

Writing between Languages: How English Language Learners Make the Transition to Fluency, Grades 4-12

Danling Fu

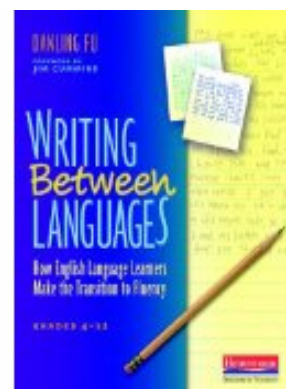
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Native-like writing practice represents the most challenging language skill for English language learners (ELLs) because “it demands use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and rhetorical conventions that are very different from conversational language” (Fu, 2009, p. ix). Since most literacy instruction for ELLs in the United States focuses on grammar skills, vocabulary building, and content reading, writing development receives little attention and, as a result, writing is rarely utilized as a tool for thinking and communicating at the beginning and even at the intermediate level of language development (Harklau & Pinnow, 2009). One of the reasons for the scarce writing experience is the perception held by many teachers that ELLs must first learn to speak English before they can write in English. Fu (2009) challenges this perception and claims that “we have made the development of strong writing skills much more difficult than it needs to be for ELL students in the junior grades and beyond because we have ignored the power of students’ first-language (L1) writing skills as a stepping stone to English” (p. ix).

Given her experience as a struggling English writer decades ago, Fu intends to help Second Language Writing Teachers better understand how ELLs make transitions from writing in their native language to writing in English, and then provides teachers of ELLs with specific strategies to scaffold their writing development. Also, this volume contributes to the understanding of ELLs’ transition to become writers of English and to the improvement of writing instruction for all ELLs. Fu (2009) argues that “what the ELLs need while learning English is to make the transition from their first-language writing to English and from personal narratives to more formal academic writing” (p.5). Further, she asserts that “the centrality of prior knowledge to all learning and the interdependence of academic skills across languages imply that we should be teaching for transfer across languages rather than creating artificial ‘English-only’ zones in our classrooms” (p. x). This argument in favor of integrative language skills has been popular for the past 40 years among whole language proponents and others. Similarly, Canagarajah and Wurr (2011) have also argued against English-only policies by noting the shift in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory from monolingualism to multilingualism as the norm.

Writing between languages: How English language learners make the transition to fluency, grades 4-12 consists of seven main chapters. Throughout the book, Fu alternatively asserts that the L1 and L2 are not isolated from each other; they are interdependent and grow together. Students bring prior knowledge to the classroom, which should be valued and incorporated in their process of creative writing. Allowing ELLs to start writing in their first language makes their writing experience less frustrating and more meaningful.

In the first chapter, Fu discusses her work in a few New York City schools from 1997 to 2007, in which she has conversations with school administrators, ESOL teachers, and parents to understand more of the ELLs' background. She has collected many writing samples from notebooks, writing logs, and portfolios, mostly from Chinese ELLs but also some from Spanish-speaking students to show how the development patterns are similar among ELLs with different linguistic backgrounds.

In Chapter Two, Fu addresses the four stages of ELLs' writing development and the facilitating feature of their first language when writing in English. She also provides charts and figures demonstrating the parallels of writing development between ELLs and native English language speakers. She claims that ESOL teachers need to tailor their instruction to scaffold each individual's writing according to their literacy development level.

Chapter Three emphasizes the importance of teachers allowing ELLs to write in their native language and how to assess native language writers when teachers cannot understand their work written in their home language. It is crucial that teachers understand the role native literacy plays in building written English fluency and use code-switching between languages to scaffold transitional writing. Fu suggests that ESOL teachers give their students the opportunities to write in their native language even though their first language literacy is limited. Writing in their first language enables ELLs to obtain new knowledge in various content areas and develop their language learning cognition as well.

Chapter Four focuses on the transitional stages in ELLs' writing development. Students are in the phase of using mixed language, including both vocabulary from their native language and words from English. ELLs' bilingual expression is significant as they practice code-switching between their native language and English in a meaningful context. Fu demonstrates how beginning ELL writers could transit to writers of English by providing the readers with two case studies. She indicates that the transition from one stage to another is a nonlinear process depending on the topics ELLs write about, their audience, and the genre they choose.

In Chapter Five, Fu proposes that beginning ELLs be allowed to write in their first language—not only in ESL and bilingual classrooms, but also in every subject area—before they are able to express themselves fully in English. Their constant writing in their native language can assist their learning in all subject areas and make their language learning more personally relevant (Fu, 2003). She also suggests collaboration between ESL and regular classroom teachers in order to improve students' writing and language learning proficiency. She provides helpful tips for ESOL teachers at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Six addresses how to use writing to teach speaking, reading, listening, and other language skills such as grammar and vocabulary to ELLs. Fu provides specific suggestions and strategies for ESOL teachers, and gives examples of English-language instruction through writing and strategies for implementing it. Since writing requires multiple language skills, ELLs will be able to develop their language proficiency through the practice of writing in different content areas.

Chapter Seven summarizes the four-stage developmental model for ELLs' transition in writing in their native language to writing in English. Fu expresses her disappointment that most ELLs lose their native-language writing competencies after becoming fluent writers in English. She is frustrated with the fact that the education they have been provided gives them little choice but to abandon their native language to achieve proficiency in English. She finally addresses the possibilities and challenges of becoming a bilingual writer.

Fu's notion of integrating ELLs' first language into their writing instruction cultivates students' cognitive development for composing as well as their ability to assimilate and adopt

English as a second language. Fu's 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, & Beeman, 1999; Dufva & Voeten, 1999; Lanauze & Snow, 1989; Lumme & Lehto, 2002). This book makes a highly significant contribution to ESOL teachers' understanding of what teaching for transition means and what it can achieve in the area of ELLs' writing development. It also 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. Overall, this volume would be beneficial for practitioners needing guidance on teaching writing to ELLs.

Since this book only studies ELLs from grades 4 to 12 who are already writers in their first language and are learning to become proficient writers of English, it leaves second language researchers space to study emerging writers at a younger age before grade 4. Moreover, there might be cases that ELLs become fluent English writers by being immersed in the English-only environment and being taught to write only in English. Consequently, there could be further discussions on the effectiveness of the pedagogy with consideration of kids' age level and other effective factors.

In conclusion, the book has achieved its aim in providing useful pedagogies for the instruction of ELLs' writing class. The book is well organized, clearly written, and includes original samples of ELLs' composition, which can help teachers visualize the strategies proposed.

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