BOOK REVIEW

Susan Lenski and Frances Verbruggen. (2010). Writing Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners K–8. New York, NY: The Guildford Press, 176 pp.

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Responding to the realization that writing is an oft-neglected literacy practice (National Commission on Writing, 2003), Writing Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners K–8 is intended to be a resource for practitioners and school administrators who work with English language learners (ELLs) in general education contexts, as well as undergraduate students studying language and literacy acquisition for second-language learners. Practical instructional strategies are purposefully scattered throughout the book, making it easily applicable and accessible to its readers. Lacking, though, are clear academic supports for teachers in monolingual English settings that align with current theories of second-language acquisition/bilingual development.

FLOW OF THE BOOK AND MAJOR THEMES ADDRESSED

Throughout the book, Lenski and Verbruggen integrate fictional vignettes involving teachers and composite examples of student writing that showcase various stages of English writing development. In each chapter, the vignettes function as the impetus for explaining how to support ELLs’ writing development, accomplished through the use of the same literacy coach in each narrative as the knowledgeable character. Each chapter concludes with a list of Web resources to further assist teachers in answering lingering questions or concerns.

The first two chapters highlight research regarding ELLs and writing and instructional strategies for how to translate theories of language acquisition and literacy development into practice. By showcasing research that considers the role of the first language in English language and literacy acquisition, the authors emphasize the diversity found among ELLs, commonly encountered differences in literacy practices between ELLs and monolingual English-speaking students, factors that affect the acquisition of English as a second language, differences between social and academic language, and what to expect students to be able to do at various levels of English development. The subsequent four chapters present detailed information for teaching ELLs to
write in English, accompanied by specific suggestions for teaching writing fluency; teaching narrative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive texts; teaching the language of academic genres; and teaching the grammatical features that are specific to different disciplines. In the final chapter, the authors discuss various types of writing assessment and their application to ELLs’ writing development, complemented by concrete examples of how to use anecdotal records, dialogue journals, and portfolios with this student population.

**TWO APPROACHES TO WRITING INSTRUCTION WITH ELLS**

Lenski and Verbruggen advocate two distinct approaches to writing: skills-based and functional. Teachers interested in a skills-based (“bottom-up”) approach to writing will find several activities that target emergent writing skills. Through activities such as creating alphabet books, signing in, writing words found in the classroom, coconstructing stories, and teaching sight words, the authors highlight the need for developing automaticity as a step toward building skills such as writing fluency. These activities, intended to scaffold ELLs’ development of English writing fluency and print awareness, provide teachers with concrete strategies/ideas that have been lacking in recent practitioner-oriented texts with a focus on writing instruction for ELLs.

Researchers such as Schleppegrell and Go (2007) have highlighted the challenges that both ELLs and teachers face when trying to say what they want to say and to respond in ways that are helpful. This challenge is particularly salient when confronted with the varying language structures used across disciplines. Drawing on Herrera, Pérez, and Escamilla (2010), one of the most important points made in the book is that many features of writing in English should be taught explicitly since they do not transfer from the conversational oral proficiency that students have already developed in their first language. This functional grammar approach signals the differential use of discipline-specific features of writing through a focus on Systematic English Language Development (referred to as the “Brick and Mortar” approach by Dutro & Moran, 2003), which the authors promote as a best practice. Examples include explicitly teaching relevant vocabulary and verb conjugations, giving minilessons on specific grammatical features, and modeling clear ways of saying what students want to say.

It is important to note that, like texts with similar goals (e.g., Opitz, 1998; Young & Hadaway, 2006), Lenski and Verbruggen balance grammar-focused instructional approaches with those that emphasize informal writing, an opportunity for emergent bilinguals to engage in practices that may allow them to make more connections with their prior experiences and use context as a support. Suggestions provided for engaging young learners in informal writing include storytelling, responding to reading, creating journal entries, and writing to learn. Oral storytelling is also highlighted, as is signaling the importance of sharing text structures with students whose native languages might have discourse styles that differ from the linear structure of Standard American English.

**WRITING ASSESSMENT**

The skills-based and functional approaches to writing instruction that Lenski and Verbruggen advocate are reflected in their ideas for assessment for ELLs, beginning with key questions that should guide instructors as they think about types of writing assessment that allow them to work
responsively with students. The authors make an important distinction between formative (also referred to as “alternative”) and summative (also referred to as “traditional”) assessment and subsequently direct readers to consider both content and language objectives when contemplating differing assessments, a practice very much aligned with Echevarría, Vogt, and Short’s (2010) Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), an instructional model for teaching ELLs that integrates content and language learning. Lenski and Verbruggen survey a variety of writing skills that are often assessed and pair these with typical assessments for each. They provide sample rubrics to guide readers in their decision-making process as well as tips for analyzing and interpreting the results of these assessments. A critical part of the assessment chapter is the focus on what Lenski and Verbruggen call “informal assessment,” which includes portfolios, dialogue journals, student–teacher conferences, anecdotal records, and self-assessment. They argue that informal assessment is not only free of the cultural bias of standardized tests but also helps teachers plan instruction based on students’ needs and reveals students’ strengths in writing (Escamilla, 2006), making assessment and instruction inseparable components of any educational program (García, McKoon, & August, 2006; O’Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996).

A BILINGUAL APPROACH TO WRITING OR A MONOLINGUAL VIEW OF EMERGENT BILINGUALS’ WRITING?

In the first chapter, the authors champion the advantages of promoting and developing bilingualism as well as the importance of teachers acknowledging and explicitly addressing language and literacy differences between a student’s first language (L1) and second language (L2). However, they fail to view ELLs holistically by not taking into account the language and experience that they bring with them to the classroom. They focus on ELLs as language learners, a perspective that represents a monolingual orientation of ELLs, and not as language users, thereby recognizing both the existing and developing linguistic abilities of ELLs. Although the authors acknowledge the connections between L1 and L2, the activities they suggest throughout the book do not align with the bilingual perspective of the first two chapters. For example, when learning about directionality of print, the authors propose that an ELL work with a native speaker of English to trace the words from left to right and top to bottom to learn how words are read/written in English. As such, ELLs are presented as a blank slate, and English development becomes the primary focus without truly supporting ELLs. Instead, teachers could ask ELLs to draw on their other languages (see Moll, Sáez, & Dworin, 2001 and Gort, 2006 for examples of “additive” approaches to biliteracy), in so doing providing opportunities for ELLs to highlight their existing knowledge and skills. Teachers can exploit ELLs’ knowledge of directionality of print by permitting them to teach the native speaker how words are read/written in their L1. The skills-based approach that the authors support simply provides ELLs with words and phrases to work with in English, a language in which they are still developing understanding. Without acknowledging and incorporating already developed skills from the students’ L1, the authors promote a deficit perspective of ELLs’ writing abilities. As such, these activities miss an opportunity to create a literacy environment that promotes the acquisition and use of multiple languages. Purposefully addressing ELLs’ prior knowledge and skills in their L1 would allow them to first generate ideas in their L1 and to then transfer them into English with the teacher’s guidance.
Readers would benefit from suggestions for how teachers—both monolingual and bilingual—can tap into emergent bilinguals’ already existing knowledge repertoire in order to write while they are in the process of adding English. This more intentional focus on the nature of children’s use of the relationship between L1 and L2 would provide teachers with valuable knowledge for understanding and promoting their students’ efforts at creating meaning through writing in their L2 (English). Other recent practitioner-oriented publications (most notably Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009; Herrera et al., 2010) directly address this relationship.

The skills-based approach to writing that Lenski and Verbruggen adopt further exacerbates the lack of acknowledgement of the role that L1 plays in L2 writing. As such, the authors fall short of their stated belief that writing means engaging “in a complex process interaction of ideas and language that compels the writer to articulate, in clear and precise terms, thoughts that may previously have been only vague in the writer’s mind” (emphasis added, p. 9). Their support of skills-based practice and decontextualized activities, together with their exclusive focus on English, precludes the authors from (a) achieving a balance that they appear to want to strike between whole-language and bottom-up approaches, and (b) promoting the bilingual perspective that they put forth at the beginning of the book.

**A COMPANION TEXT**

In responding to the National Commission on Writing’s (2003) report, Lenski and Verbruggen tackle a broad—yet ever-relevant and significant—issue in education, drawing attention to the often-overlooked writing needs of ELLs. The book’s concrete examples of writing activities provide its audience with approaches to writing instruction that can be immediately implemented in K–8 classrooms, showing the authors’ understanding of the urgency of addressing the acquisition of academic written language skills in English. However, teachers who do not have knowledge about bilingual language development may walk away with the understanding that the examples and activities in the book present a bilingual perspective when, in actuality, they represent a monolingual orientation of biliteracy. Teachers must be aware of ELLs’ strengths as writers and not only focus on perceived weaknesses (Escamilla, 2006). This text would therefore best be used to help preservice teachers develop critical literacy skills by juxtaposing it with other texts that truly adopt a bilingual perspective, such as Cloud et al. (2009), Herrera et al. (2010), O’Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996), Opitz (1998), and Young and Hadaway (2006).

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