

CURRENTS IN LITERACY *

Should ESL Students Learn to Write in English?

By Nekita Lamour

Circa Spring 1997, 1998

I began my work as an ESL (English as a Second Language)** teacher six years ago, traveling between three ESL centers in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Now I am working in one center at the Harrington School in Cambridge. These centers at various schools serve international students for whom the city does not provide a bilingual program because of the limited number of speakers of their languages. They include children from Russia, Iceland, Japan, India, Mali, the Ivory Coast, among others. Students whose parents do not choose bilingual education, even though it is available to people from their language group, also receive ESL services from these centers.

During my six years of teaching ESL, I have encountered many teachers' comments and attitudes concerning the issue of learning to write English. One of my first experiences was with a first-grade teacher when I went to pick up a Haitian student named Marie for her ESL class. The class was doing journal writing in the familiar small blue notebooks. Marie was not doing anything. I asked for a notebook so I could help her write. The teacher responded, "She can't write because she does not know her letters." Marie was in a "preconvention" writing stage as described in studies by Bonnie Campbell Hill and others in the field of early childhood literacy. When she was asked to write, she produced a series of letters. I worked with Marie during the year. What started with random letters became single-letter sounds to represent a word, then phonetic or inventive spelling. By the end of first grade, she had reached a "developing stage" in writing. On another occasion, a fifth-grade teacher told me that a student who recently arrived from an Asian country could not possibly write because he could not speak English. These experiences prompted me to start saving my ESL students' writing projects in order to observe and analyze their writing process.

The fifth-grade teacher's attitude was probably based on outdated audiolingual theories which presuppose that the second language learner must be verbally fluent in English before s/he is introduced to English reading and writing. I disagree with that theory because my ESL students have proven that they can write about themes such as family, seasons, geography, and current events, even though they are far from being verbally fluent in English. Their writings reflect their developmental stages in second language acquisition.

Research in second language teaching has focused primarily on topics such as oral language acquisition, accent, contrastive analysis of target languages in relation to English, cognitive influence of bilingualism, and the effect that literacy in one's first language has on one's second language. A systematic study of writing, in particular the writing development process of the English learner, has just begun to receive special attention. The Journal of Second Language Writing had its first issue in 1992 and is dedicated exclusively to second language writing. Even with this, the subjects of such research tend to be secondary and college students, and adult learners. Though Hudelson began to look at ESL children's writings in the 1980s, limited research is available on developmental writing by ESL students at the elementary level.

Literate students initially write in their native language and then have it translated into English. To be successful, the early stages of teaching writing to a second language learner requires frequent communication with parents or other individuals fluent in the student's native language and reasonably literate in English. Writing in whatever language should be the focused element. Students who are familiar with expressing themselves in writing in their first language transfer important skills as they acquire English.

For example, Jae-Eun, a Korean second-grader I worked with at the Harrington, wrote the piece below about Halloween.

드디어 할로윈 데이 밤이 되었다.
귀신, 호박맨, 박쥐, 다녀들이 화개를 치니 사람들이 놀라서
까악!
너무 두서워 사람 살려!
마녀는 빨리 빨리 날아가고
외국하면 아침이 되면 못 나니까,
그 이유는 아침이 되면 빗자루 털이 빠져서 못 날기 때문!
그 빗자루 털은 밤에만 난대요.

- 재은

Her mother translated it for Jae-Eun:

Halloween Night

At last comes Halloween night. Ghosts, pumpkin men, witches, swing their arms and legs. Men and women are frightened. They cry: "Oh! Help me!" Witches fly fast, because they can only fly at night. They can't fly in the morning without their brooms.

Two weeks later, Jae-Eun and her fellow students went outside for an autumn nature walk, each carrying a small bag. Into their bags they put leaves, feathers, sticks, nuts, pinecones, rocks, and other objects that they found. Back in the classroom they discussed the walk and talked about the contents of their bags and what they saw. They painted pictures of their leaves. The final activity was to write about their nature walk. At first, Jae-Eun said in an angry and frustrated voice, "I don't know! I don't know writing!" She then wrote these same words in large, forceful letters on her paper. But with encouragement, here is what she finally produced:

A Walk Outside

Last Friday walk the outside. My sister and ESL teacher is outside. Outside is very funny and cold and pickup leves.

So today and Thursday panting the leves.

and "glue leves" making.

and fall picher the painting

and this story

so I like leves. I loved making painting. and I like walk the outside so today and last Friday. and Thursday is very very very funny.

and this fall is very funny Fall.

The end

The syntax, the absence of past tense, and the lack of a personal pronoun in the first sentence ("last Friday walk the outside") are acceptable patterns in second language acquisition. As students like Jae-Eun acquire English, they use syntax, lexicons, and other linguistic patterns or phrases that may or may not relate to their first language.

Monolingual educators will often advise bilingual parents not to speak their native language with their children. That recommendation is stressed even more in cases of children with presumed special needs. Jim

Cummins and others in the second language field, however, contend that continuous oral language development in the mother tongue is vital in the acquisition of the English language.

Older students in grades 6-8, for instance, tend to use dual-language dictionaries and/or ask how to say or spell a word in English. If these students had some English instruction in their country or are at the beginning stages of learning English, they tend to compose in their native language first and then do a self-translation which is later edited. I encourage this because I am convinced that the most important goal is to teach written self-expression. If at a particular student's level of development this comes most easily in the native language, it should be reinforced and praised.

Within a year, a student who is on grade level from his or her country is frequently able to write a syntactically correct composition and is ready to be given more challenging writing assignments. As Cummins mentioned in his presentation at Lesley University last spring, students like Jae-Eun should be given more advanced reading and writing assignments. Students should be challenged and educators don't have to "sit and wait" for the six years that Cummins asserts it takes to acquire fluency in the second language prior to introducing the second language learner to challenging tasks, in this case writing.

College interns and volunteers are instrumental in facilitating small group, individual, or self editings. Effective editing and writing is time-consuming and requires a lot of one-to-one attention. Communication, interaction, partnership with higher education institutions and community-based organizations is of utmost importance in writing with ESL students. Specialists in buildings that house bilingual, ESL, and special education programs should also be involved in writing with ESL students. ESL writing is more effective when it is done with an integrated approach.

The writing process may take far longer for those who have minimal or no literacy skills in their native language. In some instances, the Cambridge Bilingual Department hires native language tutors to work with such students under the supervision of the ESL teacher. I am currently compiling examples of the written work of these students.

Based on my own observations in these ESL centers, I would strongly recommend that ESL students be encouraged to explore and experience in their own evolving developmental stages this complex but important mode of communication. Waiting for ESL students to speak English fluently before introducing them to writing in any language is not an effective way to develop skills that writers need, and it is also a waste of constructive learning time.

Students like Yurika, a recent arrival from Japan, should be given opportunities to express their thoughts in the language of their choice, like she did in this piece about stars that was later translated to English:

*I like looking at stars in the sky
because stars are always twinkling in the darkness.
If I could fly like a comet, I would dance with them
and travel to the moon
and other planets together with them.
I wish I could make friends with many stars
and have a good time with them forever.*



Yurika's drawing to illustrate her poem about stars.

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*** This article was published around Spring 1997, 1998 in Currents Literacy, a Lesley College, now Lesley University publications**

**** Reference for students learning English had been changed over the decades. The former phrase ESL, English as a Second Language had been referred to as ELL, English Language Learner). This research based article was published in Currents Literacy, a Lesley College, now Lesley University site. It was in this following site for a long time, at least 10 years <http://www.lesley.edu/academic_centers/hood/currents/v1n2/lamour.html By 2022 when this piece is being published in the web, students learning in English are being referred to as "EL" or English Learners.**

Nekita Lamour July 2022