

## The Communicative Writing Framework: Examining Bilingual Children's Writing

- This paper examines the potential for teachers to act as researchers within their own classrooms. It utilizes a four-step process for such classroom-based research: observation, reflection, planning, and action. The focus of the research described is the creation of a Communicative Writing Framework (CWF) to aid in the examination and evaluation of linguistically diverse children's writing. Research by James Cummins, Katherine Perera, and Linda Flower provide the theoretical basis for such a framework. Application of the CWF is made to (a) data from the Language Assessment Scales-Writing, a national assessment tool, and (b) writing activities of students in a first-grade Spanish-English bilingual classroom. Suggestions are provided for teachers interested in implementing and adapting the CWF model to their own writing classes.

The blending of theory and practice has no better home than in the classroom. Teachers, who spend all day with students, possess a wealth of intuitive knowledge about (a) what does and doesn't work, (b) who does and doesn't understand, and (c) which stimuli are useful and which are boring. However, teachers often want to know more about reasons behind events in their classrooms and turn to the academicians at the university to help answer the theoretical questions. Training teachers to conduct classroom-oriented research either by themselves or in collaboration with university faculty is a way to maximize educational resources (Nunan, 1990). Teachers become participants in both the evolution and application of theories as they relate to teaching strategies, lesson plans, and the use of classroom texts (Seliger & Long, 1983). The need to carry out such classroom research when teaching students from ethnically diverse backgrounds is great because while our knowledge of multicultural and bilingual learning strategies is growing, much remains unknown (Allen, Swain, Harley, & Cummins, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

The interactions I had with a bilingual classroom teacher just finishing her master's degree provided me with the opportunity to collabo-

rate on such classroom research. Since both of our interests involved the early writing experiences of bilingual children, we decided to explore the possible application of current learning theories to the elementary classroom. My intent was to construct a classroom research model that would help to account for some of the areas in which children's writing evolved, whether in the first or second language, and that could be used by Michele, the classroom teacher. To do this, we needed to first look more closely at what other researchers had found.

### Models for Classroom Research

Researchers have developed several models that provide classroom teachers and other educators with guidelines for researching classroom questions. Lewin (1946) identified four aspects in his model: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) viewed these as a continual cycle, as they incorporated Lewin's model into their *Action Research Planner*: "The linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning" (p. 5).

Hopkins (1985) states that his purpose in "tackling classroom research . . . is to give teachers an introduction to the variety of methods available to them as a means of extending their repertoire of professional behaviours and of encouraging flexibility in professional development" (p. 41). Further, Hopkins outlines three concerns for teachers doing such research: that "teachers' primary job is to teach" (p. 41); "the method of data collection must not be too demanding on the teacher's time" (p. 42); and, "the methodology employed must be reliable enough to allow teachers to formulate hypotheses confidently and develop strategies applicable to their classroom situation" (p. 42).

Palmer and Jacobsen (1974) provide a larger perspective on the action research model as they apply it to the area of policy. Theirs is an approach "which combines the development of competence with community action," in which "people empower one another. Research becomes a form of action when it is done not by the experts but by people who themselves must act" (p. 1). Their steps include defining the problem, developing research instruments, and finally collecting and analyzing the data.

The action research approach appeared to be a useful way to proceed with our classroom investigation of children's writing. I decided to use Kemmis and McTaggart's (1982) four concepts of *observation, planning, action, and reflection*. When we talked, Michele said that she had first observed that her children could write. As a result, she planned some activities (journal writing), and then had the chil-

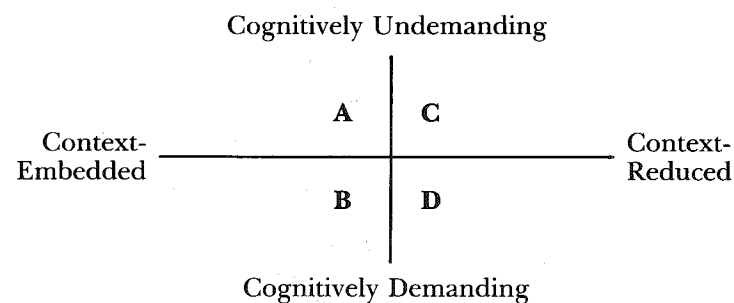
dren write (act). She then looked back and reflected on what had happened before coming to me to discuss it. Next, in order to formulate an effective classroom model for writing research, I needed to consider different ways of explaining young bilingual children's writing. This entailed reviewing studies that have attempted to explain the levels of difficulty encountered by all children learning to write.

### The Cummins Framework

Briefly, Cummins (1981) explains the interaction of communicative language skills by the construction of two intersecting continua: the amount of contextual embedding and the degree of cognitive involvement. Contextual embedding refers to the amount of information that is given through visuals, realia, and other nonverbal devices. He claims that the greater the contextual support, the easier it is for children to learn information. Examples might include drawing pictures and doing hands-on science experiments. The less the contextual embedding, the more difficult the task, such as analyzing an unknown theory for which one has no available context.

FIGURE 1

Range of contextual support and degree of cognitive involvement in communicative activities



**Note:** From "The Role of Primary Language Development in Promoting Educational Success for Language Minority Students," by J. Cummins, 1981. California State Department of Education, *Schooling and Language Minority Students: A Theoretical Framework* (p. 12), Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles. No copyright. Reprinted by permission.

The degree of cognitive involvement (demanding or undemanding) forms the second axis of the model (see Figure 1). Content that is not demanding might include, for example, telephone conversa-

tions in one's native language. Lack of knowledge of telephone codes and/or the person with whom one is speaking would make this a much more demanding task. Simple exercises that are visually demonstrable are also cognitively undemanding. On the other hand, skills such as higher math and learning to read would be highly demanding cognitively.

In this model, as the task becomes more cognitively demanding but remains context-embedded, the activity moves from Cummins' Quadrant A (e.g., Total Physical Response), to Quadrant B (e.g., hands-on math or science). When there is less obvious context, but the content is not difficult (e.g., a telephone conversation) the activity moves to Quadrant C. Finally, when the content becomes more challenging and the context remains reduced, the activity moves into Quadrant D, (e.g., analyzing difficult political concepts such as democracy and capitalism). Cummins cautions that at least three factors must be taken into account in locating any particular task in relation to the two continua: (a) the task's inherent characteristics, (b) the learner's general level of proficiency, and (c) the learner's individual learning style.

While Cummins is concerned with all communicative language activities, it might be assumed that writing, specifically (after mechanical skills are acquired), could exist anywhere along the continuum, depending on what is required of the student. For example, language experience stories written by the child may be context rich with a low level of cognitive difficulty (Quadrant A). Analytic writing, however, which many would agree exemplifies the most difficult of the writing tasks, might be found in Cummins' Quadrant D because little obvious context is available and the subject matter is complex.

In order to relate Cummins' theories to the writing of linguistically diverse children, a model must allow for three factors: (a) the inherent difficulties of writing, or the negotiation of meaning in print; (b) the level of writing proficiency of the bilingual, limited English proficient child; and (c) the child's learning style, which may be culturally based and possibly affect the way in which he or she writes, both stylistically and analytically (Hudelson, 1989a; Kaplan, 1984).

### Perera's Framework

Another way to conceptualize the degree of contextualization present in writing tasks has been explored by Perera (1984). Perera, like Cummins, is concerned with two dimensions in her writing framework (see Table 1). The first suggests that the easiest writing organization model for children (the least cognitively demanding) is chronological or narrative. Perera characterizes this type of writing in the following way.

... the sequence of events in time structures the material; in a nonchronologically ordered text, the relationships between the parts are not temporal but logical. ... Linguistically, a chronological text can be identified by its high use of verbs that describe actions or events and by the fact that sentences which contain such verbs can generally be joined by connectives like *then, next, after that*. (p. 217)

TABLE 1

### A Schematization of Kinds of Writing Showing Typical Pronoun Use

	Close personal (known to writer)	Intermediate personal (unknown to writer)	Distant personal
Organization of the subject matter	he, she, they I, we, you	he, she, they (I, we, you)	it, they
Chronological	e.g. autobiographical account Story	e.g. biographical account	e.g. account of a process
Non- chronological	e.g. description of a friend	e.g. description of a type of person (e.g. pirates, Eskimos)	e.g. description of of a structure, evaluation of an idea

**Note:** From *Children's Writing and Reading: Analysing Classroom Language*, (p. 220) by Katherine Perrera, 1984, London: Basil Blackwell Ltd. Copyright 1984 by Katherine Perrera. Reprinted by permission.

In the second dimension of her framework, Perera examines the distance between writer and reader and the writer's relationship to the subject matter, the latter being specifically concerned with the differences between writer versus reader-based writing (see discussion of Flower below). Perrera identifies three levels of distance between writer and subject. *Close personal* is the level characterized by extensive use of personal pronouns such as *I, we, and you*. *Intermediate*

includes the use of third person pronouns (*he, she, it, they*). The subject is probably unknown. In *Distant Impersonal* personal pronouns are few. They are limited to *it* and *they*.

According to Perera, developmental levels of the young writer will not necessarily be revealed by applying the framework. A child with sophisticated writing skills may still on occasion write in a close personal chronological form or style, especially since these are not mutually exclusive types of writing. Moreover, Perera does not indicate exactly how to label a piece of writing as belonging to one of the three levels.

### Flower's Approach

In her model Perera implies that the degree of reader/writer awareness that the writer exhibits, for example through the use of personal pronouns, may be closely related to the sophistication of the writing that the writer attempts. Flower (1984), explores this implication by positing *writer-oriented* and *reader-oriented writing*. For Flower, writer-oriented writing is related to Piaget's (1955) *egocentricism* and Vygotsky's (1978) *inner speech*. In this style of written communication, no concessions are made to the reader. The writer (whether adult or child) assumes that the audience understands the message (see also Calkins, 1980). In this sense the communication is elliptical: The subject is always known, at least to the message sender. In writing, this might be indicated by the apparent lack of cohesive ties, rather than the close linking of them. The writer knows how the ideas are tied together but has not made the reader aware, causing the reader to guess at the intended meaning.

In chronological writing, most often connectors such as cohesive ties are simpler (and more obvious), and other clues provide the context for the reader. As the writer moves to more difficult, less chronological writing, these connectors become more critical to maintaining communication with the reader. Similar to Perera's framework, which moves from simpler (chronological, personal) to more difficult (nonchronological, distant personal), Flower's model suggests that the writer must move from "concrete, factual bonds," or chronological writing, to concepts that are "abstract, logical relations," (p. 18) which are more frequent in analytic, nonchronological writing. When this is done successfully, the writer becomes more reader aware and more accomplished. I suggest that reader/writer awareness may be a good indicator of the developmental level of writing in the child, the degree to which the child moves from simple to more complex skills, and the extent to which the child uses context to produce his or her writing.

### The Communicative Writing Framework (CWF)

Given the similarities in the work of Cummins, Perera and Flower, I decided to combine these approaches, developing a model by which teachers can interpret and encourage young linguistically diverse children's writing, ranging from personal narratives to analytic essays.

TABLE 2

#### Communicative Writing Framework (CWF)

		Cognitively Undemanding			
		+ Chronological	- Chronological		
Context Embedded	Close personal	CWF 1	CWF 4	Context Reduced	
	Intermediate personal	CWF 2	CWF 5		
	Distant personal	CWF 3	CWF 6		
		Cognitively Demanding			

The CWF framework is compatible with the principles of the Cummins, Perera, and Flower models. The terminology is adopted from Cummins and Perera, while Flower's discussion is implicit in the concept of children's egocentric usage of written language and the distance of writer to subject matter and reader.

#### CWF 1: + chronological; close personal; context embedded; cognitively undemanding

In CWF 1, children write about what they know and what is close to them by recounting events in order. These tasks are context embedded for the children; but they may not reflect an awareness of the reader or provide context for the reader. Perera suggests as an example of this level a story or autobiographical account. Other examples might include a story about the child's birthday party, or a letter to a close friend or relative. Some of these may be written with sophisticated vocabulary, others more simply.

**CFW 2: + chronological; midpersonal; context embedded;  
midcognitively demanding**

Perera's intermediate-level chronological writing is midway between Cummins' Quadrants A and B and may show some degree of audience awareness (Flower). Children recognize the reader and produce more cognitively difficult writing. They remove themselves as writers to some extent but retain an approach that utilizes personal context. Perera suggests as an example a biographical account. Other examples might include a story about a friend's birthday party or a letter to a new acquaintance.

**CFW 3: + chronological; impersonal; context embedded;  
cognitively demanding**

At CFW 3, the furthest point on the axis for cognitively difficult (but context-embedded and chronological) writing, the child is still writing about what is known but has completely removed him or herself as author. Perera's example of a process, perhaps how to make a peanut butter sandwich, fits here. Other examples might include how to prepare for a birthday party or retelling a story the child has read.

**CFW 4: - chronological; personal; context reduced;  
cognitively undemanding**

In CFW 4 the writer uses the close personal dimension, but the task is not chronological. Since the information is still known (personal) to the writer, it is not necessarily demanding; but the context is no longer as embedded as in CFW 1-3 because its description or analysis requires the use of imagination by both reader and writer. The use of connective ties becomes more important in this type of writing. The child must become more aware of the reader. An example of CFW 4 might include the description of a friend or place the child has visited or a simple explanation of why the child did or didn't do a chore.

**CFW 5: - chronological; intermediate personal; context reduced;  
cognitively middemanding**

This intermediate personal and context-reduced level includes a somewhat more removed description or explanation than at CFW 2, such as the explanatory essay requires. Connections for the reader need to be clearly made at this level as chronological order will not be used as it is in CFW 2. However, since the subject matter does not include abstract concepts as it would in CFW 6, the level of difficulty is also lower (middemanding). Perera, in her framework, uses the example of a description of a specific group of people that

is not personally known to the writer, such as pirates. Other examples might include a description of new neighbors who are from another country or who speak another language.

**CFW 6: - chronological; impersonal; context reduced;  
cognitively demanding**

In the CWF model, nonchronological and distant impersonal writing corresponds to Cummins' Quadrant D. This represents the most difficult level of writing because no assumptions about audience can be made, and the writing requires a high level of negotiated meaning. CFW 6 might include a description of an imagined structure (such as something in outer space) or, for younger children, the simple evaluation of something they see, such as why birds fly and people don't. For older students, it might include some type of theoretical analysis of why birds fly.

**Application of the CWF Model to the Classroom**

Once teachers are familiar with the theory behind the CWF, they can use the model in several ways. For example, the model can provide a guide to begin to answer the kinds of questions that I have heard teachers ask and that I have asked myself about the writing of young bilingual children—"How do I know when children are beginning to feel more comfortable writing in their second language?" "My students just write short boring sentences. How can I encourage them to be more creative and to vary the length of their sentences?" "My students just write in the first person. Is that normal? It doesn't seem like my monolingual English students do that so much."

I developed the CWF model as a result of my earlier having examined some 30 first- through sixth-grade children's English writing portfolios and asking just such questions. The children were just beginning to learn English, and Spanish was the first language of most. I found their writing very egocentric. These children were apparently unaware that they might have an audience for their writing, an audience outside their particular world view. Their writing reflected this perception by the presence of the first person pronoun *I* to the exclusion of other pronoun reference. Also, the lack of connectives was one indication that the children might not be making the transition from writer to reader awareness discussed by Flower.

In addition, I observed from the portfolios that the limited English proficient children, as compared to native English-speaking children, were less likely to try nonchronological, or less personal writing such as would happen as children moved from CFW 1 towards CFW 6. Instead, they relied heavily on contextualized stories (e.g., chronological accounts of a particular event).

From the above experience with children's portfolios, and after consulting research, the CWF evolved as I followed the recursive process of Kemmis and McTaggart's (1982) action research model: standing back to observe what was happening, reflecting on what had happened, planning a lesson or model, implementing it, and then standing back to observe what happened, reflecting on what had happened, and then planning again.

### Application to Language Assessment

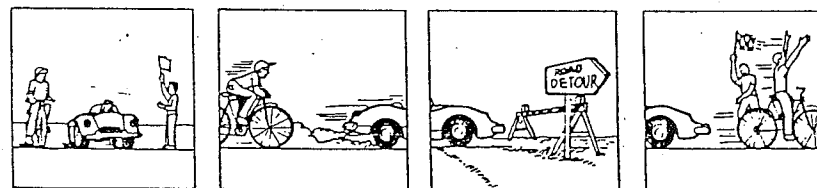
I will now discuss the CWF as it relates to language assessment, using a language assessment instrument and student writing. One of the specific applications that I made of the CWF was to the writing tasks elicited by the Language Assessment Scales Writing (LAS-W) Instrument (De Avila & Duncan, 1988). Students in my language assessment class had pilot tested the LAS-W, and the authors gave me access to several hundred of those writing samples. Since such assessments may be used as part of the identification and reclassification of students in bilingual programs, I thought it important to evaluate the kind of writing that the instrument elicited.

The writing task on the LAS-W was a response to "Let's Tell a Story." In this task, children are shown four pictures and are given a sentence prompt from which they are asked to write a story. No other instructions are given.

I applied the CWF to (a) determine how open-ended the prompt was and (b) see where children's responses would fall on the CWF. From examining these two areas, I gained additional information beyond what the assessment instrument provided.

First, I tried to determine how much flexibility the child might have in responding to the prompt (some prompts might require a narrative response; others might require an analysis of an idea). For purposes of providing some indication of the sophistication of the child's writing, the prompt should allow for a response anywhere along the CWF continuum. (Of course, a child who is capable of more sophisticated writing might still choose a simpler form). I found that the story (see Figure 2) elicited both chronological and non-chronological responses, although a chronological one was more likely. Some children viewed the story at a close personal distance, while others responded with intermediate to impersonal perspectives. Some of the children chose to elaborate on the prompts as well as to add analytic or other rhetorical and expository elements to their responses, while others simply described the picture or narrated the story in the pictures.

FIGURE 2



Val thought her new car would beat Bob's bike in a race. Jim raised the flag and \_\_\_\_\_.

From: *LAS Reading/Writing*. "Finishing Sentences" Form 2A. Published by CTB/McGraw Hill Copyright 1988. Copyright by Ed De Avila and Sharon Duncan.

Through this analysis, I saw the wide possibilities allowed the children in their written sample, since children could write anywhere along the continuum. A more limited prompt would have produced more limited responses.

My second use of the data from the LAS-W was to examine individual students' responses, using the CWF as a guide. To show how I used the CWF to evaluate the children's writing, the writing sample of a fifth-grade limited English proficient (LEP) child, whom I called "Marco," will be examined. This male native Spanish-speaking child scored 3 (LEP) on the English version of the Language Assessment Scales-Oral (De Avila & Duncan, 1976), an assessment tool used throughout the country for identification of oral language proficiency of nonnative English speakers. This was Marco's response to the writing prompt:

The race start and Val was wining the race then there was sign and the sign said Road Detour then Bob was very fast and Val's car stop and Bob's bike wins the race.

Using the CWF, I saw that Marco consistently used proper nouns, but no pronouns. Because he provided few details in his story, Marco did not need to use pronouns. Whether the lack of writing skill caused the absence of details or of pronouns is, of course, unknown from one writing sample. The majority of the story was chronological. Marco merely described the pictures in order. However, Marco's writing did show some evidence of analysis, moving part of his story to the analytic side of the CWF. Marco determined that "Bob was very fast," which was not indicated from the pictures. While this is a small point, it showed that Marco could do more than just describe the pictures. It should also be noted that Marco used a minimal

number of connectives, consistent with being a writer-centered writer (Flower, 1984).

In summary, the teacher examining this writing now knows, at least from this sample, that Marco is able to use a chronological organizational structure with few details. He has yet to begin using pronouns to replace nouns. There is no indication at all that Marco places himself in this scenario. He is not writing from an egocentric viewpoint, or CWF 1, but at a low level of CWF 2.

Another example from the same LAS prompt was of a fourth-grade male student "Ricardo," who scored 4 on the LAS-Oral, which indicates near oral fluency in English. His native language was also Spanish. His story was as follows:

... Val and Rob took off. At first Val got ahead, then she could not go any further because the road was closed. There was a sign that said Road Detour, but Val's car could not fit on the Road Detour. So Bob go on the Road Detour and he pedaled along until he got to the end of the race. Bob had won the race.

Again, using the CWF continuum, I could see that Ricardo's story showed several higher levels of sophistication than did Marco's. First, because he provided more details in his story, he needed and used more pronouns. Ricardo easily mixed proper nouns with appropriate pronouns, all third person (*he, she*). The story prompt suggested a chronological narration, which Ricardo primarily followed, placing his writing at CWF 2. However, there was also evidence of Ricardo's analyzing what was happening in the prompt. First, he showed causal relations ("... she could not go any further because the road was closed"). He also used some false causation ("There was a sign that said Road Detour, but Val's car could not fit ..."). The story was primarily chronological, but there were elements that would also place parts at CWF 5. Also, there were a few connectives to tie the story together for the reader.

### Application to the First Grade Classroom

A second kind of classroom application for which the CWF may be appropriate is in the area of portfolio development. Using this approach, Michelle, a Spanish-English bilingual classroom teacher, began to study her first graders' writing achievements. Last fall, in order to integrate speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, she had the children first write stories in journals on topics of their own choosing (in Spanish or English). When these were completed, she asked the children to read out loud what they had written. When the children were willing, she tape-recorded their responses. The oral reading frequently had only general correlation to what had actually been written, reflecting instead what the children wanted to

have written or thought they had written. It was generally longer and more complete in detail than the written version.

Michelle was able to expand the use of the CWF by comparing the level of sophistication of the children's oral skills to that of their written skills. She examined their use of cohesive ties, pronouns and use of detail in both their writing and speech. Her expectation was that, by the end of the spring, her children's oral readings would become much closer to their actual writing, and, in fact, this happened in most cases. One child in particular went from "reading" what was presyllabic writing to reading an actual story she had written. The children were very excited about this activity, which they did three times a week. Frequently when visitors came to the room, the children would run up to them and offer to read the stories they had written.

Even in the few short months that Michelle used this task, the children began moving away from close-personal contextualized speaking and writing (CWF 1), toward intermediate and, in some cases, even to distant impersonal. Some exhibited instances of analysis in the form of simple causation as their writing developed. Based on her experience with the CWF, Michelle expanded the kinds of language activities she encouraged her children to do. This she hoped would lead to the variety in writing her students needed to begin to do in order to become more interesting and successful writers. She did this when it was time for Writer's Workshop by telling her students what she herself was writing and for what purpose. Thus, she introduced the children to the variety of types and styles she used when doing her own authentic writing (e.g., letters to parents, notices for the bulletin board). She also encouraged the children to write about real things that happened to them both in and outside the classroom.

### **Reflection**

It could be tempting to use the CWF to "label" children, but that is not its intent. Rather it is to provide a continuum to chart changes and growth. The kind of analysis a teacher does when working with the CWF, taken together with other writing samples, may be useful for observing longitudinal development of individual students.

Obviously, the categories in the CWF are broad. For example, in the case of Marco and Ricardo above, both could be placed in CWF 2 with parts of Ricardo's story also in CWF 5. An expansion of the categories, for example adding the category *descriptive* between chronological and nonchronological, would allow for a more precise categorization of the writing sample. However, if the categories become too discrete (say with six or seven such categories), the process of categorization might then become too time-consuming for teachers. One could also argue that it is as important for the teacher to be able to analyze student writing more generally across sentences and pieces of writing as it is to provide a discrete score. This possible

expansion of categories is another example of how the implementation of the recursive model of reflection and replanning would be useful.

### Conclusion

The preceding pages propose a way of involving teachers in investigating the communicative writing skills of nonnative English-speaking children in their classrooms. The CWF framework that was used as the tool moves along a continuum of levels of complexity and context, levels that may reflect differences in the English language skills of the students. When applied to writing in authentic situations, this model has the potential to identify the complexity of the skills children reach in their writing development as well as to provide a means to evaluate the difficulty level of writing tasks assigned to students.

In discussing the writing skills of two second grade limited English proficient children, Hudelson (1989b) points out how both the influence of teaching methods (e.g., copying vs. creative writing) and individual personalities affect the speed of acquisition of writing by children learning English as a second language. Within these parameters, limited English proficient children's writing development is similar to that of native English-speaking children in terms of willingness to take risks, invent spellings and go beyond copying.

Regardless of language background, children who are exposed to whole language approaches to authentic tasks, as opposed to isolated and often meaningless worksheets, seem to fare better. The strength of the CWF model may well lie in its potential to distinguish the child who is ready to take or is already taking risks, who is ready to move or is moving along the continuum with support and stimulus, from the child who remains close to the safety of the first quadrant. The value of the classroom research process outlined in this paper rests in its potential for enhancing the ability of the classroom teacher to better understand the performance of the crosslinguistic student. ■

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### Footnotes

I would caution the teacher to remember that the use of any assessment instrument such as the LAS-W creates an artificial testing situation, and whatever is found should be compared with longitudinal growth of students' writing. However, the latitude allowed by the prompts in the LAS-W at least provided the children with an opportunity to choose how they wished to respond.

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