Writing Between Languages

How English Language Learners Make the Transition to Fluency, Grades 4–12

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To Donald Graves, a great writing teacher and researcher, who taught me to observe and listen carefully to children, and let them teach us how to teach them.
## Contents

**Foreword** ......................................................... ix

**Acknowledgments** .............................................. xiii

1  *My Decade’s Work with ELLs* .................................. 1

2  *ELLs’ Writing Development* ..................................... 13

3  *Native-Language Writing in ELLs’ Writing Development* .... 24

4  *Transitional Stages in ELLs’ Writing Development* .......... 46

5  *Teaching ELLs to Write* ........................................ 77

6  *Language Instruction Through Writing* ......................... 101

7  *Becoming Bilingual Writers* .................................... 117

**References** ....................................................... 123

**Study Guide** ...................................................... 131

**Index** ............................................................ 139
Writing Between Languages presents a rich and compelling account of the struggles and accomplishments of newly arrived ELL students as they grapple with the complexities of written English. For most ELL students, writing represents the most challenging language skill to acquire to native-like levels because it demands use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and rhetorical conventions that are very different from conversational language. Typically, students get relatively little opportunity in classrooms to engage with the creation of meaning through written language. As Danling Fu points out, much of the “writing” that ELL students carry out consists of little more than fill-in-the-blanks exercises or short responses to questions about academic content. One of the reasons for this poverty of writing experience is the perception by many teachers that ELL students must first learn English before they can write in English.

This book makes the claim, which many teachers may find startling, that we have made the development of strong writing skills much more difficult than it needs to be for ELL students in the junior grades and beyond because we have ignored the power of students’ first-language (L1) writing skills as a stepping stone to English. Students’ L1 represents a potent cognitive tool that they have used up to this point to make sense of their worlds and to acquire new knowledge. There is virtual consensus among cognitive psychologists and reading theorists that students’ prior
knowledge is the foundation upon which new learning is built (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). If recently arrived ELL students’ prior knowledge is encoded in their L1, then their L1 skills are clearly relevant to their learning of L2.

The research on academic development in two or more languages also highlights the interdependence between languages (Cummins 2001). L1 and L2 academic skills are not separate or isolated from each other; rather they are manifestations of a common underlying proficiency that can be developed by means of input in either language.

The centrality of prior knowledge to all learning and the interdependence of academic skills across languages imply that we should be teaching for transfer across languages rather than creating artificial “English-only” zones in our classrooms. Our own work with ELL students (Cummins et al. 2005) has demonstrated the powerful pedagogical impact of adopting bilingual instructional strategies rather than exclusive reliance on monolingual instructional strategies. Madiha, for example, a recently arrived seventh-grade student in Lisa Leoni’s class in the Greater Toronto Area worked with two of her Urdu-speaking friends who had been in Canada for several years to write a 20-page bilingual book entitled “The New Country.” The story drew on the students’ own experiences of immigrating from Pakistan to Canada and was published on the project website (www.multiliteracies.ca). Madiha reflects insightfully about the transfer of academic skills across languages:

I think it helps my learning to be able to write in both languages because if I’m writing English and Ms. Leoni says you can write Urdu too it helps me think of what the word means because I always think in Urdu. That helps me write better in English. When I came here I didn’t know any English, I always speak Urdu to my friends. Other teachers they said to me “Speak English, speak English” but Ms. Leoni didn’t say anything when she heard me speak Urdu and I liked this because if I don’t know English, what can I do? It helps me a lot to be able to speak Urdu and English.

The rationale for adopting bilingual instructional strategies in the teaching of writing as well as in the teaching of other linguistic and academic skills includes the following research-based considerations:
Translation skill is widely found among bilingual children by late elementary school (Malakoff and Hakuta 1991; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, and Meza 2003). Malakoff and Hakuta highlight potential pedagogical applications, noting that “[t]ranslation provides an easy avenue to enhance linguistic awareness and pride in bilingualism, particularly for minority bilingual children whose home language is not valued by the majority culture” (163).

For languages such as English and Spanish that have many cognate connections, a focus on cognates can enhance students’ knowledge of L2 vocabulary (Nagy, García, Durgunoglu, and Hancin-Bhatt 1993).

Encouraging newcomer students to write in their L1 and, working with peer, community, or instructional resource people, to translate L1 writing into English scaffolds students’ output in English and enables them to use higher-order and critical thinking skills much sooner than if English is the only legitimate language of intellectual expression in the classroom (Cummins et al. 2005; Reyes 2001)

Legitimating students’ L1 as a cognitive tool within the classroom challenges the subordinate status of many minority groups and affirms students’ identities (Cummins 2001; García 2008).

I believe that we are at the beginning stages of a radical shift in pedagogical assumptions regarding effective instruction for ELL students. For too long the debate centered on the dueling dichotomies of bilingual education versus English-only programs, with ideological considerations frequently playing a greater role in policy development than any research-based analysis. An increasing number of educators are now beginning to explore how bilingual instructional strategies can be incorporated into English-medium classrooms, thereby opening up the pedagogical space in ways that legitimate the intelligence, imagination, and linguistic talents of ELL students. Writing Between Languages makes a highly significant contribution to our understanding of what teaching for transfer entails and what it can achieve in the area of ELL students’ writing development.

—Jim Cummins
References


Acknowledgments

This book reflects a decade of collaborative work between me and bilingual/ESL teachers and school and regional administrators in New York City schools from lower Manhattan to the Bronx. I owe a great deal to those teachers who brought their students’ work to me and shared their insights into their students as individuals and into their progress as English language learners and writers. My special thanks go to Betty Mui, and many other veteran ESL teachers at Dr. Sun Yat Sen Middle School, who taught me how to assist struggling students in reaching their potential and to systematically help them grow as learners. Without the consistent support and friendship of Alice Young, the principal of Dr. Sun Yat Sen Middle School and later a local superintendent of Region 9, I would not have lasted a decade in the City.

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I was never required to write during my years of English study in China, even in college when I majored in English. And later, when I became an English teacher, I never required my students to write in my seven years of teaching except to have them do some translating or sentence making for grammar or spelling exercises. The first time I was required to write was during my one-year study of American literature as a Fulbright Fellow, two years before I came to the United States to pursue my graduate degree. I will never forget how I struggled through each writing assignment; it seemed nothing came out right—word choices, expressions, or even ideas. I could read English quite well: loved O. Henry, Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Emily Dickinson and had little problem communicating with others in English. But I had tremendous difficulty writing in English. When I forced myself to think in English, it seemed I could only squeeze out a few forced ideas, which I could tell were too flat or simple. But when I let myself think in Chinese, my writing didn’t sound like English.

Writing had always been easy for me in my native language, and I enjoyed expressing myself through writing. However, I continued to struggle as a writer in English during my graduate study, facing each assignment as if I had rocks in my head and stomach. After many years of struggle and practice, I finally gained my current ease in English writing. I realized that writing not only helped me improve my English language proficiency but, more important, pushed me to think deeply, analytically,
and logically. Writing about what I read helped me read with a critical lens and join the conversation in the literacy circle of my peers. Through my diligence in practicing this kind of writing, reading, and speaking, I grew academically.

When I started my work with English language learners (ELLs) in the New York City schools, I identified and empathized with students I saw struggling to write in English. Based on my own history as a struggling writer of English, I knew they should not wait in their learning to write until they gained full proficiency in speaking and reading English—especially since they were still in the process of developing their writing skills in their native language. As Kathleen Yancey states in her presidential address (2009), “We expect complex thinking to develop alongside and with beginning skills . . . because perhaps as never before, learning to write is a lifelong process” (331). ELLs needed to learn to write for their academic pursuit as well as for their language learning. But how to help ELLs develop their writing skills while they were learning English was a puzzle to all of us who were struggling to help them succeed in their studies. It was through my decade’s work in schools populated with ELLs that I gradually learned—by observing in classrooms, examining writing samples, and listening to teachers and students talk about their teaching and learning experiences—how ELLs developed as writers in English.

My work today helping ELLs develop as writers in English deals with some regrets and wishes I held deep inside myself: I regret I had to wait until I was in graduate school to first learn how to write in English. I wish that I had taught my students to write during my seven years of teaching English. I often think of those students and hope my teaching didn’t do too much damage to them in their academic pursuit. These regrets and wishes have always served as both motivation and inspiration for my current work with ELLs. I hope my work defining ELLs’ writing development will contribute to an understanding of ELLs’ transition to becoming English writers and to the improvement of writing instruction for all ELLs.

This book presents a discussion of the writing development that English language learners at the upper elementary and secondary levels are making as they proceed from their native language to English and provides suggestions for teaching this process. Over the past two decades, the number of
English language learners in the United States has grown from twenty-three million to forty-seven million, or by 103 percent. By 2030, immigrant children should account for 40 percent of the school-age population (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). Because educational advancement in the United States is closely tied to English proficiency, students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds are approximately three times more likely to be low achievers than high achievers, and two times more likely to drop out than their native-English-speaking peers (Urban Institute 2005).

Research indicates that new immigrant students in grades 6 through 12 encounter the most challenges in schools due, in part, to their age when they enter the United States, a critical age in their lives; the high academic demands placed on them; and the limited time before graduation. Among these preteen or teenage newcomers, a majority are fluent speakers in their native language and are able to read and write in their first language, though some may not be performing at grade level (Genesse et al. 2005). When they enter the schools in the United States, they have to make many transitions—linguistically, culturally, socially, and academically. Among all the academic tasks ELLs face, learning to write in English probably presents the greatest challenge. Yet writing is often taught merely as a language exercise to ELLs. As my work illustrates, any progress newly arrived ELLs in upper elementary and secondary levels can make in learning to write in English directly relates to the linguistic and academic demands they face and to their social and cultural adjustment to their new world.

This book is, first, for all teachers—ESL, regular classroom, or content-area—who teach at the upper elementary and secondary levels and who have ELLs in their classrooms, particularly, recently arrived ELLs. Teaching writing to such students is especially difficult at the secondary level, where content-area subjects, taught in academic English, are the main curriculum.

Most literacy instruction for ELLs in the United States focuses on grammar skills, vocabulary building, content reading, or speaking and listening. Little attention is paid to writing development, and a focus on writing as a tool for thinking and communicating at the beginning and even at the intermediate level is a rarity (Harklau and Pinnow 2009). The emphasis on the surface structure of English may enable ELLs to achieve
enough English proficiency to compose proper English sentences in correctly formatted monolingual papers, but it does not support them as competent writers and thinkers.

Much research (Calkins 1994; Hillocks 1995; Graves 1983) indicates that writing deepens thinking, expands reading comprehension, and reinforces language skills. Recently, literacy instruction for ELLs has included more writing, but as Samway (2006) reported in her research on writing instruction for ELLs: there is “lots of writing, but not much authentic writing” (158). Writing is a multidimensional process. It involves word-level skills, cognitive abilities, and higher-order thinking. Developing and orchestrating the various writing skills presents many challenges, even to first-language learners (Snelling and Van Gelderen 2004). Due to added linguistic demands, ELLs need more time and more instruction than first-language learners to develop the writing skills and abilities—through frequent, authentic writing opportunities and systematic scaffolding of their writing development. This book helps teachers to understand how ELLs make transitions from writing in their native language to writing in English, and then provides them with specific strategies to scaffold ELLs’ writing development.

My discussion of ELLs’ writing development challenges the view commonly held by many applied linguists that ELLs have to develop a certain degree of oral language proficiency before they learn to write for authentic purpose (Davis, Carlisle, and Beeman 1999; Dufva and Voeten 1999; Lanauze and Snow 1989; Lumme and Lehto 2002). This book addresses the questions frequently raised by teachers: How can we teach the ELLs to write when they don’t have a command of basic English skills? How can we help ELLs make the transition from writing in their native language to writing in English? My responses to these questions draw from my extensive work with teachers in New York City schools as we searched for ways to improve instruction for ELLs and promote authentic reading and writing in literacy instruction for all students.

This book also contributes to the research on second-language writing. Research on ELL writing in grades K through 12 is very limited. In the most updated review of research on second-language writing, Harklau and Pinnnow (2009) state:
Second-language writing is a relatively new field drawing from second-language acquisition and composition studies. Most of the work to date has focused on the college level, and research specifically addressing adolescent second- and foreign language writing remains sparse, characterized by isolated studies with few sustained threads of inquiry. (126)

My work is more of a practitioner-oriented guide than a well-designed empirical study. I join authors like Freeman and Freeman (1996, 2002, 2005), Samway (2006), Peregoy and Boyle (2005), and Gibbons (2002), whose work on teaching and learning of K–12 ELLs came from their close association with classroom teachers and is known as teacher friendly but woven with research and practice. All these authors stress the importance of learning relevancy, authentic communication, respect for students’ language and cultural backgrounds, and systematic scaffolding of ELLs’ language development through meaningful reading and writing in content areas.

Though grounded in the same philosophic principles, my work differs from their work. While their research studies young ELLs who are becoming writers, mine examines older ELLs who are becoming writers of English. In other words, the ELLs discussed in my work, rather than emerging as writers, are already writers in their first language and are learning to become proficient writers of English. The process of their transition from being writers of their native language to writers of English is much more complicated than young bilingual children’s quest to become emergent writers. The writing development of young bilingual children is similar to that of young monolingual English-speaking children: from scribble or drawings, to invented spelling writing, to conventional writing.

Most ELLs who came to the United States in upper elementary or secondary grades are able to read and write in their native language and have already gone through this emerging period in their native-language learning (Genesse et al. 2005). What they need while learning English is to make the transition from their first-language writing to English and from writing personal narrative to more formal academic writing. My discussion highlights the role ELLs’ native language plays in their becoming writers of English. Research of contrastive rhetoric (Raimes 1991; Leki 1991) suggests that ELLs’ writing backgrounds are an important resource rather than a hindrance in learning to write English. Connor (1996) pointed out
that ELL writers “bring to the classroom ways of structuring discourse, interacting with audiences, and valuing knowledge that they have learned in their first language, employing some of these social practices as they write in English” (26). Cummins (1979) and Garcia (2002) emphasized the transfer of L1 (first language) literacy knowledge in ELLs’ learning to write in L2 (second language). All these studies on second-language writers address the importance of background and native language, but few have shown how ELL learners make the transition from writing in their native language to writing in English. This book fills this gap and may provoke further discussion on this topic.

My Decade’s Work in New York City Schools

In the course of my extensive work in schools over the past ten years, I have gathered the work of ELL writers and developed a model of how ELLs make the transition to fluency as they learn to write in English. From 1997 to 2007, I worked two to three days a month in New York City schools. There were three phases to my work in the city.

The first phase, which lasted five years, started in Chinatown at Dr. Sun Yat Sen Middle School. The majority of the student population in this school were Chinese-speaking immigrants; 34.5 percent were recently arrived newcomers, who were all on free lunch. During those five years, I worked closely with school administrators, staff, and all ESL and bilingual teachers to transform the school from a lower-performing school to being in the top 10 percent (twenty-fourth out of 220) of middle schools in New York City. The school became a learning community where the administrators joined regular faculty study groups during lunchtime or before or after school. The literacy coaches were selected from among the faculty, and their classrooms became teaching-demonstration sites for the school. The teachers in the building conducted workshops on professional development (PD) days, and visited each other’s rooms regularly for instructional improvement and to assess the students in different learning settings. My five years in this school were documented in my book An Island of English: Teaching ESL in Chinatown (2003). During those years, I was able to
work closely with teachers and students in classrooms, tracking students’ progress and debriefing about lessons. As a writing specialist, I had a keen interest in how students grow as writers. I learned about teaching writing to ELLs while working in those classrooms by observing students in their classrooms and by examining their work at various stages of their growth as language learners, readers, and writers.

Later, my work expanded to several other Chinatown middle as well as elementary schools, where I continued to work with ESL specialists, regular classroom teachers, and ELL students in their rooms. That was the second phase, and lasted two years. Due to the limited time and increased number of schools involved, I was unable to spend as much time working with teachers in their classrooms or tracking students’ progress consistently as I had previously, since I had to hop from one classroom to another and visit different schools on different days. Working in both middle and elementary schools during those two years, I began to see a general pattern of bilingual/ELL young children emerging as writers and to notice the differences between young children and older children in their transition to becoming English speakers and writers. Because I could speak Mandarin (Standard Chinese), the schools also asked me to meet regularly with the parents of the immigrant students. Working with these parents gave me an understanding of the ELLs’ home literacy, family background, and living experiences. Whenever parents learned that a Mandarin-speaking educator would meet with them, they would try hard to attend the meeting. Some changed their work schedule, some traveled across the city to get to the schools, and some asked their friends or relatives to tape my talk if they were not able to attend the meetings. I will never forget one parent’s words and her straight look into my eyes when she asked me at a workshop, “How would you help me to help my child to be able to stand there like you as a professional, speaking to a crowd?” I don’t remember exactly if I fumbled in answering such an unexpected question, but I did feel a heavy weight on my shoulders as an educator at that moment.

After two years of working in the Chinatown schools, I was hired to lead the ELL Literacy Initiative in Region 9 to give special support to ESL and bilingual teachers. That was the third phase, the last three years of my work in the city schools. Throughout this project, I worked with ESL and
bilingual teachers in fourteen schools from lower Manhattan to the Bronx, including Chinatown and Spanish Harlem—all heavily populated with immigrant students. During this phase, I made three-day monthly visits, working one day with an elementary school group, one day with a middle school group, and one day with a high school group. Each group consisted of classroom teachers, ESL specialists, and assistant principals from four to five schools. These educators would take one day a month away from their teaching or routine work to join our study group. On our monthly study day, we discussed our assigned reading, designed lesson plans, visited each other’s teaching, and debriefed our classroom visits as a whole group. In between the monthly study days, Karen Low, the regional ESL specialist and a former middle school principal, followed up with weekly visits to the participant-teachers in their classrooms. In these visits, she helped the teachers implement the lessons we had discussed during the study day and solve specific problems in their teaching.

During our three-year project, we worked hard to implement language instruction to ELLs through authentic reading and writing. We introduced developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant, quality literature to the classrooms along with daily writing for communication and accountable talk. Together as a group, we created ways to assess students’ progress individually as readers, writers, and language learners. We also sought ways to ensure time for real teaching and learning while dealing with high-stakes test demands.

It was during this decade in New York City schools that I determined that there are roughly four types of ELLs: (1) those who have strong first-language literacy; (2) those who lack first-language literacy or who had an interrupted formal education; (3) those who are long-term ELLs (over six years); and (4) those who are mainstreamed in regular classrooms after passing the required English language tests.

The first group of ELLs usually quickly becomes the fourth group, mainstreamed into regular classrooms after being in the ESL program for two or three years. Once they are mainstreamed, they are still very much ELLs but have to learn the same curriculum as their English-proficient peers, with little extra support. The second group is a challenging one;
usually the students of this group become long-term ELLs (the third group). Some have spent their entire school career, from elementary to high school, as ELLs. These long-term ELLs may have proficiency in oral English communication but have problems with academic reading and writing. Many eventually drop out of school.

Teaching ELLs is challenging, especially at the secondary level, where the curriculum is demanding, grade standards are stressed, and teaching is departmentalized. In addition, ELLs are placed in grades according to their age no matter what background of education they have, and they are expected to graduate at the same time as their English-proficient peers. With the No Child Left Behind Act imposed on U.S. schools, both teachers and ELLs are facing unrealistic teaching and learning expectations.

In U.S. public schools, ELLs are provided with different services depending on school budget, resource availability, and state policies. These services include self-contained ESL programs (content based), bilingual programs, and pull-out and push-in ESL programs. Research suggests (Carrasquillo and Rodriguez 1995) that self-contained ESL programs in content-subject study offer the best way to develop language skills and subject-content knowledge in ELLs. Usually ELLs are provided with two to three years of service in these programs. If they need more, they are considered long-term ELLs. However, due to budget cuts and a shortage of resources, most schools in New York City cannot afford self-contained ESL or bilingual programs. Also, in many schools, the number of students (at least twenty needed to make a class due to budget limits) can’t make a self-contained class at each grade level. Therefore, pull-out (taking ELLs for ESL service) and push-in (ESL teacher coming in the classroom for service) ESL programs are the most common practices in our schools. With only one or two periods a day in this kind of ESL program, ELLs spend most of day in the regular classrooms studying the same curriculum along with their English-proficient peers.

As a writing specialist, I had a particular interest in ELLs’ writing development while working to help them develop their overall English literacy. Unfortunately, writing instruction for ELLs was often presented as language exercises in which students practiced grammar skills or vocabulary
usage, similar to monolingual students’ making sentences with spelling words or writing sentences to practice capitalization or punctuation. During my first year of work in Dr. Sun Yat Sen Middle School, we began to promote language learning for ELLs through meaningful speaking, reading, and writing. This was a tremendous challenge for the teachers of ELLs, especially at the beginning level. It appeared to be impossible to engage them with meaningful speaking, reading, and writing before they had developed a certain level of oral English language proficiency.

Together, their teachers and I searched for ways to discover the students’ potential. We tried different strategies, made many errors, and let students teach us how to teach them. Every year we made some progress. By the end of my third year in this middle school, quality literature reading and meaningful writing across the curriculum were adopted in almost every classroom for beginning ELLs. My first five years’ work was solely in this Chinatown middle school, and I continued to work with the teachers from this school later, when my work was expanded to over a dozen other schools. I examined thousands of pieces of student writing; many were collected by teachers to examine their teaching techniques and track their students’ progress and many were brought to our monthly meetings for discussion. When I had any chance to work with the teachers in their classrooms, I would read through the students’ work from notebooks, writing logs, and portfolios to understand how they were learning to be English writers, readers, and language learners and to figure out what would be the next step for them. When I worked at Dr. Sun Yat Sen Middle School, I had the most access to the students’ work as well as opportunities to interview students and teachers, which enabled me to make sense of the students’ writing and see their progress in context. That access was like a treasure island to me.

In the past decade, I repeatedly examined all the students’ writing I collected, trying to make sense of the ELLs’ learning process and to connect their work with the strategies the teachers used in their instruction. After examining these thousands of pieces of writing produced by beginning ELLs at upper elementary to secondary grades, I found a general pattern of ELL writing development from their first language to English. Most ELLs
in the school worked hard and were eager to become readers and writers in English. They knew that their ability to make it in this new world depended on the development of their English language skills. I concur with many bilingual researchers that long-term bilingual and dual-language programs are more effective for literacy achievement for ELLs, and that we should value the students’ home languages equally as much as English, society’s dominant language in our schools. However, in our current educational system and political era, this belief remains an ideal rather than a reality. Of the bilingual programs I encountered in the New York City school system, the majority are transitional programs, where students are given service for two to three years and then must exit to mainstream classrooms to study along with their English-proficient peers. In these schools, teachers constantly face the challenge of helping their ELLs make effective transitions from their learning in the first language to developing both communicative and academic English proficiency in two or three years (under the NCLB Act, ELLs have to take the identical standardized test as their English proficiency peers after one year of being in U.S. schools).

In my discussion of ELLs’ writing development, I use writing samples mostly from Chinese ELLs to illustrate my points because most of the writing samples that came to me were written by ELLs in Chinatown schools. However, I include some samples from Spanish-speaking students to show how the development patterns are similar among ELLs with different linguistic backgrounds. In my decade’s work in the New York City schools, I spent the most time in Chinatown schools heavily populated with Chinese-speaking ELLs. It took years of consistent work to develop a program that could show teachers how to help ELLs grow as writers of English by implementing daily writing into every classroom. The ELLs in most of the Chinatown schools where I worked were given opportunities to write daily in all classes—ESL/bilingual, regular, and content area. The ELLs there were allowed to compose in their first language and switch between languages to express themselves. I gathered volumes of writing from ELLs, mostly the Chinese-speaking ones: journal writing, personal narratives, essays, science reports, poems, and fiction stories in different forms, for different purposes, and in different classes.
In the following chapters, Chapter 2 provides a theoretic framework for my definition of ELL’s writing development; Chapter 3 discusses the important role of ELLs’ native language in their writing development; Chapter 4 illustrates the transitions ELLs make to become writers of English; Chapter 5 provides specific suggestions and strategies for teaching writing to ELLs; Chapter 6 shows examples of English-language instruction through writing and strategies for implementing it; and the last chapter sheds light on becoming a bilingual writer.