



2009

Success with ELL's: Writing in the ESL Classroom: Confessions of a Guilty Teacher

Susan R. Adams
Butler University, sradams@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/coe_papers

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), and the [Educational Methods Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Adams, Susan R., "Success with ELL's: Writing in the ESL Classroom: Confessions of a Guilty Teacher" (2009). *Scholarship and Professional Work – Education*. 3.
https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/coe_papers/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work – Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Success with ELLs

Writing in the ESL Classroom: Confessions of a Guilty Teacher

Susan R. Adams
Butler University
Indianapolis, Indiana
sradams@butler.edu

When I first started teaching ESL students, I was incredibly naive about the second language acquisition process. I was a foreign language teacher in a former life, so I thought I knew how to teach English: I would simply reverse the process I had always used with my Spanish students. Even that decision was loaded with assumptions about the success of my Spanish foreign language students (a topic I would rather not pursue!) and about the reasons that my foreign language students were studying Spanish (some out of guilt or college-prep expectations, a few who truly longed to learn Spanish, with most there by force). I soon realized that my high school ESL students had little in common with my English-speaking Spanish-language students, and something would have to give. That something was me.

One of the first moves I made was to look at the TESOL goals, and I began to think about the

purposes and situations in which my students need to read, write, speak, and listen in English. Students resisted when I asked them to do any writing that exceeded a few sentences. Writing can be painful for ESL students, particularly high school students who want to communicate complex, sophisticated thoughts but do not want to look childish. In addition, many of my students had arrived in the United States with interrupted formal educations and had low literacy levels in their native language, so the types of writing that were required in the high school English classroom were a considerable challenge for them. Gradually, without noticing the shift, I drifted into a format that included lots of reading, speaking, and listening, but little writing. Sometimes I would think about writing with a guilty pang but would reassure myself that reading was the greater urgency and would try to ignore the feelings until they passed.

Bull's-eye! Identifying the Target

Life as I knew it continued in my classroom until the fateful day a colleague approached me with an invitation to attend the National Writing Project's annual summer

intensive institute. The entire experience was wonderfully invigorating, not only for my teaching practice but also for my personal writing practice (for more information, please see <http://www.nwp.org>). While I learned many useful and exciting things during my three weeks in the institute, the major implication for my teaching practice was simple, but huge: My students were unable to write well and meet my expectations because *I had failed to show them what the target was*. Oh, sure, I had provided them with a print-rich classroom and we had done some reading, but when it came time for our annual state assessment, they melted down completely during the writing portion of the test. I realized that I needed to build the students' capacity for the long, exhausting, and lonely process of writing the ubiquitous five-paragraph essay that the state assessment demands by demystifying the writing process.

The first thing I did when my unsuspecting students returned to school was announce that we are all writers. This came as quite a shock to them, and frankly they were not even convinced that I could be a writer, so they hoped in vain that I would soon tire of this new madness the way teachers usually do after some crazy teacher

training turns their heads for a few days. I am aware of my tendency to try something out and then drop it when I hit a wall, so I held my feet to the fire by inserting writing goals into the annual professional objectives required by my district. Now there was someone who would know if I failed to meet my expectations, and it was enough to keep me on the path. Every day when the students came into the classroom, I reminded them that we are all writers, and they humored me with gentle, knowing smiles on their faces while I gave them each a folder and notebook to be used exclusively for writing. Their smiles began to fade as I passed out copies of the lyrics to a country-western song and we began to discuss the poetry that surrounds us all the time, listing things such as music, jingles, chants, rap, and advertisements, in addition to the obvious classics. When I announced that each of them would write a poem, their faces fell in shocked horror. What madness was this?

We dismantled the structure of the chorus that I had given the students. We identified what was communicated with each line, clarifying both the writer's intention along with the word choice, allusions, and sentence structure selected by the writer. I selected the chorus to the song "Who I Am" by Jessica Andrews to examine, and I adopted the pattern we identified in the chorus when I modeled my version for the students. I even invited them to help me choose characteristics about myself, imitating the gentle self-deprecation of the songwriter in my version. Because students

think that writing comes easily, magically even, for teachers, I allowed them to watch me think aloud and struggle over word choice. They were transfixed as they witnessed what real writers go through as they write. This was the transforming moment for us. The students began to realize that good writing is work for everyone,

When I announced that each of them would write a poem, their faces fell in shocked horror.

What madness was this?

and that it does not just pour out effortlessly onto the paper, even for native English speakers. I had just enough time to breathlessly and triumphantly announce that tomorrow each of them would repeat the process and create their own poem before they gratefully made a run for their next class.

Becoming a Community of Writers

I created a worksheet that followed the pattern established in the song lyrics, leaving room for students to write in their lines. For example, the song's second stanza begins "I am Rosemary's granddaughter, the spitting image of my father." I asked students to tell who they are in relation to someone else. "Whose daughter are you? Whose brother are you?" We sat down together at the table with our dictionaries, pencils, and erasers and began the hard work of thinking about their characteristics, their foibles, their hopes and dreams. Students helped each other, reluctantly at first but more readily as they tired of waiting for

individual attention from me. The students were often overly dependent on me for feedback and encouragement. As the line of waiting students began to form, I would say, "Hey, Guadalupe, since you are already done and waiting to talk to me, would you mind looking at Julio's poem with him?" While they may not have felt ready to help each other, they were remarkably supportive and encouraging. My unspoken hope had been that they would come to see themselves as a community of writers who help and encourage one another through the process of production, and while it was imperfect, they were taking the first steps.

Some students naturally finished more quickly than others, so I met with each of them to talk about editing and revision needs before sending them to the computer to create a Word document of their poem. Students had to decide if that classic red or green squiggle indicated a serious spelling or grammar error or if they could cite poetic license for word choice and phrasing in their poem. As they finished creating their documents, I insisted that each student put his or her name at the bottom, where all proud poets post their claim on the work. Ultimately I printed each student's poem and placed them prominently on the bulletin board in my classroom. Because I secretly prearranged it, my classroom was visited "randomly" by some administrators who exclaimed and praised the poems loudly while the students stood nearby. The students were pleased that these adults took the time to read and respond to their writing, even

though they played it cool since they have an image to protect.

When students entered the classroom the next day, I am sure they thought that they had weathered the storm. After all, they had written a real poem and those poems were hanging proudly on the wall; clearly we had gotten this writing bug out of our system. Wrong! Next we moved on to personal narratives, friendly letters, persuasive essays, and other short poems, all addressing the theme of identity. My devious plot was to entice students to write by asking them to think and write about themselves. Adolescents are consumed with the task of understanding themselves and figuring out where they fit into their school, their families, and their communities. Why not tap that goldmine of potential material? After all, we are all pretty interested in thinking and talking about ourselves, and ESL students seem to struggle with this even more intensely than native-speaking students do. Most of them have been uprooted from their native homes, family, and friends and are now in a strange place that is not always welcoming. They feel the social, political, and economic pressures around them and are trying on new perspectives daily.

I allowed frequent blocks of time in class for journal writing and provided provocative topics to stimulate their creative juices. I read aloud some of the new, excellent children's books that use simple language with many illustrations, yet present eloquent and complex ideas. It can be risky to bring children's literature into a high school classroom, so I was careful to choose works that communicate powerful

social messages in simple language and with strong, supportive artwork. I have successfully used *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* by Doreen Cronin; *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne; and *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox and Julie Vivas, among others. These books, while written in simple English, convey complex and provocative messages about employment, social relationships, prejudices, and helping older people remember when remembering is difficult. I brought in song lyrics and short poems that addressed identity—a topic near and dear to adolescent hearts. We discussed word choice and noted the rhythmic quality of poetry. We examined the impact of art and the way it assisted us to make meaning of the books we read together. I placed little emphasis on grammar, allowing Word to serve as grammar police for us. I have learned that teaching grammar in isolation, while comforting and familiar for some students, is of little value. The beauty of using Word is that students *wanted* to know why those squiggles were on their documents, so when I discussed those squiggles with them, they listened. Sometimes even Word makes an error, so it was empowering and exciting to be able to tell a student that what they had written was correct, and that the computer was wrong.

When ELLs Are Writers

One or two students resisted my efforts, but most responded beautifully. Several quiet, newly arrived girls began to write at levels that astounded me, writing in English and inserting words from their native language only when they

lacked English vocabulary. One shy 17-year-old positively glowed as she realized she could communicate when she used the English words she knew and combined them with a few Spanish words. Boys who had never before finished anything had work hanging on the walls. More-advanced students began to feel more confident writing in their other classes. We were not setting the literary world on fire, but we were making progress.

For the first time I felt like I was covering all the instructional bases while including some critical academic skills such as using technology for document production, email communication with teachers, formatting, sending and storing documents, and finding reliable Internet sources for research. Writing pulls together all the language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) ELLs need to acquire to have academic success as they move

Adolescents are consumed with the task of understanding themselves and figuring out where they fit into their school, their families, and their communities. Why not tap that goldmine of potential material?

toward continuing their education or preparing for the adult world of work. To begin writing, I collected short examples of text, children's books, poems, and song lyrics for us to read together to inspire us and to provide a format we could imitate. We talked and listened to one another as we examined texts and participated in the give and take of peer feedback. Students learned how to utilize technology to optimize their communication, to store their work, and to search for information.

This process was also an introduction to the collaboration and production expected in American classrooms, something my students often struggled to understand and participate in previously.

I learned a powerful lesson about my need to commit to a new practice long enough to truly see if it will affect learning, and that it helps to find ways to be accountable for sticking with the process.

The possibilities are endless and I encourage you to explore them. What would it take to get students writing more and at higher levels? There are many workbooks and dreary lessons on writing, but I think your students

will write more if you join them, writing alongside them in the classroom, and letting them see the process and the products of your work. Ask students to help

Writing pulls together all the language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) ELLs need to acquire to have academic success as they move toward continuing their education or preparing for the adult world of work.

you edit and revise your work. Be transparent as you compose, and allow them to witness the joys and struggles of choosing just the

right way to say what you feel. Applaud the tiniest efforts and post their magnum opus on the wall for all to admire. Invite local authors to visit your class to talk about their work, especially authors who are not native speakers of English. Seek out some of the resources such as writing clubs, university writing centers, websites, blogs, and coffeehouses that have open-mike nights (or start your own). Be enthusiastic as you explore the writer within you, and that enthusiasm will be contagious among your ESL students. *We are* all writers and we must unleash that potential hidden in our English language learners. 

Susan R. Adams is Project Alianza Manager in the College of Education at Butler University and is a Teacher Consultant with the National Writing Project.