Strategies for Teaching Writing to English Language Learners

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All educators are aware of the important role writing plays in a student’s academic success. Although many of these teachers are knowledgeable of ways to improve native English speaking students’ writing, they may not be aware of effective ways to assist English language learners. With a rapidly increasing population of English language learners (ELLs) present in our public schools, it is now more important than ever to be equipped with strategies to assist these students as well. Interactive writing, modeling, frequent exposure to writing, and allowing ELLs to write in their native language are just a few strategies to improve their writing.

Interactive writing involves both the student and the teacher (or more knowledgeable student) working together to compose a piece of writing. Scaffolding their writing allows ELLs to write at a higher level than they could do on their own (Colombo, p.223, 2012). According to studies, another one of the many benefits of interactive writing is that it can “increase vocabulary and language structures for ELLs” (Colombo, 2012).

Next, modeling is a common and valuable tool used to improve the writing of all students. When teachers model writing, students begin to see how to implement writing strategies. They also begin to understand how both written language and the writing process work. Knowledge of writing strategies and how written language works in English will vastly improve the writing of ELLs (Swinney, Velasco, & García, 2011).

Another effective strategy is to provide ELLs with frequent exposure to writing. This includes both giving many opportunities for students to write per day and providing several chances for them to see others (such as a teacher) write. It is important to note that students most benefit from opportunities that allow them to write in various genres (Li & Edwards, 2010). In fact, studies have shown that providing ELLs with opportunities to write and have exposure to a variety of genres of writing throughout the school day is vital to improve students’ writing (Li & Edwards, 2010).

Finally, allowing ELLs to write in their native language can improve their writing for a few reasons. Writing in their native language allows low proficiency ELLs to both create more complex writing and better express themselves than when they write in English (Uribe, & Nathenson-Mejía, 2008).Also, research has shown that ELLs more successfully develop second language literacy skills when they have a “strong foundation in their first language” (Li & Edwards, 2010). Allowing ELLs to write in their native language can strengthen their writing skills in their L1. Having a strong foundation of literacy in their native language will then allow them to transfer some of that knowledge when they begin writing in English (Troia, 2009). Finally, native language writing can build a sense of confidence and pride which then makes ELLs more willing to write (Uribe, & Nathenson-Mejía, 2008).

There are a number of ways to help improve the writing of ELLs. To much surprise, many of the writing strategies used to assist ELLs are also effective with native-speakers. Interactive writing, modeling, frequent exposure, and native language writing can all be used to enhance the writing of ELLs. However, it must be noted that although research has shown these strategies to be successful, they may not work for *all* students. It is important that educators determine what strategies work best for each writer. In addition, I recommend that educators of ELLs research additional methods for improving the writing of ELLs. The number of strategies covered in this paper comes nowhere close to the true number of valuable, effective ways to teach ELLs.

References

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