Best Practices for Teaching Writing to English Learners

How can English learners who are developing their proficiency in academic language navigate the challenging writing tasks advocated in the Common Core State Standards by themselves? The language demands of writing and the many constraints ELs must juggle while composing are such that ELs require instructional assistance to convey ideas and information, construct viable arguments, and critique the arguments of others in cohesive, well-reasoned written texts. As Goldenberg (2013) reminds us, “It should be clear that despite progress in understanding how to improve teaching and learning for the millions of ELs in our schools, many gaps remain. The challenges posed by the Common Core State Standards make those gaps more glaring” (p. 10). We look first to what research can tell us about effective practices to enhance the academic literacy of ELs.

RESEARCH ON WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Multiple books, articles, and policy reports on grades 6–12 EL writing instruction have been written in the past 10 years (for a recent summary, see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013). Much has been written on the development of second language writing studies as a field of practice (Matsuda & Silva, 2005), critical pedagogy in L2 writing (Pennycook, 2001), biliteracy (Hornberger, 1989), literacy in different modalities (New London Group, 1996), digital literacy (Warschauer, 2009), sociocultural theories on the particular kinds of literacy that are valued in different settings (Gee, 2011; Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Street, 2005), intercultural rhetoric (Connor, 2011), basic research on writers and their composing processes (Polio & Williams, 2009), particular groups of writers such as Generation 1.5 students and their needs (Harklau et al., 1999),
linguistic features of writing and their development (Ortega, 2003), and error analysis (Ferris, 2011).

Despite the explosion of publications, the dearth of empirical studies on effective practices for teaching writing to ELs reveals that this research area is nearly untapped (August & Shanahan, 2006). Most of the studies are small in size and qualitative in nature. Fitzgerald and Amendum (2007), for example, report no empirical studies of grades 6–12 writing instruction in their meta-analysis that involved 1988–2003 research studies of the K–12 writing instruction for ELs in the United States. Panofsky et al. (2005) summarize the available research and point out the growing need to investigate effective practices for teaching writing to adolescent ELs. This lack of research leaves teachers of the over 1 million EL students largely to speculate about how best to teach their students. How can they teach students to meet the rigorous standards of the CCSS when they have had so little training in how to diversify instruction in order to meet the needs of the entire spectrum of ELs, from newcomers to LTEls? Fortunately, despite the scarcity of scientific studies on writing instruction of ELs in grades 6–12, promising research-based practices are beginning to emerge indicating that ELs need types of high-quality writing instruction similar to what adolescents who speak only English need, as well as additional supports. Goldenberg (2013) explains that existing studies suggest that what is known about effective instruction ought to be the foundation of effective teaching for English learners. Drawing on the research, he argues that, in general, ELs benefit from clear instructions and supportive guidance as they engage with new skills; effective modeling of skills, strategies, and procedures; active student engagement and participation; effective feedback; applying new learning and transferring this learning to new situations; practice and periodic review; structured, focused interactions with other students; regular assessments, with reteaching as needed; and well-established classroom routines and behavior norms. He notes that in all the research he reviewed, students made significant progress, improving their English if “at least several of these practices were incorporated into their instruction” (p. 5).

**BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHING WRITING TO ENGLISH LEARNERS**

What follows are best practices that research has shown benefit ELs as they develop academic literacy. First and foremost, designing
and implementing culturally responsive curricula and instruction is fundamental to effective practice and has gained much traction in recent years, as has an emphasis on understanding student motivation and reducing the affective barriers that may block learning (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Strategy instruction also has been widely accepted as one of the most effective practices for literacy development, not only for ELs but for all students (Graham & Perin, 2007). Additionally, modeling appropriate language use and processes of connecting reading and writing is important, as is scaffolding instruction using graphic organizers and meaningful visuals to support student learning. And finally, it is generally accepted that ELs need explicit instruction in academic English, opportunities to practice and develop this complex register of language, and formative assessment to monitor progress and craft ongoing instruction (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, & Collins, 2007).

**CREATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT WRITING INSTRUCTION IN A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS**

Despite the paucity of scientific study, there is widespread consensus that culturally relevant instruction facilitates learning, improving the access ELs have to high-quality instruction (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010). Practices that facilitate connections between students and their classrooms, homes, and communities form the basis for culturally relevant teaching and can tap particularly into the strengths that ELs bring with them to school (Goldenberg, 2012).

Diaz, Moll, and Mehan (1986) were among the first to advocate instructional approaches that built upon the unique cultural heritages of students. They found that instruction was more successful when teachers systematically drew upon students’ “funds of knowledge” in designing curricula. Villegas and Lucas (2002) further suggest many culturally relevant activities that can be effective in the writing classroom, for example, involving students in discussions, building on students’ interests, building on students’ linguistic resources, utilizing community and home resources, helping students examine the curriculum from multiple perspectives, using examples and analogies from students’ lives and communities, establishing a classroom climate that prevents bullying and discrimination, and fostering constructive relationships with parents and community members.
A growing number of researchers recognize the affective and motivational dimensions of academic literacy, asserting that there is a social as well as a cognitive dimension of literacy (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). Based on their review of adolescent literacy research in general, as well as research on the literacy of adolescent ELs in particular, Meltzer and Hamann (2005) recommend three primary instructional practices to reduce the affective constraints for ELs: (1) making connections to students’ lives, thereby connecting their background knowledge to the content they are learning in school; (2) creating responsive classrooms that acknowledge students’ voices, giving them an element of choice in learning tasks, and strengthening their literacy skills (Valdés, 2001); and (3) engaging students in collaboration where they interact with one another about texts they are reading and writing.

One way to motivate ELs to write well is to establish a supportive environment in the classroom and create a community of writers. In Beyond Discipline (1996) Alfie Kohn writes:

In saying that a classroom or school is a “community,” then I mean that it is a place in which students feel cared about and are encouraged to care about each other. They experience a sense of being valued and respected; the children matter to one another and to the teacher. They have come to think in the plural: they feel connected to each other; they are part of an “us.” And as a result of all this, they feel safe in their classes, not only physically but emotionally. (p. 101)

In such classrooms teachers actively encourage students to collaborate; they provide ongoing opportunities and thoughtful activities that invite students to engage in shared inquiry, keeping in mind that “what a child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1934/1986, p. 188). Building a classroom community also involves collaboration between teacher and students and lets students develop a sense of ownership in the learning.

Celebrating students’ writing by displaying it in the classroom can help students feel valued. Two activities that can result in classroom displays that foster a sense of community are the My Name activity and the Biopoem.

**My Name Activity**

Writing about names in secondary school can be especially effective because it can “save students from feeling unimportant or not
valued when no one knows their names” (Tchudi & Mitchell, 1999, p. 122). Sandra Cisneros’s vignette “My Name” from *The House on Mango Street* (2013) works particularly well with English learners because the speaker, Esperanza, struggles with how her name is pronounced in English “as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth” rather than the softer sounds “like silver” of her name in Spanish.

After reading “My Name,” discussing how Esperanza feels about her name, and noticing how Esperanza compares her name to a song, an object, a color, and so on, students can fill out a sentence frame, like the ones below, comparing Esperanza’s name to other things:

If Esperanza were an animal, she would be a chameleon because she’s looking for a name to change and match her mood.

If Esperanza were a plant, she would be a dandelion because she sometimes wants to let go and fly away from her sad name.

Subsequently, students can create sentence frames about their names and a coat of arms for themselves like the one by Mathew Loayza, an EL student in Maureen Rippee’s high school English language arts class, shown in Figure 2.1. Using their coats of arms as a planning strategy, students can then write paragraphs about their names that can be posted along with their illustrations. To make the task more accessible for students with less fluency in English, the teacher may want to provide a paragraph frame like the one in Figure 2.2.

**Biopoem Activity**

The Biopoem frequently is used by teachers as an initial writing and get-acquainted activity that creates a sense of group cohesion. Because this is a pattern poem, it offers ELs a low-risk opportunity to participate in the community. The poetry frame in Figure 2.3 is bookended by the students’ first and last names and enables them to share personal information about themselves that reveals who they are and what they care about. Students’ poems can be read to partners or in small groups and then decorated and displayed on a class bulletin board along with their photographs. Later, when the class is studying a work of literature, students can write a Biopoem in the voice of a literary character or a historical figure as in Figure
Figure 2.1. Coat of Arms

Mathew Loayza (student)

Coat of Arms

If my name were an animal, it would be sloth because I am very lethargic.

If my name were a plant, it would be maple tree because of my reminiscence of childhood in Canada.

If my name were a song it would be immigrant song because of how the song describes the distant lands like all the unknown that I fear.

Figure 2.2. “My Name” Paragraph Frame

My parents named me ________ because _________. In the baby book, my name means _________. If my name were an animal, it would be ________ because _________. If my name were a plant, it would be a ________ because _________. When I think about my name, I feel _________.

Sample:

My parents named me Carol because I was born on Christmas Day and they thought of a story by Charles Dickens called “A Christmas Carol.” In the baby book, my name means song of joy. If my name were an animal, it would be a cat because I’m very affectionate and I love to curl up in a ball and sleep. If my name were a plant, I’d be a sunflower because I have a sunny disposition. When I think about my name, I feel happy because my name is so full of cheer.
2.3. This is an example of how a teacher might help ELs make connections to their personal lives and to one another, acknowledge students’ voices, and engage students in interacting with one another as readers and writers.

In their IES Practice Guide, Graham et al. (2012) base their evidence for recommending that teachers create an engaged community of writers on five intervention studies that led to positive effects on the quality of student writing. In describing the support for this recommendation, they point out that since writing is a lifelong skill and requires effort for even experienced writers, it is especially important to establish a nurturing environment in which “every member of the community has room to grow and it is acceptable to take risks and make mistakes” (p. 50).

**STRATEGY INSTRUCTION**

Numerous reports from policy centers and blue-ribbon panels “implicate poor understandings of cognitive strategies as the primary reason why adolescents struggle with reading and writing” (Deshler, Palinscar, Biancarosa, & Nair, as cited in Conley, 2008, p. 84; Graham, 2006; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). According to a recent Carnegie Corporation report, inadequate educator capacity and the limited use of research-based instructional practices prevent adolescent ELs from learning academic English and meeting content standards in English language arts (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). To address the needs of adolescent ELs, the report encouraged teachers to help ELs use cognitive strategies to understand, interpret, and write essays about complex texts.

A number of instructional frameworks and recommendations support approaches that incorporate strategy instruction to advance ELs’ development of English (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Keiffer, & Rivera, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2009). Grounded in studies that demonstrate the efficacy of cognitive strategy use in reading and writing (Block & Pressley, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Graham & Perin, 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991; Tierney & Pearson, 1983; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991), the frameworks stress the importance of including modeling, scaffolding, guided practice, and independent use of strategies so that students develop the ability to select and implement appropriate strategies independently and to monitor and regulate their use (Block & Pressley, 2002).

Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) hypothesize that strategy instruction develops ELs’ English by providing them with an explicit
focus on language, increasing their exposure to academic texts, making the texts they read comprehensible, giving them multiple opportunities to affirm or correct their understanding and use of language, assisting them in retrieving new language features and in using these features for academic purposes, and providing them with the means of learning language on their own, outside of class. They further hypothesize that adolescent ELs of an intermediate level of English proficiency and above have sufficient proficiency to benefit from strategy instruction (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2012; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). These students have automatized lower level reading and writing skills. Furthermore, they possess the language proficiency required to use cognitive strategies that will provide them access to the higher order cognitive reading and writing tasks that they will encounter when they have mainstreamed into regular content instruction.

Although the Common Core State Standards do not explicitly define “the full range of metacognitive strategies that students

Figure 2.3. Biopoem

(First name)
(Four adjectives that describe the person)
Son or Daughter of (your parents’ names)
Lover of (three different things that the person loves)
Who feels (three different feelings and when or where they are felt)
Who gives (three different things the person gives)
Who fears (three different fears the person has)
Who would like to see (three different things the person would like to see)
Who lives (a brief description of where the person lives)
(Last name)

Barack
Strong, determined, compassionate, calm
Son of Ann Dunham and Barack Obama, Sr.
Who loves his family, books, and the Chicago Bulls
Who feels proud of his country, happy when he’s with his children, and sad when people suffer
Who gives his time, his money, and his skill to help people
Who fears discrimination, war, and lack of progress
Who would like to see all young people graduate from college
Who lives in the White House
Obama
may need to monitor and direct their learning” (p. 4) or the “the full range of support necessary for English language learners” (p. 6), teachers clearly will need to implement pedagogical strategies to help their ELs to become strategic readers and writers. Teaching struggling writers strategies for planning, in particular, has a strong impact on their writing performance (Graham, 2006).

Let’s look at two pedagogical strategies, the Easy as 1, 2, 3! activity to motivate reluctant readers and the Do/What activity to help struggling writers respond appropriately to a writing prompt.

**Easy as 1, 2, 3! Activity**

When asked to read independently, inexperienced readers can be quick to abandon a text when they encounter unfamiliar words or a complicated story line. Donna Moore, an ELD teacher at the intermediate school level, developed a strategy called Easy as 1, 2, 3! to spark students’ curiosity, to acquaint them with the text, and to build personal investment, in order to make her students less likely to tell themselves “I can’t” or “I won’t” and more willing to read further.

The first step in Easy as 1, 2, 3! is to prompt students to tap prior knowledge and make predictions by asking them to think about the title of a text in light of their own background knowledge and experiences and to write down and then discuss their predictions of what the text will be about based on the title. For example, in responding to Ray Bradbury’s short story, “All Summer in a Day” (1998), students often predict that the story will focus on all the exciting events of summer crammed into just one short day. The next step is to select a significant picture that accompanies the text or to take a picture walk through the text and to “read” the pictures by visualizing. Students then record their predictions about the context of the text based on the pictures they have analyzed; students also are prompted to revise meaning. These thoughts are recorded on the Easy as 1, 2, 3! sheet before the class discusses them in pairs or as a whole group. In “All Summer in a Day,” for instance, the picture by Robert Vickrey that a publisher selected to accompany the text creates a mood of isolation and entrapment. Students are quick to “read” the somber expression on the child’s face, revise their original prediction of a fun-filled adventure, and anticipate a much gloomier outcome than they initially had expected. Finally, the teacher reads a selection from the text, if possible stopping at a spot that leaves the students in suspense. Students jot down their new or revised predictions based on how they perceived the words
and then turn to a partner or to the whole class to compare their speculations. Figure 2.4 shows a graphic organizer for the Easy as 1, 2, 3! activity.

The Easy as 1, 2, 3! activity is designed to convince students that interacting with a text is as easy as making predictions about the title, “reading” the pictures through visualization, and responding

**Figure 2.4. Easy as 1, 2, 3!**

![Graphic Organizer](image)

*Source: Adapted from Donna Moore, ELD Teacher, Fitz Intermediate, Garden Grove, CA.*

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to the words. While she’s getting her students hooked and ready to read on, Moore also is fostering the cognitive strategies she wants her students to access and practice.

**Do/What Activity**

Students often fail to respond to a writing prompt adequately because they haven’t taken the time to thoroughly examine what they are being asked to do and to plan before they start composing. Further, many struggling students and ELs who have limited practice may fall back on retelling or summarizing instead of presenting the high-level interpretation of substantive topics and texts called for in the CCSS. Teaching students to analyze the prompt and construct a Do/What chart can enable them to develop a road map for composing.

Teachers will need to model how to construct a Do/What chart with students before the students can construct one independently. For example, teachers can provide students with a prompt such as the one presented to Marisela Gonzalez, whom we met in Chapter 1, on analyzing the theme in “Sometimes, the Earth Is Cruel,” an article about the Haiti earthquake, as shown in Figure 2.5. They can guide students through the prompt and demonstrate how to circle verbs that describe what the student needs to do in the prompt and then underline the words that indicate what the task is. For example, under Writing Directions, the first verb that tells the writer to do something is “select” and the task words identifying what to select are “one important theme.”

Note that teachers should not take for granted that EL students understand what the verbs in the CCSS Anchor Standards, such as analyze, make inferences, cite, support, integrate, identify, determine, reflect, etc., mean and should realize that they will need to model the acts of mind or actions the verbs entail. Once students have circled and underlined the key words, they construct a Do/What chart beneath the prompt. Not only will this strategy help students with planning and goal setting, but, as they compose, students can refer continually to this road map to ensure that they are on course and addressing all of the elements of the prompt. In fact, in a large-scale randomized field trial of an intervention using a cognitive strategies approach to enhancing the text-based analytical writing of ELs, students who employed the Do/What chart wrote significantly higher quality essays in a timed writing situation without guidance from the teacher (Kim et al., 2011; Olson et al., 2012).
Helping English Learners to Write

Connecting Reading and Writing Through Strategy Instruction

In his analysis of the Common Core State Standards from his perspective as a member of the review panel for the College and Career Ready Standards for English Language Arts and of the Validation Committee that provided oversight for the development process, Arthur Applebee (2013) identifies the connection between reading and writing as one of the document’s major strengths. He writes:

Figure 2.5. Do/What Chart

“Sometimes, the Earth Is Cruel”

Writing Situation

Two days after the Haiti earthquake on January 12, 2010, Leonard Pitts, an award-winning journalist, wrote an article for the Miami Herald in which he described the Haitian people’s response to the tragedy which struck their country.

Writing Directions

After reading “Sometimes, the Earth Is Cruel,” select one important theme to write an essay about. Create a theme statement which expresses the author’s main point, lesson, or message in the article. Your theme statement will be the thesis of your essay—the claim you make about the writer’s message or main idea.

As you develop your essay, pay specific attention to:

- Pitts’s description of the Haitian people’s actions after the earthquake
- The language Pitts uses to describe nature and the relationship between the Haitian people and nature (including similes, metaphors, symbols, personification, or other figurative language)
- Pitts’s response to the way the Haitian people deal with their tragedy

When a journalist’s purpose is strictly to inform, he or she will present the facts objectively without trying to influence the reader. However, Pitts does more than this. Discuss Pitts’s purpose in writing “Sometimes, the Earth Is Cruel.” What message does he want his readers to take away from reading his article and why is it especially significant?
The high stakes testing environment created by No Child Left Behind has privileged reading as an essential element of the English language arts curriculum, leaving writing instruction at risk. CCSS, on the other hand, elevates writing to a central place, not only giving it the same number of individual standards as reading but also making writing the central way in which content knowledge is developed and shared. (p. 27)

Indeed, the first College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading in grades 6–12 identifies writing as the key vehicle for text-based analysis:

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. (National Governors Association, 2010, p. 35)

Reading and writing traditionally have been thought of and taught as flip sides of a coin—as opposites; “readers decoded or deciphered language and writers encoded or produced written text” (Tompkins, 2013, p. 46). However, researchers increasingly have
noted the connections between reading and writing, identifying them as complementary processes of meaning construction involving the use of similar cognitive strategies (Tierney & Pearson, 1983). Strategy instruction is an especially effective way to connect reading and writing. According to Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000), readers and writers share four basic types of knowledge: meta-knowledge about the processes of reading and writing; domain knowledge that the reader or writer brings to the text; knowledge about text attributes; and procedural knowledge and skill to negotiate reading and writing. It is precisely because reading and writing access similar cognitive strategies, but to differing degrees, that reading and writing make such a powerful combination when taught in connection with each other. Research suggests that using writing as a learning tool in reading instruction leads to better reading achievement (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991) and that using reading as a resource for elaborating on ideas or for understanding opposing views leads to better writing performance (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991; Tierney et al., 1989). More important, reading and writing taught together engages students in a greater use and variety of cognitive strategies than does reading and writing taught separately (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991, p. 272). This exposure to and practice in an array of cognitive strategies promote and enhance critical thinking. In fact, research indicates that “reading and writing in combination have the potential to contribute in powerful ways to thinking” (Tierney et al., 1989, p. 166). This is why in analyzing principles for building an EL-responsive learning environment, Coady et al. (2003) conclude that ELs are most successful when teachers explicitly model the reading, writing, and thinking skills ELs need to master in order to function successfully in educational settings.

One way to connect reading and writing through strategy instruction is to provide students with cognitive strategy bookmarks with sentence starters that they can use to annotate the texts they are reading. Once students become adept at implementing these strategies, they can participate in book clubs where they can write letters about their texts, engage in discussions, and share artifacts they have created.

**Cognitive Strategy Bookmark Activity**

Prior to introducing ELs to the cognitive strategy bookmarks, the teacher will need to introduce the concept of a cognitive strategy
to the class. To make this accessible, the teacher might say the following:

Today we are going to learn about what experienced readers and writers do when they make meaning out of words. They use something called cognitive strategies to help them understand. The term cognitive strategies sounds very complex. Let’s break it down. “Cognitive” means knowing or thinking and “strategies” are tools or tactics people use to solve a problem. So, a cognitive strategy is a thinking tool. Inside your head, you have a lot of cognitive strategies or thinking tools that you use to make sense of what you read and write. It’s almost like there’s a little voice inside your head that talks to you while you’re reading and writing. It tells you when you’re confused or when you suddenly understand something. It helps you to make pictures in your head or to decide to go back and reread something before going forward. (Olson, 2011, p. 22)

The teacher can then pass out the bookmarks in Figure 2.6 and demonstrate how to apply cognitive strategies to construct meaning by thinking aloud while reading and annotating a text.

Think-Aloud Activities

In his book Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies, Jeff Wilhelm (2001) describes the following procedure for implementing think-alouds in the classroom:

Step 1: Choose a short selection of text (or a short text) that will be interesting, challenging, and could present some difficulty to students if read independently.

Step 2: Decide on a few strategies to highlight and explain to students what a think-aloud is, why you are modeling these particular strategies, and how these strategies will be helpful to them.

Step 3: State your purpose for reading the specific selection and ask students to pay attention to the strategies you select so they can explain what, why, how, and when you used them.

Step 4: Read the text aloud to students and think-aloud as you do so.

Step 5: Have students underline the words and phrases that helped you use a strategy.

Step 6: Ask them to make a list of the strategies you used and the verbal cues that prompted strategy use.
### Cognitive Strategies

#### Cognitive Strategies Sentence Starters

**Planning and Goal Setting**
- My purpose is...
- My top priority is...
- I will accomplish my goal by...

**Tapping Prior Knowledge**
- I already know that...
- This reminds me of...
- This relates to...

**Asking Questions**
- I wonder why...
- What if...
- How come...

**Making Predictions**
- I’ll bet that...
- I think...
- If _____, then...

**Visualizing**
- I can picture...
- In my mind I see...
- If this were a movie...

**Making Connections**
- This reminds me of...
- I experienced this once when...
- I can relate to this because...

**Summarizing**
- The basic gist is...
- The key information is...
- In a nutshell, this says that...

**Adopting an Alignment**
- The character I most identify with is...
- I really got into the story when...
- I can relate to this author because...

### Cognitive Strategies

#### Cognitive Strategies Sentence Starters

**Forming Interpretations**
- What this means to me is...
- I think this represents...
- The idea I’m getting is...

**Monitoring**
- I got lost here because...
- I need to reread the part where...
- I know I’m on the right track because...

**Clarifying**
- To understand better, I need to know more about...
- Something that is still not clear is...
- I’m guessing that this means _____, but I need to...

**Revising Meaning**
- At first I thought _____, but now I....
- My latest thought about this is...
- I’m getting a different picture here because...

**Analyzing the Author’s Craft**
- A golden line for me is...
- This word/phrase stands out for me because...
- I like how the author uses _____ to show...

**Reflecting and Relating**
- So, the big idea is...
- A conclusion I’m drawing is...
- This is relevant to my life because...

**Evaluating**
- I like/don’t like _____ because...
- My opinion is _____ because...
- The most important message is _____ because...
For example, consider the following opening passage from Leonard Pitts’s (2010) article, “Sometimes, the Earth Is Cruel”:

Sometimes, the earth is cruel. That is ultimately the fundamental lesson here, as children wail, families sleep out of doors, and the dead lie unclaimed in the rubble that once was Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Sometimes the rains fall and will not stop. Sometimes the skies turn barren and will not rain. Sometimes the seas rise and smack the shoreline like a fist. Sometimes the wind bullies the land. And sometimes, the land rattles and heaves and splits itself in two. Sometimes, the earth is cruel.

After reading this passage, the teacher might say the following and then model annotating the passage:

**Teacher’s Think-Aloud**

Okay, from reading the passage so far, I know the article is about Haiti and I have some prior knowledge that there was a devastating earthquake there a few years ago. When the author talks about children wailing and the dead lying in the rubble, which is broken stones from crumbled buildings, it reminds me of watching the TV coverage of the disaster. So, I remember that and can make a personal connection. I can really visualize how destructive the earthquake was because of the concrete details the author uses to describe the devastation in the capital city, Port-au-Prince. The author says the earth is cruel, so he’s giving it personal emotions. That’s called personification. For instance, he says, “the wind bullies the land,” turning the wind into an enemy and the land into a victim. When he says that “the seas rise and smack the shoreline like a fist” I feel like the earth is beating up Haiti. I can really picture the fist and feel the punch because of the simile “like a fist.” The way the author crafts his language is very powerful. He also repeats the word “sometimes” over and over, and it gives me the feeling that one disaster after another strikes this poor country. I’ll bet that the lesson that Pitts refers to will have more to it than just that nature is cruel. But I’ll have to keep reading to find out more.

As the teacher thinks aloud, he or she can annotate the text in the margins using the sentence starters such as *I already know that, I can picture, I’ll bet that, The idea I’m getting is,* and so forth. The
annotations also can be labeled with abbreviations such as TPK for tapping prior knowledge, MC for making connections, and so forth. Students will then need to practice using their bookmarks to annotate the text along with the teacher as a whole group before using the bookmarks independently.

**Book Club Activities**

Another way to connect reading and writing and promote strategy use is to engage EL students in reading, discussing, and writing about self-selected fiction and nonfiction material in book clubs. Researcher Stephen Krashen (1993) identifies free voluntary reading as “one of the most powerful tools” in language arts instruction. He writes:

> My conclusions are simple. When children read for pleasure, when they get “hooked on books,” they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called “language skills” many people are so concerned about. They will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. . . . Without it, I suspect that children simply do not have a chance. (p. 84)

While we remain skeptical of ELs’ ability to acquire most of the language needed to write academic texts through pleasure reading alone, we note that the preponderance of second language research makes it clear that pleasure reading plays a critical role in English language development (Ortega, 2009). Research also suggests that students who engage in frequent discussions about their reading are more motivated, have higher reading achievement, read more widely, and read more frequently than students who do not (Gambrell, 1996). In other words, social collaboration is an important factor in developing confidence and competence as readers.

Kong and Pearson (2003) note that in classrooms with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, “comparatively little time is typically spent on comprehension and, especially on meaning construction and authentic communication” (p. 86). Yet, when they studied ELs who read, wrote, and talked about age-appropriate quality literature, they found that those students became more “expert-like and focused” in their conversations over the school year, their command of vocabulary increased dramatically, and they became “more aware of the strategies they were using to construct meaning in response to texts” (p. 86).
Students can use their cognitive strategy bookmarks to annotate their books with Post-it® notes as they read. On several occasions throughout their reading of the text, students compose and share “Lit Letters” (Atwell, 1998) in which they reflect on the texts they are reading (discussing character, plot, setting, theme, etc.), as well as discuss their process, progress, and insights as readers. Students often create artifacts to accompany their letters, such as postcards, found poems, collages, timelines, and so on, often in the voice of a character in the text. The 21st Century Skills English Map (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008) suggests that students write a stylistic imitation of the poem “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon (www.georgeellalyon.com) to explore the impact of setting in shaping who they are. In her 12th-grade English language arts class, Barbara Sickler suggested that her students become characters from their chosen books and write and illustrate a Where I’m From poem from their characters’ perspectives for their book club. This is an exercise in the cognitive strategy of adopting an alignment. Tierney and Pearson (1983) suggest that having students adopt an alignment by projecting themselves into a text as a character or an eyewitness or object can account for “much of the vibrancy, sense of control, and fulfillment experienced during reading and writing” (p. 573).

Sickler found that this activity was especially beneficial for ELs in her classroom. For example, Jiayuan Liu selected the novel Winter’s Bone by Daniel Woodrell (2007), adopted an alignment with the main character, Ree Dolly, and wrote and illustrated a Where I’m From poem from his perspective. His poem, in Figure 2.7, and his letter, in Figure 2.8, demonstrate his deep affinity with the character.

Sickler had this to say about Jiayuan’s participation in her book club:

Jiayuan is an avid reader but at times the limitations of his fluency prevented him from expressing exactly what he wanted to say about a text. He found the book club activities very accessible, especially poetry which allowed him more creative freedom to express himself and his reaction to his book. He also enjoyed the visual elements of the book club artifacts. Indeed, several of my EL students said that art allowed them to express their thoughts and feelings when they lacked either the confidence or ability to do so in English. But perhaps the most beneficial aspect of book clubs was the social interaction of meeting to discuss their books. This allowed my EL students to enter into conversation about their books and receive positive feedback and support from a group of peers. Students looked forward to these meetings and
their desire to share their artifacts and literature letters grew as the year progressed. Listening to their book club members talk about their books also increased their motivation to read one of the books they heard discussed.

**MODELING WITH MENTOR TEXTS**

When Jiayuan Liu wrote his Where I’m From poem in the voice of Ree Dolly in *Winter’s Bone*, he used George Ella Lyon’s poem as his
Figure 2.8. Student’s “Lit Letter”

Dear Book Club,

In *The Winter’s Bone*, Ree Dolly is a girl at the age of seventeen that has to rise her family which contain her mother who is mentally ill and her two younger siblings Sonny which is twelve years old brother and Ashlee who is only six. Their family is really poor because of her father Jessup Dolly who was into drug and left the house. She has to not only make sure the family gets food and she also has to take care of her mother. At the mean time, she has to teaches her siblings survival skills not only cooking but hunting too.

One day, Ree found the sheriff around her house who wanted to talk to her mother about her father’s case, he bonded on their house and part of their factory, and the police can’t find her father anymore. Ree knew that they could lose their house if she can’t find her father, so she decided to go on her adventure to find her dad. However, everywhere she went, everyone just pretend to keep silence about her father. It’s a world with violence, drug use, even relatives are not nice to her. The story is full of mystery of loosing father and lost in humanities, however, Ree Dolly is strong and brave so I hopes she can find her father and someone nice in the future of the book.

Sincerely,

Jiayuan


mentor text. Mentor texts are pieces of writing that provide examples of the kind of texts the students are expected to write but may not yet be able to compose by themselves. The teacher can use mentor texts to point out the various features of a given text or genre, thereby enabling students to envision their writing goals. Mentor texts are especially useful in secondary classrooms where there sometimes is a mismatch between the texts students typically read (narrative texts such as stories, poems, etc.) and the texts they are expected to write (informational texts such as essays, reports, etc.) (Pike & Mumper, 2004). For example, students read narratives in their English language arts classrooms and are expected to write analytical essays interpreting them. However, students rarely read essays in class. Providing students with both professional and student models of essays will lessen the textual constraints of writing in an unfamiliar genre. Modeling writing using mentor texts may improve student writing outcomes. A recent meta-analysis of writing instruction in grades 4–12 indicates that guiding students in analyzing mentor texts and emulating “the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models in their own writing” had positive effects on writing quality (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 20).
The teacher also can be a source of mentor texts. When teachers write alongside their students in the classroom and model their own composing processes by thinking out loud, students gain insights into the many decisions writers must make as they put pen to paper. They begin to understand that “words do not just magically spill from [their] brain[s] to the paper” but that writing is often difficult, a “struggle” (Gallagher, 2011, p.16). Modeling is especially useful when introducing a new writing task or genre as it can clarify the conventions of the genre and the teacher’s expectations, and make visible the skills and strategies necessary to effectively carry out a particular writing task. Modeling thus provides a multi-sensory map that students can access and learn from as they are composing their own texts. It is essential especially for ELs who have limited exposure to texts written in English.

**EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE**

Academic language is a key component of effective instruction for ELs (Gersten et al., 2007; Goldenberg, 2013; Rivera et al., 2010; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). It is used in school-based text, which structures information efficiently and objectively, involves higher order processes, and integrates multiple linguistic features, including phonology, vocabulary, and discourse. Such text is densely packed with information, objectively written, and dependent on academic content and abstract thinking. It is more decontextualized than conversational language and is characterized by complex sentences and controlled sentence structure, the use of formal grammar, and the application of grammar rules, precision, and tightly organized text. In contrast, informal language is exemplified by the use of slang, everyday words, simple sentence structure, frequent topic shifts, disconnected text, and loose organization (Anstrom et al., 2010; Fillmore & Fillmore, 2012; Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

Teaching academic language explicitly to adolescents figures prominently in the CCSS and is a time-effective way to ensure that ELs gain enough proficiency in academic language to reach rigorous standards. Can’t students just acquire it through their interactions with others and their reading? No. English learners often have limited access to proficient speakers of English and even when they do have opportunities to interact with them, ELs are unlikely to hear them using academic language. Moreover, many do not receive much exposure to academic language in their reading, since
the reading they do is limited by their language proficiency. They also may avoid reading altogether or skim over texts quickly, reading only for the gist. Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) point out that ELs often encounter challenges in reading academic texts, the very type of writing that could expose them to academic language. Their reading problems can become severe over time, giving rise to increasingly serious challenges that prevent them from acquiring the same features of academic language that their English-speaking classmates acquire subconsciously through their reading. The explicit instruction of academic language can compensate for EL students’ inability to develop academic language through their interactions with others and through their reading.

A research-based practice to help EL adolescents catch up so that they can reach grade-level language and writing standards is the explicit instruction of those features of the language that are teachable and are challenging for ELs to acquire on their own, without instruction. Our analysis of language use in thousands of student essays over the past decade reveals that even advanced ELs have difficulties using the following specific, teachable language features, grouped by language category in Figure 2.9 (Olson et al., 2012; Olson & Land, 2007).

The language features in Figure 2.9 are the focus of language standards 1 and 2 (National Governors Association, 2010, pp. 26, 28, 52, 54). They commonly occur across subject areas (social studies, science, mathematics, and English language arts) and are considered part of core academic language (Bailey, 2007). They are strong candidates for explicit instruction since they are teachable and improve students’ academic writing.

Below we describe two activities using explicit instruction: one for teaching ELs features of academic language and the other for teaching ELs the ways in which academic language differs from informal language. The activities help ELs reach the following CCR Anchor Standard for Writing CCSS: ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Preposition Activity

In the following activity, teachers provide preposition instruction that helps students improve particular writing assignments. Prepositions are especially important for ELs because they have high utility across writing genres (narrative, informational, and
Figure 2.9. Teachable Language Features by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Category</th>
<th>Sample Sentence Using Feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoidance of sentence fragments</td>
<td>When Martha loved the dog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoidance of run-on sentences</td>
<td>Jay sat Belinda danced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbs</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Modal auxiliaries</td>
<td>Concha can drive, but she must not do so at night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Verb complements</td>
<td>Enrique got Steven to run an errand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Causative structures</td>
<td>John wants to go on a camping trip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Infinitive structures</td>
<td>She avoids going to soccer practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Gerund structures</td>
<td>Julius Caesar is murdered by Brutus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Passive structures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Markers of Cohesion/Linking Words</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transition words</td>
<td>Nevertheless, the people persevered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Word forms</td>
<td>Although the earthquake devastated the villages, the villagers persevered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nouns</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nominalization</td>
<td>The earthquake led to the depletion of valuable resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Densely packed/modified noun phrases</td>
<td>The painstaking solidification of the nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Plural forms</td>
<td>The crises increased over the years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Subject–verb agreement</td>
<td>The large number of assignments was finally completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Articles/determiners/adjectives</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Such earthquakes occurred frequently.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prepositional Phrases | The book was written by Leonard Pitts.
---|---
Vocabulary
- Word choice | A patient (instead of this guy) was on a ventilator for many months.
- Fixed expressions (Including Collocations and Idioms) | On the one hand, school uniforms can reduce gang-related crime. On the other hand, they do not necessarily prevent it.
- Adjective + Particle/preposition combinations | Henry is angry about losing the race.
- Verb + Particle/preposition combinations | The teacher commented on her insightful analysis.

argument writing). Also, as indicated by the example below, they play essential roles in academic writing, allowing writers to pack into their texts dense noun clauses that convey authority and an objective stance, add sentence variety, and introduce critical information about texts, such as authors’ names and the titles of texts:

In the Gettysburg Address, a speech delivered by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, he suggests that the nation was formed at the same time as the Declaration of Independence, not at the time when the Constitution was written.

Prepositions present challenges for ELs. This is because prepositions are used in different ways in different languages, often convey only linguistic relationships rather than content meaning, are unstressed, and occur in thousands of fixed expressions that are used rather infrequently in comparison to content words. Because prepositions lack salience, ELs often do not pay attention to them in the same way that they do content words.

A typical mistake when ELs attempt text-based writing, illustrated by the example below, is to confuse prepositional phrases for the subjects of sentences:
In the Gettysburg Address, by Abraham Lincoln, is about freedom for slaves.

While it is sometimes easiest to teach prepositional phrases as fixed expressions that students memorize as word groups, this approach does not always work. Eventually students will need to learn to create prepositional phrases on their own. Teachers can teach prepositional phrases expediently through explicit instruction. We have found the following instructional steps helpful.

**Step 1: Getting the Students Ready and Engaging Their Interest.** Here, students learn the lesson objective (learning to use a specific set of prepositions, in this case, *in, on, and by*) and revise their own writing to improve their use of prepositions. In setting the stage for learning, teachers might say:

Today, we will learn to use prepositions and prepositional phrases. When introducing the titles of essays, short stories, and other texts, use prepositional phrases. Using prepositional phrases will make your writing sound academic. They add important details to your writing and increase sentence length and sentence variety.

**Step 2: Providing Clear Explanations.** Teachers provide student-friendly explanations while their students take notes. The explanations are tied to specific writing tasks, are delivered in the context of writing instruction, build on students’ knowledge, and have an immediate effect on improving students’ writing. When explaining prepositional phrases, teachers might say:

Prepositions are words that connect nouns or pronouns to other parts of the sentence. They are like bridges since they link parts of sentences together.

Here is an example of the way teachers can explain how prepositional phrases are used to introduce title, author, and genre (TAG) of a text:

When writing an introduction to a text-based essay, it is customary to acknowledge the title, the author, and the genre of the work you are discussing. Typically, when you are referring...
to the text or the genre, you use the preposition “in,” and when you are referring to the author, you use the preposition “by,” as in the example below:

TAG: In the short story “The Medicine Bag” by Native American author Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, a young boy is confused by his grandfather’s heritage.

In the explanation stage, teachers also model how students should use prepositional phrases in writing. They do this by demonstrating the types of thinking the students should use when they are deciding how to use prepositional phrases. They explain the challenges that they themselves face as they use the feature when they are in various stages of the writing process. They remind students that not all small words are prepositions. For example, an and the are articles, and is a conjunction, and not is an adverb. They also remind students that prepositional phrases cannot be subjects of sentences. Figure 2.10 provides examples of incorrect and correct uses of prepositional phrases followed by helpful sentence frames for introducing TAGs.

Figure 2.10. Incorrect and Correct Uses of Prepositional Phrases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incorrect Example: In the Gettysburg Address, by Abraham Lincoln, is about freedom for slaves.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepositional phrase used as subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct Example: The Gettysburg Address, by Abraham Lincoln, is about freedom for slaves.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noun phrase used as subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Helpful student frames for tags:

1. In the narrative ________________ (give the title of the story),
   the author ________________ (name the author)
   ________________ claims/states/argues/other reporting verb... 

2. In the narrative ________________ (give the title of the story)
   by ________________ (name the author), ________________ (name a character) +
   Verb Phrase (tell what the character does, believes, or feels)...
Step 3: Providing Practice. Teachers give students additional opportunities to see the language feature used in effective writing and to practice using the feature with others and by themselves. They might ask students to call out the prepositional phrases that are used in the types of TAG statements that they will need to write in their own essays. For example:

TAG: In the autobiography, The Long Walk to Freedom, by Nobel Peace Prize winner and former South African president Nelson Mandela, the author argues that “difficulties break some men but make others.”

Teachers also ask students to discuss prepositional phrases in a piece of writing in small groups or with partners and later to add prepositional phrases in a text similar to the one that they are in the process of writing.

Step 4: Providing Formative Assessment. As students practice, teachers monitor and provide feedback on students’ use of prepositional phrases in their writing. They glean useful, nuanced information about their students’ developing knowledge of prepositions from the students’ productive attempts to use them in their writing. They use this information to provide those students who need it with additional instruction, including additional text analyses and practice. Further, they give students direct encouragement to attempt to use targeted prepositions prior to or during the completion of the writing assignment.

Comparing Academic and Informal Language Activity

In a different activity designed to teach academic language, students learn to distinguish between informal and academic language and to make their own writing more academic. Learning to recognize the differences between academic and informal language is essential to knowing when to use the features of one register and when to use the features of the other. Identifying differences in register builds students’ metalinguistic awareness, enabling students to reflect on language, manipulate it to convey meaning, and maintain consistency in register use, thereby boosting their writing ability (Schleppegrell, 2013).

In the activity, teachers begin by helping students identify the features of academic writing in a given text. After explicitly
discussing the general characteristics of academic and informal writing, teachers create two essays, one written in informal English and another written in academic English, seaming together portions of essays that their students previously composed. They make sure to include, in the informal essays, the types of linguistic features that they want students to avoid in academic writing. In analyzing student writing, we have found that these features include general words like nice, story, or man instead of more academic or technical ones like compassionate, narrative, or novelist; slang like stuff, guy, and blown away; inappropriate hedges like kind of and sort of; informal expressions and markers of spoken English like ya know and by the way; needless repetition; misspellings; grammatical errors; contractions; poorly linked sentences with an absence of clear referents; the unnecessary or redundant use of I (e.g., I think . . . followed by plot summary or In my opinion, I believe that . . .); and simple rather than complex sentences with little sentence variety.

After discussing the linguistic features in the two essays with others, students can work in pairs to revise a sample informal paragraph (see Figure 2.11).

**SCAFFOLDING INSTRUCTION FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS**

Scaffolding breaks learning into chunks and then provides tools to help students understand each chunk, so that teachers can provide academically challenging instruction to those who need additional conceptual, academic, and linguistic support. It can help ELs flourish as writers (Juel, 1994), giving them multiple forms of high-level assistance. The concept of scaffolding is based on the work of Lev Vygotsky (1934/1986), who proposed that with adult assistance, children accomplish tasks that they ordinarily cannot perform independently. In extending his colleague’s work, Jerome Bruner (1983) used the term scaffold in reference to the “process of ‘setting

**Figure 2.11. Essay Introduction in Informal English**

Well, this story by Leonard is about Haiti. A lot of people over there gotta accept the earth is cruel and they gotta suffer cuz of a big earthquake. It is not there fault. In my opinion, I think Haitians could not of stopped the shaking cuz they did not make the shaking. But the men and women over there gotta be pretty brave. And they need to learn to live even if there is a lot of rain. What’s up with that?

Note that in this paragraph, the informal words in need of revision are underlined.
Helping English Learners to Write

up’ the situation to make the child’s entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it” (p. 60). In Bruner’s view, adults can give children support until they are able to apply new skills and strategies independently.

Students need to develop their competence to read and write texts not only with their teachers’ guidance and with the support of their classmates, but also on their own. They will read and write many types of texts by themselves at school, in their communities, and at their work. This means that their teachers must take time to plan activities that shift the responsibility of learning, reading, and writing to the students, so that the students are able to complete reading and writing assignments independently. In describing this process, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) coined the term “gradual release of responsibility.” In their model, students move from explicit instruction and modeling to guided, collaborative practice with partners and groups, and finally to independent practice. Four parts of a lesson that shifts responsibility to learners, presented by Fisher and Frey (2011), are:

1. The Focus Lesson: “I Do It.” (The teacher completes a task in front of the students; this involves teacher explanation, modeling, and/or demonstration.)
2. Guided Instruction: “We Do It.” (The teacher guides the students, step by step, taking the lesson apart in manageable chunks; the students, with the teacher’s guidance, complete reading and writing assignments.)
3. Collaborative Instruction: “You Do It Together.” (The students complete a task with classmates, for instance, during pair and group activities.)
4. Independent: “You Do It Alone.” (The students work on their own to complete a task.)

The activities described earlier in this chapter that teach academic language features (prepositions) and the differences between academic and informal writing illustrate ways teachers can shift responsibility for learning to students, empowering them to become competent readers and writers.

Many scaffolding theories and models have been developed (Gibbons, 2002; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). All involve teachers providing specific scaffolds. These include graphic organizers; word banks; sentence, paragraph, and essay models and
templates; and outlines. They foster students’ development of a wide variety of cognitive and language competencies, helping them construct just the right sentences and discourse structures required to explain, describe, or clarify what they want to communicate. Using language scaffolds lessens students’ affective, linguistic, and cognitive loads, helping students get their words together, giving them language, and preventing them from losing their focus. This in turn allows them to concentrate on their ideas and convey them in writing. Let’s look at two scaffolding activities that have been highlighted by Goldenberg (2013) as being especially beneficial for ELs.

**Graphic Organizer Activity**

Graphic organizers include T-charts, concept maps, webs, mind maps, note-taking templates, and more. T-charts, such as that in Figure 2.12, help students develop their ability to describe similarities and differences, for example, between themes, events, characters, and settings in literary texts, and between evidence, important concepts, and events in persuasive writing and informational texts. Graphic organizers visually display critical relationships between concepts, facts, and ideas. In so doing, they enable students to “step back, analyze text closely, form preliminary interpretations, and seek validation for interpretations” (Olson, 2011, p. 138). They are particularly helpful in developing ideas for writing. In Figure 2.12 an 8th-grader uses a T-chart to compare and contrast two characters, Roger and Mrs. Louella Bates Washington Jones, described in Langston Hughes’ (1998) short story, “Thank You, Ma’am.”

To help ELs gain the English proficiency to complete the assignment, the teacher can begin the assignment with the entire class, brainstorming and giving examples of appropriate similarities and differences, and ask students to work with pairs with word banks or sentence strips before completing the assignment on their own.

**Sentence Frames Activity**

To help ELs organize their writing, teachers also can give students a different type of scaffolding template that students can refer to as they write. Sentence frames are especially helpful in accelerating learners’ development of the complex sentence structures needed in writing (Zwiers, 2008). English learners who have difficulty producing comparative structures can benefit from sentence frames such as those in Figure 2.13.
Among the 15 elements of effective adolescent literacy programs, Biancarosa and Snow (2004) have theorized that three are most critical to improving student outcomes: (1) ongoing and sustained professional development to improve teacher practice; (2) the use of summative outcomes to evaluate efficacy; and (3) the use of formative assessment to inform instructional activities. Frequent formative assessment is especially important for improving the academic literacy of ELs. It enables teachers to gauge the effectiveness of their writing instruction and shape their instructional practices to their students’ needs. It also provides students with essential information about their writing strengths and weaknesses, and delivers it in a nonthreatening, objective way. This type of assessment includes writing rubrics; informative feedback, for example, with editing marks and comments in the margins of students’ papers; checklists; self-evaluations and reflections; peer reviews; teacher conferences; and ongoing portfolio reviews (Graham, Harris, & Herbert, 2011). Fisher and Frey (2011) present a variety of practical assessments to correct students’ misconceptions and improve their knowledge of academic language features.

In Chapter 1, we described Marisela Gonzalez’s analysis of the theme in “Sometimes, the Earth Is Cruel.” Fortunately, Marisela’s teacher used her writing to assess her strengths and weaknesses and help her improve her writing. The teacher encouraged Marisela, drawing attention to her many strengths, such as her efforts to use academic words (memorialize) and complex sentences to convey authority, her use of quotation, her developing ability to use transition words such as also to link sentences, and her

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both are African Americans.</td>
<td>One is male and the other is female.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both are outside of the place they live on the same evening.</td>
<td>One is caring and the other is self-centered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both want to gain the other’s confidence.</td>
<td>One injures (by stealing) and the other is the injured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both regret some past actions.</td>
<td>One is a kid and the other an adult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both probably want a sense of security.</td>
<td>One is mature and the other is immature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2.13. Sentence Frames for Compare and Contrast

Describing Similarities

The traits they have in common are ______________.
They are similar because ________________.
Both are the same because ________________.
Their shared/common attributes are ________________.
They are similar in that ________________.
The way they are alike is that they both are/have ________________.
By comparison, _____________ is ________________.
In comparison, _____________ is ________________.

Describing Differences

The differences between _____________ and ___________ are ________________.
A distinction between _____________ and ___________ might be ________________.
_____________ is ________-er than _____________.
_____________ is ________-er than _____________, but ________-er than ___________.
_____________ is ________-er than ________.
_____________ and ______________ are similar because they both are/have ________________.
They are different because ____________ is ____________ and ____________ is ____________.
A notable difference (key distinction) between ____________ and ____________ is ________________.

Other Expressions to Show Differences and Similarities

Neither _________ nor ____________ has/contains/demonstrates/shows ________________.
___________ is/tends to be ____________, whereas ____________ is/tends to be ________________.
ability to engage the reader’s attention by using vivid examples. The teacher also gave her a short list of language features to work on improving. They included spelling (exept, sufferd, lttel, Gought, reboit, earthquak, bing, meony), sentence structure (so people can see what will happen if that was us; That what people did to help people that were very sick. Thats why we should be happy to be safe), converting informal English (like stuff) to more academic English, and modal auxiliaries like would (when it raind it will not stop for days).

OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE

In the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Practice Guide Teaching Elementary Students to Be Effective Writers (Graham et al., 2012), the first recommendation is Provide daily time for students to write. This might seem so obvious that it wouldn’t need to be mentioned; however, recent surveys of elementary teachers indicate that students spend little time writing during the school day (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010). A national survey of high school teachers’ reported writing practices indicates that secondary students also lack opportunities to write as a routine component of their classroom instruction (Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009). In fact, almost one half of the participating teachers did not assign at least one multi-paragraph writing assignment monthly. Another national study of writing conducted by Applebee and Langer (2011) confirms that much of the writing students do in secondary school is short (less than a paragraph) and does not provide students with the opportunities “to use composing as a way to think through the issues, to show the depth and breadth of their knowledge, or to go beyond what they know in making connections or raising new issues” (p. 16). Perhaps this is why the National Commission on Writing (2003) recommends that schools double the amount of time students spend writing in school.

It is ironic that struggling writers and ELs, students who might benefit most from writing practice, often spend the least amount of time engaged in authentic, extended writing activities. One might hope that Gallagher’s (2006) description of the EL classroom, quoted below, might be an anomaly, but many other researchers (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003) have corroborated his observation:
Recently I visited a classroom in which ELLs spent forty-five minutes diagramming sentences. There was no hint of authentic reading or writing. There was no evidence of genuine fluency building. There was also no classroom library. This is not an isolated incident—I have seen similar evidence of low expectations in other ELL classrooms as well. (p. 10)

He adds, “Though a cliché, the old adage is true: no one rises to low expectations” (p. 10).

The expert IES panel (Graham et al., 2012) recommends that teachers devote at least 1 hour per day to writing. However, noting that practice alone is insufficient to guarantee writing improvement, the panel suggests that at least 30 minutes of that hour be allocated to teaching a variety of writing strategies, techniques, and skills appropriate to students’ levels of proficiency. Especially critical for ELs is providing instruction in how to write complex texts and ongoing opportunities to practice writing in specific genres on diverse topics for a variety of audiences and purposes. In particular, ELs need time and practice in exploring textual references, gathering and organizing information, analyzing evidence, and defending their ideas in order to produce the type of well-reasoned arguments in extended pieces of essay writing emphasized in the Common Core State Standards.

**To Sum Up**

- Research tells us that ELs benefit from clear instructions and supportive guidance; effective modeling of skills, strategies, and procedures; active student engagement and participation; effective feedback; practice and periodic review; and regular assessments.

- ELs need culturally relevant writing instruction that capitalizes on the funds of knowledge they bring to the learning task. Practices that facilitate connections between students and their classrooms, homes, and communities tap into the strengths that ELs bring with them to school.

- Strategy instruction has been widely accepted as one of the most effective practices for literacy development, not only for ELs but for all students. It helps students to understand, interpret, and write essays about complex texts by providing them with an explicit focus on language, by increasing their exposure to academic texts, by making the texts they read comprehensible, and by providing them with the means of learning language on their own, outside of class.
• Modeling appropriate language use and processes of connecting reading and writing is also important as is scaffolding instruction using graphic organizers, mentor texts, and other meaningful visuals to support student learning.

• ELs need explicit instruction in academic English, opportunities to practice and develop this complex register of language, and formative assessment to monitor progress and craft ongoing instruction.