

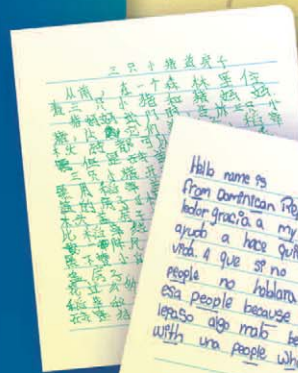
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FOREWORD BY  
JIM CUMMINS

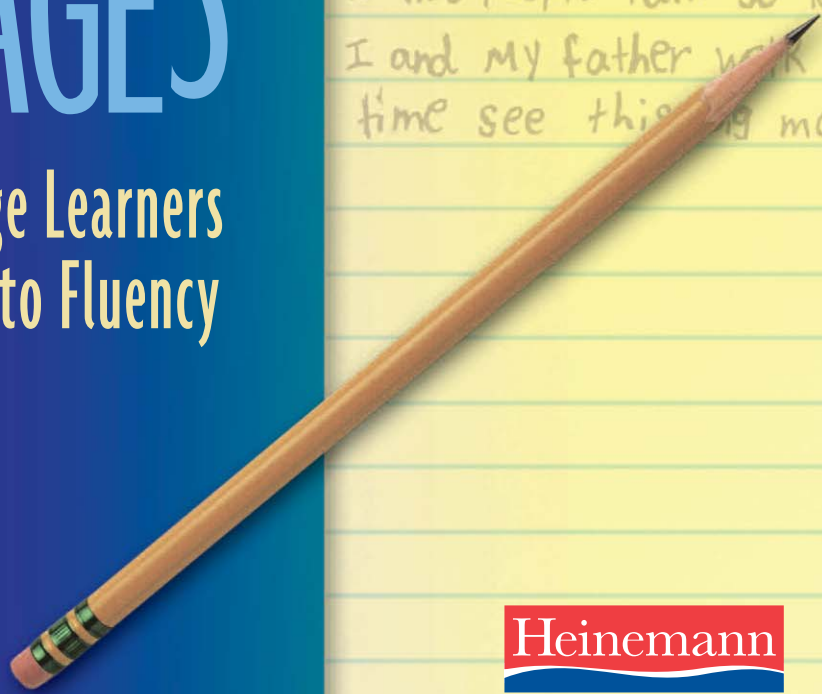
# WRITING Between LANGUAGES

How English Language Learners  
Make the Transition to Fluency

GRADES 4-12



My first time see look  
and my father  
street I was very  
nches long. It ta  
5 inches lo  
people run f  
this people t  
My father s  
many food". Th  
eat 15 pounds for food. My  
1. hours run who long"  
mouse 1 hours run so  
van rental. I say "this  
This people say "live in dog  
to this people talk so long  
I and my father walk to  
time see this big mous



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# Contents



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FOREWORD . . . . .	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	xiii
<b>1</b> <i>My Decade's Work with ELLs</i> . . . . .	1
<b>2</b> <i>ELLs' Writing Development</i> . . . . .	13
<b>3</b> <i>Native-Language Writing in ELLs' Writing Development</i> . . . . .	24
<b>4</b> <i>Transitional Stages in ELLs' Writing Development</i> . . . . .	46
<b>5</b> <i>Teaching ELLs to Write</i> . . . . .	77
<b>6</b> <i>Language Instruction Through Writing</i> . . . . .	101
<b>7</b> <i>Becoming Bilingual Writers</i> . . . . .	117
REFERENCES . . . . .	123
STUDY GUIDE . . . . .	131
INDEX . . . . .	139

# *My Decade's Work with ELLs*

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I was never required to write during my years of English study in China, even in college when I majored in English. And later, when I became an English teacher, I never required my students to write in my seven years of teaching except to have them do some translating or sentence making for grammar or spelling exercises. The first time I was required to write was during my one-year study of American literature as a Fulbright Fellow, two years before I came to the United States to pursue my graduate degree. I will never forget how I struggled through each writing assignment; it seemed nothing came out right—word choices, expressions, or even ideas. I could read English quite well: loved O. Henry, Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Emily Dickinson and had little problem communicating with others in English. But I had tremendous difficulty writing in English. When I forced myself to think in English, it seemed I could only squeeze out a few forced ideas, which I could tell were too flat or simple. But when I let myself think in Chinese, my writing didn’t sound like English.

Writing had always been easy for me in my native language, and I enjoyed expressing myself through writing. However, I continued to struggle as a writer in English during my graduate study, facing each assignment as if I had rocks in my head and stomach. After many years of struggle and practice, I finally gained my current ease in English writing. I realized that writing not only helped me improve my English language proficiency but, more important, pushed me to think deeply, analytically,

and logically. Writing about what I read helped me read with a critical lens and join the conversation in the literacy circle of my peers. Through my diligence in practicing this kind of writing, reading, and speaking, I grew academically.

When I started my work with English language learners (ELLs) in the New York City schools, I identified and empathized with students I saw struggling to write in English. Based on my own history as a struggling writer of English, I knew they should not wait in their learning to write until they gained full proficiency in speaking and reading English—especially since they were still in the process of developing their writing skills in their native language. As Kathleen Yancey states in her presidential address (2009), “We expect complex thinking to develop *alongside* and *with* beginning skills . . . because perhaps as never before, learning to write is a lifelong process” (331). ELLs needed to learn to write for their academic pursuit as well as for their language learning. But how to help ELLs develop their writing skills while they were learning English was a puzzle to all of us who were struggling to help them succeed in their studies. It was through my decade’s work in schools populated with ELLs that I gradually learned—by observing in classrooms, examining writing samples, and listening to teachers and students talk about their teaching and learning experiences—how ELLs developed as writers in English.

My work today helping ELLs develop as writers in English deals with some regrets and wishes I held deep inside myself: I regret I had to wait until I was in graduate school to first learn how to write in English. I wish that I had taught my students to write during my seven years of teaching English. I often think of those students and hope my teaching didn’t do too much damage to them in their academic pursuit. These regrets and wishes have always served as both motivation and inspiration for my current work with ELLs. I hope my work defining ELLs’ writing development will contribute to an understanding of ELLs’ transition to becoming English writers and to the improvement of writing instruction for all ELLs.

This book presents a discussion of the writing development that English language learners at the upper elementary and secondary levels are making as they proceed from their native language to English and provides suggestions for teaching this process. Over the past two decades, the number of

English language learners in the United States has grown from twenty-three million to forty-seven million, or by 103 percent. By 2030, immigrant children should account for 40 percent of the school-age population (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). Because educational advancement in the United States is closely tied to English proficiency, students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds are approximately three times more likely to be low achievers than high achievers, and two times more likely to drop out than their native-English-speaking peers (Urban Institute 2005).

Research indicates that new immigrant students in grades 6 through 12 encounter the most challenges in schools due, in part, to their age when they enter the United States, a critical age in their lives; the high academic demands placed on them; and the limited time before graduation. Among these preteen or teenage newcomers, a majority are fluent speakers in their native language and are able to read and write in their first language, though some may not be performing at grade level (Genesse et al. 2005). When they enter the schools in the United States, they have to make many transitions—linguistically, culturally, socially, and academically. Among all the academic tasks ELLs face, learning to write in English probably presents the greatest challenge. Yet writing is often taught merely as a language exercise to ELLs. As my work illustrates, any progress newly arrived ELLs in upper elementary and secondary levels can make in learning to write in English directly relates to the linguistic and academic demands they face and to their social and cultural adjustment to their new world.

This book is, first, for all teachers—ESL, regular classroom, or content-area—who teach at the upper elementary and secondary levels and who have ELLs in their classrooms, particularly, recently arrived ELLs. Teaching writing to such students is especially difficult at the secondary level, where content-area subjects, taught in academic English, are the main curriculum.

Most literacy instruction for ELLs in the United States focuses on grammar skills, vocabulary building, content reading, or speaking and listening. Little attention is paid to writing development, and a focus on writing as a tool for thinking and communicating at the beginning and even at the intermediate level is a rarity (Harklau and Pinnow 2009). The emphasis on the surface structure of English may enable ELLs to achieve

enough English proficiency to compose proper English sentences in correctly formatted monolingual papers, but it does not support them as competent writers and thinkers.

Much research (Calkins 1994; Hillocks 1995; Graves 1983) indicates that writing deepens thinking, expands reading comprehension, and reinforces language skills. Recently, literacy instruction for ELLs has included more writing, but as Samway (2006) reported in her research on writing instruction for ELLs: there is “lots of writing, but not much authentic writing” (158). Writing is a multidimensional process. It involves word-level skills, cognitive abilities, and higher-order thinking. Developing and orchestrating the various writing skills presents many challenges, even to first-language learners (Snelling and Van Gelderen 2004). Due to added linguistic demands, ELLs need more time and more instruction than first-language learners to develop the writing skills and abilities—through frequent, authentic writing opportunities and systematic scaffolding of their writing development. This book helps teachers to understand how ELLs make transitions from writing in their native language to writing in English, and then provides them with specific strategies to scaffold ELLs’ writing development.

My discussion of ELLs’ writing development challenges the view commonly held by many applied linguists that ELLs have to develop a certain degree of oral language proficiency before they learn to write for authentic purpose (Davis, Carlisle, and Beeman 1999; Dufva and Voeten 1999; Lanauze and Snow 1989; Lumme and Lehto 2002). This book addresses the questions frequently raised by teachers: How can we teach the ELLs to write when they don’t have a command of basic English skills? How can we help ELLs make the transition from writing in their native language to writing in English? My responses to these questions draw from my extensive work with teachers in New York City schools as we searched for ways to improve instruction for ELLs and promote authentic reading and writing in literacy instruction for all students.

This book also contributes to the research on second-language writing. Research on ELL writing in grades K through 12 is very limited. In the most updated review of research on second-language writing, Harklau and Pinnow (2009) state: