Empowering English Language Learners: Moving Toward Competency as Speakers, Readers, and Writers

by Marie Milner

In her contributions to Chapters 4, 5, and 7, Marie Milner has shared a range of writing strategies that can be used successfully with all student writers. In this chapter, Marie highlights in greater depth the more daunting challenges English language learners face in the complex literacy of writing.

Introduction

Fear is the single most powerful obstacle to learning. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the English language learner. I have seen students embrace not only learning in general, but writing in particular when I've "lowered the affective filter" for my ELL students. In their work on language acquisition, Jim Cummins (1996) and Stephen Krashen (1982) describe the affective filter as the way in which stressful environments prevent students, particularly second language learners, from acquiring new skills and abilities. Testing situations create the highest anxiety. By definition, a test environment is stressful and increases the *affective filter*.

Developing writers do best in environments where they feel supported, engaged, validated, and respected. Because of this, I've created a "no testing environment" in my

classes with English language learners. I teach in a school with a high percentage of English learners, along with a significant number of native speakers who are also considered "at risk for failure" because they read at about the fourth or fifth grade level. Both of these groups of students come into my classes with high anxiety levels. To help address my students' feelings of apprehension, I provide them with an enriched language environment where material is presented to them in multiple ways. I call this my "forget fast food—serve them a banquet" curriculum. ELLs bring so many unique and varied experiences to the classroom that it is insulting to teach them as if they are small children. Instead, they need multiple opportunities to build their language skills.

Academic Language Instruction: The Lessons of Robin Scarcella and Kate Kinsella

Both Robin Scarcella (2003) of the University of California at Irvine and Kate Kinsella (2009) of San Francisco State University have written and spoken extensively about the necessity of providing access to academic language for ELL students. Without it, they do not have access to the power they need to be successful. With these women as role models, I have learned to provide a framework within which my ELL students can more fearlessly access academic language.

Whether they are in mainstreamed or ESL classes, ELLs benefit through strategies that fit into three broad categories:

- Engagement in activities that lower the affective filter
- Exposure to extensive modeling
- Learning language conventions (grammar) through compelling content

Part I: Lowering the Affective Filter: Updating a Conventional Mythology Unit for ELLs

Classical mythology, which is often an opening unit in regular ninth grade English classes, is also one I use for my ELL classes, where students cover the grade level curriculum along with other special instruction. In teaching classical Western mythology, teachers can engage immigrant students by using parallel myths from their own cultures. The notion of the universality of human experience is a complex one, but I've found that my mythology unit helps my ELLs access this difficult concept.

For example, in reading Laurence Yep's *Child of the Owl* (1977), which contains an elaborate Chinese myth within Yep's larger story, my Vietnamese students see much of their own culture reflected because of the profound influence 1,000 years of Chinese rule continues to have on Vietnamese culture.

Since I teach my mythology unit at the beginning of the school year, we are well into the unit when Halloween rolls around. I make use of this quintessentially San Francisco Bay Area holiday by reviewing Halloween traditions and creating a word bank with terms describing Halloween costumes, practices, and treats. Students write a humorous story describing a Halloween party on Mt. Olympus, building on their knowledge of the Greco-Roman gods' and goddesses' amazing transformational powers, magical tools, and conflicted family relationships. These stories are read aloud for practice in speaking and listening comprehension.

Here is an excerpt from one of my ELL students' "Halloween on Mt. Olympus" story:

> *Artemis races across the sky, putting the [shining] moon up. Apollo leads his chariot and horses into his stables and changed into conductor clothes, ready to fill the halls of Olympus with music. Poseidon followed, rushing in like a tsunami, he appeared in a mermaid costume. [Hephaestus] marched into the room, clunking, in his Spock costume. Behind him followed his two assistants dressed as Star Trek look-alikes."*
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> —Nguyen Hoang, ninth grade

The stress level for ELL students naturally increases when they are asked to read in front of their peers, so I lower their anxiety level by reading their stories for them with energy and enthusiasm. I then ask students to comment on how well the students have incorporated their understanding of myth into their stories. The rule for this read-aloud activity, which I state clearly and reinforce frequently, is that the student audience may only comment positively on how well a given student's story has demonstrated a comprehension of mythology. As Stephen Krashen (1981) emphasizes, if a teacher wants an ELL to write authentically and engagingly about any topic, there are gentle ways of promoting Standard English usage while still validating and encouraging student voice. Thus, as I read the student stories aloud, I edit the non-Standard English in them. Because of this strategy, student writers hear the Standard English form while still having their creativity acknowledged. The students learn that I will not highlight their errors in written English, and that with each successive story-writing assignment they will be given another opportunity to "show off," rather than feel uncomfortable with their developing skills.

I tell my students that they have accumulated a vast knowledge of classical mythology by this point in the semester and that these stories are a chance not only to show off their knowledge, but also to make us laugh!

Before each read-aloud, I remind the classroom audience that they are already widely read mythology scholars. Now is their opportunity to show off by recognizing the allusions to mythology in their peers' stories. For example, consider a student story containing the line "Aphrodite come dressed as a which because she usually so beautiful," which I would have read as "Aphrodite came dressed as a witch because she is usually so beautiful." At the end of the read-aloud, a fellow "scholar of mythology" in the classroom might remark that "Jose remembered that Aphrodite is the goddess of beauty as well as love, so it is ironic that she would come as a witch." I acknowledge both the student scholar and the writer for his or her extensive mythological expertise.

On these Halloween/Mt. Olympus days everybody wins. The students are afforded a chance to be validated and enjoy writing creatively. They review the content of mythology

in a non-threatening way, and their creative and humorous intelligence is rewarded. I can also model reading aloud with passionate emphasis, validating and supporting other peoples' talents and efforts, and utilize Standard English conventions with my at-the-moment read-aloud revisions of my students' narratives.

As December approaches, the class brainstorms regarding the various holidays that are celebrated in different cultures at this time, and I give students a broader choice to write a story imagining the gods and goddesses of Mt. Olympus celebrating any holiday they choose. Since we will have completed another work of literature at that point, perhaps *Romeo and Juliet*, I ask the students to imagine a holiday story in which the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses have invited a couple of characters from that work of literature to attend their holiday party.

My students' stories become more sophisticated as the unit proceeds. The students strive to impress and outdo one another with how well they can blend their understanding of the content and purposes of myth with the world in which they live. They often use contemporary humor in their stories, and I encourage them to do so, validating their use of topical allusions.

These stories, in which different cultures and traditions are intermingled, may be adapted to any unit. For example, I've asked my students to write about how Casey Young, the protagonist in *Child of the Owl*, would react as a new student in our high school. This narrative assignment encourages student voice, lowers the affective filter, and my reading of these stories frees students from the dread of being called upon to read their own stories aloud.

Adding Orality to the Mix: The Mythology Talk-Show Panel

Almost everybody likes to play "dress up," and English language learners are no exception. A number of years ago, I began asking my mainstreamed ELL students to participate in a panel of gods and goddesses. I wanted to help them become engaged in their study of classical mythology while also practicing their oral language skills.

A couple of weeks into our mythology unit, I explain that we will present a panel of gods and goddesses in another teacher's classroom, but that we will take several weeks to prepare. I lay out our task. While I am to become their "talk show host," they are to become experts on one particular mythological figure. In this visit from "Mt. Olympus" to "Earth," I will be interviewing them in character. Since the interview will not be scripted or rehearsed, they need not worry about forgetting their lines. We will have many practice interviews beforehand, so they will feel confident on the day of their visit. Kate Kinsella's notion of sentence starters is applicable here. Students practice responding to my impromptu questions with sentence starters such as, "My powers are many because I can . . ." or "I know I am the most important of the Greek gods because. . . ."

The students help each other build costumes and prop banks. What has always impressed me is how little encouragment it takes from me for students to bring props in for one another in preparation for these mythology talk shows. My classroom soon becomes filled with aluminum foil-covered tridents, shields, crowns, and daggers.

My students begin the process of choosing a mythological character with a quick-write: *If you could be any Greek or Roman mythological character, who would you be and why?* We start the oral practice sessions slowly in order to build student confidence. Over a few classroom meetings, two or three students at a time sit together in front of the class, while the other students and I take turns asking questions. A sample dialogue might run as follows:

Teacher: Zeus, where are your brothers today?
Student: Hades is at home in the Underworld, and I think Poseidon is still in his home. Why?
Teacher: I may need Poseidon's help if I'm going to sail today.
Student: Oh, he's in a bad mood. I think he lost his trident!
Teacher: Do you get along with your brother?
Student: I suppose so, but I know I am the most important of the Greek gods because after all, I am the King of the Gods and Lord of the Skies. What could be more important?

Most students easily slip into character, and the stress seems to slide off their shoulders. For my end of the bargain, I generally ask one of the teachers with a class of predominately ELL students if we may present our mythology talk show to his or her class.

I've never had a negative experience with this activity. If a particular student does not attend class on performance day, all is not lost because there are no scripted roles or rehearsed dialogues. The students in the classrooms we visit have been consistently attentive and supportive of my students. The fact that they are all English language learners seems to lower everyone's stress level, including mine!

A day or so after the completion of the mythological panel classroom visit, the students reflect on their experiences. When they do so, most students state how easily they overcame their initial anxieties once the interviews were underway. I also write a letter to the students, complimenting them on their performances and acknowledging the courage it took for many of them to speak before an audience of their peers when their own command of spoken English is still developing.

Students follow up this activity with a letter of recommendation, akin to those I write for students applying to college, for the character they have just finished role-playing. An excerpted letter from an ELL student follows.

Dear Mr. Pawlikowski:

I am writing this letter to inform you that I think my student, Poseidon C. Oshin, would be a great fit at the University of California, San Diego. In particular, I would recommend Poseidon for the marine biology program. He has always shown a love for learning about sea creatures and is very knowledgeable about them. I definitely noticed this while he was in my class, which is an AP Biology course. Whenever the class would write essays, Poseidon would surprise us with things even I didn't know.

Sincerely,

—Robert Zalog, ninth grade student

The theatrical aspects of this assignment, with its focus on developing confidence in oral presentations on one's chosen character, thoroughly engage students and subsequently elicit passionate and authentic writing.

Part II: Modeling Multi-Paragraph Essays with ELL Students

Robin Scarcella argues that ELLs are often not given enough basic academic language to prepare them for working at a college or university level. She believes that the language acquisition strategies espoused by Stephen Krashen and Jim Cummins must be balanced with rigorous exposure to academic language and conventions. Having witnessed the frustrations and obstacles ELLs encounter when academic language is essentially dismissed in favor of "fun" activities meant to lower student anxiety, I could not agree more.

ELLs are expected to write formally and academically, and they are frequently expected to generate such writing "on demand," even as they struggle to acquire preliminary English language skills. Expository or informational writing is the genre most often required at the college level, and is the skill most frequently evaluated on national assessments. Additionally, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) place an increased emphasis on expository and informational writing. Knowing the fears English language learners harbor regarding such writing assignments, I try to demystify this genre for them by extensive modeling. Far from robbing their writing of passion, modeling strong academic writing for ELLs provides them with the security afforded by any scaffolded material. When the conventions of academic writing are revealed to them, they begin to develop their own strong writing voices.

In my regular English classes, I always model an entire, full-length formal essay toward the beginning of the school year. However, with my ELL classes, I model essays periodically throughout the entire academic year. My ELL students generally write shorter papers than students in my regular English classes, so it takes a few class sessions for us to write a multi-paragraph essay.

The students understand that on the third day of this essay-writing unit, they will be asked to write their own multi-paragraph essay. Student anxiety level is lessened, however, because they know they can use the essay we wrote together as a model, and the topic of their essay will be closely related to it. For example, if we have written together during a mythology unit about which *goddesses* we find to be the most powerful, the students might later write about which *gods* they find most powerful. As the students' English language skills develop over the course of the year, they take on more complex and varied topics. My long-term goal is for students to be able to develop their own topics. In what follows, I describe an essay writing activity that is highly adaptable to a wide range of classroom situations.

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Beginning with a very broad topic such as "gods and goddesses," we narrow it down to something like "goddesses who would be powerful in today's world." We review the basic structure of a multi-paragraph essay, as I write a skeleton version of one on the board. The model is not limited to the conventional five-paragraph essay "formula," although the structure I use shows students that an essay contains certain components and conventions. I resist following any one scripted or formulaic writing program because I don't want to deaden my students' prose or restrict their ideas.

We use a variety of pre-writing activities such as mapping or clustering to demystify the writing process. Sometimes we complete a traditional outline together. We then review the conventional elements of an essay introduction such as an attention-grabbing opener or "hook," background or contextual information, and a clear thesis, assertion, or claim.

I also explain that the purpose of body paragraphs is to contain supporting evidence for the writer's thesis, while commenting on the significance of that evidence, and the function of concluding paragraphs is generally to restate a paper's thesis while summarizing and commenting on some of its central ideas. I reiterate the importance of ending the essay with a powerful closing statement. The concluding paragraph is one that often challenges fluent English speakers, so powerful models are especially critical for the ELL student. For them, the fatigue that accompanies their struggle to be expressive in a second or subsequent language may partly explain why their essays lose steam when they reach their conclusions.

To start, the class offers a variety of opening "hooks" or "grabbers" until the students collectively choose one they prefer. At the beginning of the year, this step is especially intimidating, so students benefit from explicit models. Some of these might include provocative questions, startling statements, anecdotes, or relevant quotations.

Developing a strong opener with students is not sufficient, however. They need explicit instruction in how to incorporate the opener into the rest of the introductory paragraph, so that they don't merely have an out-of-place attention grabber. I show them how to blend their grabber with the upcoming background information. For example, we might collectively compose, following a hook that classical Greek and Roman myths have had a

profound impact on much of Western culture, something about the origins of myth in general. Students then copy the opening sentence and the rest of the opening paragraph from the board, or from the document camera.

The class then reviews the content that needs to go into the background portion of an essay's introduction. With an essay about the Greek and Roman goddesses, students learn to focus on the era in which these stories were created and by whom and for what purpose. As we compose our essay, students offer ideas, phrases, and whole sentences, and I model how to construct them using "Standard" English language conventions.

Together we review the purpose of a well-written thesis statement and then convert our essay topic into one. In writing about the powerful Greek and Roman goddesses we might develop a thesis that states, "Sometimes the Greek and Roman gods are deemed the most powerful, but the goddesses wield an incredible amount of power as well."

Moving on to body paragraphs, students learn to construct focused topic sentences while providing strong evidence for their thesis statement. We revisit the conventional structure of a body paragraph, which includes contextualizing or introducing evidence, such as why Aphrodite is such a powerful entity because of her role as goddess of love and beauty. I enjoy playing the "Why?" or "So what?" role with students as we practice providing meaningful commentary. As we continue to compose, I review the following literacy skills: using appropriate academic language, sentence variety, punctuation for clarity, and transitions that help readers follow the flow of the writer's thoughts. Additionally, I model the value of reading back through their initial paragraphs in order to ascertain "flow" and do early revision, drawing attention to those revisions that will improve the coherence of the text.

In the concluding paragraph, my ELL students' essays always decline in power; therefore, when I model essays with them, we spend a great deal of time on this paragraph, reiterating its importance and discussing ways to impress our readers with our *grand finale.* As we compose a concluding paragraph together, students are reminded to somehow refer to their hook or grabber and then restate the thesis statement. If the students are writing about a specific piece of literature, they can easily conclude their essay with a discussion of the work's themes, but with the essay about goddesses they can also easily anticipate their readers' needs with comments that answer general questions or deflect criticism. For example, we might write about why freshmen in a typical English class would be reading and writing about Greek mythological characters 3,000 years after their creation.

When we have completed this "class essay," which students have copied as it has developed on the dry erase board or projection screen, we proofread it together. I read aloud, stopping at specific points to see if students can identify the steps we took and the choices we made as we composed. I might point out a transitional sentence and ask students to identify it as such or ask them to restate the important contextual components in our introductory paragraph. I might also review the importance of the topic sentence in a body paragraph, emphasizing the role it plays in focusing the reader's attention. I reiterate the importance of providing thoughtful commentary rather than simple summary in body paragraphs and emphasize the necessity of a powerful conclusion. I also emphasize the need to proofread one's work aloud in order to "hear" errors. I collect the model essays

once we have completed them, and award nominal points for student completion and participation.

Why a Handwritten Copy? Why Model at All?

Since students will have physically written the essay in class as we composed it, they will now have a copy of it in their own handwriting to use later as a model for their individual papers. Recent neurological studies suggest that having students physically copy the modeled essay helps hard-wire the language structures and patterns into their brains. I've witnessed this to a significant degree in my own classroom; I often see a marked improvement in the next written essay my students submit after copying down a modeled essay.

This modeling strategy allows students to internalize the various language patterns and structures that are being modeled. The clear advantage of having the teacher model the essay, by writing it longhand using a document camera or typing it using an LCD projector, is that students and teachers can revise and edit the essay as they compose. This process allows the teacher to emphasize the importance of revision and editing to the overall writing process, and instills in students the writing habits that will make them more likely to be successful in completing their writing assignments as they move from high school to college.

Part III: Refining Language Conventions (Grammar) Through Compelling Content

Mythology has built-in appeal; however, most students fail to dance a little jig of happiness when the subject of grammar is broached. I'd wager the average teacher of grammar units does not dance one, either. A number of years ago, however, I inadvertently discovered a highly motivating way to teach ELLs how to improve their writing with sentence variety (i.e., compound and complex sentences). While I generally stand on the shoulders of giants in my liberal borrowing from the best practices of the best teachers with whom I've worked, this particular unit—using primatology (the scientific study of primates) to teach sentence variety—is unique to my classroom.

I love literature with all my heart, but I also have a profound passion for primatology, having once imagined myself heir to such respected primatologists as Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Francine "Penny" Patterson. Because I bring this excitement to the grammar unit, I have had great success with it.

Although most English teachers might not share my enthusiasm for primates, the unit is adaptable to other areas of teacher and student fascination. Once teachers determine an area of high interest to themselves and their students, the unit can proceed from there. Since the Common Core emphasizes writing across the curriculum, this unit could also be team-taught by a language arts teacher and a teacher from another subject area.

Why Primates? A Rationale

About 20 years ago, I was teaching a summer school Language Arts class comprised of English language learners who were trying to pass a state-mandated writing exam. These summer school students had some English abilities, having been in the United States for at least a few years, but the great number of mechanical errors they made in their writing made it unlikely that they would pass the test. Chief among those errors were run-on sentences and sentence fragments.

Having long believed that a whole language approach to grammar is best, I told the students that I could help them improve their writing by teaching them "sentence variety." This approach is less punitive than informing students that they must *fix* their run-on sentences by learning about compound sentences or *solve* their sentence fragment *problem* by studying complex sentences.

Late on a Friday afternoon, as class was winding down during one of the early weeks of summer school, I casually broached the topic of Koko, a lowland gorilla who had been taught American Sign Language. Having studied sign language along with primatology, I continued to be intrigued by the study and wanted, just for fun, to share some news of Koko with my students. Soon I found a classroom full of engaged students. The room had that electrified air recognizable to anyone who loves teaching. The more I discussed Koko, the faster the questions flew at me. Then the questions grew in sophistication. Was Koko a monkey or an ape? How could a gorilla learn sign language? What exactly is sign language?

I then had one of those teaching epiphanies. I realized I could employ the students' newfound fascination with Koko to review the grammar we had begun working on in class. I went to the chalkboard and wrote, "Koko is an ape, for she has no tail." I also wrote "Gorillas are not violent by nature, for they are vegetarian," since I knew that information always stuns and intrigues students. We also utilized a variety of resources, including Koko's official website (http://www.koko.org) and Nigel Cole's 1982 movie, *A Conversation with Koko*, for additional information to write about.

Over the next several years, I earned the reputation of "gorilla lady" at my high school, filling my classroom with primate-themed gifts from students who had obviously enjoyed this unit. What follows is this unit's basic structure, which generally takes six weeks to complete.

First, my students take a pre-quiz about general primate topics. This activity generates a great many dismayed stares. A sample question to pique their interest might be, "What animal besides a human being can use sign language?" Another might be, "What does a gorilla eat, and for how many hours a day does he eat?" (Seven hours of chomping on mostly grass and leaves!)

We subsequently discuss the answers to the quiz questions, and I whet the students' appetites with primate pictures from my vast collection. Student engagement is evident with statements such as "Oh, I wondered why you had so many gorilla and monkey toys in your classroom." Once the excitement has been generated, I tell the students that we are going to be learning more about primates as we practice some sentence variety. No one has ever protested, and I feel this is a direct result of using a topic with broad student and teacher interest.

We begin by watching the National Geographic documentary *Gorilla* issued in 1998. Each class watches the entire film, quietly attentive to the animal science information

being presented in the documentary. I pause the film periodically to comment and clarify. Students' eyes are riveted on the screen, as they whisper knowing comments to each other such as, "That's just like Koko in the other movie!"

The students have several days to complete this writing assignment. I have them underline all of the *coordinating conjunctions* in their paper, so that I can tell if they are grasping sentence coordination or just randomly underlining words such as *for* as a preposition, or *and* when used in a list. Since some of the students are at first puzzled by how to *respond* to a film, we brainstorm ideas in the form of questions. "Did you learn anything from this film?" "Did any one part really capture your imagination?" "Would other people in your life enjoy the film?" "What would your science teacher say if she knew you had watched this film in your English class?"

To validate ELL student learning and to give them practice using academic language, I have each student share aloud what he or she learned from or enjoyed about the film. This brief oral practice offers early preparation for upcoming group presentations in class about a particular primate topic. This student talk also facilitates subsequent writing about primates.

Complex Sentences—More Primate Excitement!

Eventually, I introduce complex sentences, building on my students' schema of compound sentences and examining the similarities and differences between the two grammatical structures. I use the same strategies I did when teaching compound sentences, but with some variations in instruction and assignments. Two students might compose complex sentences together, writing their sentences on the board so the class can review them aloud. To keep the emphasis on content and grammar in context, we always evaluate these sentences first with respect to their scientific accuracy. I might say, "Hmmm. Tuan's sentence says, 'Chimpanzees are not monkeys because they have no tails.' Is that true? Are chimps, in fact, apes?" Once the students have acknowledged that, indeed, chimpanzees are apes rather than monkeys, I will proceed to examine the accuracy of the grammar in the sentence.

As the unit progresses, and the students' knowledge of primates increases, the writing topics become more complex and the students have more choice in their assignments. At some point the students start employing compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences to discuss such topics as the similarities and differences among primates, as well as the similarities between humans and other primates.

An Oral Presentation—Science, Grammar, and "Chat" in the English Class

To facilitate my ELLs' oral language skills, I assign a presentation based on the primatology they have been studying. For this presentation, students are expected to do independent research as well as review what the class has learned together. I generally have the students present with a partner or on a panel, lowering my students' anxieties about oral presentations. In order to further lower their anxieties, my students use a visual aid in the form of a

student-created poster and refer to its pictures or text when they feel the need. This visual aid also proves valuable in facilitating the learning of the classroom audience.

Once the students have given their presentations, they write about their experience doing so. I also ask the audience members to write about what new information they acquired from each of the presentations. In doing so, I continue to ask students to underline the coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in their writing to reinforce their acquired knowledge and allow me to ascertain their developing grasp of sentence variety.

In this unit's final assignment, students reflect on the value of having learned some language conventions in conjunction with an animal science unit. Students may quick-write in class and then pair-share before going home to formally complete this assignment.

At the end of the school year, as a culminating activity, I have my students reflect on their growth throughout the year. I am always touched by how frequently students write about the primatology/sentence variety unit. If I've played my monkey and ape cards right, that final paper is also filled with sophisticated sentence variety, and there is rarely a run-on sentence or inappropriate fragment in sight. I do, of course, always enjoy those *appropriate* sentence fragments such as, "Gotta love that Koko!"

Some Reflection—Fearless (Almost) ELL Strategies

Learning another language is always challenging, but it should never be threatening. Learning to write well in any language is also a challenge, but it should be something that students look forward to rather than dread. In my classrooms, I strive to lower the students' anxiety level with various strategies so that writing and speaking will become something that empowers them. Over the past 20 years, the assignments and activities I've described in this chapter have gone a long way toward my goal of engendering passionate writing from my beloved ELLs.

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