had little or no previous schooling. They have acquired some English conversational skills, but in academic contexts they are unable to communicate effectively in writing.)
- English learners who are fluent in a variety of nonstandard English forms (These students fill their pages easily, but the writing is not academically acceptable. The students have lived in the United States for a lengthy period, some for as long as five years, and they are often unable to relate to the immigrant experiences of others.)

The students come from many different educational traditions and cultural backgrounds. Observations of their speech and writing reveal that they have acquired different levels of English proficiency in each of the four language skill areas—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They follow diverse patterns of acculturation. Some spent many months eagerly preparing for their life in the United States, while many others were forced to come here by their parents. Some hear a lot of English outside school; others hear none at all; and yet others hear only nonstandard varieties of English.



All students can benefit from the rich experiences and literary traditions of recent arrivals who have been educated in their own countries and are literate in their first languages. Some of these recent arrivals may transfer first-language writing skills into their second language. For example, some Korean learners might avoid writing thesis statements since avoiding the statement of theses in some types of Korean writing is conventional and preferred. Similarly, some Latino learners might hold different expectations of their audience. For instance, unlike some European-American learners, they might expect their audience to appreciate descriptive language—even in expository essays. However, first-language transfer does not occur wholesale. It interacts with other variables—such as age, proficiency level in English, degree of acculturation, and writing proficiency in the students' first language. Not surprisingly, the more experience the learners have in writing about specific topics in particular genres, the more English writing proficiency they gain. Recent arrivals are sometimes unable to write in specific genres because they simply lack the experience.<sup>10</sup>

Immigrants who are illiterate in their first languages and who have had little previous schooling have their own rich cultural traditions that can be appreciated in their classrooms, too. These students will need to learn the written symbol system of English. Increased emphasis will need to be made on the English alphabet, the formation of letters, the patterns of spelling, and the stylistic conventions of English (including capitalization and punctuation). Before moving on to more difficult levels, these students will need intensive English language instruction and time for their initial language skills to mature. In addition, they will need encouragement and many successful experiences using the language during short and frequent easy-writing assignments.

Students who have lived here for a long time, some for as long as five years, and who show signs of beginning to acquire a nonstandard variety of English need to be given much exposure to standard English input inside the classroom. Teachers must not think that students in this group have mastered standard English because they know English slang and converse fluently. Feedback about their progress in English is especially critical. The students must not be allowed to think that they know standard written English when they do not. Intensive English instruction tailored to their linguistic needs is also important.

Today's writing instructors need to respond to linguistic as well as to cultural diversity. English learners have different language learning experiences, and teachers need to become sensitive to those experiences. Becoming sensitive to and learning about the language needs, educational traditions and cultural backgrounds of linguistically diverse students is not impossible for teachers but imperative.

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<sup>10</sup> Robin Scarcella and Rebecca Oxford, *The Tapestry of Language Learning: The Individual in the Communicative Classroom*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1991, p. 122.

