

TEACHING WRITING IN **MIXED-LANGUAGE** CLASSROOMS

Powerful Writing Strategies for All Students

Joanne Yatvin



New York • Toronto • London • Auckland • Sydney
Mexico City • New Delhi • Hong Kong • Buenos Aires

DEDICATION

For all the young writers whose work appears in this book and their classmates
whose work would be here if there had been more space

Credits

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Although I never expected to be quoting myself, I can think of no better way to acknowledge the people who helped me bring this book to fruition than to repeat what I said in an earlier book: *No writer writes alone. No teacher teaches alone. We are surrounded by a crowd of shadowy mentors, whispering their knowledge in our ears and re-enacting their experience in our mind's eye.*

My most immediate mentors have been seven teachers in high-poverty schools in Portland, Oregon: Emma Harris, Allen Koshewa, Sheryl Lindley, Sharla Sanford, Mary Starrs, Lisa Staver, and Sally Wells. All these teachers bring skill, creativity, perseverance and devotion to the teaching of writing—and everything else—in their mixed-language classrooms. In addition, I want to thank principals Susan Dunn, Heidi Masanuga, and Shane Basset for inspiring their teachers and giving them the freedom to make curricular and instructional decisions in the best interest of their students.

My more removed mentors are the teachers at Crestwood Elementary school in Madison, Wisconsin, where I was principal from 1974 to 1988. Back in the days before standards and testing narrowed the school curriculum and sapped teachers' energies, they developed a school-wide writing program that was revolutionary in its time and is still powerful today.

To identify the early mentors who shaped my understanding of good writing, I have to reach back many years to my time as a graduate student at Rutgers University. My mentors were the professors who assigned the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Melville and other greats for us to read and then expected us to write about them clearly, succinctly, and without jargon.

Returning to the present, I want to acknowledge three colleagues who read parts of this book while it was in progress and gave me good advice: Pam Perrin, Brett Dillingham, and Allen Koshewa. At the same time I want to acknowledge my editor and friend, Lois Bridges, who is always responsive, supportive and helpful when I call on her, just as a good teacher should be. I also appreciate the respectful and efficient work of my production editor Amy Rowe. As always, my mentor behind the scenes has been my husband, Milton Yatvin, who makes it easy in so many ways for me to lead a writer's life.

INTRODUCTION

What's a Teacher to Do?

All over America English language learners (called ELLs throughout this book) are being educated in regular elementary classrooms. Although some of these children have spent time in bilingual classes before their current placements, and others are now receiving an hour or so a day of English as a second language (ESL) instruction, they still need a lot of support for learning. In oral activities and cooperative learning projects, teachers and classmates give that support by helping ELLs find the information they need, supplying the words they don't know, and accepting their less-than-perfect grammar and usage. Most of the time, easy-to-read books are available in classrooms to provide ELLs with background knowledge about unfamiliar subjects. But when it comes time to write, ELLs, like their native English-speaking classmates, are expected to go it alone, selecting appropriate topics, deciding how best to cover them, and finding the language to express their thinking fully, clearly, and correctly. Often, this is too tall an order for children who have missed out on years of schooling in the ways of American life and its written language. Some children just give up, and some teachers give up, too.

Although the original impetus for writing this book was the situation of ELLs in regular classrooms, I could not ignore the fact that there are other children in the same classrooms who also struggle with writing. That's why I have addressed the needs of native English-speaking students as well as those of ELLs. But above all, this book is for you, their teachers, who must consider all your students when you plan instruction, when you demonstrate and explain new material, and when you identify students who need extra help.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In my experience, the materials and methods commonly used to teach writing in mixed-language classrooms are inadequate for the breadth and depth of the job students are expected to do. Not only do many commercial programs assume that all children are alike, they also chop

writing into its parts and focus far more on the mechanics of spelling, punctuation, and word usage than on the background knowledge and conceptual power every writer needs. While a writing workshop approach offers students more leeway to express their own personalities and interests and more relevant instruction in the form of mini-lessons, it often does not provide them with direct support before or during the writing process. Only after students have made their decisions about a topic and written their first drafts do the teacher and other students step up to give assistance. Traditional writing textbooks offer even less support than the other two approaches, separating instruction from writing altogether. These texts focus on the four standard types of writing, formulas for constructing paragraphs, sentence variation and combination, and exercises in grammar, usage, and punctuation. Students are expected to call up these generalities and transform them into the specifics they need while immersed in writing.

With any of these programs, competent English-speaking students may succeed by drawing on the knowledge and skills they've acquired through their home backgrounds and personal reading, but ELLs and strugglers often do not have enough of these resources to fall back on. Without them and without supportive instruction, they may do no more than put some pedestrian—and, often, unrelated—sentences down on paper. Their finished pieces too often reveal a meager vocabulary, immature and repetitive sentence structure, and a lack of information, thought, and feeling.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Program weaknesses are not the only reasons young writers need support before and during writing. An additional problem is that ELLs and other at-risk students may be more at home with spoken language than written language, which are different in several important ways. Even at the level of literal communication, written language requires complete sentences, names and descriptions of things that the reader cannot see or hear, punctuation to replace missing voice intonation, precise verbs, and more nouns than pronouns. The box on the following page illustrates all of those things with two different language examples representing the same incident. Unfortunately, my example of spoken language is not truly authentic because I can't speak it to you; I have to write it. Still, I think you'll get the idea.

In addition to the differences I've just pointed out, you may have also noticed that my example of written language starts with a participial phrase, producing a sentence structure that is common in writing but almost entirely absent in speech. This is just one stylistic feature that differentiates written language from spoken language. However, the most distinguishing characteristic of written language is coherence. Unlike spontaneous speech, which rambles on, repeats itself, and switches topics randomly, written language is held together by the purposeful organization of words and sentences into paragraphs, sections, and complete entities. Because of its coherence written language has greater power to inform, persuade, and please its recipients than its spoken counterpart.

Spoken language: Look there.

Who did that? Was it you?

Written language: Pointing to a puddle of orange juice and a sprinkling of cereal flakes on the kitchen counter, Mom asked Jonathan if he was the culprit.

SUCCESSFUL TEACHING STRATEGIES

The problems inexperienced and disadvantaged writers face are serious instructional issues, and there are no quick and easy solutions. Nevertheless, many teachers are helping their students make significant progress in writing by integrating a variety of supports into their teaching. In this book, I describe several of the most successful teaching strategies I have observed or used myself in classrooms where ELLs and native English speakers were learning together.

At this point, let me say something about the nature of those successful strategies. Almost always, they include “front-loaded” supports, that is, assistance provided to children both before and while they are writing. Good teachers front-load their teaching by building a fund of knowledge I call “context” that includes firsthand experiences, informational sources, visual images, oral explanations, relevant vocabulary and, above all, models of the kind of writing students are expected to do. Teachers also demonstrate how the various parts of that context can be used in the process of writing, guide their students through that process, and provide classroom partners who assume the role of critical listeners.

In identifying supports for writing, I must emphasize that they are always offered as choices, not prescriptions that children must follow. For instance, students are free to take as much or as little from a model as they need, or to ignore it entirely and write on a topic and in a form

that are altogether different. This point is important for teachers to understand because many English-speaking students will use only a few of the supports provided, and ELLs will differ in how much they need.

In addition to teaching strategies based on building a context in the classroom, this book includes other strategies that rely on children's own experiences and the language that accompanies them. Those experiences that deal with forms of popular culture, games and sports, interaction with family and friends, features of their own community, travel to other places, and recreational reading are, in themselves, contexts. Because such contexts are more familiar (and less demanding) than school-based literary and academic contexts, students need less teacher support for writing that is grounded in them.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

In planning this book, I tried several organizing approaches, but ultimately decided to use types of writing as the organizing centers of chapters and include different strategies for primary- and intermediate-level students in every chapter. In addition, the sequence of chapters moves—roughly—from easy writing to difficult writing.

This organizational structure means that it won't be easy to pick and choose the strategies for the grade level you teach or for the types of writing you are most interested in; you are going to have to read—or at least skim—the whole book. But by reading it all, you will better understand the entire range of writing that elementary students should be able to do and the supports they need.

A DILEMMA

I also faced a dilemma in presenting examples of student writing. Although I had plenty of examples for the writing types I intended to cover, not all were written by children in the mixed-language classrooms of high-poverty schools. Many were the work of native English-speaking children from the middle-class school in Wisconsin where I was principal for 12 years. Believing that these examples would serve well as models for writing in your mixed language classroom, I wanted to include them; but I didn't want to misrepresent them. Therefore, all the examples from my Wisconsin school appear without authors' names, and the examples from Oregon schools have the first names of the children who wrote them.

Even though the sources of all examples are now readily identifiable, another problem still remains. The Wisconsin students' writings passed through other hands before they came into mine. I have no way of knowing how much the teachers or the parent volunteers who typed up the writings edited them after students handed them in. Conversely, the writings from Oregon students came to me with little or no editing by adults. As a result, the examples I present in this book make the Wisconsin students look like much better revisers, spellers, and punctuators than the Oregon students, which is probably not true. As you read, please keep in mind that adult editing can make young writers look more mature than they really are.

A WRITING PHILOSOPHY

Finally, I want to be explicit about my philosophy of writing right at the beginning. Although this book is meant to be a concrete, practical guide for teaching writing in mixed-language classrooms, it is based on beliefs I have developed over 50 years as a teacher of children and adolescents, a mentor of teachers, a classroom observer, a lover of literature, and a lifelong writer. Here they are.

1. Writing is more than inscribing letters, words, and sentences. It is the power to communicate knowledge, thought, and feeling through written language.
2. Every form of writing is characterized by rules and conventions originating in a particular culture and developed over time. Overall, writers follow these protocols so that readers can understand their work and feel comfortable with it. What makes a piece of writing original is its content.
3. To be successful at any form of writing, writers first need to become familiar with that form through their reading and teachers' presentations of examples.
4. Teachers need to provide a full range of supports for their students, who, at the elementary level, are writing novices. Students should be free to use as many or as few supports as they need.
5. Learning to write well is a lifelong journey. Each small step taken along the way is a worthy accomplishment.

I hope you will find this philosophy and the teaching strategies and writing examples that have emerged from it easy to use in your mixed-language classrooms and effective for all your students.

CHAPTER 1

A Context for Writing

The central principle of this book is that children’s school writing experiences should be embedded in a supportive context. That context can be anything from a social studies unit, school project, or the books of a particular author, to a popular sport, social relationships, or a community problem. The choice hinges on what children are interested in or need to write about at the time. Be aware, however, that I am using the terms “interest” and “need” rather loosely. We can’t always expect children to recognize what they want or need and tell us about it. Interest can grow out of something new that the teacher has brought to the attention of the class. Need can grow out of assigned work that inspires children to learn more and communicate their knowledge to others. In short, interests and needs are whatever moves children to write and do it well.

To give children the support they need, a context for writing should be as all-enveloping as you can make it. Context is not a one-shot exposure to a poem, a news article, or a classroom problem, but a cluster of experiences around a theme, made meaningful to children through seeing, hearing, speaking, reading, and thinking about its various facets. Such a context is commonly referred to as “background knowledge,” but that term does not do it justice because it does not make clear the amount, variety, and depth of information a child needs to write about an unfamiliar topic. Perhaps the reason personal narrative writing has become so widespread in classrooms is that children’s knowledge of their own lives is the one context teachers can count on. Conversely, the reason other types of writing are so rare may be that teachers doubt the sufficiency of students’ knowledge of genres and topics beyond their personal experience.

MODELS AS PARTS OF CONTEXT

One important but little-recognized component of any supportive context is written texts that serve as models and springboards for new writing. Because written language differs from spo-

ken language, children who are inexperienced with its forms, styles, conventions, and technical characteristics need the support that experienced writers—professional and amateur, adult and child—give through their finished writings. By examining those writings and using them as the foundation for their own work, children are able to create pieces that others will find meaningful and pleasurable to read.

A HISTORY UNIT AS CONTEXT

To clarify the concept of a supportive context, let me describe two classroom contexts that teachers have used successfully to generate student writing. The first context is a social studies unit called “The Western Movement,” which is taught in fourth or fifth grade all over America, and the second is a class field trip. Although many teachers approach the social studies unit through textbooks, the teaching team I observed started with a piece of fiction that they read aloud. They continued by providing students with short informational articles, showing videos of early settlers traveling west, playing music of that time, and taking their classes on a field trip to a history museum where they could see genuine clothes and artifacts from that period of American history. Then, small reading groups read and discussed trade books that were biographies of real settlers or fictional accounts of frontier life. The teacher in the vignette below is a composite of all four teachers on the team.

TRAVELING THE OREGON TRAIL

Jeremy Stone adapted a popular simulation game that has students make choices about what to take with them in their covered wagons, which routes to travel, how to cope with the dangers of the trail, and what to do when food or water runs low. He also found examples of authentic writing from those times, such as posters, newspaper articles, letters to relatives, and diary entries, and shared them with his class.

As the students relived the journey west through simulated experiences, they did a lot of their own writing, pretending to be the original pioneers. Their immediate supports were authentic writings of the past and the trade books they had read. Below are examples of student writings done by these fourth and fifth graders. If some of them look too good to be true, be aware that Mr. Stone allowed students to borrow vocabulary and sentence structures very liberally from the models he presented. These students also had to revise and edit their pieces before

their teacher would accept them. Finally, Mr. Stone read every finished piece very carefully, knowing it would be published in a school writing collection.

Signs Posted in Towns Where Pioneers Stopped

FOR SALE

2 oxen

1 iron cooking stove

1 oak rocking chair

WAGON MASTER FOR HIRE

Experienced guide will bring you
to Oregon safely.

Knows how to talk to Indians

Knows where water holes are

Dedications for Personal Journals

To my dear sister Faith
who gave me help and confidence
all the way

I dedicate this diary
to my Pa who made me feel safe
through all the dangers on this trip.

Gravestone Inscriptions

Here lies Joe Harris
who was shot by Shoshone Indians
1837-1859

Here lies our son
Seth Martin
Died of small pox
March 1852

Warning Signs for Later Wagon Trains

This trail is rough on wagons.
Go through the valley.

This water ain't fit to drink!
Watch out for Indians at the river.

Journal Entries

I opened the door. There stood a man with a horse by his side handing me a letter. Then I found myself crying as it said that Steven's pa was ill in Oregon and needed us to take care of him and the Blacksmith shop. Today, Steven sold our home and store. I reckon it was the saddest thing to see it all go. We told the kids, Mathew and Samantha, about leaving. They thought it was grand.

The days have been busy with excitement but hard decisions of what to

bring because we knew we could only bring what the wagon would hold. Things like . . . warm and cool clothes, pots and pans, great-grandfather's hand carved rocker and so on. We had to leave the rest of the furniture. We decided to bring one cow for milk, our dog, Prince, and four oxen to pull the wagon. The rest of the animals were sold.

Our last trek was to say our prayers for a safe journey to Independence, Missouri and to say goodbye to our fellow friends.

Now on to Oregon!

Letter to Relatives Back Home:

My dear brother Sam,

Liza, Gramps and I made the final decision today to head out to Oregon. Liza didn't really want to leave Virginia, but she was outvoted. Gramps and I are just itchin' to see the rest of this country and be a part of a new territory. Might try a little farming there til I can make a living selling dry goods.

We decided to go by train, then by wagon to Independence, Missouri, where the wagon trains head west. Will write again from Independence so you'll know we're okay. Maybe you'll come out west, too.

Your brother,

Tom Bonner

A CLASS FIELD TRIP AS CONTEXT

A different type of context for elementary-level students can be a school situation or event that captures their interest. Understanding the power of motivation, teachers often allow their students to write letters of complaint about cafeteria food or the conditions on the playground during recess. Although this is a valid activity, it is usually a one-shot writing experience with only a limited context to support the young writers. In contrast, I want to describe the context and the writing activities that grew out of a school field trip. The teacher I name is also a composite.

Sarah Aked took her third-grade class to visit a local museum where there was an exhibit on robots. On their tour, the children had a guide who explained

how the robots were constructed and programmed. Back at school the children talked about what they had seen, then made a class list of the robots they remembered, with annotations about what each one could do. Then Ms. Aked asked the children to write about what they considered the highlights of the trip. As expected, these pieces focused on visual perceptions and feelings. Below is what one girl wrote:

Our class went on a field trip on Thursday, January 16th. It was fun on the trip. We saw a lot of things. We saw a show with two robots. One of the robots was named Topo and the other was named RVSX. Topo was operated by a computer. The robots could clean up a room. The robots were neat. I thought it would be a show, but it was a tour. I liked the show and the tour a lot.

Hoping to give the children a clearer idea of how robots worked, Ms. Aked obtained a video about the making of robots. She also had them read an article from a children's magazine. Afterward, the children wanted to make real robots at school. Although the teacher appreciated their enthusiasm, she had to point out that they did not have the tools, materials, or safeguards to work with metal and electricity in the classroom. She suggested instead that they make imitation robots from cardboard boxes and tubes and decorate them with colored paper and aluminum foil. They could make moveable joints by using large brass brads. This project took about two weeks, resulting in robots that resembled animals and people. From Ms. Aked's point of view, a more important result was the robot-related vocabulary that the children assimilated.

Ms. Aked suggested that a further step might be to write programs for their robots. She showed them one she had written for setting a dinner table and tried it out by having a child act out commands one by one, with a real table, plates, and utensils. When the human "robot" became confused at times, the children began to understand how complete and explicit a program had to be. After the teacher made corrections in her program, the human robot was able to set the table correctly.

Now the students felt ready to write their own programs. When their drafts were completed, they tried them out with a partner and then made corrections.

Here is Dan's draft of the program for his robot to do homework:

Go to the coat rack.
Open my backpack.
Take out math packet.
Come to my desk.
Put packet on desk.
Open packet to first page.
Grab a pencil.
Start doing the problems.
Complete the first three pages.
Flip the packet shut.
Put back the pencil.
Thank you.

After watching his program acted out, Dan realized that it did not tell the robot to close his backpack after taking the math packet out, where to get the pencil from, or to put the packet back in the backpack. He added those directions to his final version and felt ready to demonstrate to the whole class.

Since some of the children finished before others, Ms. Aked allowed them to demonstrate their programs with a human robot. Most of these demonstrations showed that there were still flaws in the programs that left the robots not knowing what to do. The demonstrators corrected their programs, and the observers went back to their own unfinished programs on the lookout for similar flaws. Finally, everyone produced a program that worked.

Even after all this work with robots, the children still wanted more, so Ms. Aked suggested that they write stories imagining what their robots could do. Here's Lesley's story:

My robot can walk and talk and has moveable joints. If you touch the red button on his back, it will say "Sorry." If you touch the blue button, it will say "Hi."
My robot can play checkers with me because he has a computer in his head.
He has electronic eyes so he can watch me sleep at night.

Below is a narrative written by a boy in the class. It is not clear whether his account is totally imaginary or partly true. In any case, his continuing enthusiasm for robots comes through.

The robot Chris, Mike, and I are making is made of an old toy truck, walkie-talkies, 60 spark plugs, and a cord. It can go frontwards and backwards and we made it! It has a light in its head. He can pick up things. He can move in the dark, too.

When the class finally moved on to other interests and the regular curriculum, Ms. Aked felt very satisfied with what they had accomplished. The context she had provided beyond the field trip experience produced a deeper understanding of robots and better writing.

MY STRATEGY

In choosing these two examples as illustrations of how children's writing can be supported through context, I have deliberately relied on situations that can be reproduced in most classrooms. In other words, I am using a strategy similar to the one I am encouraging you to use for teaching ELLs—call up or create familiarity with a theme and provide models of written language to support children as they write.

As you proceed through the types of writing and suggested supports in this book, you will not always find contexts so thoroughly described. I am counting on you, knowledgeable teachers, to search out new contexts or seize existing ones that will be right for you and your students.