

**Effective Strategies for Improving Writing Skills of  
Elementary English Language Learners**

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## **Abstract**

Reaching proficient levels of literacy is a universal goal for all children in the elementary classroom. This objective is especially challenging for English language learners particularly in the domain of writing. Writing has been identified as one of the most essential skills because the world has become so text-oriented. Due to this change, mainstream teachers as well as ESOL instructors, are in great demand of effective techniques to improve writing skills of this particular population. The purpose of this project is to provide research based techniques successful in improving the writing skills of ESL students. The findings suggest that through the use of technology, pre-taught vocabulary, various teacher influences and the implementation of positive diverse literacy practices, this goal can be attained.

## **Statement of the Research Problem**

In the United States, teaching English as a second language has always been a part of our educational undertakings. In the colonial times, there was a conglomeration of nationalities and languages: English, Scottish, French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Irish, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, and Native American (Cavanaugh, 1996). Because of the vast diversity, there was a tremendous need for a sense of unity. In the mid 1600's, the Dutch and Swedes started their own schools, but over time they assimilated by the people around them who were mostly English speakers. The colonists, with the exception of the Germans in Pennsylvania, decided English would be their prominent language. Following the American Revolution, the pressure was on for all citizens to learn the English language via common schools. By the 1800's, thousands of immigrants were pouring into the United States, most of which were poor and illiterate. This increase in immigration led to consideration for mandatory public education. Yet the issue arose, once again, that Germans were a large majority of the population and there was a great debate

regarding which language would be taught and some were left undecided until after World War I. It was then that the final decision was made for English to be the common language. By the 1900's, public schools were not equipped to handle the number of students being taught, especially given their various languages. All children were held to the same standard (taught homogeneously) and this caused great frustration, which led to massive levels of dropouts, causing a rise in crime. This was a dangerous problem, so theorists began to try and transform the way we approached educating ESL students. In the 1950's, a report was made by UNESCO that students should be taught as much as they can in their primary language. In the seventies, a Supreme Court judge ruled that children were not getting an equal education due to the Chinese language barrier in San Francisco, California. Therefore, sociologists began arguing that there needed to be some sort of multicultural or bilingual approach to teaching English. Historically, there have been numerous ways in which we have taught English learners, however, recent studies show there has to be a change in the way we teach writing (Cavanaugh, 1996).

According to the National Center for Education, the number of school age children who speak a language other than English grew from 4.7 to 11.2 million between 1980 and 2009 (NCES, 2011). As of 1990, fourteen percent of the U.S. school age population lived in homes where English was not the primary spoken language and this percentage has grown tremendously in the last two and a half decades. Demographers predict that in twenty years, the ratio of English learners in the student population could be one in four. While research regarding how to teach English language learners is prevalent today, in as late as the mid-seventies, it was quite scarce. In fact, there was a deficiency of research regarding specific successful approaches for mainstream teachers teaching second language learners (Fitzgerald, 1995). As this population

increases, the need for educational research becomes more prevalent in order to reach these learners academically especially in the area of writing.

Given these statistics, it is paramount for mainstream educators to be knowledgeable regarding the education of English learners. One obstacle standing in the way of the success of ESL students is writing. Writing is a fundamental component of language. When a child writes, thoughts and knowledge are blended together creating a unique meaning (Jones, Reutzel, & Fargo, 2010). Consequently, students identify the skill of writing, as more difficult than listening and reading (Berman & Cheng, 2010). Furthermore, writing is the skill that most students are least proficient in when acquiring a new language (Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh, 2001). Even the most advanced students in the ESOL program score lower in writing than in any other domain on the ACCESS test. Even when students exit the ESOL program and become monitored students, mainstream teachers often show great concern, frequently seeking methods to improve the writing skills of monitored students.

There are numerous reasons for writing to be the last acquired domain of learning English, one being that a more detailed and analyzed knowledge of a language is needed to write it than to understand it (Bialystok & Bryan, 1985). Additionally, ESL students do not come to school with the same background knowledge as native English speakers; therefore, it is more difficult for them to write with meaning. Their vocabulary is often limited, and while they can communicate orally and be understood through gestures and so forth, writing proves to be frustrating for them as they attempt to express their ideas without the luxury of using their hands. Additional work time is also a necessity for students who are processing two or more languages and, all too often, they are not given such opportunities. Furthermore, because of how difficult it is for ESL students to write as well as their native English speaking peers, teachers' responses

tend to be negative which can result in them being too familiar with the expectation to fail (Kasper & Petrello, 1998). Fu-Lan (2006) believes this expectation of failure, causes anxiety in writing which can happen due to two scenarios: first, when students are asked to write about a specific topic and second, when students think of writing as a translating activity. Similarly, Elias, Akmaliah, and Mahyuddin (2005) stated that anxiety and frustration in writing may be caused by unnecessary focus on errors in spelling and grammar, instead of content. All of these factors contribute to the ongoing problem of writing successfully as an ESL student.

As previously stated, writing is the most difficult area of academics for ESL students, which is evident in their ACCESS scores and their classroom performances. Living in a text oriented society, all students need to be proficient writers, but achieving this goal is particularly daunting students who are learning English as their second language. Due to this universal area of weakness for ESL students, this research project has been designed to discover and implement effective strategies that will improve the writing skills of ESL students.

## **Summary**

Writing has always been seen as an important skill in English language acquisition. This importance is due to the fact that it reinforces grammatical structures and vocabulary that educators strive to teach their students. It is the area in which learners need to be offered adequate time to develop their writing skill, therefore more time should be devoted to it in classrooms containing ELLs so that they will be prepared to effectively communicate in real life as well as academic situations (Ismail, 2007). Exposing them to the writing process itself through various venues is an excellent way to reach this goal. Additionally, writing skills can be developed when the learners' interests are acknowledged and when they are given frequent

opportunities to actually practice writing (Ismail, 2007). Because one of the main goals of ESL students is to learn to produce a well-thought-out piece of writing, a specific writing program must be in place in order to meet the needs of these learners. After careful evaluation of the literature, it was found that numerous researchers discovered the need for ESL students to be exposed to a variety of genres, strategies, and methods in order to succeed in the writing of English.

## **Literature Review**

### **Creating an Environment Conducive for ESL Writers**

Data consistently shows that ESL students on all levels score lower in writing than any other domain. It is the last domain of second language learning to fully develop. Researchers have discovered many reasons for this problem, and a key part of it is how they feel about themselves as writers. Becoming a proficient writer of English is a problem for many ESL students as they believe that they simply cannot write English. This becomes more prominent in the upper grade levels of elementary school and beyond. This feeling of incompetency leads to self-doubt and anxiety in writing and can hinder the process of achieving writing proficiency (Thomas, 1993). Researchers believe that it is not the task of writing that is deemed so intimidating, but more so the feedback and assessment of that writing by instructors and/or peers (Kasper & Petrello, 1998).

Before the 1970's, writing instruction focused on rules of grammar (Pour-Mohammadi, Zainol Abidin, & Cheong Lai, 2012). Today research shows that it is more important to create an environment that encourages students to take risks in their writing which means less concentration on conventional rules of writing and more on expression of ideas (Shaughnessy,

1998). To do so, means being less critical at the beginning of the writing process in terms of errors, be it grammatical or otherwise. By not being focused on the errors of a writing piece, a student feels permitted to express his thoughts more freely. Overlooking the grammatical errors and focusing on the ideas is a skill to be acquired for certain, but a skill that is essential if educators desire a decrease in student frustration and an increased level of actual writing. Furthermore, when creative ideas are not hindered by concerns of using correct form, ESL students are more likely to progress. This shift of focus is what MacGowan-Gilhooly (1991) calls a *Fluency First Approach*. She believes that only after students have learned to express themselves can they then move toward correction of grammatical errors. With this approach, MacGowan-Gilhooly (1991) saw higher pass rates among her ESL students.

In addition to the *Fluency First Approach*, Kasper and Petrello (1998) also suggest that the type of feedback teachers provide plays a very significant role in decreasing writing anxiety of ESL students. Mary Beaven (1977) found that teachers who used shared experiences, discussed students' thoughts, and requested additional information as feedback were most successful in decreasing students' frustration thus making them feel more confident. Examples of such feedback would be task oriented questions like: Could you give more information? Could you start your writing in a way that relates to your main purpose of the paper? This type of feedback is meant to encourage and provoke more thought regarding ideas rather than correcting conventional errors. This type of student/teacher conferencing should also include opportunities for students to ask questions regarding the writing process or the product itself (Hyland 2000).

### **Preparing Students to Write**

Activating prior knowledge is one method in which teachers can assist ESL students before they even begin writing. Making sure students have the opportunity to think about what they already know before the task begins helps ESL students incorporate new information into existing structures of knowledge which activates long-term memory (Watt-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). Several strategies can be used to accomplish this including graphic organizers, cooperative learning, read-alouds, and group discussions. Graphic organizers can be used as visual tools for students to write or draw what they already know about a subject, for example in the genre of informational or persuasive writing. From this activity, teachers can then evaluate whether further instruction is needed. This is where read-alouds, cooperative learning, and group discussions come in to play. If needed, a hand-selected text can be utilized in order to provide additional background information, which can lead to group discussions. Cooperative learning is also a great strategy to help students gain more background knowledge especially for ELLs. This strategy requires students to collect information from books, the internet, or each other as they work together with another student or group of students, preferably students who are native to the English language. Through this strategy, ELLs not only gain additional information needed to complete the writing assignment, but it is also a great opportunity for them to develop language skills through peer led conversations.

The next step in preparing ELLs to write is a vocabulary pre-view. Pre-viewing vocabulary is an effective tool when asking an ESL student to attempt any genre of writing. Second language writers have a vastly different linguistic base than native English speakers who can instinctively manipulate the language (Pour-Mohammadi, Zainol Abidin, & Cheong Lai, 2012). Therefore, vocabulary is an enormous obstacle for English learners creating the need for teachers to provide both definitional and contextual information about keywords. Instructors



should also allow students to actively elaborate on word meanings (i.e. physically acting out a word), as well as teacher led explanations (Stahl, 1985). Without this preview, most ESL students will not be able to move past the instructions of the writing task.

### **Scaffolding Instruction**

Scaffolding is a means to which teachers can build upon a student's strengths. They should be contextual, social, and temporary frameworks used to support successful learning with a specific academic domain such as writing (Vygotsky, 1987). Scaffolding is thought of as using steps in a process, modeling the steps, and then giving students the opportunity to try it themselves. This strategy should be prepared with the mindset of gradual release after a student has reached a predetermined point in his writing which is, of course, controlled by the instructor. Baradaran, & Sarfarazi, (2011) found that students who had the opportunity to receive scaffolding principles outperformed the ones who did not experience scaffolding thus having a significant impact on the ESL students' academic writing.

Read (2010) suggests the IMSCI (Inquiry, Modeling, Shared, Collaborative, Independent) model for scaffolding and finds it extremely effective for second language learners. The first stage is inquiry, which facilitates background knowledge; the significance of which is as aforementioned. After activating prior knowledge, the instructor then models drafting the type of writing expected. Students and teacher then participate in shared writing where the students have significant input in the topic, sentence usage, etc. They are then given the opportunity to write collaboratively with one or more other students to produce one piece of writing. Having completed the above steps the students are then ready for independent writing, which is the ultimate goal of the scaffolding process.

This scaffolding technique can also be used in a different manner involving students scaffolding amongst themselves leaving the teacher as a less active participant (Gagné, & Parks, 2013). Students are consequently completing writing tasks that are collaborative in nature and facilitate the opportunity for pair or group work. Research has shown that in small groups, learners have more opportunities to use the second language for a range of functions than in teacher-led classroom activities (Storch, 2007). Furthermore, Storch (2007) suggests that pair work allows learners to combine their linguistic resources in order to collaboratively create new knowledge about language, which leads them to more successful writing experiences. Gagne and Parks (2013) found that using this method of small group scaffolding was, in fact, a successful strategy to produce the language needed to complete a writing task. English language learners as individuals often do not possess the vocabulary base needed to create writing pieces in the mainstream classroom so by scaffolding amongst themselves, students learned how to use one another's strengths, rely less on the instructor, and feel more confident about writing tasks.

### **Technology**

The rise of technology integration has significantly contributed to the change in teaching reading and writing in a second language. Such integration in second language learning teaching demonstrates a shift in educational models from a behavioral to a constructivist learning approach (Kasapaglu-akyol, 2010). These recent developments reveal that rapid changes in literacy have taken place as a result of the arrival of the computer and the development of other new technologies. Consequently, the pressure on teachers to keep up with such developments and to raise standards in their classrooms is ever present (Feiler & Logan, 2007). Not only does it motivate and encourage ESL students to engage in reading and writing, but the various ways it is used proves beneficial in cultivating writing skills among this population of students (Lee, 2012).

Using e-journals, much like a composition notebook, gives students a safe venue for expressing their ideas without having to worry about handwriting or spelling mistakes. This technique hones their vocabulary skills and gives them an opportunity to receive written feedback from an instructor, which in turn aids in reading proficiency. Another method, among many, is using online discussion boards. With this approach, students can communicate with one another as well as the teacher, receive peer feedback and practice conversational skills, all the while putting complete thoughts together in the form of typed sentences. Peer feedback is one of the most influential methods of becoming a proficient writer of English. Studies show that school age children are more conscious of their peers' reaction and perception than their instructor's, therefore, more apt to learn from their constructivism (Bitchener, Cameron, & Young, 2005). Using these technological tools can provide that much needed opportunity. By interviewing students, Ghandoura (2012) found that students thought computers made the acquisition of writing skills easier and faster. The possible downfall of these tools is that writing on computers gives an immediate alert to grammatical and spelling errors, which could become a lesson learned or a crutch. However, in a rich-technology, ELLs can become better readers and writers of English (Ismail, Al-Awidi, & Almekhlafi, 2012).

### **Journal Writing**

The method of journal writing has been suggested as an unthreatening means of practice in writing for ESL students. Often referred to as interactive journals, this approach allows for student and teacher communication via a designated notebook designed for written dialogue between student and instructor (Wong Mei Ha & Storey, 2006). According to Lee (2012), research along with classroom practices has shown how the implementation of an interactive journal greatly benefits English language learners as it motivates them to write more in length

and richer in content. Not only does it provide consistent practice, as the journal is meant to be used daily, but it allows the teacher to have an easier and more holistic access to students' writing, which in turn gives way to more individualized instruction opportunities.

Various ways in which to use journal writing in the classroom include reading response journals, correspondence journals, and e-journals. Reading response journals are a means for which students can create meaning from their experience with a text. This type of journal also allows the teacher to observe how a student is developing as both a reader and a writer. For example, Fagan (2008) used journal writing as a self-reflection activity on previously taught reading strategies to monitor their understanding of using sticky notes to track comprehension. She found it gave them a chance to think about how they learn, and what they do to help themselves while giving her valuable information about their understanding of the strategy as well as inspiration for future writing instruction segments. Students respond to a text through teacher led inquiries such as predicting plot, personal reactions to characters, synthesizing text, and more. It can be used as a scaffolding step as well before launching into a more formal writing task (Evans, 2008). Using this reading-to-write process can gradually prepare ESL students with appropriate skills for future academic writing tasks.

Correspondence journals are quite simply as they imply. Children need time to talk both orally and in written form, especially English learners. More often than not, talk is what leads us to understand and process what we are learning (Bloem, 2004). Unfortunately, oral talk is often discouraged in a classroom setting; therefore, using a correspondence journal as a means to facilitate written talk proves to be both an effective and valuable tool. Such correspondence provides a vehicle for questions otherwise unanswered due to anxiety or lack of confidence, expression of feelings of frustration or folly, celebration of accomplishments; the possibilities are

unending. Not only is this a safe place for ESL students to write, but it also gives them an opportunity to practice conventions such as punctuation, capitalization, grammar and so forth without penalty. Furthermore, according to Bloem (2004) it is a place for powerful reflection free of peer criticism and rich with freedom of expression.

In order to improve writing skills of English language learners, educators must consider new and innovative methods for their instruction. Current methods are simply not moving these students to the level of proficiency that is expected of them. A safe environment can reduce ESL anxiety and provide opportunities for risk taking which is necessary to produce even adequate writing. Scaffolding coupled with peer work provides English language learners the support they need to facilitate the writing process. Finally, diverse literacies along with technology, work together to capture their interest while motivating them to succeed in the writing classroom. When students are given opportunities to write for authentic meaning-making, message-sharing purposes, they can enjoy the benefits of writing even when they are beginning readers and writers who are doing so in a language they have not yet mastered (Han & Ernst-Slavit, 1999).

### **Statement of Research Question**

By implementing the research-based techniques outlined above, will English language learners show improvement in the academic domain of writing?

### **Methodology**

With the knowledge of the above techniques outlined in the literature review, it was decided to conduct a research project with a mixed method approach to investigate the validity of the techniques. The initial study was of the quantitative nature using two segments of second grade ESOL students. Group 1, the experimental group, consisted of five students whereas

Group 2, the control group, consisted of six students. To obtain a baseline for data, ACCESS scores were used from the previous year as well as a pre-instruction writing sample at the beginning of the year. The writing sample gathered was a narrative and was scored using a rubric created by Cobb County to be used with all second graders regardless of their primary language.

The other component of my research was a qualitative method designed to gather information regarding how ESL students feel about themselves as writers, what their thoughts were about their actual writing, and what they thought they needed help with. This was done via a student survey. Teachers were also given a survey inquiring about how they felt about teaching writing, what areas of concern they had for ESL students, and what techniques they had previously used.

After the surveys and writing samples were gathered, I met with the teachers I would be working with to analyze the data. Including myself, the team consisted of three teachers. We discussed, at great length, the need for writing skills of ELLs to improve and used the data to pinpoint areas of concern. Following a lengthy discussion, it was decided that there existed a lack of sufficient vocabulary among the ESL writers, frequent incomplete thoughts, and an obvious inability to express their ideas effectively. Through the research I previously conducted along with input from my colleagues, we chose what we thought would be the best strategies to implement with our second grade ESL students. Strategies we selected were journal writing, activating prior-knowledge, pre-viewing vocabulary, utilizing graphic organizers, scaffolded instruction, and increased teacher/peer conferencing. We also decided to make a purposeful effort to concentrate more on expressing ideas rather than being critical of grammar errors. So as not to imply that grammar was not taught, we set aside specific times to address those issues.

Throughout the year, I, along with the classroom teacher of the experimental group, Group 1, implemented the above strategies with writer's workshop. With the control group, Group 2, the classroom teacher and I simply followed the writer's workshop curriculum with our ESOL students.

At the end of the year, ACCESS data and post-instruction writing samples were gathered for analysis. The writing samples were scored using the same rubric from the beginning of the year. To continue the necessary ongoing research in this particular area of concern for English language learners, an action research plan followed. We discussed at length not only what we could do to continue to help support ESL students in writing, but what techniques we could add.

### **Procedure**

For the experimental group (Group 1), journals were given to each ESL student. As explained to the students, the purpose of the journals was to simply get the students writing without the concern of scrutiny. I started the communication process by commenting about myself and then writing a question in each journal. They would then be expected to respond, thus keeping the written conversation going. I would respond back to them and so it continued throughout the year. As stated in the literature synthesis, these journals were a way to provide ESL students the opportunity to write with freedom about whatever they desired, ask questions, and simply practice their English skills. Not only was it beneficial for them, but it also provided me with much needed insight as to how to help them in the classroom.

Generally speaking, the classroom teacher and I spent about two weeks for each genre of writing and then repeated the process. In between genres, we addressed grammar issues both on a basis of need and those outlined in the second grade curriculum. Using the pacing guide as a map, we navigated our way through the school year quite successfully. She and I took turns

being the lead teacher so we each had ample opportunity to be among the students throughout the lessons. We purposefully set out to create an encouraging writing environment so that all the students felt comfortable and safe to write their ideas without fear of harsh criticism. However, as experienced teachers, we knew when we needed to push and when to step back.

We began each genre by activating prior knowledge with a book, a piece of realia, or a think-pair-share. For example, if the genre was narrative, we had various books on display and/or discussed television shows and movies that told stories. We then conducted a read-aloud followed by rich engaging discussions, charting the components of the genre with the students for a visual aid and future reference. Charting the elements of a narrative led to vocabulary preview opportunities and in this example included the terms setting, characters, problem, solution, beginning, middle, and end. Using the text we just read, we identified and charted each element. Through informal assessments such as observations and class participation, we could pinpoint those who were ready to move on and those who were not. At the beginning of the year, we repeated this process the following day with a different book. If vocabulary was still a hindrance, we often physically acted out words of concern, showed examples, and allowed for collaborative learning experiences with their peers, but we made sure each and every student was ready before we moved to the next step. Using differentiation, we were able to provide students, who were ready from the onset of the lesson, opportunities for extension.

For every genre and task, scaffolded instruction was implemented as we progressed through the writing process. Graphic organizers were used to assist students in organizing their thoughts for the pre-writing stage. Differentiated organizers were also used as we had one student who had just moved to the United States and obviously required a more basic organizer. After modeling a class graphic organizer, the students began completing their own. The next



lesson would include taking our ideas from the class organizer, which was projected on the promethean board, and turning them into sentences. After we modeled our beginning, the students would create their beginnings and so on. Following each mini-lesson, students wrote and we monitored the room conferencing with students on a daily basis. When a rough draft was complete, we modeled revising followed by editing and finally publishing. By the year's end, the students were able to go through the process with less assistance and finally independently, but it was spring before they were ready to do so and some still needed assistance like our new-comer.

During the writing process, we were careful not to focus on punctuation and grammar mistakes. We wanted the students to have the freedom to express their ideas in written form also known as Fluency First. Ideally, and from what I gathered from the literature review, not focusing on conventions during the first half of the year would be greatly beneficial to the ESL students but it is not realistic as each student is graded in that area with the same rubric every nine weeks. Since grammar and conventions were scored with each genre, explicit lessons were provided between genres and of course, when individuals required it, but again, it was not our focus.

During post-planning, the team reconvened to analyze the data and discuss the improvement of the writing skills for most of the students and possible reasons for those that did not. We concurred that using the techniques outlined above proved to be beneficial to not only ESL students, but to general education students as well.

### **Data Analysis**

Below are two charts that document the quantitative data for each group of students. Actual names of the students were left out to protect their privacy. It is important to note the Tier of ACCESS given to each student when analyzing the students' progress or lack thereof.

Both writing samples were narratives and were scored with the same rubric. Students used the topic of their choice and were not given direct assistance. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that it is extremely difficult to receive a 3 on a writing piece using this rubric. If I could display the actual writing samples, it is possible one would notice more growth than shown in the results below for both groups.

### **Group 1 (Experimental Group)**

<b>Student</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Grade ACCESS Writing Score (TIER B)*</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Grade ACCESS Writing Score (TIER C)*</b>	<b>Pre-instruction Writing Sample Score**</b>	<b>Post-Instruction Writing Sample Score</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>Not enrolled in USA</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>

### **Group 2 (Control Group)**

<b>Student</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Grade ACCESS Writing Score (TIER B)</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Grade ACCESS Writing score (TIERC)</b>	<b>Pre-Instruction Writing Sample Score</b>	<b>Post-Instruction Writing Sample Score</b>
<b>F</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>G</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>H</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>J</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>K</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>

**\*ACCESS scores can range from 1.0-6.0 with 6.0 being the highest. There are also 3 tiers of the test A, B, and C. Tier C is the highest level of the test and is given to students who are proficient in English and have potential to exit the program in the near future.**

**\*\* Number scores from 1-3 are given in second grade for all academic areas.**

**1=does not meet standards**

**2=meets standards**

**3=exceeds standards**

**T-Tests using Baseline Data** (Group 1= Experimental Group, Group 2= Control Group)

A *t* test compares the means of two groups. Moreover, the *t* test compares one variable between the two groups. In this case, I used two *t* tests to compare growth with ACCESS scores and actual writing samples for both the experimental and control groups. The first two *t* tests below display the results for pre-instruction data and first grade ACCESS scores. The final two represent post-instruction data and second grade ACCESS scores.

**T-Test for Pre-Instruction Writing Sample**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Group One</b>	<b>Group Two</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>1.20</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>0.71</b>	<b>0.45</b>
<b>SEM</b>	<b>0.32</b>	<b>0.20</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

(The above results are not considered statistically significant.)

**T-Test ACCESS Scores (First Grade)**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Group One</b>	<b>Group Two</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.325</b>	<b>3.017</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>0.189</b>	<b>0.504</b>
<b>SEM</b>	<b>0.095</b>	<b>0.206</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>

(The above results are not considered statistically significant. Both groups were tested on Tier B.)

**T-Tests and Graph for Final Research Results****T-Test Post-instruction Writing Samples**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Group One</b>	<b>Group Two</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.20</b>	<b>1.80</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>0.45</b>	<b>0.84</b>
<b>SEM</b>	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.37</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

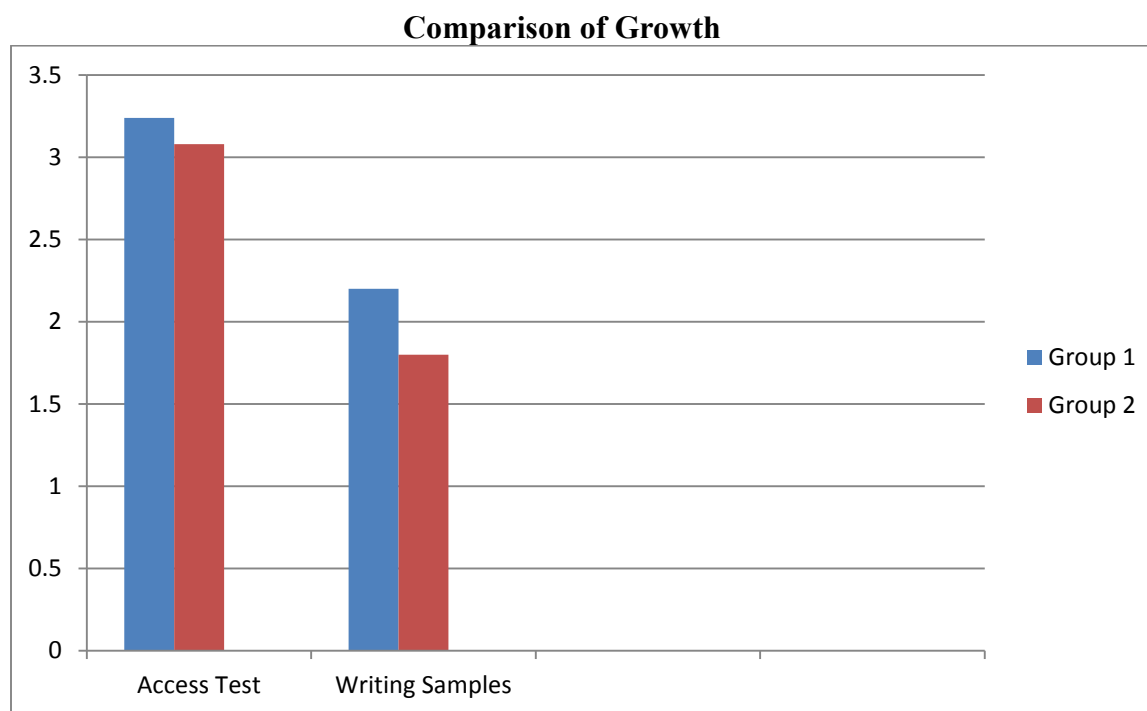
(The above results are not considered statistically significant.)

**T-Test ACCESS Scores (Second Grade)**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Group One</b>	<b>Group Two</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.240</b>	<b>3.080</b>

SD	0.351	0.259
SEM	0.157	0.116
N	5	5

(The above results are not considered statistically significant. Both groups were tested on Tier C with the exception of the newcomer from Group 1.)



The qualitative data gathered in the form of student/teacher surveys was very beneficial for the initial process for planning purposes, especially from the teachers' point of view. However, I will start with the student information. As shown in the Appendix, students were given a survey to complete regarding how they felt about writing and what they thought they needed help with. Nine out of the ten students felt excited/happy about writing and considered themselves good writers. Only one student said he was a bad writer and that was due to his handwriting skills. (One student was new to the United States so I did not ask him to complete

the survey.) When asked what they thought they needed help with, four students requested assistance in writing complete sentences whereas the rest wrote “I don’t know” or “learn more”.

The end of the year student surveys yielded the same results with ten out of eleven students rating themselves as good writers. However, it was a different student who did not feel confident about writing. Student “I” had a lot of family issues throughout the year and did not make much progress across the board. He lost a lot of confidence, generally speaking. Two students responded that the reason they were good writers was because they read what they wrote (a practice we frequently discussed), four indicated that their grades were better, two did not know, and one wrote because he was smart. For the last question which inquires as to what they still needed help with, they were well versed using the terms that were taught throughout the year. Four students listed organization, three wrote capitalization, two mentioned complete sentences, one did not know and my newcomer wanted to learn more English words.

The teacher surveys indicated that writing was a part of their everyday routine. Each one agreed from their past experiences, that they were aware that ESL students fall behind academically in the area of writing. When asked to pinpoint problem areas, four out of five teachers mentioned vocabulary, expression of ideas, and complete sentences. One teacher indicated that lack of prior knowledge was a hindrance for English learners. Techniques they had previously used included small group instruction, building real life connections, peer conferencing, teacher modeling, and student friendly rubrics. Everyone was willing to be on the “team”, but I chose to only collaborate with the teachers I was co-teaching with. At the year’s end, I met with the team which is discussed below therefore I did not give a survey to the rest of the second grade teachers.

### **Project Implications**

From the data, it is clear that for the most part, both groups improved. The experimental group improved slightly more than the control group, especially in the writing samples.

Everyone, including the newcomer, met the standards at the end of the year and also showed improvement on the ACCESS test. The control group was not as successful but three out of the six met the standards at the end of the year. However, each showed gains on the ACCESS test albeit slight for some.

As far as the qualitative student data is concerned, I believe it was lofty of me to think that in second grade, students can effectively self-evaluate. For the most part, they believe they are great at everything even if they are not, so they definitely find it hard to pinpoint what they have trouble with especially at the beginning of the school year. It was much easier for them at the end of the year because the subject was fresh on their minds. We had conferenced with them so consistently that they were aware of their shortcomings and for that matter, their strengths. Upon reflection, I wish I would have included strengths on the survey, instead I focused on weaknesses.

The project proved that the techniques implemented with the experimental group were, in fact, successful thus effective because the students' writing skills did improve. There still exist weaknesses in the area of complete sentences and expression of ideas for a few students. These students need additional explicit instruction with writing complete sentences rather than run-on sentences. As far as expression is concerned, the students who struggle in this area have lower English proficiency levels so the weakness is expected. Overall, the goals were met and problem areas addressed.

### **Limitations of the Research**

As with any research, there are outside variables to consider. In this particular project, the classroom teacher of the experimental group was out on maternity leave the last two months of school. The supply teacher was more than adequate yet it was very difficult to remain in the same rhythm and routine as before. Furthermore, she had very little experience teaching writing and we had opposing views as to how much to assist the children. I include this information as I expected most of the experimental group to score higher on the post-instruction writing sample. Another factor to consider is the proficiency levels of the two groups. Aside from the newcomer, the experimental group consisted of students who were more proficient in English than the control group, which in my mind put them at an unfair advantage when comparing growth. Additionally, the classroom teacher for the control group did not provide any writing instruction on the days that I was absent or testing new students. She also did not meet with students about their writing outside of our ESOL segment which was not the case for the experimental group. The classroom teacher of the experimental group continued the writing block for an additional twenty minutes past our ESOL segment each day, giving the group more time and assistance.

### **Discussions**

Going forward, the action research will continue. Although I will not be teaching with either one of the teachers from this project due to scheduling and other school related conflicts, I will continue to implement the techniques used with the experimental group. Ideally, the continued research would be more successful if I could teach with the same classroom teacher using what we know from the previous year, supplementing as indicated from the year-end results, and utilizing the new information we would receive from the pre-instruction writing sample gathered in the fall. In the future, I would also like to use two groups that are similar in English proficiency levels if at all possible to eliminate any unfair advantages. My plan is to

continue the research project so that I am always aware of the needs of my students as well as recent research-based strategies in writing to implement with my ESL students.

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