



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs

Portland Public Schools
150 Ocean Ave., Portland, Maine 04103

Donald L. Bouchard

Tel.(207) 874-8135

Fax (207) 756-8421 Vol. 12, No. 1

Teaching Writing to English Language Learners: Best Practices

The Landscape of Academic Writing

Standards-based accountability places greater emphases on academic language proficiency for learning content. One of the greatest academic challenges for English Language Learners (ELLs) is the language domain of writing. Writing combines knowledge of language and meaning to express content knowledge in cognitively varying ways. Academic writing is equally a *language* as well as a meaning event for ELLs, creating greater cognitive demand in along with topic, content and style in writing. This *Bulletin* defines and examines the combined, interacting roles of linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control as constructs for academic writing.

LINGUISTIC COMPLEXITY

Linguistic complexity is amount and quality of language for writing. It combines grammar, organization, and cohesion of ideas and the use of text structures in specific genres, such as recount (retelling past events); procedure (how something is done); description (an imaginary or factual account); report (classifying factual information); and explanation (giving reasons for or judgment on something).

For ELLs, linguistic complexity builds developmentally in the following manner:

- single words and chunks of simple language;
- short sentences and adapted amounts of texts;
- expanding sentences with added details;
- varying sentence lengths of varying complexities within an organized paragraph; and
- varying sentence lengths in well-organized paragraphs or extended texts.

VOCABULARY USAGE

The specialized language of academic discourse (i. e., expression of ideas) is different from conversation and in general varies from high frequency words to technical use of vocabulary. Specifically it ranges in complexity in the following manner:

- high frequency vocabulary in the school setting (e.g., *book, sit, take, find*)
- general language related to the content area (e.g., *in all, person, knee, people*);
- combined general and specific language related to content (e.g., *total, character, kneecap, population*); and
- technical words related to content (e.g., *sum, protagonist, patella, demographics*).

LANGUAGE CONTROL

Language control is the extent to which writing is communicable. It involves number and types of errors that affect meaning or intent of the message and refers to the *lapses* in fluency, grammar, and word choice.

Specifically, language control varies in the following manner:

- comprehensible text that is copied or adapted from a model;
- original text that is simple;
- generally comprehensible text in which errors do not impede meaning but may reflect first language interference;
- generally approaching text comparable to English proficient peers; and
- comparable text with that of English proficient peers according to state standards-based criteria.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROMOTING ACADEMIC WRITING

1. Don't be afraid to focus on language! Academic writing involves the interacting dynamics of linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control. As a result, it is very important for teachers to be cognizant of the following constructs of academic complexity: sentence variation, pronominal referents, transition signals, and connotative and derivative uses of vocabulary. A simple and useful reference guide for this is a laminated ESL study guide (see SOURCES).

2. Frontload for language demands. Be aware of and help ELLs use progressively complex language as they developmentally progress in their writing. Help them be aware of language use as they engage in reading, as an aid in fostering writing practice.

3. Use writing as an integrative component of all language domains - listening, reading and speaking. Engage learners in active use of all language domains as they learn content. This will help

foster an intuitive understanding of the language in specific content areas.

4. Where age and developmentally appropriate, engage learners in form-focused instruction as a part of their academic writing practice. Form focused instruction is simply helping learners pay attention to the structure of the language they are using in writing. This can be done either integratively through the content being studied or as a separate "mini-lesson" prior to engaging in writing.

5. Maximize the 'teachable moment'! The art as well as skill of teaching, in part, is to be aware of and discuss language and content as a part of learning. Regardless of the content being learned and regardless of how it is manifested in language use - listening, speaking, reading, or writing - helping learners become more aware of the linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control elements in learning academic content increases the depth of cognitive learning in content.

There is no one way to teach academic writing. Academic writing needs to be consistently practiced as an integral part of content learning. Academic writing must be modeled and seamlessly integrated into the fabric of daily teaching and learning for ELLs.

SOURCES:

- Bar Charts, Inc. (2003). "Quick Study Academic English as a Second Language."
Gottlieb, Margo, Crtanley, Elizabeth, and Oliver, Andrea (2007). WIDA Consortium English Language Proficiency Standards and Resource Guide (2007). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin System.,
Miller, Kristyan, Lindgren, Eva, and Sullivan, Kirk. "The Psycholinguistic Dimension in Second Language Writing: Opportunities for Research and Pedagogy Using Computer Keystroke Logging." Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc. Vol. 42, No. 3, September 2008.
Spada, Nina and Lightbrown, Patsy. "Form-Focused Instruction: Isolated or Integrated?" Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc. Vol.42, No. 2, June 2008.