



Effective Writing Instruction for English Learners CHAPTER SIX

PREVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. What factors affect the ELs' emerging writing proficiency in English?
2. Why do some learners have such difficulty improving their writing?
3. Why is it so important for all Language Arts and English teachers in California to be able to teach ELs to write?
4. What instructional practices help ELs develop strong writing proficiency?
5. What is the role of reading in developing strong writing proficiency in a second language?

I received the following letter from Van, an undergraduate student at the University of California at Irvine (UCI) who was enrolled last fall in my course, Humanities 20 — English as a Second Language (ESL) Writing. Van allowed me to share the letter on the condition that it would help improve the English instruction that public school teachers give their English learners. I share it with you here with that hope.

Letter from Van Requesting an Exemption from UCI's ESL Requirement

Dear Mrs. Robbin

I really not need humanity 20 writing class because since time I come to United State all my friend speak english. Until now everyone understand me and I dont' need study english. I don't know vietnam language. I speak only english. I have no communication problem with my friend in dorm. My english teacher in high school key person to teach me. My teacher explain to me that how important the book was for the student and persuaded me read many book. I get A in English through out high school and I never take ESL. I gree that some student need class but you has not made a correct decision put me in english class. Please do not makes me lose the face. I have confident in english.

Sadly, Van's writing is typical of the writing of many freshmen at UCI. Van is not an anomaly. Her writing closely resembles that of other ELs enrolled in UCI's ESL/ELD courses. At the time that Van wrote the letter, she was unhappy that UCI required her to take these courses. She had, after all, received straight A's in her high school English courses, and she believed that her English was excellent. In her view, a mistake had been made.

Harmful mistakes had been made, but I suspect that these mistakes were more related to Van's previous English instruction in public schools than an inaccurate assessment of her English proficiency. The primary purpose of this chapter is to understand why English learners like Van, who have attended kindergarten through twelfth grade in California public schools, are unprepared for the English language demands of higher education. In exploring this question, I will argue that the instruction received by Van, as well as by many ELs in California schools, does not prepare them for university course work. In addition, I will argue that teachers need to provide ELs with carefully planned instruction. Such instruction incorporates the explicit study of the English language — including phonics, vocabulary, and grammar; corrective feedback tailored to the specific needs of students; honest assessment of English skills with appropriate remediation when necessary; and a deliberate structuring of input and experiences that provide students with ample exposure to academic English and multiple opportunities to use this English.

BACKGROUND

Each year thousands of freshmen enter the University of California (UC) without proficiency in academic English. These students require specially designed instruction in order to do well in their university classes. All of the UC campuses these students attend, with the exception of UC Santa Cruz and UC Riverside, provide a variety of ESL/ELD courses designed to help the students acquire academic English. Most UC ELs are not international; over 90% are permanent residents who have received four years or more of English instruction in California public schools.