

Circle Time



Giant Steps through Nonfiction Writing

by Judie Haynes

A recent professional development program in my district on the writing process prodded me to reexamine how I teach writing. I have been teaching process writing to English language learners over the past twenty years. (This is a method of teaching writing in which the focus is on the process, not on the product.) During the program, however, I realized how many modifications I make to the writing process to meet the needs of English language learners.

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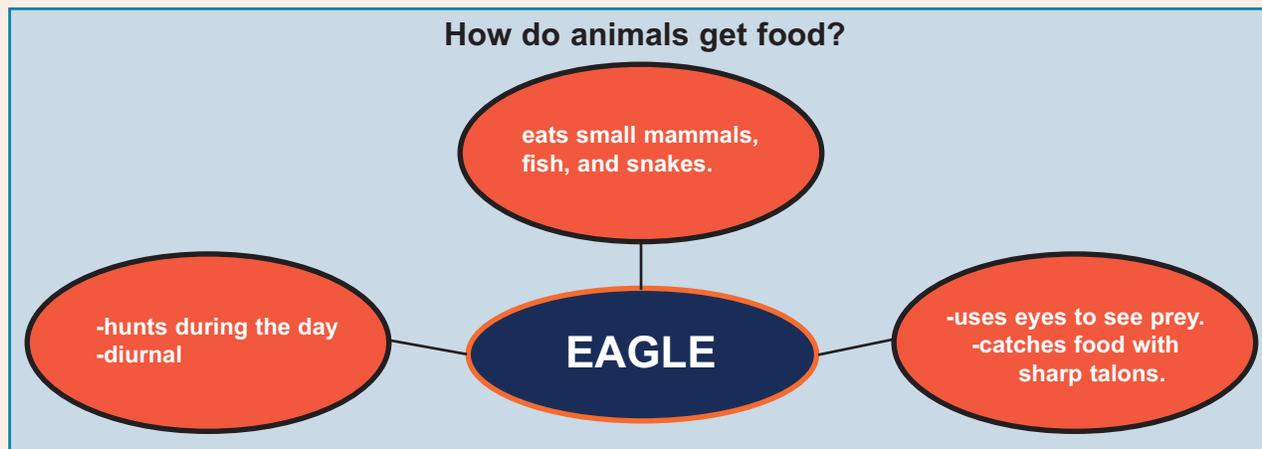
The biggest challenge when teaching writing to new learners of English is that many of them develop text in their native language and then try to translate it into English. This translated writing is full of inaccurate verb tenses and unintelligible sentences. There are so many errors that editing becomes problematic for teachers. I feel strongly that it is better to help students avoid writing in English through the filter of their native language. In my experience, the problem is particularly evident when students in grades three through six have developed writing skills in a first language that is very different from English.

For this reason, I don't have my students free write. (In free writing, students write without stopping and without worrying about correctness.) Why teach them to write incomprehensively? Nor do I encourage beginners to write in a journal, as this writing is also unstructured. One classroom teacher

told me that she had students write in a journal every night at home. I could only imagine the results of that with English language learners. Their text would range from incoherent writing to work that has been overseen and overcorrected by parents. The writing would definitely be product oriented.

What problems do students face when learning to write in English? First, their vocabulary is restricted, and they limit themselves to words they know how to spell. As a result, they repeat the same words and phrases again and again. Their sentence structure is generally chaotic and the grammar obscure. Here is a text written by a fifth-grade newcomer in her mainstream classroom in response to the prompt "If you were an animal, what animal would you like to be and why?"

I like be eagle becas eagle birds king and he fly very up. They scard. When they baby, they take off they feather and they squek they claw. (Yimin, September 2003)



How can you avoid the garbled writing that Yimin produced? I am convinced that English language learners write better if they begin with nonfiction reading and writing. Graphic organizers such as story maps, T-charts, and Venn diagrams help scaffold writing and provide students with language chunks that can be used in their text. If topics are developed orally, nonfiction vocabulary expanded and charted, and correct sentence structure modeled, student writing will improve dramatically.

One way to achieve this is to teach nonfiction writing during a writing workshop and to modify the steps in the writing process for beginning-level English language learners. The topics used during this lesson should be taken from the students' subject-area content. I recommend the following steps:

Prewriting: You will need to spend a lot of time in this stage with new learners of English.

- As a follow-up to nonfiction reading, brainstorm and chart facts about the topic in sentence form. Have the students read the facts from your chart orally. Strengthen the link between oral and written language.
- Keep a running list of content vocabulary. Review and practice the vocabulary every day. Speak and write facts in full sentences.

- Use graphic organizers to help students arrange ideas. English learners will usually find it difficult to go from phrases to comprehensible sentences, so complete the organizer with sentences, not phrases. Students may not value this strategy if they have not used organizers to write in their native language, so you will need to insist on their using it.

Writing: Have students practice writing from a story map, Venn diagram, or other type of graphic organizer. Provide them with an organizer that you have written together on the nonfiction topic. This organizer gives beginning writers the language and structure that they need. Show clearly what should be covered in the writing and how it should be organized.

Editing: Don't expect students who are not fluent in English to edit their own work. They will not usually find their own mistakes. Take a hands-on approach: hold regular conferences to discuss their works-in-progress. If you have students peer-edit, remember that English learners may be reluctant to share their work with native speakers. You may want to group beginning-level students with more fluent native speakers. Give pairs a specific item to check (for example, "Check the -s at the end of a verb if you are talking about one other person."). You may need to teach a minilesson about the item you want edited.

Revising: English language learners will not remember what to revise unless you mark changes clearly on their papers. Instead of writing "Add more information here," write more specifically "Tell what eagles eat here." If you involve students in the editing process, the revisions will be more meaningful to them.

Publishing: This is an important step. Help students develop a sense of audience by encouraging them to share their writing with classmates and family. Display work in the classroom and hallway, or make classroom books.

I see beginning-level students take giant steps when nonfiction writing is introduced in writing workshops and the process is modified as shown above. Weeks later, Yimin wrote this piece in her ESL classroom:

Eagle are carnivores. They live in forest. They eat small mammal, fish and snakes. They use eyes to see prey. They catch food with sharp talon. They are diurnal because they hunt in the day.

Yimin's nonfiction writing is comprehensible. She has correctly used the unit vocabulary, errors in grammar are easily identified and rectified, and the sentence structure is accurate. She is now ready to try other types of writing. 