

A Warm wELLcome for Language Learners

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About this Column

The Winter 2020 issue of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal* published a special issue focusing on “action for equity,” with thoughtful articles and abundant family and classroom resources. This issue of the “wELLcome” column, which is dedicated to topics regarding English language learners (ELLs), continues in that same vein.

Word Choice: A Neglected but Key Skill for ELL Writers

Introduction

With all of the urgent, critical issues confronting education in general, and literacy practices in particular, why write a column on something as obscure as word choice? *Word choice* (sometimes called *vocabulary choice* or *diction*) often drops to the bottom of the “To Do” list for English as a Second Language (ESL), English, bilingual, and language arts teachers. Even when teachers are able to focus on writing to begin with (writing development is often the first thing cut when lessons run over), teachers of English language learners (ELLs) are too preoccupied with teaching grammar, spelling, organization, syntax, genres, and building background knowledge to spend even a moment on word choice! Also, teachers may conflate teaching vocabulary words for reading comprehension with teaching students how to choose—and use—the best possible words in writing.

What Makes Good Writing?

The test of good writing is whether a reader understands it—and enjoys reading it. Without good writers, reading is no fun! The same thing that constitutes good writing for native speakers of English constitutes good writing for those

learning English as a new language. However, writing in a new language, in this case, English, is considered the last, and hardest, set of skills to learn, and it takes the longest. It is the domain which caused the WIDA Consortium to raise the annual ACCESS test exit scores more than once because students were being exited with strong oracy skills, but weaker skills in reading and writing. Although the “literacy” composite score includes reading and writing, writing still predictably lags behind the other scores at all grade levels.

Writing is an abstract process in which we convey something to unseen readers through words alone. We do not have eye contact, hand gestures, or conversational fillers, and we cannot circle back and say something a different way. You might almost say (not entirely metaphorically) that written words are “set in stone.” Writing is doubly abstract for ELLs because the general abstract process of writing gets even more abstract when the writer has to produce his or her own words, phrases, and sentences in a new language.

We always tell students to read their work aloud to see if it “sounds right,” but that does not really work much beyond noticing missing words, problems with subject-verb agreement, or verb tense problems. It can be hard to know if something sounds right in a new language, especially because more formal writing is not meant to be spoken aloud. Although narrative stories are strongly related to oral storytelling, most writing after the early grades is not conversational and is

likely to involve academic language. In fact, by the time most ELLs enter classrooms conducted only in English, narrative or creative writing is often no longer in the curriculum, having been supplanted by book reports, science lab reports, comparison/contrast essays, argumentative essay writing, and the like.

Language skills, both in the WIDA standards and the Common Core State Standards, are often divided into two broad categories: (1) social language and (2) academic language. In the field of ESL and bilingual education, these are usually referred to as BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) language, which is mostly oral, and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) language, which is mostly written (Cummins, 1979, 1981). Estimates of how long it takes to become fully proficient in using academic language across all domains varies, but it may reach upwards of seven years (Thomas & Collier, 2002). That means a lot of ELLs may not achieve it even by the end of high school, and that means they may not be “college and career ready.”

Academic Language Is Misunderstood

The phrase *academic language* is often misunderstood to include only things like “beakers” or “foreshadowing” or other content-specific words. Academic language is much more than that, and the words it encompasses are needed for most writing. These include words that can be found in the comprehensively researched *Academic Word List* (2023) and includes such versatile words as *issues*, *present*, *signifies*, *source*, *throughout*, and *unless*, just to name a few random selections (an excellent downloadable two-page summary of words on the *Academic Word List* can be found at the Colorin Colorado website: <https://www.colorincolorado.org>). Looking at these words, you can immediately surmise that they are not usually spoken aloud—oral language is structured differently from written language and uses less

extensive vocabulary (Lems et al., 2023). At the same time, these words are very common in written English.

There are many genres of formal writing, and these have important and practical value. They include such tasks as creating reports, applying for jobs or for college, applying for a scholarship or entrance to a program, challenging a charge or a ticket, lodging a complaint, writing a tribute or obituary, communicating with a lawyer, or applying for benefits, to name only a few. Writing well definitely matters! Each genre has specific protocols and includes specific words and phrases, and that means that finding an appropriate word may not be the same as finding the best word. The habit of using a “good enough” word might be okay but not if students have college interests that might include journalism, engineering, law, medicine, or government—all of which require report writing and coherent, logical prose. Suddenly, we see that some of the important middle-class careers do, in fact, require strong writing with “just right” word choices. The habit of knowing and using the right words must begin well before college and, in fact, well before high school.

How Writing Is Taught Now

The way writing is taught in English grade-level classrooms, which often include ELLs, may overlook ELLs’ specific writing needs. For example, a study of Calkin’s *Units of Study for Writing* in a 4th-grade classroom (Westerlund & Besser, 2021) found that the main writing activities, drafting and free writing, did not provide enough explicit attention to language. Scaffolding was discouraged, and too many concepts were expected to be understood implicitly and not made explicit. Lems et al. (2023) call for explicit teaching of writing skills for ELLs:

ELLs need considerable teacher guidance. In a process writing model, ELLs may be left in a small group without guidance from an

expert peer or adult. Teachers need to guide ELL writers in topic selection, sentence and paragraph structure, word choices, grammar, editing, spelling, and punctuation, in addition to overall cohesion and coherence. (p. 10)

In fact, in one study (McCarthy et al., 2004), researchers took a look at ELL writing assignments for 4th- and 5th-grade ELLs in several programmatic settings and found that the writing tasks and requirements were both complicated and “fragmented.” They said,

The students’ school routines were quite complicated, as each interacted daily with several different teachers, and each setting entailed different tasks, expectations, and rules for governing interaction. As a result, students’ views of writing at school were somewhat fragmented. Even when assignments ostensibly focused on authentic communication, the students did not always recognize the purpose or value. (p. 351)

Word Choice in Two Writing Rubrics

The WIDA Consortium develops and maintains many of the standards used in the ESL field, including the ACCESS test and the language proficiency levels. In the *WIDA Model Writing Rubric Grades 1-12* (WIDA Consortium, 2023), writing is evaluated in three basic areas—(1) linguistic complexity, (2) vocabulary usage, and (3) language control—with each described at six levels of proficiency. At the highest level of “native like” proficiency in English, vocabulary usage is described as “Consistent use of just the right word in just the right place.” That nuanced description has native-speaker bias in it (“I know it when I see it”), and it requires a lot of background knowledge to know how words are used in particular ways. What is “just right” anyway?

Word choice, which is called “diction” in some rubrics, is defined as “appropriateness and

maturity in words and expressions” (National Writing Project [NWP], 2010, p. 3). In a 2010 comparative study of student writing done by teachers who were, or were not, trained in NWP professional development, student diction was significantly better in students whose teachers went through the training. Clearly, teacher engagement in writing creates better student writers, but for ELLs, these must be combined with explicit, systematic lessons in building skills, and one of these skills is word choice.

Six Ways to Teach Word Choice

Here are a few thoughts about making the implicit become explicit in the area of word choice. Of course, this will vary according to your teaching setting and the curriculum your district is using. Nevertheless, these activities can be incorporated in any setting, including the teaching of monolingual English students!

1. Make word choice part of your writing rubric. Instead of the generic “vocabulary” category, give some points for lively, evocative words and phrases—and let students know it is part of the grade.
2. Do class think-alouds that explicitly ponder word choices. Take suggestions from the class. Have kids look up the words that might be used in a certain place and discuss the nuances of meaning, not just whether they are appropriate. Even simple sentences about emotions can span a wide range of possible word choices.
3. Consider phrases and idioms instead of single words. Teach two-word verbs and idioms as part of vocabulary development. Teach figurative language, especially for verbs (Lems, 2018). The “best word” might be a phrase or an idiom or a metaphor.
4. When analyzing a text, take time to highlight the author’s word choices. Talk about

what would have changed if the author had used a different word. For example, you could ask why “The cat crept along the ledge” is better than “The cat walked along the ledge.”

5. Show examples of word choices that are vague, wordy, or unclear (NEVER use student writing as an example. Do I need to say that?) and explain why. You, the teacher, can model this, whether or not students can participate actively. You are the expert. That’s why you’re the teacher.
6. Use creative writing as the playground for rich word choices. Many students love creative writing but do not like expository writing. One consolation you can offer is to tell them that they can bring the treasure hunt for great words over from creative writing into expository writing, and that great words and phrases can liven up their report, research, or essay.

Just remember, “little things” can add up to very big things in writing, and good word choices can transform dreary writing into writing that is lucid and memorable. (I hope this column qualifies for the latter!)

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