Tips for Teaching Writing to English Language Learners (ELLs)

by Judie Haynes

What are the challenges ELLs face in learning to write in English? How can you help them?

Writing is the most difficult language skill for ELLs to master. Here are some of the challenges these students face in a writing class.

- English language learners have a limited vocabulary. They repeat the same words and phrases again and again. Content is restricted to known vocabulary.
- ELLs are reluctant to use invented spelling and content is restricted to words they know how to spell.
- Verb tenses are inaccurate. ELLs will usually write in the present tense.
- The chaotic structure and grammar of students' composition make their writing difficult to understand.
- Students are reluctant to share their work during peer editing. When they do share, they prefer to work with other ELLs who may not provide appropriate feedback.
- When ELLs read their writing aloud, they have no sense of what sounds right and what doesn't.
- In many cultures, students are not encouraged to express their opinions. ELLs may have little experience with creative writing to bring from their native language.

What is Translated Writing?

The biggest challenge for teachers working with ELLs is translated writing. This occurs when English language learners develop their ideas in native language and then try to translate them into English. Even if they don't write this native language text down, they are thinking in native language first. When this happens, the writing is full of inaccurate verb tenses and unintelligible sentences. The chaotic structure and grammar make the writing difficult to understand.

Editing this type of writing presents insurmountable challenges for teachers. One strategy is to pick a skill, such as verb tenses, to correct. However, it is better to avoid having students write down their ideas in English through the filter of their native language. Once the student has written an incomprehensible passage, you are stuck with it.

What about Free Writing and Unscaffolded Journal Writing?

Should students be encouraged to free write? (Free writing is a method of writing where students write without stopping for a predetermined amount of time.) The idea behind this is that the more students practice, the better they will write and they will write without an internal censor. It is my experience that free writing and unscaffolded journal writing are not beneficial to beginning ESL students. Students will translate from native language when writing in English. ELLs in both ESL and bilingual programs should be encouraged to write in either English or native language but should not be mixing the two.

Teach nonfiction Reading and Writing

Here are some tips to help your students avoid translated writing and promote thinking in English.

- Teach nonfiction reading writing first. This type of instruction gives ELLs language chunks that they can use in their writing.
- More time should be spent in the pre-writing stage. It is better for ELLS to develop a topic orally with a small group rather than to allow them to choose their own subjects.
- Chart facts about a nonfiction topic. Strengthen the link between oral and written language. Have students read the facts from the chart aloud.
- Use graphic organizers to introduce the skill of arranging information for writing. Have students learn to write from this organizer.

- Use sentences on your organizer rather than phrases. ELLs sometimes find it difficult to go from notes to comprehensible sentences.
- Don't expect students who are not fluent in English to self-edit. They will not usually find their mistakes. Teachers will have to be more hands-on with the writing of their non-native speakers.
- When ELLs read their writing aloud, they have no sense of what sounds right and what doesn't. Working in pairs to edit work is good practice for social skills but it probably won't improve the beginner's writing.
- Specifically model good writing from texts at the learner's English language level. For example, to demonstrate a specific skill such as writing a good opening paragraph, have students examine opening paragraphs in books on the same topic.

Selecting Other Genre

Once students have written nonfiction pieces and you want them to move on to other types of writing, you will still need to carefully select the genre. You still want to avoid translated writing. Give students real reasons to write: Letters, invitations, postcards, lists and interviews with classmates.

When you are ready to teach creative writing, use a dialogue journal rather than having students write in their own journals. Have students write about topics they find interesting. Reflect what they have told you in your response in correct English. If students write at home on their own, you will find that the work is not always their own and you risk having them revert to translated writing.