



## **The Write Aid for ELLs: The Strategies Bilingual Student Teachers Use to Help Their ELL Students Write Effectively**

Many students, especially English language learners (ELLs), struggle when they write. This study examined the various writing strategies 3 Spanish-speaking bilingual student teachers used to help their elementary school ELL students write. This was a case study that looked at how these student teachers used their primary language, among other writing methods, to help their ELLs access writing strategies so these students could write effective English compositions. The authors used the interviews of student teachers, their lesson plans, and reflective journals to identify the instructional methods these student teachers used with their students. These methods included strategies such as helping their ELL students write their ideas in Spanish and English and using Spanish and English cognates to build students' word banks. The knowledge from this study is important because it showed how ELLs may benefit when their teachers use the students' primary language to help them write English compositions.

**I** think we make a big mistake, I think teachers easily make the mistake of thinking that because our English learners maybe aren't as proficient in English that maybe they don't know as much, and I think that is such a mistake to not take the time and to really, if you're able, because not everybody is bilingual, but if you're able, just really what is it these students do understand, what do they have conceptually, and if they are understanding, then why not give them the opportunity to write in their primary language and then eventually build on that as English comes with time and more explicit instruction in English. (Interview with Nadia)

According to Sparks (2016), "Nearly 3 in 4 American classrooms now

[include] at least one English language learner, and these students make up roughly 1 in 10 public school students” (para. 1). As a result, ELL (English language learner) students have been considered a separate demographic group in many American public schools for purposes of analyzing performance on standardized tests. The prominence of ELLs in American schools has led to several instructional challenges, a primary one being how to teach these students to write effectively in English. This concern resonates in the observation of the student teacher quoted above.

The idea that Spanish-speaking ELL students may have difficulty communicating in English is supported by test data regarding writing achievement. The National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessed writing among fourth-grade students. For this assessment, the writing scores of Spanish-speaking ELLs were not reported separately. Thus, the ELL scores for these students were included with those of Hispanics with the assumption that many Hispanics are designated ELLs because their home language is Spanish. In 2003, there was a significant difference in fourth-grade writing scores between White and Hispanic students. While 10% of White students scored “Below Basic,” 23% of Hispanic students received that score. Also, 31% of White students scored “Proficient” while 16% of Hispanic students received that score (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). The most recent publication of NAEP test results was in 2011. In that year, fourth-grade writing was not assessed but eighth-grade writing was. While 13% of eighth-grade White students were in the “Below Basic” category, Hispanic students scored 31%. In the “Proficient” category, 30% of White students scored in that area, and Hispanic students scored 13%, according to *The Nation’s Report Card: Writing 2011* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). These scores appear to indicate a gap in writing achievement between White and Hispanic groups, including ELLs. As the quote above mentions, this gap may be attributed to the disadvantage ELLs experience because they lack the native-language literacy skills of their classmates whose first language is English (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). This lack of proficiency in English may affect the students’ ability to significantly participate in classroom activities (Ackerman & Tazi, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2016). Also, because of this lack of proficiency in oral and written English, ELLs are unable to demonstrate adequate academic knowledge in content subjects such as mathematics and science (Banks et al., 2005).

Because writing is considered a gatekeeper skill, several strategies have been used to help ELLs write more effectively (Short, 2002). One strategy is scaffolding writing instruction (August et al., 1997; Cobb, 2004; Echevarria et al., 2006; Education Alliance, 2006). Teachers use scaffolding to help students represent their ideas on paper. This strategy also makes it easier for students to add information to these concepts. Another strategy that extends scaffolding is using visual organizers such as graphic organiz-

ers. Graphic organizers represent a way of showing a relationship among concepts on paper. These images, originally known as structured overviews, look like tree diagrams (Moore & Readance, 1984). Another type of visual organizer, similar to graphic organizers, is Hyerle's (2004) thinking maps.

Thinking maps use scaffolding as a way of breaking down information and organizing this information to write a composition. One of the thinking maps, the Tree Map, helps students write a composition by breaking down the information into categories like tree branches. An example of a prompt that would use the Tree Map is asking students what their favorite activity is. After students talk about their activity in pair shares, the teacher would help the students brainstorm the topic by asking students what a reader would want to know about their activity. From this exercise, the teacher and students would decide the three most important subtopics. Each of these subtopics would be a branch of the tree. The teacher would model making the Tree Map with the topic on top (Favorite Activity). The teacher would help the students come up with three details for each subtopic. Then the teacher and students would write a composition from the outline that was created. The students would create their own outlines and compositions based on the models the teacher had displayed on the document camera and whiteboard.

An additional strategy is the teacher's showing students writing samples to teach organization (Lin, 2015). Olson, Scarcella, and Matuchniak (2016) recommend teachers use strategy instruction with ELLs, including providing sentence starters.

Because bilingual teachers can communicate with ELL students in the shared primary language, several authors believe bilingual teachers may be more effective at helping their ELL students write (Gandára & Santibañez, 2016). To begin with, bilingual teachers see their ELLs as equally capable of succeeding academically as their English-only classmates (Jiménez et al., 2015). Thus, these teachers have high expectations about what their ELL students are able to learn and do. To reach these expectations, bilingual teachers support their students' writing efforts in several ways. Because these teachers speak the same primary language as their ELLs, these teachers are able to give primary language words to their students to bridge the linguistic gap between Spanish and English. In addition, teachers encourage motivation in their students by using the students' background knowledge when the students write. Because some of these bilingual teachers grew up in families and communities that resemble those of their ELL students, they are more likely to use context or culturally responsive pedagogical methods in presenting their writing strategies (Jiménez et al., 2015). So they help their ELLs "associate reading and writing with meaning and literacy knowledge derived from their home experiences" (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2010, p. 1). An example of using context that would call upon students' family backgrounds in a writing prompt is one in which

students talk about a favorite experience they had with their families. In preparation for writing about this prompt, students would do a pair share about the topic. The teacher would call on students to talk about the experiences they shared with their partner. The teacher would model brainstorming and outlining an event that the teacher experienced that was similar to the students' experiences. This example might be how the teacher's family prepared food for Thanksgiving. The result would be the teacher's writing a composition on the document camera with students volunteering each sentence. Because the teacher uses students' experience with their families as a writing topic, ELLs are more motivated to write more fluently and more effectively because they are using their personal experiences in responding to writing prompts.

### **Method**

The purpose of this study was to examine how Spanish-speaking student teachers used Spanish to help their ELLs access writing strategies so the students could write English compositions more effectively. This study is important for several reasons. While several studies have examined the effectiveness of bilingual and dual-immersion programs in using the students' primary language to help them access English (Lanouze & Snow, 1989; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Lindholm-Leary, 2005), few studies have examined teachers' using the students' primary language outside a formal bilingual program. Equally important, little research has been conducted about preservice teachers and their roles in helping students, particularly ELL students, learn. Student teachers make important contributions in the classrooms where they student-teach. Often, they use new strategies in teaching and technology. They are open to new ideas and readily include them in their instructional strategies. For that reason, many school districts are eager to have them student-teach in their schools in preparation for hiring them as first-year teachers. These district leaders see these student teachers as enriching the schools' instructional programs with their innovative approaches. Thus, the results of this study could be significant if the strategies these student teachers used with their ELLs were adapted by other teachers to support and encourage their ELL students' classroom participation in writing activities.

The authors used a case study approach in examining the student teachers' classroom experiences when the student teachers completed their preliminary Multiple Subject teaching credentials at a private university in Northern California. The student teachers participated in a Clinical Practicum class one of the authors taught. The Clinical Practicum class is a support class for student teachers. It is an opportunity for student teachers to ask questions about their student-teaching experiences and to receive advice from their instructors about issues concerning them. The student teachers

did their student teaching at schools where they spent a year observing and student-teaching in two classrooms that spanned pre-kindergarten through sixth grades. As part of their assignments, the student teachers spent equal amounts of time observing and teaching in a primary classroom (pre-kindergarten to second grades) and an upper-elementary (grades 3 to 6) classroom. Two of the three student teachers were assigned to a designated Title 1 school. A school is designated Title 1 if at least 40% of students come from low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). For purposes of this study, each of the student teachers was given a pseudonym. One student teacher, Nina, was assigned to grades kindergarten and 6 at a Title 1 school. Nadia, also at a Title 1 school, worked with kindergarten and third-grade students. Adriana worked with students in third- and sixth-grade classrooms at a non-Title 1 school.

While the student teachers had ELLs in their classes, it should be noted that many of the students were non-ELLs. Thus, the classroom instructional language was English. So the strategies that are mentioned in this article are designed to be used with all students. To increase ELL students' participation, the student teachers used specific strategies with ELL students on a one-on-one basis or in small groups as needed to ensure the ELL students understood the lesson and were able to do the assigned work.

### ***Introducing the Case Studies***

The study was based on oral interviews conducted individually with the three student teachers. A copy of the interview questions can be found in the Appendix. Other support documents included the student teachers' lesson plans and reflective journals. The interviews began when the student teachers were asked when they considered themselves to be bilingual. Nina said she was considered bilingual in middle school. Nadia grew up speaking English to her mother and Spanish to her father. She considered herself to be bilingual beginning in second grade when she learned to read in English. Adriana believed she was fully bilingual when she attended college.

Another introductory question concerned the student teachers' assessing their writing performance and whether they liked to write. Nina said she struggled with writing until she was a senior in college. At that time, she began excelling in writing, and she thought she was a pretty good writer. Nadia said she was able to articulate her thoughts and received positive feedback from her teachers. She did not see herself as a writer but believed her writing skills had allowed her to excel. Adriana said she always liked writing growing up, especially writing fiction. She saw writing as being the same thing as reading "but this time you're creating instead of just absorbing."

### ***Organization of This Study***

As previously mentioned, the data for this study consisted of three

sources: interviews with the student teachers, their lesson plans, and their reflective journals. This information was then organized into six sections. These sections discussed strategies used in reading, vocabulary development, speaking, writing, and strategies for developing structure and fluency in writing.

### **Reading Strategies**

As stated before, the student teachers used various language activities to develop their ELL students' writing in English. One of the chief ways Nadia helped students write was connecting reading with writing. She believed that when students thought aloud about something they had read, it was easier to write these spoken thoughts down. She modeled this process for her students as she read a story to them and asked herself questions orally such as "Oh, this made me think of summer and eating ice cream." She continues:

I also think that even reading or any other subject area is pausing and having a discussion with ourselves about what we've read, you know, and then using the written form to share our thoughts, just getting them into the practice of writing something. (Interview with Nadia)

After Nadia shared her thoughts, she had students get into pair shares and talk about what these students were thinking when she read the passage from the story to them. Then she had the students write a few sentences about their thoughts on paper. She continued this strategy of reading a section of the story and then pausing for students to talk and write about the story until she finished reading the story. As a culminating activity, students share their writing in pairs.

### **Vocabulary Strategies**

The student teachers used Spanish to develop their ELL students' language. One strategy was the student teacher's showing the relationship between Spanish and English. For one of her ELL students, Adriana had a chart that had Spanish words on one side and the English translation on the other. "So with one of my ELLs right now, we have a chart on her desk. 'In Spanish it's like this, in English it's like this.'" Adriana added, "I try to do a lot of cognates [words in various languages that look similar and have similar pronunciations and meanings] so they see the similarities across languages" (Interview with Adriana). Adriana also used body movement to help her students remember vocabulary words when they wrote. The method is called total physical response or TPR. Adriana helped them create dance moves.

So to help them, they had to pick a word and they had a little dance movement that went with it. Kids cannot remember words unless they dance, so you'll see them during a sit-down when they're writing and they can't remember, you see them moving their arms. (Interview with Adriana)

Adriana also used "Word of the Day" to stimulate students to learn vocabulary words and use them in sentences. She would present a vocabulary word to the students, who tried to figure out the word and then got the definition from the dictionary. Each student had a paper dictionary he or she created. On each page was a "Word of the Day." Students would include the word, its definition, and draw a picture of the word or how the word would look. For example, to illustrate the word *angry*, students would draw a picture of someone who was angry. For her ELL students, Adriana worked with them to make their dictionary a glossary. For each vocabulary word written in English, she would help her ELL students come up with the Spanish translation for the word and the meaning of the word. All students wrote a sentence with the word and posted it in the room. Her ELL students' papers included the English and Spanish versions of their sentences. Students took turns presenting their sentences to the class. ELL students were invited to present their sentences in Spanish and English. The teacher would post the word on a word list that was displayed on the classroom walls. Periodically, she would orally review the meanings of these words with students.

### **Speaking Strategies**

The student teachers used oral strategies to help their ELLs develop their language skills to participate in class by using their primary language.

I will insert vocabulary or concepts into their primary language to just kind of understand at least conceptually what it is we're talking about, but I also have them partner with bilingual students who can also use their bilingual skills as an asset, and it also helps, you know, students who are maybe at the beginning level to be able to participate. (Interview with Nadia)

Adriana also had ELLs work with partners: "Partnering ELs who speak the same primary language when discussion of complex content is required; •This allows them to have a more meaningful discussions and clarify points in their native language" (Lesson Plan). The discussions that Nadia and Adriana had with their students, including ELLs, could culminate in the class's writing a composition about the topic of the discussion. For example, this discussion might occur in talking about a science topic such as solar

energy after reading an article about the topic. After the teacher presented the topic, the students, in pairs, would recall facts from the article. Then the teacher would have students take turns orally sharing with the class what they discussed in pairs, including their ELL students. As the students shared orally what they discussed in pairs, the teacher would write their responses on the whiteboard. The culminating activity could be the teacher's using the document camera to write the first sentence of a composition with students taking turns at the document camera writing sentences using the notes the teacher wrote on the whiteboard about what solar energy is and how it is used. This composition could be displayed in the classroom as a model for students to use when they are writing about science topics.

The student teachers used other oral strategies to help their ELLs write. One way was stimulating students' writing by having students, particularly those in the primary grades such as kindergarten, share their writing with each other. Nadia gave the students writing ideas and modeled how to take these ideas and begin writing about them. She said, "So I would like to have them begin the writing process and start with, you know, shared writing experiences or just having them think aloud." In addition, she used oral language to stimulate writing when she talked about how students' retelling a story can lead to writing about it.

Kids need to connect their oral language with the written, and the oral language comes first, so I think that I would want my kids to be able to have conversations, discussions, be able to articulate what a good retelling is ... and then turn those good oral skills into good writing skills. (Interview with Nadia)

Nadia modeled the process of reducing an oral retelling of a story into written form. She retold a story she just finished sharing with the students. Then she had students retell the same story in pair shares. Using a document camera, she wrote each sentence in the composition that retold the story. Then she had students write a composition about their own retelling using her composition as a model.

Spanish-speaking parents were also used to help ELLs respond in English.

Thankfully, there is a parent volunteer in the room who speaks fluent Spanish and works with her [the student]. If the parent is not available to help, the student she is seated next to is fluent in Spanish as well and helps translate when needed. She knows she can raise her hand and ask me questions in Spanish because I can understand and will respond and guide her. (Adriana's Lesson Plan)



According to Nadia, having students speak in complete sentences helped their writing. She said, “Teaching kids orally to be able to communicate their ideas in complete sentences will transfer into writing in complete sentences” (Interview with Nadia). Nadia used this strategy as a way of preparing students to write. For example, if students are reading about the Statue of Liberty, she would call on student volunteers to come up with words and phrases that described the facts they read in the social studies text. She would list these words and phrases on the whiteboard. Next to this list, Nadia wrote the first sentence of the summary on the document camera, such as: “One of the most famous statues in the United States is the Statue of Liberty.” Then she called on volunteers to make each of the items on the list a complete sentence. She wrote these sentences on the document camera. Then she asked for a volunteer to come up with a concluding sentence that she added to the other written sentences. When the composition was completed, Nadia posted this composition in the classroom as a model students could use when they were writing summaries.

### **Writing Strategies**

As with oral language, the student teachers used Spanish to help their students write in English. One method was having students write a sentence in Spanish and then translate that sentence into English using the student teacher’s help. This strategy was particularly useful for those students who were fluent in Spanish and tested out at the beginning levels of English fluency.

So I have her [the student] skip a line, so she’ll write a sentence in Spanish and then she’ll write it in English, and then she’ll get another piece of paper and she writes it all in English so that she’s practicing, and then she reads it out loud to me, and we practice words she didn’t know, words that sound the same. (Interview with Adriana)

In referring to the opening quote for this study, Nadia also talked about the value of ELLs using their primary language as a starting point for writing.

Nina stimulated her students’ writing in Spanish by using dictation. She had the students dictate a written paragraph to her in English. Then Nina translated the English into Spanish. “And sometimes we dictate what they’re saying in English and so the dictations I do are also written in Spanish” (Interview with Nina).

Nadia believed that using the students’ backgrounds—she called it “funds of knowledge”—was a valuable writing source. She said, “I think any time that we can bring our students’ culture into that learning environment and we’re able to write about it and express their ideas, as often as we can,

I think it's a wonderful practice" (Interview with Nadia). Nadia used funds of knowledge when she talked about how the students' families celebrated holidays and prepared special foods. For example, she talked about a custom her family followed in celebrating Christmas. She asked the students to talk in pairs about customs their parents followed. Then she encouraged each pair to share what they discussed and wrote their answers on the whiteboard. She helped students brainstorm details about a Christmas custom that could be included in a model composition. She modeled how to transfer three of the subtopics into an outline she wrote on the whiteboard. Nadia and student volunteers took turns writing sentences about a family's Christmas custom on the whiteboard using the outline. When the composition on the whiteboard was finished, the students completed their own outlines and wrote a composition about their family's Christmas custom. Nadia also used another type of funds of knowledge, called "background knowledge," when she would begin a reading lesson. She would list the new vocabulary as a prereading strategy. For each vocabulary word, Nadia would ask students what prior or background knowledge students might have about this word and what the word might mean. After possible student contributions, she would tell them the word's definition and how the students' answers correlated with it.

As a writing strategy, Adriana used secret notes with her younger students. Students passed notes among themselves using vocabulary dealing with the "Octopus" unit.

So they had to write ... and they had to secretly pass it [the note] without me seeing so that they're writing, they're practicing. ... It's a game now, and they want to write it down because whoever's note I catch they win or whatever game was that day. (Interview with Adriana)

Thus, if Adriana caught the note, the note passer and recipient both received a prize of some sort.

When Adriana was teaching her students how to engage in persuasive writing, she used sentence strips to help them build their paragraphs.

We had sentence frames posted on the wall, so we made a chart that in the middle said, "Our language function is," and it said "Opinion Writing" and on the left we had words that we could use to signify we're using our opinion, so "In my opinion, I think," and then on the right we had situations you could give your opinion, and then on the bottom we had like a graphic organizer example of how to write, so it was, "In my opinion, I think this first because 'second, third, and then conclusion.'" (Interview with Adriana)

### **Strategies for Developing Structure in Writing**

As previously mentioned, students, especially ELLs, need to structure their writing so their compositions are well organized. Many teachers use graphic organizers to help their ELLs organize their writing. For some teachers of ELL students, the question is how these students can access this writing strategy, especially those students who are not fluent in English. Nina said she helped her ELLs use Spanish words to complete a graphic organizer in preparation for writing. Nadia asked students to write about a time the students showed courage. She had them share their own stories with each other about a time they showed courage. She had them brainstorm subtopics such as what the event was, who was there, when it took place, and so on. She wrote these subtopics on the whiteboard. Then she completed an outline in which the students and she added details to each subtopic. Nadia would model how to take the details of the writing outline and write a composition with students taking turns volunteering sentences. As the culminating activity, the students would create their outlines and write compositions using details from their outlines.

Teachers who are not Spanish speakers could use Nadia's idea of students' writing about a courageous event with their ELL students. The teachers could pair up their ELL students. As partners, the students could talk about the courageous event they wanted to write about. The students could help each other brainstorm details about their event using Spanish words as necessary to describe specific details such as where the event took place, who was there, and so on. As with Nadia's example, teachers could help the students come up with subtopics to complete a writing outline and model how to write a composition with students volunteering sentences on the whiteboard. Finally, the students could complete a writing outline and use the model composition written on the whiteboard to write a composition about their event.

### **Strategies for Developing Fluency in Writing**

A key strategy for helping students to develop their writing abilities in English is having them write for several minutes in dialogue journals. Students could write about a topic of their choosing or the teacher could assign a topic. Then students would write for at least 10 minutes. At the end of the time, the teacher would collect the journals and respond to the journals using comments, not corrections. This strategy is important because students can write about what interests them and not have to worry about corrections. Also, when students write more frequently, their writing improves and they become more comfortable with composing.

Two of the student teachers had their students write dialogue journals that the student teachers would read and respond to. The students in the classes of Nina and Adriana appeared to enjoy using them. Nina said,

It's been so incredible to really connect with them, and it goes into their personal life, as well, and they start talking about their family and what they did on the weekend. Just to see them write because they want to is incredible. (Interview with Nina)

Adriana agrees:

Writing about experiences, what you did, definitely doing journals is something fun. With my fifth, sixth graders, I had them do journals with me so they would write, I would write back, and I got to know about my quiet kids and it was just fun. (Interview with Adriana)

### **Discussion and Implications**

As we reflect on the bigger message of our research, two main themes surface. Both themes focus on the goal of improving the writing skills of ELL students. First, the different strategies that we have identified and described involve a high level of commitment and engagement. From oral strategies (telling stories before writing them down) to writing practices (writing in Spanish and then rewriting in English), the student teachers actively participated in the learning of their students. Doing so makes students more active participants, and they seemed to focus less on what they did not do or could not immediately understand. The activities we included are those that could be potentially useful for non-ELL students, but they are especially effective for ELL students who are no less capable, and they are strategies that any teacher can employ. Strategies such as providing ELL students with Spanish-English glossaries and focusing on organization target specific pitfalls for many ELL students, and they in turn provide students with practices that will be useful throughout their educational careers (and beyond).

We focus on supporting and developing the writing skills of ELL students, but we do so because we know it will also benefit the lives of those same ELL students. As teachers are the ones implementing those strategies, they represent the second theme of our research. We know that students are more likely to do well in school when they are more engaged in the classroom. Strategies that specifically involved the cultures and everyday lives of the students referenced in this study were crucial to their success. The strategies themselves were mixtures of old and new practices; they might have been strategies that our student teachers also experienced as students. As teachers, we all bring our quirks and preferences into the classroom to the extent to which we can. They can take the form of activities and topics of discussion. The student teachers in this study mindfully chose their activities, and because they identified themselves as bilingual speakers and writers to their students, they were able to model behavior. They drew upon their own “funds of knowledge” to help their students be successful in writ-

ing and, in doing so, demonstrated that potential for all teachers. To this end, we encourage credential programs to empower their bilingual student teachers in their classroom assignments. We should encourage all teachers, at all levels, to reflect on their own strengths and lived experiences as ways to engage and encourage their students, with the goal of helping students be more successful in writing, in school, and in life. Doing so models the same understanding for students and can only fuel their own passion for writing, for school, and for life.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Are you bilingual? If so, when did you consider yourself a fluent English speaker?
2. What kind of writing experiences did you have in elementary school? Was writing easy or challenging for you?
3. How do you see yourself as a writer?
4. How did you see yourself as a writer in college?
5. What goals do you have for ELLs' writing?
6. What role does the students' contextual/cultural knowledge play in their writing?
7. Do you use your primary language in helping students write? How do you do this?
8. What kind of writing experiences have you provided to your students? How did these lessons go?
9. What kind of writing experience do you plan on giving your students when you begin teaching full time?
10. Other than using primary language with your ELL students, what other skills do you plan to use in helping your students write (e.g., vocabulary development, scaffolding, writing outlines, etc.)?
11. Did your classes in the credential program prepare you to teach writing to ELLs?
12. What was your student teaching experience with ELLs in your classroom?

