

Teaching Diverse Learners
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Writing

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Considerations for ELLs

When students write, they draw upon the sum of their experiences in listening, speaking, and reading. As ELLs apply themselves to solving the problems they face in writing, such as how to spell a word, where to place a period or an adjective, how to introduce a character, or how to organize supporting details, they gain metalinguistic awareness. Producing text encourages conscious attention to the ways in which language conveys meaning.

Effective teachers try to differentiate between ELLs' content knowledge and their writing proficiency. Although ELLs may achieve a high level of content knowledge, aspects of their writing (e.g., incomplete knowledge of idioms, vocabulary, and writing styles) can suggest a poor grasp of content. ELLs need opportunities to explain their writing to teachers and to obtain help in expressing their knowledge effectively.

ELLs need to experience rich and well-integrated opportunities to participate in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Learning standard writing conventions is especially difficult for young ELLs who depend so much on visual cues and contextual relationships. Teachers help provide such cues and relationships when they write interactively with students and make writing a social activity.

When writing interactively, teachers verbalize their thinking as they write (e.g., "I'm going to put a comma here after bananas because I want to list three fruits: bananas comma apples comma and grapes period. The comma tells the reader to pause in between, and the period says that's the end of the sentence."). Writing is interactive when teachers invite student participation (e.g., "What would be a good title for this journal entry? What was my topic?").

Effective teachers often provide a visual context for writing by having students draw a picture before they write. Teachers may elicit more detail and provide language models by talking with students about their drawings (e.g., "Tell me more about what's happening? I see the dog near the house. What's the dog doing? Is he barking? Is he making noise?").

Writing becomes a social activity when the teacher and students brainstorm together, read their work to each other, and talk about each other's writing. When it is the focus of social interaction, writing is supported by oral language and interpersonal relationships. Students write for the audience of their classmates and are eager to hear what others have written. There are many opportunities for students to learn from each other and from the teacher's interactions with their peers.

Because writing in English is challenging for ELLs, their progress depends greatly on the learning environment and the scaffolding provided. When large writing tasks are subdivided into manageable steps, students experience greater success. ELLs may need more help with vocabulary, spelling, and word order than English-proficient students do, but helping ELLs get started is an investment in their development.

Advice like "Sound it out" or "Find it on the word wall" can be appropriate for

English-proficient students with strong literacy backgrounds. Beginning ELLs, on the other hand, may need help with breaking down a word into component sounds or with locating and identifying the word on the wall. Effective teachers observe students carefully for indications of what tasks they are ready to manage successfully on their own. In addition, purposeful writing projects, such as making invitations, get well cards, announcements, and class helper charts, engage students in the types of writing that they may see in their homes. When teachers provide such integrated opportunities for learning, ELLs can thrive as writers.

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Strategies

1. Teachers demonstrate how writing and reading are connected.
2. Teachers demonstrate how writing and reading are tools for thinking and learning.
3. Teachers explicitly demonstrate how brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing are recursive processes.
4. Teachers model exemplary writing practices for their students and demonstrate how writers write about topics that are meaningful to them.
5. Teachers teach grammar in the context of actual writing.
6. Teachers provide varied and increasingly challenging writing experiences for students at all grade levels.
7. Teachers develop a list of core words for their students to use in their writing.
8. Teachers regularly integrate spelling into writing and reading instruction.

1. Teachers demonstrate how writing and reading are connected.

Beginning ELL readers concentrate on word recognition and on grasping meaning. Differences in narrative style, voice, and genre may not be apparent to ELLs unless explicitly pointed out. Once students' basic reading skills become more automatic, they can begin to notice stylistic differences. Likewise, when ELLs master basic writing skills, they can begin to "try on" or emulate the styles they have read.

A variety of strategies can draw students' attention to differences in narrative style and genre. To increase ELLs' exposure to a variety of texts, teachers can arrange for volunteers, aides, librarians, and older students to read to and with them. Book selection is not random. Teachers can choose two different books to compare their genres, such as the topic of animal behavior in fiction and nonfiction books. They can choose books by different authors to compare their styles. A week of reading informational books on animals can be followed by a group analysis of the types of information such books include (e.g., habitats, food, species, breeds, caring for young). This explicit analysis prepares students to write their own informational pieces. Students can compare different books using Venn diagrams and focusing questions.

To compare texts, effective teachers say things like:

Let's look at the books we read this week.
We read *The Cat in the Hat* and *Cross Country Cat*.
What do the two books have in common?
What's the same about them?
That's right, they're both about cats.
Are the cats in these books real cats like mine?
That's right. They're not.
Tell me what the cats in these books can do that our cats can't do?
Now listen to the first page of each book. (Teacher reads aloud.)

Do they sound the same, or do they sound different?
What differences do you notice?

Let's talk about the book *Dear Mr. Henshaw*.
What's special about how this book is written?
Is there a narrator who tells us about the characters?
Do the characters speak to the reader?

Effective teachers also seek information about home literacy practices and find interesting and often unexpected models to build upon.

They say things like:

Draw me a picture of someone in your family reading and writing.
Tell me about the picture.
Does anyone in your family read newspapers or magazines?
What language are they in?
Does anyone in your house write letters?
Whom do they write to? What language do they write in?
Does anyone in your house do homework?
What kind of homework is it?
Who else do you see reading and writing?

Teachers also try to establish a flow of books to and from home. ELLs can read at home with English-speaking older siblings and family members. Parents who speak little or no English are often thrilled and proud to have their own children read to them in English. Appropriate children's books in Spanish and other languages may be read aloud in school by bilingual adults or older students, and the books may be sent home for families to enjoy together.

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2. Teachers demonstrate how writing and reading are tools for thinking and learning.

Early on, ELLs need to write frequently and become accustomed to the idea that writing is a recursive process involving revision and editing. With skillful teacher modeling and a sequence of manageable steps to follow, ELLs can use writing and reading as tools for thinking and learning. Effective teachers demonstrate how writers read their writing and get more ideas about what else to write. They model some of the questions that writers ask themselves to evaluate what they have written.

There are many ways that teachers can support students' reading, writing, and thinking skills. English language learners (ELLs) can learn how to write from sources (e.g., two different fire engine books), to conduct and write up research (e.g., stories from their grandparents, a survey of classmates' pets, or school staff members' favorite foods), and to write persuasively about their opinions (e.g., "I think soccer is better than American football because . . ."). Effective teachers show students how to use graphic organizers such as timelines, Venn diagrams, semantic webs, and lists of pros and cons for decision-making. Teachers demonstrate how they evaluate their own writing and prompt students to do the same.

To show students how to review their writing, teachers say things like:

Did I introduce my main character, the person that the story is about?
Did I tell where my story happens?
Did I tell when my story takes place, night or day, summer or winter?
Does my title fit my story?

Some teachers encourage ELLs to review their writing portfolios and to think and talk about what they have learned (e.g., Students make reflective comments such as, "I learned to use periods." "I use more capital letters now." "I didn't know how to spell *school*." "My daily journals were very short. It didn't have details."). ELLs are often amazed to see their own progress. Some teachers ask their students to select a paper from the portfolio to revise and edit once they have learned more.

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3. Teachers explicitly demonstrate how brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing are recursive processes.

Effective teachers of ELLs employ a variety of strategies to encourage revision and editing. In formal and informal writing conferences, teachers ask young writers for more information or clarification. These prompts for revision can come from both teachers and students when students read to their classmates from the "author's chair" or during a writing workshop.

To engage students in all aspects of the writing process, effective teachers structure writing projects in deliberate and distinct stages that require multiple re-readings and rewritings leading to "publication." For example, a first-grade English as a second language (ESL) teacher has her students write their stories in stages: beginning, middle, and end. After each section is completed, the writer reads it aloud to classmates and makes some revisions based on their responses. As students complete their story drafts, they have a publishing conference with the teacher. Each student reads aloud to the teacher, and she types the text using the class computer, often asking questions or making suggestions for revision. As the teacher makes the revisions on the computer, the student has to make the same changes to the original hand-written draft to better understand the revision process. The final printed pages are then illustrated, bound, and proudly read to classroom visitors, families, and friends.

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4. Teachers model exemplary writing practices for their students and demonstrate how writers write about topics that are meaningful to them.

ELLs may not be familiar with the many functions and types of writing used in our society and practiced in our schools. They may not know what to write about or may feel daunted by the difficulty of writing. For these reasons, effective teachers model how to write for a purpose and for an audience. By inviting students to observe and participate in the teacher's own writing process, ELLs can better understand ways to approach the task of writing.

Effective teachers model not only the process of writing but also topic selection. They often model interactively, asking ELLs to participate in various dimensions of the teacher's writing process. This provides practice in the tasks of a writer and a glimpse into the decision-making process.

Teachers say things like:

Next Sunday is Mother's Day, so I am thinking about writing a Mother's Day card to my mother. I want to say thank you for many things.

How does a letter start?

We're going to Sunflower Farm next week, so I'm going to write a description of it. I'm going to write about what it's like there. My title

will be *Sunflower Farm* because that's my topic.

Most of you usually draw beautiful illustrations to go with your journal entries, but sometimes people just scribble very fast and don't use many colors or they don't draw a picture that goes with their writing topic. So today I'd like you to help me write a rubric for illustrations. I want your help to think about what makes a good illustration.

Okay, we agreed that a good illustration has five or more colors in it. I'm going to write that: *f-i-v*. . . Next? There's a silent . . . Right, silent *e*.

I want to write a scary ghost story for Halloween. Should I start it by writing "One sunny day" or by writing "One dark night"? Why?

Okay, I wrote, "One dark night, Maggie heard a strange noise . . ."
Now, what goes here at the end? Right, a period. It's the end of my sentence.

When I start the next sentence, what kind of letter do I need?

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5. Teachers teach grammar in the context of actual writing.

ELLs learn many structural patterns of English unconsciously through hearing them and then using them in their speech. Basic communication is the first goal of language development. Effective teachers acknowledge the accomplishments of young ELLs and beginners who achieve basic communication in speaking and writing.

When students speak or write sentences such as, "No like," "Want book," or "Him taking pencil, mine," they are conveying messages effectively, although these sentences are not conventionally grammatical. Beginners do not have an intuitive sense of what "sounds right" in English. That sense develops with time and experience. ELLs' grammar improves over time when they are provided with good language models, guided practice, clear explanations, and tactful but explicit feedback on grammatical correctness. Writing activities provide excellent context for providing the models, practice, explanations, and feedback that ELLs need.

Effective teachers model their own writing process, using the opportunity to present mini-lessons in grammar.

They say things like:

I wrote two sentences: *We walked in the woods yesterday. We fished in the river.*
Who knows why I put *ed* after the verbs *walk* and *fish*?
Listen to me say these words: /walkt/ / fisht/. What sound do you hear at the end?
What does it mean when I say /walkt/ instead of /walk/?
What does the /t/ sound tell you?
What letters spelled the /t/ sound in walked?

In addition, teachers use students' writing as an opportunity to focus on form.

They say things like:

I enjoyed reading in your journal about your day at the circus with Kim. It sounds like you two had a great time. It was really interesting to read about the acrobat dogs! Now let's go back and read your journal writing again to look at the language. I saw a sentence that needs some revising.

Me and Kim ate hot dogs and popcorn. Mm? delicious, but do you see anything that needs to be changed?

Well, I do. It's here, *Me and Kim*. It will be better writing if you change it to *Kim and I*. In English we're supposed to put the other person first. I guess it's more polite. So we'll write *Kim and I*. We'll write *I* instead of *me*. When you talk about yourself doing something, when you're the subject of the sentence, use *I*. We don't use *me* to begin a sentence.

Listen to this, "I ate hot dogs. Kim and I ate hotdogs." Can you say that?

"I ate popcorn. Kim and I ate popcorn." Say it. Good, now you can cross that out with a thin line and rewrite it.

Taking it a step further, teachers design guided writing practice activities to focus on grammatical features that need attention. Based on the example above, extended activities might include those in the following scenario:

On a Monday morning, the teacher asks each child to write three sentences about something that they did over the weekend with a friend or relative. The students first brainstorm a list of past tense verbs that they can use. The teacher calls on students for their suggestions, and she writes their words on chart paper. As she writes, she divides the words into two columns to highlight the difference between irregular past forms, such as *went*, *saw*, *had*, *ate*, *bought*, *made*, and regular verbs, such as *talked*, *fished*, *played*, *cooked*, *visited*. When a student contributes a verb without using the past tense, like *listen*, the teacher prompts the student to say the past form, *listened*.

Before students begin to write, the teacher reviews the sentence pattern they should use: "_____ and I _____ on Saturday/Sunday."

She asks some volunteers to share their experiences orally.

"Tasha and I played hide-and-seek on Saturday."

"My cousins and I visited our grandmother on Sunday."

"My brother and I washed our car on Saturday morning."

After they finish their compositions, the students read them aloud, and their classmates point out any edits that are needed. (Only a few "me and him's" slip through.) They post the compositions on the wall and reread them from time to time. The teacher and students refer to these compositions whenever there is a problem with first-person subject pronouns.

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6. Teachers provide varied and increasingly challenging writing experiences for students at all grade levels.

While it is a good idea to have curricular guidelines specifying writing genres for each grade level, teachers cannot assume that all ELLs arrive in their classrooms with grade-level skills and experience in those genres. Teachers may not always be able to ascertain whether a particular writing style, skill, or

genre was taught by previous teachers or whether the student was able to understand it when it was taught.

Effective teachers understand that ELLs may need to gain experience in basic genres typically learned in earlier grades, such as picture labeling and "I like . . ." lists. ELLs who are beyond the beginner stage can write in more challenging genres, such as informational reports, short skits, and fictional narratives, when their teachers plan and structure the writing tasks carefully and provide good models.

To get young English language learners (ELLs) started, teachers assign writing projects such as journals, narratives, letters, plays, poems, reports, instructions, lab reports, book reports, persuasive essays, and other genres that students will practice again in the grades to come. Effective teachers of ELLs in the upper grades add new and challenging writing tasks, while revisiting writing genres that their students may or may not have experienced or mastered previously.

The following example is adapted from *Teacher Talk and Writing Development in an Urban, First-Grade, English as a Second Language Classroom* (Yedlin, J., 2003).

An experienced English as a second language (ESL) teacher, Mrs. R. describes her formula for teaching a multilevel group of first graders: "Review, reiterate, and revisit again and again and again." Although her class makes great progress over the course of the year, taking on increasingly challenging writing tasks, Mrs. R. continues to revisit basics, such as letter names and sounds, sentence punctuation and capitalization, possessives and apostrophes, throughout the school year. She knows that when she teaches these basics in the fall, some newly arrived students, like Ricardo, are unable to understand. "Ricardo will never get the chance to learn basic punctuation if I've already packed it up and put it away when he's ready for it," she reflects.

Even in the last month of the school year, when modeling her own three-part narrative, Mrs. R. asks for students' help with spelling, punctuating, and capitalizing. This provides Ricardo and students with another exposure to this material now that they are ready for it. Ricardo watches with interest as Mrs. R. writes down each letter of the word that the students spell for her.

At the end of each sentence, she asks, "What goes here?" When students tell her, she writes the period and says, "That's right, a period. A period goes at the end . . ."

"Of a sentence!" respond several children.

During a brainstorming session on the topic of Our Favorite Places, Mona volunteers that her favorite place is "My cousin's house." Mrs. R. asks, "Whose house it? Who does the house belong to?"

"My cousin," answers Mona.

"The house belongs to her cousin, that is what this apostrophe means. This mark, this apostrophe means it belongs to her cousin. It isn't my house or Mona's house. It's her . . ."

"Cousin's house!" chorus several children.

Ricardo, who could do little more than listen and point in September, listens intently, and he joins the chorus, a beat or two after the others.

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7. Teachers develop a list of core words for their students to use in their writing.

The success of a piece of writing depends largely on the writer's vocabulary

choices. In order to communicate effectively, writers need to know many words and to know those words well. This means knowing the various meanings a word may have (e.g., *Mean, root, log, and citation* are all examples of words with multiple meanings.); knowing how to use the word grammatically (e.g., We use a mop to mop the floor, but we don't broom the floor when we use a broom; we sweep it.); knowing the words it typically occurs with (e.g., *toxic waste; poisonous snake*); and knowing its level of politeness or formality (e.g., *kids* versus *children, fake* versus *fictitious*). Because this knowledge requires time and multiple exposures to each word in a variety of contexts, ELLs are likely to need a great deal of work in vocabulary in order to read and write like their English-proficient peers.

Young writers also need to know how to spell words conventionally or how to represent them phonetically so that readers can understand them. To learn all of this, ELLs need rich listening, speaking, and reading experiences, multiple exposures to words, and explicit teaching of definitions and usage. Using words in writing to express their ideas is a culminating experience in which ELLs and other students make words their own!

When working with ELLs at varying levels, effective teachers work with and augment the core word list for their grade level in several ways. Their classroom word walls and word webs include words that were taught in previous grades. They define words that students have asked for in their writing (e.g., How do you write *video games*? I don't know how to write *Santo Domingo*. How do you write *grandma*?). Teachers make sure to include content-area and thematic words by connecting with the science, math, and social studies curricula as well as to cross-curricular themes.

In classrooms where many ELLs can already read Spanish, lists of Spanish-English cognates (i.e., "sister words" with common origins and meanings across languages, *telephono/telephone, sal/salt, estudiar/study*) are posted on the wall for Spanish-speaking students' reference. Picture dictionaries, labeled posters, and graphic organizers are also posted and discussed for the benefit of all children.

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8. Teachers regularly integrate spelling into writing and reading instruction.

Sounding out words and inventing spelling may be quite difficult for ELLs for a variety of reasons. ELLs may have inaccurate impressions of how some words are pronounced. They may be unclear about how particular sounds are represented in English. Some ELLs come from language backgrounds where sound-letter relationships are more constant or from backgrounds that disapprove of unconventional spelling. To learn to spell, ELLs need explicit instruction in the conventions of English spelling in the context of actual reading and writing.

In order to help ELLs learn to spell, effective teachers direct students' attention to the spellings of words encountered while reading. They point out common spelling patterns and ask students to think of other words that follow the pattern (e.g., *ate, late, gate, date*) as well as derivational patterns (*beauty/beautiful*). Teachers point out spelling oddities (e.g., the /f/ sound in *phone* and *photograph* or the rhyming words *good* and *should*).

When teachers write with students, they demonstrate how to segment words into phonemes and how to represent the phonemes with letters. Teachers use spelling terminology such as "silent e" or "double letter." They reference rules as they write (e.g., "I'm going to write about our parties. How do you spell *party*? When we write the plural, *parties*, I know I have to change this *y* to *i* and add *es*. Do you know any other words like that? How about *puppy* and *bunny*?").

Some ELLs "play it safe" when they write, using only words they have memorized or can copy from the classroom print environment. This can result in writing that has no spelling errors but also little individuality. Effective teachers encourage ELLs to figure out the spellings of new and different words that express their thoughts. It is important to see the proliferation of unconventional spelling as progress when the spelling reflects a student's willingness to experiment with sound-letter relationships and a desire to say interesting things. To cultivate accurate spelling, teachers design manipulative spelling activities in which students arrange, combine, match, and sort cards containing words, letters, syllables, prefixes, and suffixes.

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Literature Review

Writing has been characterized as the most challenging of the literacy domains (Juel, 1994). Nelson and Nelson (1978) underscore the difficulty of writing by describing it as "a complex of interconnected systems" (p. 278). Writing requires simultaneous use of phonological, graphic, orthographic, semantic, syntactic, and discourse rule systems (Dyson & Freedman, 1991, p. 762). Most students learn to understand speech first, and then learn to read and write; English language learners (ELLs) have to do all this simultaneously. August and Hakuta (1997) acknowledge that there is little research that sheds light upon the enormous cognitive challenge faced by ELLs who must acquire oral and literacy skills.

Yedlin (2003) identifies the prerequisite skills and knowledge that English writing demands of ELLs in the primary grades:

In order to even begin writing English, the child must be able to discriminate aurally among various phonemes (sounds) and visually among graphemes (letters), and understand the relationships between sounds of speech and letters of the alphabet. Children must also recognize and remember high-frequency words that do not conform to orthographic regularities. Children must master the motor skills necessary to form and arrange the letters and to space words evenly. They must decide what to write about and be able to generate topics suitable for school writing. Furthermore, they must access and produce vocabulary and construct discourse patterns appropriate to their topics. (pp. 111-112)

ELLs who have already learned to write in another language have knowledge and literacy skills that can help them write in English, but they still face many difficulties (Kroll, 1990). To become effective and fluent writers, ELLs must overcome their unfamiliarity with English syntax (Ammon, 1985) and develop their vocabulary. ELLs typically need to develop larger repertoires of words and to learn more about the multiple meanings, connotations, and usages of the words that they already recognize and use (August & Hakuta, 1997). In order to sound out and spell English words accurately, ELLs must surmount their unfamiliarity with the English sound system (Verhoeven, 1999; Yopp, 1992) and learn to perceive "speech chunks" as strings of individual words (Ellis, 1994). Finally, writers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds may already be accustomed to different styles of writing and argumentation (Connor, 1987). Montañó-Harmon's (1991) research showed that Mexican students' English writing reflected the same discourse patterns that they had learned to use in Spanish. Kaplan (1967) found that many ELL compositions rated as vague, disorganized, or off-topic by U.S. teachers, actually conformed to organizational styles favored by students' home cultures.

The consensus of researchers and practitioners is that reading and listening to read-alouds has positive effects on developing ELLs' vocabulary and other facets of their second language development, including writing (Krashen,

2004; Elley, 1991). However, there is little research yet to directly link listening and reading with writing performance (Lightbown, Halter, White, & Horst, 2002).

Studies by Kreeft-Peyton (1990), Hudelson (1986), (1989), Franklin (1986), Ammon (1985), and Urzua (1987) demonstrate that when in supportive contexts, ELL students in the primary grades can write productively. Kreeft-Peyton defines supportive contexts as those characterized by: (1) "frequent opportunities to write, (2) rich language input from the teacher, and (3) teacher feedback focused primarily on content" (p. 195).

In studies of a first-grade ESL class where writing improved substantially over the course of a school year, Yedlin (2003, 2004) observed the first two characteristics above, but also noted that the ESL teacher provided students with feedback on both content and form. In addition, Yedlin observed that this classroom supported ELL writing through a rich print environment containing a word wall and semantic chart listing frequently used words. Peregoy and Boyle (1997) have found that ELLs often use drawing as a pre-write and illustrate their stories and journal entries to support the communicative power of their writing. Yedlin (2003, 2004) described how a teacher used ELLs' drawings as a basis for conversation with students and for eliciting written elaboration of journal entries and stories. Dialogue journals, in which teachers reply in writing to student entries, and learning logs, in which students write about their content learning, have been found effective in encouraging ELLs to write daily, interact with the teacher, and reflect upon their learning and their comprehension (Kreeft-Peyton & Reed, 1990; Dolly, 1990).

Research (Yedlin, 2003; Kucer & Silva, in press) and Carasquillo, Kuser, and Abrams' (2004) review of literature on writing all point to the benefits of intensive teacher modeling of writing accompanied by the teacher's explicit moment-to-moment account of thinking processes. Teachers model their composing processes by verbalizing their own thoughts about purpose, audience, genre, vocabulary choice, and spelling as they write demonstrations in class. Teachers model their revising and editing processes by rereading and evaluating out loud what they have written. Students may simply observe and listen or the teacher may engage students as participants by asking for help or opinions (Yedlin, 2003).

Another way to assist ELLs with composing, rereading, and revising is for teachers to reference and graphically display structural features (e.g., beginning, middle, and end; setting and character; or cause and effect) and use rubrics. In such contexts, teachers use and explicitly explain discourse markers that signal what follows (e.g., Once upon a time, but, since, because, for example). Gradually, teachers involve students in interactive and shared writing activities where students gain increasing independence and teachers respond by "relinquishing control" (Carasquillo, Kuser, & Abrams, 2004, p. 46).

Teachers also support students' writing by simplifying complex tasks into steps and stages that ELLs can manage (Yedlin, 2003, 2004). When well scaffolded, assignments to write reports, essays, and other genres (e.g., letters or journal entries by a historical figure) can encourage academic writing (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997). Authentic writing assignments such as invitations, letters, recipes, and simple books for younger children are highly motivating for ELLs. Maculaitis and Scheraga (1988) suggested that ELL students write easy-to-understand student handbooks for new arrivals. ELLs can be highly motivated by opportunities to write on culturally relevant topics in formats such as oral histories, country reports, and biographies of their heroes and celebrities (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997). Writing may well be the most challenging of the literacy domains (Juel, 1994), but a rich and responsive environment and well-scaffolded writing tasks can help ELLs flourish as writers.

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