

## CHAPTER 3

# Facilitating Writing Fluency

Rana, a newcomer from India who was in fourth grade, learned how to communicate with her classmates and teacher quickly, but she wrote hesitantly. She was able to learn English words and phrases with no trouble and was pleased that she could communicate with her classmates. When it came to writing what she was thinking, however, Rana froze. Rana had learned the Indian alphabet in school before she arrived in the United States and was surprised that the letters that formed the English alphabet were very different. Ms. Wilson, Rana's teacher, worked with her and other newcomers to learn the English alphabet and simple sight words. With Ms. Wilson's expert teaching, Rana was able to learn how to write letters and short words in a few weeks. She also began learning simple rules of conventions, such as capitalizing the first letter in a word. Rana practiced writing sentences and, although she made many mistakes, she knew she was improving. Within a few months, Rana felt comfortable writing short sentences, but she still couldn't express all of her feelings and ideas in English. Ms. Wilson knew that she needed to help Rana and her other students develop writing fluency as she taught them the rules that govern English, so she contacted Ms. Ramos, the literacy coach, for ideas.

Students like Rana can have a difficult time incorporating their ability to learn conversational English into writing. According to Herrera, Perez, and Escamilla (2010), "The skills that allow a student to understand and/or speak English do not automatically transfer to writing" (p. 193). This is because writing is an output activity and thus is more complex than either listening or speaking. Many teachers are familiar with the notion that comprehensible input is necessary for language learning (Krashen, 1985). Ms. Wilson knew that speaking in class so that the ELLs could understand her was an example of comprehensible input. According to Anthony (2008), the output of ELLs is as important as language input. Output is defined as the product of learning, such as when students answer a question or take a test (Swain, 2005; VanPatten, 2003). When ELLs are producing language in output activities, they are accessing their knowledge of words, syntax (word order), and morphology (word forms). They are also "testing" how words go together through trial and error. Just participating in output activities, such as

speaking and writing, help ELLs practice ways to use English in different contexts. Anthony suggests that output activities, such as writing, need to be practiced so that they become automatic.

The ability to write automatically is commonly called writing fluency. This chapter explains the reasons why teachers need to focus on writing fluency, the challenges ELLs face when learning to write, and instructional strategies for facilitating writing fluency.

## **WHAT IS WRITING FLUENCY?**

Writing fluency is the ability to produce texts without drawing heavily on working memory (McCutchen, 2006). Since Rana was a new learner of English, she had to remember how to form the letters, how words are spelled, and how words form sentences. Since Rana could be classified as a beginning-level ELL writer who was transitioning into an early intermediate-level ELL writer (see Chapter 2 for stages of writing development), she needed to spend much of her cognitive capacity accomplishing basic writing skills. Her ability to form ideas worked much faster than her ability to write them down. Julio was another of Ms. Wilson's students. He had been in American schools for 3 years and was an intermediate-level writer. Julio was able to compose English sentences without much difficulty and was able to write down his thoughts quickly. According to McCutchen (2006), writers like Julio who are able to compose sentences quickly can use a higher percentage of their cognitive capacity to achieve higher-order tasks, such as organizing thoughts and choosing words.

When ELLs write, they are experimenting with English and trying out ways to express themselves. It's much like learning any new skill. Think about a skill you have learned or that you watched someone else learn. For example, think about learning to play the violin. Imagine for a moment taking the violin in your arms and lifting the bow to the strings. Then imagine a teacher explaining the fingerings for the notes, how to read music, and how to move the bow across the strings. After being taught each one of the skills, would you be ready for a performance? You need to practice and practice. The same principle holds true for writing. Students, especially ELLs, need to practice writing in order to build the kind of writing fluency that good writers need (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000).

### ***Facilitating Writing Fluency***

Writing fluency can be developed by participating in informal writing activities. Informal writing activities can take the form of writing in journals, responding to reading, or writing to learn. In each case, ELLs express what they are thinking without focusing too much on the conventions of language. With informal writing, it is the work of the mind that is more important than language conventions. Students need to know that for informal writing, it's the thought that counts, but more formal writing requires attention to details such as conventions.

There are two main reasons why informal writing activities are important for all writers, and especially for ELLs. Effective writing depends on being able to use low-level writing skills, such as letter production and the use of function words, automatically (Lesaux, Koda, Siegal, & Shanahan, 2006). When that is the case, writers are able to devote more cognitive capacity to expressing ideas and feelings. This is especially important for ELLs who are learning both the vocabulary and the grammar of a new language. In addition, informal writing can help ELLs learn. "Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning" (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 13).

ELLs need time to write. "Writing maturity develops through practice and trial and error. We must first challenge our writing to improve it. Safe writing allows no room for growth" (Sjolie, 2006, p. 39). Ms. Wilson learned that she needed to provide many opportunities for Rana and the other students to write in a nonthreatening environment. Before Ms. Wilson could get all of her students writing, however, she knew that she needed to address their knowledge of the English alphabet.

## **ALPHABETIC FEATURES**

Students won't be able to write fluently if they're not used to the English alphabet. Ms. Wilson had 10 ELLs, four of whom spoke Spanish and were familiar with most of the letters in the English alphabet. Six of the students were not. Olga and Leo spoke Russian and knew the Cyrillic alphabet; Xiaoqin was from China and used Chinese ideograms; Kaliaq was from Syria and used the Arabic alphabet; and Rana and Bansari spoke Hindi and used the Indian alphabet. Ms. Wilson decided that she needed to learn about the language systems of the world to determine how best to teach these fourth graders the English alphabet. She contacted Ms. Ramos who gave her some basic information about the world's writing systems.

### ***The World's Writing Systems***

The writing systems of the world are divided into two kinds: those that represent consonants and vowels (alphabets) and those that represent syllables (syllabaries). A few writing systems do both (Parker & Riley, 2010). Most of the 400 languages spoken in the United States are based on alphabets (Shin & Bruno, 2003) and are based on the five main language families: Latin or Roman, Cyrillic, Indian, Arabic, and Chinese (Bukiet, 1997). Each of these writing systems is briefly described as follows.

#### ***Latin***

The Latin alphabet, also called the Roman alphabet, was first used to write Latin and is the most widely used writing system in the world today. The Latin alphabet is the basis for English and most of the languages of Europe. The languages based on the

Latin writing system, especially English and Spanish, were spread around the world during the age of colonialism. Basic modern Latin alphabets have changed over the centuries but they all use at least 26 letters. Some of the modern languages that use the Latin alphabet are Afrikaans, Basque, Catalan, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Filipino, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Kurdish, Malay, Modern Latin, Norwegian, Romanian Slovak, Spanish, Swedish, and Zulu (Bukiet, 1997).

### *Cyrillic*

Cyrillic writing is the most recent of the scripts. It resembles Greek and is used by many people in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The languages that use Cyrillic do not necessarily use all of the 31 letters of the Cyrillic alphabet. Some of the languages that use Cyrillic are Belarusian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Russian, Serbian, and Ukrainian. It is also used by the following non-Slavic languages: Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek, of the former Soviet Union, and Mongolia. Cyrillic has become the third official alphabet of the European Union (*www.omniglot.com/*, June 5, 2009).

### *Indian*

The Indian alphabet is based on Phoenician and appeared in India before 500 B.C.E. In the Indian alphabet, each of the letters represents a consonant, vowels are indicated with diacritical markings, letters are grouped according to the way they are pronounced, and many letters have more than one form. Some of the modern languages that use the Indian script are Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. Hindi is spoken by approximately 40% of the people of India (Gupta, 2009).

### *Arabic*

Arabic is used primarily by the countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa. In addition to Modern Standard Arabic, which is the language of literacy, other spoken dialects exist across the region such as Egyptian Arabic, Gulf Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, Levantine Arabic, and Maghrebi Arabic. These dialects are generally mutually intelligible with the exception of Maghrebi Arabic, which is spoken in Northern Africa. The Arabic script is written from right to left. Only the consonants and the three long vowels are represented by the Arabic alphabet. Short vowels are orthographically represented with diacritics; that is, marks that are placed over or under the letters (S. Al-Widyan, e-mail communication, January 31, 2009).

### *Chinese*

The Chinese writing system is the only nonalphabetic language in use today and is the world's oldest writing system. Chinese is based on ideograms that represent

ideas or words. Each character represents one syllable each of which has a meaning. Chinese script spread to Korea with Buddhism in the seventh century and from there to Japan. It is currently used by one-fifth of the world's population and can be found in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. Although the Chinese dictionary has more than 47,000 characters, educators note that it takes the knowledge of only 4,000 characters to be literate in Chinese, 2,000 of which a child learns by age 10 (Bukiet, 1997; Parker & Riley, 2010).

### ***Directionality of Writing Systems***

Not only do different writing systems contain different alphabets, writing systems can also be written in different directions. Most of the modern languages are similar to English and are read from left to right horizontally. Some languages, however, are written from right to left horizontally; some are written left to right vertically; some are written right to left vertically; and still others can be written in more than one direction. Although scholars do not know with certainty why the languages were written in different directions, it is supposed that the different directions are based on the writing surfaces writers originally used and the writing implements they used. Figure 3.1 is a chart with various languages and the direction in which they are written.

### ***Teaching the English Alphabet***

Ms. Wilson realized that she needed to teach some of her students about the Latin alphabet and even the directionality of reading and writing. She and Ms. Ramos decided to expand their repertoire of ideas by talking with a kindergarten teacher. Ms. Wilson learned that teachers of young children have some good ideas that can be incorporated into all grade levels for students who need to learn the basics of English. Two of those ideas, teaching concepts about print and using alphabet books, are described next.

### ***Concepts about Print***

The knowledge about directionality of language is typically learned when children are very young (Teale & Sulzby, 1989). Children who are exposed to books in English learn that reading moves from left to right horizontally and that pages are turned from right to left. Even looking at environmental print, such as signs and billboards, provides children with information about how the language works. Clay (1985) termed this knowledge "print concepts."

ELLs who have learned print concepts that are different from English can be taught through shared reading and writing. Ms. Wilson decided to pair her ELLs with native speakers to learn these concepts. She gave each pair a book and told the English speakers to read the book while moving their fingers under the line of print and turning the pages slowly. After repeating this process a few times, Ms. Wilson then asked the English speakers to help the ELLs move their fingers

FIGURE 3.1. Directionality and languages.	
Left to right Horizontal	Armenian, Batak, Bengali, Blackfoot, Burmese, Cherokee, Cree, Cyrillic, Dehong Dai/Tai Le, Ethiopic, Fraser, Georgian, Greek, Gujarati, Gurmukhi (Punjabi), Hmong, Inuktitut, Irish Uncial, Javanese, Kpelle, Lanna, Lao, Latin alphabet languages, Limbu, Malayalam, Manpuri, Modern Mayan languages, Modi, Naxi, Ojibwe, Oriya, Ranjana, Redjang, Santali, Sinhala, Soali, Sorang Sompeng, Sourashtra, Syloti Nagri, Tagalog, Tai Dam, Tai Lue, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan, Yi
Right to left Horizontal	Arabic*, Aramaic, Chinese, Hebrew, Mende, N’Ko, Tifinagh *In Arabic numerals are written from left to right.
Left to right Vertical	Manchu, Mongolian
Right to left Vertical	Chinese, Japanese, Korean
Variable	Chinese can be written from right to left in vertical columns, left to right in horizontal lines, or occasionally right to left in horizontal lines. In Taiwan it is often written in vertical columns, while in China it is usually written horizontally from left to right. In newspapers and magazines with vertical text, some of the headlines and titles are written horizontally right to left across the top of the main text. Japanese can be written from right to left in vertical columns or left to right in horizontal lines.
Data from Bukiet, S. (1997). <i>Scripts of the world</i> . Lathrup Village, MI, and Cincinnati, OH: Multi-Cultural Books & Videos and AIMS International Books. Gipe, J. P. (2010). <i>Multiple paths to literacy: Assessment and differentiated instruction for diverse learners K-12</i> . Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Omniglot: Writing systems and languages of the world. <a href="http://www.omniglot.com">www.omniglot.com</a> . Parker, F., & Riley, K. (2010). <i>Linguistics for non-linguists: A primer with exercises</i> (5th ed). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.	

under the print and turn the pages. The student pairs repeated this activity over several days until the ELLs learned the direction they were supposed to read in English.

### Alphabet Books

Alphabet books are not just for young children; they can be just as appropriate for older students. Alphabet books have letters arranged in sequential order from A through Z. There are many alphabet books that range over a multitude of topics. Some alphabet books are whimsical, such as *Jazz ABZ* (Marsalis, 2005), and others are serious, such as *A to Z China* (Fontes & Fontes, 2003). Some alphabet books also contain poems, such as *B is for Beaver: An Oregon Alphabet* (Smith & Smith, 2003), and some have informational paragraphs for each letter. Reading alphabet books helps students become familiar with the names, sounds, letters, and order of the

alphabet. They are also excellent for teaching phonemic awareness and alliteration.

Reading alphabet books to ELLs or having them read the books paired with native speakers facilitates the learning of the alphabet. While reading, the teacher should point out any special features and eventually encourage the ELLs to recite the alphabet along with them. Teachers can also have students write alphabet books at all ages and can differentiate the assignment by having students write words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs (Evers, Lang, & Smith, 2009). Teachers can also write alphabet books for their students, as exemplified in Figure 3.2.

**FIGURE 3.2.** *B Is for Bilingual*, edited by Anna Tachouet and McCale Ashenbrenner.

- A** is for alphabet, reading and writing in both.
- B** is for bilingual, being bicultural, bi-literate and living in the best of both worlds.
- C** is for communication, connecting to other people.
- D** is for dedication, devoting yourself to a multicultural world.
- E** is for enthusiasm, emitting energy and empathy.
- F** is for food, eating your way into countries and cultures.
- G** is for games, using play to gain global perspectives.
- H** is for hope, helping students understand the possibilities.
- I** is for immersion, using ingenuity to stay afloat.
- J** is for joyous, when joining the bilingual community.
- K** is for knowledge, discovering grammar, vocabulary, culture and more.
- L** is for love of learning, always longing for new challenges.
- M** is for music, helping to memorize through melodies.
- N** is for necessity, the increasing demand for languages in a global society.
- O** is for optimism, having an open mind and positive attitude for what's new.
- P** is for people and places, sharing your personality and perspective.
- Q** is for quality, quickly and concisely saying what you mean.
- R** is for relevance, remaining engaging and pertinent.
- S** is for speech, showcasing your language learning skills.
- T** is for travel, oh the places you'll go when you have two languages in tow.
- U** is for unique, understanding your own perspective.
- V** is for visuals, seeing a language come alive.
- W** is for wanderlust, always searching to broaden horizons.
- X** is for being excellent at crossing cultures.
- Y** is for yes, a positive attitude has you always yearning to learn more.
- Z** is for zeal, now you're ready to share your enthusiasm and knowledge.

### ***Language Differences with the English Alphabet***

After teaching alphabet books for several days, Ms. Wilson noticed that some of her students were still having difficulties with certain letters. According to Olshtain (2001), teachers should help students whose own alphabet is similar to English, like Spanish, by focusing only on the differences between the alphabets. So Ms. Wilson decided to spend some extra time teaching her Spanish-speaking students English sounds that are not found in Spanish, such as /v/ in *vote*, /th/ in *then*, /z/ in *zoo*, /zh/ in *measure*, and /j/ in *jump* and also blends with an /s/ such as *wasp*, *last*, *desk*, and *star* (see Johns & Lenski, 2010, for additional language differences). For students who know a completely different alphabet, Olshtain suggests that teachers spend extra time working on the recognition of the English consonants and vowels, again focusing on sounds that are new to students.

#### ***English Consonants***

English is not a completely phonetic language, but it does have a group of rules that govern it (Chomsky & Halle, 1968). ELLs tend to look for a one-to-one letter-sound correspondence and this works well with the 21 English consonants. A few English consonants have more than one sound: The letter *c* can have the sound /k/ when followed by the letters *a*, *o*, *u*, *l*, or *r*, but it has the sound /s/ when followed by the vowels *e* or *i*. The letter *c* has a different sound when followed by the letter *h*, such as *chocolate* or *choir*, or the letter *k*, such as *chicken*. The consonants *g* and *h* also have a few more rules than do the other consonants.

#### ***English Vowels***

The English vowel sounds are more complicated, but they do have some rules that can be widely applied. There are five vowels in English (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*) that result in at least 11 different sounds. Olshtain (2001) suggests that teaching the vowel sounds by focusing on the types of letter environments works best. For example, the letter combination consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) most often results in the short vowel sound, as in the words *cat*, *dog*, and *bag*. Long vowels are typically found in the combinations consonant-vowel (CV) and consonant-vowel-consonant-silent *e* (CVCe) as illustrated by the words *he*, *see*, and *game*. As teachers use the letter combinations to teach vowel sounds, they should also be aware that the terms *long* and *short vowel sounds* might be confusing to some ELLs. Some students might think that the terms *long* and *short* are used to express the length the sound is spoken as it does in some languages rather than how the vowel sounds.

### **ACTIVITIES FOR BEGINNING AND EARLY INTERMEDIATE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY WRITERS**

Ms. Wilson taught fourth grade but sometimes she felt as if she were teaching first grade. She considered five of her students as beginning-level ELL writers even though

it was February. (See Chapter 2 for a description of writing stages.) Four of her ELLs and one other student still needed practice writing simple words. Ms. Wilson knew that beginning-level ELL writers should be encouraged to write words and sentences. Fourth-grade beginners should be able, at the very least, to copy words and the alphabet, according to the writing standards found in Chapter 2. She also agreed with the British author Cowley (2002) that she should have all of her ELLs teach the class how to write a few words in their own language, so she had each one share five words from his or her language. To encourage the beginning-level ELL writers, Ms. Wilson was able to adapt activities from her primary teaching colleagues and Ms. Ramos to help them learn to write simple words. Four of the activities she used were signing in, writing the room, sharing the pen, and teaching sight words.

### ***Signing In***

Researchers have found that having students sign their names when they enter the classroom promotes literacy development (Richgels, 1995). Name writing empowers beginning-level ELL writers and provides an entry point through which they gain insights into written language (Clay, 1975). As students learn to write their names, they practice writing English letters and begin to notice the sounds associated with the letters. Once students are able to write their names, they can begin writing other words next to their names on the sign-in list. Ms. Wilson also placed a column on the sign-in list for things like favorite foods, colors, girls' names, boys' names, and so on. Students practiced writing their names and one other word every day. After several weeks had passed, Ms. Wilson began to encourage students to write lists. She asked all of her students, for example, to write as many words as possible that begin with the letter *b* or all of the things they could think of that were white. Ms. Wilson began using this as a prewriting activity. As students became more competent at writing lists of words, she was able to have them write sentences.

### ***Writing the Room***

Ms. Wilson had already labeled all of the features of her classroom and had as much environmental print as possible for students to read. She also had logos from household articles posted on her bulletin board (Prior & Gerard, 2004). In addition, Ms. Wilson had a sentence wall to help her students learn how academic words are used in sentences (Carrier & Tatum, 2006). Students were given time each day to "write the room." They were given paper and markers and were asked to write any words or sentences that they saw around the room. Students were also allowed to add words or sentences to their pages. This activity helped many of the students become more comfortable writing English words and sentences.

### ***Sharing the Pen***

Literacy instruction for ELLs tends to focus on drill and practice of decontextualized skills rather than on authentic writing (Manyak, 2008). While attending

to discrete skills has its place in writing instruction, activities in which students write sentences or paragraphs that express their ideas can support students' literacy development. One activity that Ms. Wilson used to promote authentic text is called Sharing the Pen.

Students and teachers "share the pen" as they create text with interactive writing (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994). This activity begins with teachers and students thinking of a shared experience or familiar story to write about. Then the teacher composes the first sentence that describes the events and writes it on the chalkboard. Students copy the sentence on their paper. The teacher then asks the students to think of the next sentence. After the students agree on the sentence, the teacher asks them to write it down. If students have trouble with any of the words, he or she can assist them. The teacher scaffolds the students' writing by helping them spell or write any of the words they don't know, allowing them to focus on the ideas as well as on the mechanics of writing. The teacher and students continue to "share the pen" until they have finished the description.

### Teaching Sight Words

Knowledge of sight words is critical for fluent reading and writing. When students know sight words, they are able to read, write, and say the words automatically. There are 13 basic sight words in English that account for nearly 25% of the words that occur in texts (Fry, Fountoukidis, & Polk, 2000). They are *a, and, for, he, in, is, it, of, that, the, to, was, and you*. Basic sight words are a necessary, but insufficient, basis for fluent reading and writing. The Revised Dolch List comprises approximately 50% of the words children encounter in reading (Johns, 1981). The most common sight words are listed in Figure 3.3.

FIGURE 3.3. Common sight words.

a	his	they
about	I	this
all	if	to
am	in	was
and	is	we
are	it	were
as	of	what
at	on	when
be	or	would
but	out	you
by	said	
can	so	
for	some	
from	that	
had	the	
have	their	
he	there	

Sight words are best taught through explicit instruction because the words themselves are abstract. Nor are most sight words easy to decode. Basic sight words, however, are common in speech so showing students words and phrases that are used in common speech patterns helps them remember sight words. Another way to teach sight words is to label classroom objects by using sight words with nouns, such as *the* lion, *a* pencil, or line up *by* the door. Students can then copy these sight words as they “write the room.”

## **INFORMAL WRITING STRATEGIES**

As the year progressed and as Ms. Wilson’s ELLs spent time writing, all of them became competent using the English alphabet and writing sight words. Even Rana was able to write simple sentences fluently. Some of the ELLs, like Rana, had learned how to compose writing in their native language, so once they learned how to use English, their writing skills grew rapidly. Other students in Ms. Wilson’s class were intermediate writers and were quickly learning how to write. Ms. Wilson found that using storytelling, translated stories, and journal writing helped all of her students become more fluent writers.

### ***Storytelling***

Many of the students in Ms. Wilson’s class came from backgrounds that value oral language so she decided to use storytelling as the basis for encouraging students to write. Cultures that have primarily oral traditions, such as Hawaiian, Hmong, Latin American, and many African cultures, use storytelling and songs as entertainment, passing on traditional values, and sharing history (see Thao, 2006). Stories are used in these cultures to instill cultural knowledge, share personal experiences, inspire, entertain, and examine or share individual and cultural identities (Johnstone, 2001; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Stories are also used to share a community’s beliefs, values, and attitudes (Heath, 1983). According to Bruner (1996), people “swim in a sea of stories” that are used to construct a model of a version of themselves in the community they inhabit.

According to Perry (2008), storytelling is an important cultural practice for many marginalized communities in the United States, and using storytelling in the classroom can influence students’ literacy practices. Ms. Wilson knew that stories from different cultures can have different structures, but that stories are typically defined as a sequence of events that tells an actual or fictional experience (Labov, 1972). She decided to capitalize on the stories that her students knew from their home culture as a “border-crossing” activity. (Border-crossing is Zhang’s [2007] term for importing practices from different contexts.) Ms. Wilson knew that all of her students, not only those from cultures with oral traditions, have stories to share. Some stories students know or create are mixed with popular culture, such as music, movies, and television (Dyson, 2003), but all of her students tell stories.

Ms. Wilson decided to use storytelling as a springboard for building writing fluency. To begin, she asked students to think about stories they knew or could create. Some students needed help, so she used an activity adapted from Lenski and Johns (2004) called “Let Me Tell You a Story” (see Figure 3.4). In this activity, students read a list of ideas to spark their memories about stories they knew and placed a check mark next to some of the items on the list. Then Ms. Wilson divided her class into pairs and had each member of the pair tell a story. After all of the students had shared their stories, Ms. Wilson asked them to write the stories on paper without worrying too much about the conventions of language. She emphasized that writing fluently meant getting the words down on paper and that they would correct spelling and usage errors at another time.

### ***Translating Stories to English***

As ELLs learn English, they are frequently responsible for interpreting communications and translating documents from their home language to English (Martinez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008). Ms. Wilson knew that most of her ELLs translated for their parents and grandparents as they learned English. Some of their translations focused around school communications, and so Ms. Wilson decided to connect students’ home lives with her writing program. She asked her ELLs to list the kinds of interpreting and translating they already do. The list included translating notes from the school, telephone conversations, doctor’s visits, and translating mail. Ms. Wilson then encouraged her ELLs to also ask their family members to tell them stories from their childhood or from their home country. She knew that translating stories into English would help students value their home culture (Dworin, 2006). At school, Ms. Wilson was able to help students find the English words they needed to complete their stories. Ms. Wilson asked the students to translate as much of the stories as they could and write them down in their journals. An example of a story told by a Russian grandmother and translated into English can be found in Figure 3.5.

### ***Journal Writing***

Ms. Wilson had given students journal topics for a number of years but she was never sure what her purposes were. She instinctively knew that having students write in journals could make them more comfortable with writing. And she was right. Journal writing helps students develop fluency (Newman, 1983). Journals are typically notebooks where students can write whatever they want. They are often used as places for students to write down what they think, see, feel, or have experienced. When students write in journals, they are formulating ideas and practicing expressing themselves in English. They are learning how to string together ideas into sentences and paragraphs to make their thoughts comprehensible.

Writing in journals, however, is not only a way to express thoughts; it can also be a process of discovery. Journal writing can be a spontaneous, unplanned means of understanding oneself (Giorgis, 2002). When writing in journals, students can

FIGURE 3.4. “Let Me Tell You a Story.”

Please ask me to tell you a story about the ideas I’ve checked.

- |                       |                             |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| ___ my family         | ___ my favorite food        |
| ___ a fun party       | ___ work I do               |
| ___ a TV show         | ___ a time I helped someone |
| ___ when I was little | ___ a video game            |
| ___ things I like     | ___ my neighbors            |
| ___ my family         | ___ my town                 |
| ___ my pet            | ___ places I’ve lived       |

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**FIGURE 3.5.** Translated Russian folk tale.

Once a man planted a turnip. The turnip grew to be the biggest turnip anyone had seen. The man decided to pull the turnip and make soup for his family. He started to pull the turnip, but he couldn't get it out of the ground. He pulled and pulled and pulled. Finally, he called his wife to help him.

The wife took hold of the man and they pulled together, but couldn't pull out the turnip. So they called their daughter. The daughter took hold of the wife who took hold of the man. They pulled and pulled, but they couldn't pull out the turnip.

The daughter called the dog. The dog took hold of the daughter who took hold of the wife who took hold of the man. They pulled and pulled, but they couldn't pull out the turnip.

The dog called over the cat. The cat took hold of the dog who took hold of the daughter who took hold of the wife who took hold of the man. They pulled and pulled, but they couldn't pull out the turnip.

So the cat called the mouse. The mouse took hold of the cat who took hold of the dog who took hold of the daughter who took hold of the wife who took hold of the man. They pulled and pulled and they finally pulled out the turnip!

(When the story is told in Russian, the words form a tongue twister.)

relive experiences from a different vantage point and let their imagination redefine reality; they can explore new worlds, and become more cognizant of their own beliefs. When writing in journals, students can learn what they truly think and who they really are (Piper, 2006). Artists, scientists, engineers, and dancers write in journals to record events and to reflect on their reactions. Anderson and Anderson (2003) expressed a common feeling about journal writing: "Sometimes I don't know what I think until I see what I write" (p. 94).

Just asking students to write in journals may not result in much writing. That's why Ms. Wilson usually provided her students with one or more journal prompts. She also gave students the option of writing about whatever they wanted. One year Ms. Wilson tried giving journal prompts almost every day. She found that the students grew tired of the activity so she now gives journal-writing prompts twice a week. Figure 3.6 contains a short list of journal-writing prompts that Ms. Wilson has found useful. Ms. Wilson often wrote questions back to her ELLs to clarify words or ideas that they were struggling to come up with. In this way, she could model vocabulary and sentence structures without correcting students' writing.

### *Journal-Writing Issues*

There are a number of issues to consider when giving students journal-writing assignments. First, journals need not be graded or even read. The audience for

journals should be the students, so it is not necessary for teachers to read students' journal entries. Ms. Wilson reads two to three students' journals every day on a rotating basis so that in 2 week's time she has read one entry from each student. When she collects the students' journals, she asks them to tag the page they want her to read. Because students know that their teacher will read their journal occasionally, they know that they should not write about personal issues that they don't want read. Teachers in many states are mandatory reporters, which means that if they suspect any type of abuse, they must report it to social services. Sometimes students write things in journals that they really want to keep private, and at times students exaggerate during journal writing. Teachers should let students know that journal entries are part of schoolwork and are not strictly private.

Another issue Ms. Wilson had to face was whether to allow students to write in their home language or whether she should encourage students to write only in English. Since the goal of the writing assignment was to encourage fluency in writing English, Ms. Wilson told students that they should attempt to write in English, but that they could use their home language if they couldn't think of the English word for something and they didn't want to interrupt their writing to ask someone. Switching languages in this way is called "code-switching" and is commonly accepted in certain types of student writing (Wheeler & Swords, 2006).

**FIGURE 3.6.** Journal-writing topics.

About my family . . .  
What I did last night . . .  
Places I've seen . . .  
Favorite TV programs . . .  
Weekend chores . . .  
My dreams . . .  
What surprises me . . .  
Things that scare me . . .  
What I learned . . .  
My family . . .  
Places I want to see . . .  
What I wish . . .  
Valuable possessions . . .  
People I admire . . .  
How I spend my time . . .  
My biggest problem . . .  
Things I wonder about . . .  
What bothers me . . .  
When I grow up . . .

Some teachers prefer to have students write using both languages so that they can write more fluently. If students have the opportunity to learn literacy in their home language, it will help them develop a repertoire of strategies for writing in English.

### **RESPONDING TO READING AS AN INFORMAL WRITING ACTIVITY**

Ms. Wilson read her class a picture book or a chapter in a novel every day. She knew that students needed to hear stories in English to learn how language works. She also decided to have students write in response to reading so that they could reinforce their knowledge of the story and practice writing. After each day's reading, she would ask the class to name a dozen or so vocabulary words from the story that they wanted her to spell out for them. These words she listed on the board.

When students write in response to stories, they begin to listen in new ways. They are listening to retell the story or they are listening for something specific. When students respond to reading, they are bringing their background knowledge and experience to the reading event (see Rosenblatt, 1978). According to Echevarria and Graves (2003), ELLs are more successful and have a better attitude toward learning when they can use their background knowledge to respond to reading. This personal response may not indicate a complete understanding of the story but it could show that the student was trying to make meaning of the story.

Ms. Wilson was able to develop a number of activities that gave her ELLs opportunities to write as well as to respond to reading. Some of these activities were two-column response charts, response cards, and e-mail dialogue journals or blogs.

#### ***Two-Column Response Charts***

Two-column response charts (Ollmann, 1991/1992) are designed for students to think more deeply about specific things that authors write. Authors include many facts, ideas, and emotions that different students respond to in different ways. For example, in the book *If You're Not from the Prairie* (Bouchard, 1995) the author writes about different aspects of living on the prairie, such as the wind, the flat landscape, and the snow. When students hear this book, they can write something they hear in the left side of the chart. On the right side, they write a response, usually what they think or how they feel about the statement. The comments students make can lead to a lively discussion about the story that can, in turn, lead to more writing.

Ms. Wilson would sometimes pair her lower-proficiency-level ELLs with native English speakers. The ELL would dictate a response to the native speaker, who would write it down. The ELL would then copy what the native speaker had written.

### **Response Cards**

When ELLs read grade-level text independently, they may miss important parts of the story and have minimal comprehension as a result. When students have to write responses after reading, they stop and reflect, thus increasing their understanding of the story (Berger, 1996). Students could also be encouraged to write responses to the self-selected reading. Figure 3.7 includes some ideas that Ms. Wilson used to encourage students to write responses to stories they heard or read. Taking notes on their reading can serve the dual purpose of practicing writing while keeping track of the flow of ideas in reading passages. Ms. Wilson supported her ELLs by giving them paragraph frames to help them write their responses to the stories.

### **E-mail and Blogs**

E-mail is a familiar tool for almost every student today and can be a good method for students to respond to stories. When students write an e-mail, they typically do not pay close attention to the conventions of writing; instead, they concentrate on getting a message to the reader. This type of writing illustrates what teachers want students to do when writing informally. Students should concentrate on writing as much as they can, making the text readable, but not being overly concerned about writing in Standard English. (That can come later and with other types of writing assignments, and the spell-check feature can help students with spelling.) Students can write e-mails about a story they heard or read, either to a friend or to a teacher. Many teachers also have the capacity for developing blogs. For some reason, some students will eagerly write a blog about a book when they typically don't like to write. Encouraging students to write e-mails or blog in response to reading can motivate even the most reluctant writer.

Asking ELLs to write using e-mail, blogs, or word-processing programs assumes that they have some level of keyboarding skills. Once ELLs acquire these skills, e-mailing and blogging can be an effective way for them to develop writing fluency.

## **WRITING TO LEARN WITH LEARNING JOURNALS**

Ms. Wilson was pleased that all of her students, including her ELLs, were writing in journals and responding to reading. She wondered, however, whether there were other ways students could practice writing so that they learned science, social studies, and other academic subjects. Ms. Wilson talked with another teacher who told her about learning journals. Learning journals are places for students to record what they have learned. They provide the double benefit of helping students practice writing in English using academic language and in solidifying their knowledge of academic subjects.

Asking students to record what they have learned helps them understand what they know (Fulwiler, 1987). This is particularly important for ELLs who need

FIGURE 3.7. Response cards.

**Questions about Authors**

How do you picture the author?  
What would you ask the author if you could?  
Why do you think the author wrote this book?

**Questions about the Plot**

What happened in the story?  
What was the problem in the story?  
What part was most exciting?

**Questions about the Characters**

How would you describe the main characters?  
Would you choose one of the characters as a friend?  
How are the characters like or unlike one of your friends?  
How do the characters change in the story?

**Questions about the Setting**

Where did the story take place?  
When did the story take place?

**Questions about the Theme**

What was the point of the story?

**Questions about the Style**

How did you feel while you were reading this book?  
Did you like the first sentence in the book?  
Did the author use words that were interesting?

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a great deal of practice with academic language (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002). For this reason having students write in order to learn is a powerful learning tool, both in content area learning and for writing instruction. Students learn content material through the mental processes they experience as they write (Elbow, 1981; Farnan & Dahl, 2003).

Ms. Wilson remembered what she had learned in the ELL study group with Ms. Ramos and the other teachers. She knew that she would need to support her ELLs' content area writing by teaching them to write and properly use academic vocabulary, or brick words, and the other word patterns that characterize the various content areas, or mortar words. To do this, Ms. Wilson kept a word wall with key content vocabulary words on display in the classroom, arranging the words by subject area. She also made use of sentence and paragraph frames, providing ELLs at different proficiency levels with just enough scaffolding so that they could successfully write about their lessons.

### **Learning Journal Prompts**

Ms. Wilson found that she needed to supply students with a variety of learning journal prompts to get them to write about academic subjects. Through trial and error, she was able to develop a list that included easy and difficult questions (see Figure 3.8). She most often allowed students to make choices about which prompt to use, but at times she found that she needed to target particular questions for some students. For example, Abdisa, an immigrant from Ethiopia, tended to answer the first question whenever given the choice. Ms. Wilson, therefore, decided to push Abdisa to connect what he was learning in social studies class to the present day. Once Abdisa tried a new question, he felt confident enough to try to think in other ways about the subject he was learning (see Figure 3.9). Generating ideas for writing is the hardest part for almost all writers. Having students explore a topic

**FIGURE 3.8.** Learning journal prompts.

- What did you learn from today's lesson?
- How do you feel about the subject you are learning?
- How did this lesson relate to your life?
- Select an idea from the lesson and explain it.
- Write a letter to a historical figure discussing an event.
- Write a letter to a contemporary figure discussing a historical event.
- Compare what you learned in this lesson to a previous lesson.
- Explain how you would teach this lesson to a friend.
- What else do you know about this topic?
- How does this lesson connect to other things you've learned?

**FIGURE 3.9.** Writing sample from a sixth-grade Ethiopian immigrant student.

*Dear President Roosevelt,*

*I'm a photographer who traveled the country documenting the effects of the Great depression. In this time lot people life looks miserable. They doesn't have any job and shelter. This people needs food. shelter, clothing and job. Mr. President this people have victims of the Depression. I saw lot people hurt by losing house and they didn't get enough food. I felt fear and so sad. I smelled dirty and I heard when childrens cried to get food. Mr. President you should do to help hurting Americans, you should create the job. You should make rules to help this poor people. I hope you'd change everthing. The time has com. Thank you for everything you do.*

*sincerely Abdisa Godana*

through reading and discussion before writing will help them to have ideas about what to write. Taking notes while they read helps students to remember what they have read and gives them additional writing practice.

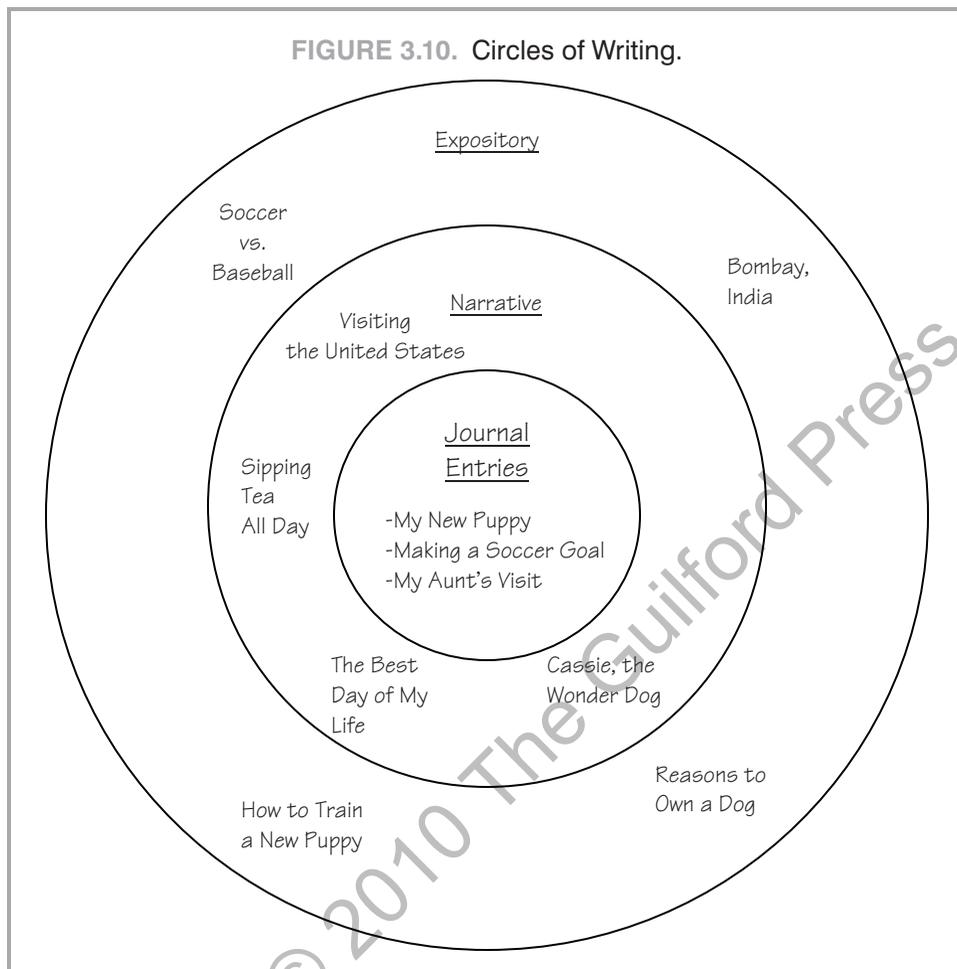
### **BENEFITS OF INFORMAL WRITING ACTIVITIES**

Ms. Wilson was pleased with her students' progress when she gave them informal writing assignments such as writing in journals, responding to reading, and writing in learning journals. Her students were becoming more confident, fluent writers. She was especially pleased with Rana's progress. By the end of the year, Rana was able to compose her own sentences and short paragraphs. However, Ms. Wilson was concerned that students were not learning how to write Standard English by using these informal writing assignments.

Informal writing can be beneficial on its own, and it can also help students in other areas of writing. Chapters 4 and 5 describe narrative and expository writing, respectively, and explain how to teach the writing process. Much of the informal writing done by Ms. Wilson's students ended up being rough drafts for other types of writing. Ms. Wilson also used some of the informal writing that she read to inform her instruction about English grammar and usage.

#### ***Circles of Writing***

Students' informal writings can be used as prewriting for other more formal pieces of writing (see Chapters 4 and 5). Hughey and Slack (2001) suggest that students develop Circles of Writing to help them use their informal writing pieces as the springboard for stories and expository pieces (see Figure 3.10). Ms. Wilson



used this strategy to help Rana develop as a writer. She wrote the names of some of her personal and learning journal pieces in the center of the circle. Then she helped Rana identify some of the stories that were of most interest to her to use as drafts for narratives. In the outermost circle, Rana identified some topics from her journals that could be the basis of expository pieces. Using the Circles of Writing, Ms. Wilson was able to help students see that their informal writing pieces were “thought pieces” that could be used in other writing situations.

### ***Distinguishing between Talk and Writing***

Informal writing is similar to speech in that it doesn't focus on the conventions of language as much as producing written output. This kind of writing helps students explore their thoughts and ideas, make tentative responses to literature, and investigate their learning. When students write using informal writing activities,

they use words and language to discover the meaning of their experiences and of their learning (Murray, 1982). It's almost like writing down thoughts and speech without paying too much attention to editing.

Ms. Wilson knew that she needed to scaffold students' ability to distinguish between conversation and writing so they wouldn't be confused when they were assigned formal writing activities. When students write informally, they often write what they hear in conversation. For example, many of Ms. Wilson's ELLs wrote *kinda* rather than *kind of* and *wanna* rather than *want to*. Ms. Wilson used the information she got from looking at students' informal writing for on-the-spot teaching. She told students that when English speakers talk, they shift their pronunciation of function words. In English, function words are not given the same emphasis as content words (Allington, 2009) so that when people talk their words sound as if they are running together. For example, when Ms. Wilson's students heard the words *want to* from fluent English speakers, it sounds like *wanna*. Ms. Wilson used this and other examples to show students how to write these common English phrases to scaffold students' English learning so that as students developed writing fluency they also continued to develop their competence in their knowledge about the English language.

### **SUMMARY**

ELLs come from a variety of language groups, some of whom may not be familiar with the English writing system. These ELLs need to learn the English alphabet and the directionality of English. All ELLs, from beginning to advanced English proficiency writers, need practice writing connected text. Teachers can provide ELLs with writing practice by helping students build writing fluency.

Writing fluency is the ability to write without spending cognitive effort on sight words or on conventions. Students who write fluently focus primarily on communicating their thoughts or feelings. Teachers can facilitate writing fluency through a variety of activities including writing in journals, responding to writing, and writing to learn.

### **WEB RESOURCES**

Alphabets of the World  
[www.word2word.com/alphabet.html](http://www.word2word.com/alphabet.html)

Excellent resource for information about the world's alphabets.

EFL/ESL Lessons and Lesson Plans from the Internet TESOL Journal  
[iteslj.org/Lessons](http://iteslj.org/Lessons)

A variety of ideas for all of the language arts.

Language Variations

[www.mla.org/census\\_main](http://www.mla.org/census_main)

A map of language variations in the United States.

Omniglot: Writing Systems and Languages of the World

[www.omniglot.com](http://www.omniglot.com)

Information about all of the world's languages, past and present.

Sentence Fluency Lessons

[www.teacher2teacherhelp.com/six-trait-writing/sentence-fluency-activities-and-minilessons](http://www.teacher2teacherhelp.com/six-trait-writing/sentence-fluency-activities-and-minilessons)

Lessons that teach students how to build sentences.

Spanish Cognates

[www.latinamericalinks.com/spanish\\_cognates.htm](http://www.latinamericalinks.com/spanish_cognates.htm)

A list of Spanish cognates organized alphabetically.

Story Corp

[www.storycorps.net](http://www.storycorps.net)

Stories told from different generations across the country.

Write Source Writing Topics

[www.thewritesource.com/writing\\_topics](http://www.thewritesource.com/writing_topics)

A variety of journal-writing topics.