

In the STARlight



Research & Resources for English Learner Achievement

Issue 11

Research-based Writing Practices for English Learners

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★ Students of Today ★ Achieving ★ Results

“Research-based Writing Practices for English Learners”

If we could institute only one change to make students more college ready, it should be to increase the amount and quality of writing students are expected to produce. We need to develop student writing skills systematically in all classes and across a range of writing genres, especially expository, descriptive, and persuasive writing. (Conley, 2007, pg. 23)

What does quality writing instruction for ELs look like?

Key Points

This edition of Starlight addresses six research-based writing practices for English learners (ELs). Teachers of ELs need quality and sustained time to acquire the specific skills and knowledge necessary to develop a shared understanding of what research-based instruction for ELs looks like. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), together with the new English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) Framework, provide a clear, cohesive map that addresses writing instruction across content areas.

Research-based Writing Practices for English Learners

Research underscores the need for a shared understanding among writing teachers, and researchers broadly agree that teachers need high-quality professional learning around writing instruction. It is teacher self-efficacy – a teacher’s belief in his or her ability to teach writing – that most positively correlates with students’ academic achievement in writing (Chambless & Bass, 1995; Lapp & Flood, 1985; Street, 2003). Nevertheless, teachers largely do not feel qualified to teach writing in first language (L1) or second language (L2) (Fang, 2005; Street, 2003). The following six high-leverage practices emerge from the collective research on L2 writing, including three seminal reviews of the literature (Goldman, 2013):

1. **Teach genre writing as a process.** Researchers acknowledge the interconnected nature of both process and genre writing approaches. Genre frameworks facilitate language acquisition and improve comprehension by clarifying the patterns and meanings of language (Christie, 1997; Hyland, 2004; Reid, 2011).

For writing teachers, genre pedagogies promise very real benefits. The concept of genre enables teachers to look beyond content, composing processes, and textural forms to see writing as an attempt to communicate with readers – to better understand the ways that language patterns are used to accomplish coherent, purposeful prose. (Hyland, 2004, p. 5)

2. **Build on students’ background knowledge.** In order to develop the writing skills necessary for high achievement, teachers of ELs need to know who their students are, validate their backgrounds and experiences, affirm their identities and cultures, and link new concepts to their daily lives. This recursive, dialogic approach also encourages ELs to use writing to think critically about possible connections to family, school, community and global issues (Ada, 1993; Banks, 2008; Delpit, 2005; Nieto, 2000; Walqui, 2010).
3. **Model writing for and with students.** Simply put, modeling writing makes the writing process visible. Model texts are teaching tools that provide “adolescents with good models for each type of writing that is the focus of instruction. Students are encouraged to emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models in their own writing” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 20). Model texts initiate discussions, reinforce content, promote inquiry, foster new learning, draw connections and encourage reflection (Calderón and Minaya-Rowe, 2011; Graham & Perin, 2007; Smagorinsky, 1992). Interacting with teacher-written models help students create space to reason, analyze, organize and structure their writing process. Kelly Gallagher (2011) makes a case as to why modeling writing is the most powerful writing strategy:

The teacher should model by writing – and think out loud while writing – in front of the class. When my students see me wrestling with decisions as my writing unfolds, it gives them insight on how to compose their own pieces. I don’t tell them how to draft their papers; I show them how I draft my papers. (p.15)

4. **Develop academic oral language.** Language frames provide structure for academic thinking and speaking. Researchers focusing on the specific needs of Long-term English Learners (LTELs) emphasize the need for powerful oral language development tied to writing (Genesse, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006; August & Shanahan, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Olsen, 2010).
5. **Teach vocabulary and grammar explicitly and in context.** Research supports the intensive teaching of high-frequency, academic vocabulary across the content areas. Among the most pressing questions in L2 grammar instruction is how to manage corrective feedback on student writing. Researchers largely concur that teachers need to address students' written errors by providing students with both direct and indirect feedback. While many teachers concentrate time and energy solely on direct feedback (i.e., teacher correction), student-led indirect feedback engages students in the self-editing process by noticing their own errors through focused mini-lessons on specific grammar points (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesse, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006; Ferris, 2004, 1994; Santos, 1988; Saunders & Christian, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).
6. **Publish (and celebrate!) writing using technology.** According to a recent meta-analysis, publishing writing using technology is engaging and empowering. Students who used computers to write wrote more, produced higher quality writing, made more changes, collaborated more, questioned more, used a less linear process, were more motivated, and experienced improved literacy skills, attitudes and thinking skills (Goldberg, Russell, & Cook, 2005).

Implications for Teachers and Administrators

With a persistent achievement gap in academic writing between ELs and their English-speaking peers, there is a critical need for well-prepared educators prepared to teach L2 writing. Schools and district leaders can use the research-based, high-leverage practices to support high-quality professional learning around writing. By focusing on fostering teacher expertise, districts can develop systems of support around a shared vision of quality instruction for ELs.

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STUDENTS OF TODAY ACHIEVING RESULTS

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Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways does your school or district address each of the six high-leverage writing practices?
2. What are some current professional learning efforts around CCSS writing for ELs in your district?
3. What data-driven sources do teachers draw from to inform their instructional practices around writing?
4. How does your school or district currently assess EL progress toward meeting the CCSS?
5. Reflecting on the six high-leverage practices, what might be a next step to strengthen your writing program at your site? How would you specifically address the needs of ELs?

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