"But That's Not How I Write": Writing, Teaching Writing, and English Learners

Tracy Spies, Ed Nagelhout, and Cristina Reding

Across the nation, writing teachers continue to struggle with teaching secondary students to write effectively, with only about 27% of these students demonstrating writing proficiency (National Center for Educational Statistics; NCES). More importantly, standard writing proficiency of English Learners (ELs) is persistently below that of their native English-speaking peers, with ELs scoring 28 to 58 points lower than their non-EL peers on national writing assessments (NCES). As writing teachers, we must acknowledge these numbers as an indictment on the ways that we think about writing and the ways that we teach writing, especially with our EL students. We can, and we must, evaluate our assumptions, our practices, our pedagogies, and our personal attitudes about writing.

This evaluation becomes even more critical as a growing body of empirical evidence shows that the learning during professional development activities and the subsequent implementation of instructional practices are filtered and possibly impeded by teachers' belief systems (Han 265). Since school leaders utilize professional development opportunities as the most common avenue for improving teacher practice (Correnti 263), the beliefs that teachers hold when participating in professional development —including beliefs about their students and families, assumptions about how their students learn, and values about education in general for the students they serve (Pajares 316)—must likewise be interrogated and addressed in more systematic and comprehensive

ways: not as oversight, but as potential pedagogical tools for improving teacher development and student outcomes.

For the purposes of this article, we believe that it would stand to reason that in teaching writing at all educational levels, teachers' personal beliefs, assumptions, and values for writing would heavily influence their teaching of writing. And, at the same time, the beliefs teachers hold about their students and the assumptions they make about how their students learn will also influence their teaching of writing. Contrary to the body of literature highlighting the linkage between teacher beliefs and practices for writing, we argue that teachers' personal writing processes have little influence on their teaching of writing to ELs. We contend the focus on standards-based instruction coupled with deficit-based views of language proficiency more strongly influence their teaching of writing, even more so than teachers' personal beliefs and self-efficacy as writers.

Our goal is to offer a new perspective on the ways that we think about and teach writing. For us, this means acknowledging the inherent differences between how we write and how we teach writing, how we write and how we learn writing.

- How do our beliefs and assumptions (and biases) about writing and learning influence our teaching of writing?
- How can we overlay our own self-efficacy for writing with our own self-efficacy for teaching?
- How does this align with our students' self-efficacy for writing? For their self-efficacy for learning?

Learning to Teach Writing in Local Professional Development

A collaborative between TESOL, technology, literacy, and English faculty developed a series of professional development workshops at a large minority majority urban district in the Southwest United States. In the participating district, English Learners (ELs) made up approximately 18.5% of the total student

population. The EL population grew rapidly and the effects can be seen in significant achievement gaps between ELs and their non-EL peers on state assessments, particularly at the secondary level.

To address writing achievement of ELs, the district participated in a federally-funded professional development grant targeting schools with a high percentage of ELs. The professional development project focused on the use of blended learning to differentiate standards-based writing instruction for ELs based on their English language proficiency strengths. A recursive writing process served as a foundational tenet for each of the professional development trainings. University faculty collaborated to develop the essential knowledge teachers needed for teaching writing with ELs, and lead teachers from the participating district developed model lessons integrating the knowledge with differentiated technology apps. Figure 1 displays a sample of one session's professional development activities.

Training Topic	Prewriting with English Learners
Objective	By the end of today's session, participants will be able to design a prewriting lesson supportive of ELs using differentiated apps.
Pre-Reflection Online	How do you prepare to write? How do you prepare your students to write?
Knowledge Development	*Focus Question:* How do you support ELs of varying proficiency levels in the prewriting process? *Key Concepts:* Importance of building background, relevancy of the topic; use of native language; oral language opportunities; differentiation of approach based on language proficiency skills
Technology Development	Lead teachers present various apps that support differentiated prewriting for ELs. Integrating knowledge and technology development, teachers develop a differentiated prewriting lesson.

Post-Reflection	Based on your experiences today, what do you need to consider in preparing your ELs to write?

Figure 1: Prewriting Professional Development Activities

Some Nagging Questions from Our Professional Development

The year-long, voluntary professional development workshops were a combination of face-to-face interactive trainings, participation in online activities and discussion boards, implementation of and reflection on project activities in the classroom, and coaching from a school-based teacher-leader. The participants enrolled in the professional development were English language arts and special education teachers serving a high percentage of ELs in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade in the participating school district.

Throughout the professional development (PD), these teachers were asked to reflect on various topics as they related to writing and the teaching of writing with ELs. The questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their beliefs about writing, teaching writing, and the strengths and challenges of their students. These reflective questions served to prompt participants to situate their current beliefs within the context of new learning and experiences. The project faculty reviewed teacher-written reflections and engaged in ongoing reflective dialogue with participants. More importantly, teacher reflections guided the content and activities of subsequent PD trainings.

However, over the course of the PD, our conversations with the teachers and their posts indicated an unexpected trend: an apparent discrepancy between themselves as writers and themselves as teachers of writing. Seeking to better understand this seeming disconnect, especially as it related to teaching ELs, we kept returning to some nagging questions:

- How do teachers see themselves as writers?
- How do teachers see themselves as teachers?

- How do teachers see themselves as teachers of writing, especially to ELs?

Since we had a variety of artifacts from the ongoing PD activities, we decided to look more closely by employing homogeneous purposive sampling. The seventh-grade teachers were selected as the focus for this analysis. In the participating district, secondary schools range from grades six to eight. Sixth grade traditionally focuses on moving students away from elementary skills and curriculum while eighth grade focuses on the transition to high school. As such, seventh grade allowed us to isolate teachers' beliefs related to practice void of the challenges associated with transitioning students.

We selected five seventh-grade teachers from the participating district to study. All five of the teachers were female and had graduated from traditional teaching licensure programs. Teaching experience of the participants ranged from two to twenty years. Two of the participants held an endorsement to teach English Language Learners. All of the teachers held positive views about their students and teaching and spoke highly of their students in terms of work ethic and drive. Most noted that their students were motivated to learn. Many participants highlighted how much *they [students] have grown* during the school year.

In analyzing the artifacts, each member of the research team independently read all of the written reflections and searched for emerging categories across participant responses. We then compared and narrowed categories collaboratively. Responses within categories were independently read and coded for emerging themes. Afterwards, team members compared and narrowed themes and codes. Reflections were independently coded a final time and compared.

Self-Efficacy and Teachers Writing

For more than three decades, Albert Bandura has been arguing that a person's beliefs in their ability to succeed in an activity, self-efficacy, is "the foundation of human motivation, performance

accomplishments, and emotional well-being" (1,534). In other words, as Pajares articulates, self-efficacy in a given domain accounts for the choices we make, the amount of effort we put forth, and our persistence in the face of obstacles (140). Obviously, domain-specific self-efficacy is highly complex, but we want to use these ideas as a backdrop to help us understand the beliefs, attitudes, and self-efficacy that teachers have for themselves as writers and teachers in the writing classroom, to account for the (sometimes stark) differences between teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and self-efficacy about their own writing practices and their beliefs, attitudes, and self-efficacy about their teaching writing.

Self-efficacy has been a particularly rich vein of research for writing studies, primarily because most people develop their perceptions of self-efficacy, according to Pajares, by interpreting information from four sources: 1) interpreted result of one's performance; 2) experience observing others; 3) verbal messages and social persuasions from others; and 4) physiological states, such as anxiety and stress (145). Even if writing research does not explicitly incorporate these four sources into their discussions in terms of self-efficacy, they align in many respects with the ways that writing researchers describe pedagogy, process, interventions, and activities (see Bruning et al. for a more complete literature review of self-efficacy for writing over the past 30+ years). Likewise, whether writers are students in a classroom or professionals in a business context, "self-efficacy judgments will affect both whether they attempt specific tasks and their continuing engagement when they encounter difficulties" (Bruning and Kauffman 161). These findings would imply that teachers who define themselves as "writers" would also describe themselves in these self-efficacy terms.

In the reflections that we reviewed from our PD, all of the teachers indicated that they appreciated the *"messiness"* of their own writing process. While this shows a lack of anxiety about their writing, at the same time, each one also stressed the importance of developing precision and clarity to effectively communicate their message in the final stages of the writing process. All stressed the

critical role of revision at this stage, although they practiced a wide range of approaches to revision. A few of our participants discussed the importance of feedback from others. Data indicate that our participants did not seek feedback for specific reasons (e.g., areas they may be struggling with), but rather they sought the general opinion of others on their writing or help in lower-order editing concerns. One teacher pointed out, *"I ask another person to proofread for corrections or ideas."* As we will discuss in the next section, this use of a term like "proofread" to define a more open-ended practice like revision indicates for us that to these teachers writing may be more about "correctness" than rhetorical development.

This point is heightened by the centrality teacher responses placed on clarity in writing. They believed that clarity in their writing evolved in the process as they moved from drafting to revising. One teacher related, *"I write the basics first and then elaborate more when I am revising."* Similarly, another teacher confirmed*, "After these words, ideas are down on paper, I then go back and I reread what I wrote. At this time, I am able to add, erase and add more details to my writing."* Another teacher noted the importance of time, particularly to think through the writing, *"Before I finalize any of my writing, I let it rest for a while. Just like when one makes homemade bread. Bread needs to rise before it is to be put in the oven to bake."*

Terry Locke, David Whitehead, and Stephanie Dix offer quantitative data from their study that reveals positive and significant effects in terms of self-efficacy as writers and teachers of writing. Teachers in their "writing project" professional development workshops generally self-reported assurance in both their skills as writers and as teachers of writing, but, importantly, changes in self-efficacy could be moderated by the way individual teachers cognitively processed "source" data (55). In other words, the ways that teachers interacted with materials as both writers and as teachers of writing mattered, which could have both positive and negative effects in both domains, leading to self-reported success, apprehension, and anxiety. This aligns with findings from Margarita Huerta et al. who found that self-efficacy is a statistically significant and large predictor of writing anxiety (1).

The majority of the teachers in our PD acknowledged that their writing is a process. Interestingly, however, the teachers we reviewed had varying applications of a recursive writing process. Each of them began with some sort of brainstorming and prewriting focused solely on getting their ideas on paper. Teachers referred to brainstorming and prewriting interchangeably but viewed these stages as essential to the writing process. Participants noted this stage as crucial in simply transferring seemingly disconnected thoughts to paper. During these stages teachers did not focus on form and at times noted that effective communication was not important at this stage. Each of these prewriting sessions led to the development of a messy first draft.

Teachers were comfortable with the fact that their initial drafts may not be well organized. The teachers asserted that these initial drafts were about initial stages of effective communication. Many teachers indicated that they utilized or returned to their brainstorming and prewriting during the drafting stages. One teacher pointed out, *"I try to get all my ideas on the paper. I know what my paragraphs are going to be about, but they may not be in the best order when I first write."* All of them acknowledged that their first drafts may have issues with focus. Interestingly, they did not worry about focus in their early drafts.

Most of our teachers highlighted the importance of feedback from others to refine and further shape their drafts into a final product, noting the critical role of revision to shape and tighten the focus of their message: *"I ask others to read what I have written and take their opinion into consideration when revising."* Teachers viewed revision as the time to slow down and think deeply, to clarify their message, and make their language more precise, whereas prewriting and drafting seemed as almost a race against the speed of their thoughts rolling around in their minds.

While there were varying degrees of teachers' application of the writing process in their own writing from linear to recursive, many teachers noted that their writing process was far from linear. Teachers emphasized that their initial ideas, including the initial messages of their writing, could rarely be found in the final stages

of their writing. One teacher emphasized, *"Though I might start off with a minor plan, I often hit several detours before the final product is written."* Another noted, *"Often, what I think I'm going to start with isn't what I end up with."*

According to Mary Brindle et al., elementary teachers in their study were generally confident in their ability to teach writing, their competence as writing teachers, and their own skills as writers (929). And this positive attitude, this self-efficacy, is further correlated by teachers who "enjoy creative, relevant, and personal writing throughout their lives" and generally had positive experiences of their own in middle and high school experiences (Norman and Spencer 29). These positive experiences carry over to their attitudes toward teaching writing, and, interestingly, as this study also points out, teachers generally find personal and/or creative writing to be the most meaningful and interesting kinds of writing. Results from a similar study support the notion that beliefs about writing could possibly be used as a leverage point for teaching students to write (Sanders-Reio et al. 9). As we will discuss next, the personal writing processes of these teachers seem to have little influence on their teaching of writing to ELs.

Self-Efficacy and Teachers Teaching Writing

It's easy to see that teacher beliefs and attitudes about the nature of writing can have a profound influence on their writing instruction and writing pedagogy; likewise, a relationship also exists between teachers' understanding of second language learning and their practices when teaching ELs in the mainstream classroom, and this relation will influence their practices in the classroom (see Gilliland). As Pettit describes in her literature review, certain factors, such as years of teaching experience, training in teaching ELs, and exposure to language diversity, are predictors of those beliefs (123). Unfortunately, there remain educator misconceptions regarding how second languages are learned (Reeves 137), which arises, some argue, because the lack of teacher preparation to teach ELs effectively is widespread, particularly at the secondary level (see Rubinstein-Avila and Lee; O'Neal). Thus, it is not surprising

that secondary teachers feel under-prepared to meet the language and academic needs of their students, especially their EL students.

Still, when considering teaching writing to second language learners, a range of studies show similar findings for the ways that teachers' understandings of second language learning influence their practices in the classroom. Based on teachers' implicit theories about teaching, learning, and language deficit, one study showed the ways teachers nuanced their writing instruction (Berry 11), while another described the ways pre-service teachers adapted their lessons for ELs in varying degrees of language and content support (Uzum et al. 7-10). Still another suggested that a teacher's belief that language is best learned inductively through exposure to models indicates an emphasis on writing instruction focused on essay structure and correctness (Gilliland 291). Finally, one study implied that literacy beliefs dictate reading and writing routines for teachers in the classroom (Bingham and Hall-Kenyon 22).

As previously noted, the teacher participants in this study viewed their students very positively. They noted their students' perseverance and positive attitudes about learning. They viewed their students' work ethic from an asset-based perspective. However, as teachers were asked to examine and respond to student writing, there was a notable shift to a more deficit-based view: meaning, teachers first noted what students were *not doing* as writers rather than what they were doing.

When we asked our participants to describe their students as writers, most of them noted that students' writing was improving, that their writing was understandable, and that they had good ideas. Some of our teachers highlighted students' struggle with organization. However, these comments were quickly overcome with notations of students' linguistic deficits. The majority of the teachers focused on student errors as a result of developing English proficiency. Overwhelmingly, teachers highlighted students' grammatical errors, ongoing issues with subject-verb agreement, spelling, and punctuation.

We would argue that focusing comments on lower-order issues, such as grammar and punctuation, arises both from a deficit view of

student writing and from a lack of rigorous and/or comprehensive training in responding effectively to student writing. In fact, according to Brindle, et al., three out of every four teachers indicated that their college teacher preparation programs provided no or minimal instruction on how to teach writing (940). Therefore, our review of the literature shows us that discrepancies exist not only for second language learning and mainstream classroom practices, but also between their perspectives about writing development and their instructional practices in the writing classroom (Brindley and Jasinski Schneider 331). More importantly, this lack of preparation not only limits the choices that teachers are aware of for teaching ELs to write, but even when reflecting on their own writing practices, Claudia Peralta Nash and Celia den Hartog King describe different factors that may be responsible for why teachers may not implement strategies and techniques in their instructional practices that they believe are useful in their own practices, such as teacher education programs, prior teaching experiences, life experiences, personal experience with linguistic diversity, and previous teaching experience with linguistic diversity (72-74). Graham et al. found that four writing interventions for scaffolding or supporting students' writing produce statistically significant effects: prewriting activities, peer assistance when writing, product goals, and assessing writing (886-88).

Our review of teacher reflections showed a top down, teacher-centric writing process, focused primarily on the product, student language deficits, and correctness. In their reflections, the majority of the teacher participants perceived teaching writing to ELs as a linear process and product-centered. Similarly, as we described above, they also focus their attention on what students are not doing, a deficit-based view that seems to organize much of their thinking about teaching writing to ELs. They primarily focused on the writing products students produced. This was evident in the way teachers prepared students to write, the ways in which they reflected on students' writing abilities, and how their students responded to feedback. It appears to be a kind of bottom-up approach

to teaching writing with little acknowledgement of higher-order considerations.

When teachers were asked what they do to prepare students to write, it was evident that teachers were preparing students to produce a particular type of writing, not to develop students as writers. Many teachers *"began with the end in mind"* as a way to prepare their students to write. For example, many teachers reported beginning writing assignments with a review of the rubric highlighting the writing expectations as a way for students to organize their work and "self-check" upon completion. Teachers also reported providing students with completed exemplars of writing and collaboratively *"dissected the essays with them [students] prior to writing,"* not as a model to build an understanding of various genres, but as a means for strict emulation.

While teachers provided students multiple scaffolds and supports in preparing them to write, these scaffolds and supports were specifically aligned to help students develop a writing product with the intended outcomes. Teachers provided students with specific outlines that included the essential components of the writing product. In other instances, the teacher would provide skeleton paragraphs for students to complete.

In preparing students to write, teachers also reported preparing students for the amount of text that must be produced. For example, teachers noted that they told students how many sentences they expected in each paragraph. In instances in which students were encouraged to talk about their writing prior to drafting, the purpose was for students *"to be able to think and decide whether they have enough information to write a good, detailed paper."* This, however, appeared contradictory in that the teachers also describe ultimately making the final decisions for whether students have enough information.

As the majority of teachers viewed the teaching of writing from a product-centered perspective, the writing process, consequently, was presented as a linear rather than a recursive progression. When asked about their students' writing processes, teacher responses highlighted a series of sequential steps leading students from

prewriting to completion of a final draft. None of the responses indicated an acceptance of the "messiness" or the "back-and-forth" nature of a recursive approach to the writing process in which feedback from readers brought the writer back to various components of the writing process to strengthen the argument, refocus on the audience, or reorganize for the purpose of clarity of communication.

While all of the reflections described classrooms that provided feedback from both peers and the teacher, the feedback sessions were also linear in nature. Feedback was somewhat evaluative, a one-way conversation from the reader (e.g., peer or teacher) to the writer. In most instances, after the rough draft, students received feedback from a peer in terms of how well they were approaching the targets of the rubric and the best ways to "fix" the paper. After feedback from a peer, students received feedback from the teacher. This took place through either one-on-one conferencing sessions or through explicit corrections on the students' papers. In both instances, however, the focus of these sessions was primarily on "correctness" —moving students to a polished piece of writing. It was evident in all responses that the teacher was in control, especially, of this stage of the writing process. At this point the teacher determined a priority area to address that moved the writing toward more acceptable levels of a finalized piece.

This consideration of the ways that teachers assess student writing and how they are trained to assess student writing, especially for ELs, is an important one. Our review of teacher reflections indicates that too often assessment focuses on lower-order issues because teachers don't feel particularly prepared to address higher-order issues. This coupled with EL student apprehension about mechanical errors creates a consistent negative variance in student writing (Sanders-Reio et al. 6). Based on a fairly comprehensive survey of second language teachers, Deborah Crusan et al. argue that the bulk of the workload for second language writing teachers can be directly attributed to assessing student writing (43). Further, they report that most teachers receive the majority of their training in writing assessment through graduate courses, workshops, and

conference presentations, but more than one-quarter of teachers surveyed admitted to little or no training in writing assessment. This means that too many teachers often fall back on whatever linguistic background and teaching experience they have to supplement their limited knowledge, beliefs, and practices in writing assessment.

We found that teachers' focus on writing as product-centered, coupled with an examination of student writing through a deficit lens, led to writing instruction with a heavy emphasis on lower-order concerns, particularly at the revision stages. Most of the teachers noted two revision stages. In the first stage, students revised with a peer and in the second stage, with the teacher. During peer revision, students were prompted to use checklists to evaluate writing and provide feedback based on the components indicated on the checklist. These components focused primarily on spelling, punctuation, and subject-verb agreement. The checklist also included the elements that must be present in an essay, but no indication as to the quality of presentation.

In subsequent revision stages with the teacher, although there was some indication of feedback related to organization and clarity, there was a strong indication that the revision process was focused on "correctness." Correctness in these instances was characterized as elements that make a paper look polished. For example, one teacher noted,

After the first draft, I will ask all students to check their writing for punctuation and to make sure uppercase letters are used in the right places. Some students use an online dictionary or translator to check their spelling. Then I will check their writing individually to give feedback for corrections toward the final draft.

In another example, the teacher notes how well a student responds to revision support, specifically, how little support is needed.

Jessica [pseudonym] does the best with feedback. I do not have to be super specific. I can say go double-check your spelling, or go check

your punctuation, and even if she misses a couple of things, she will dramatically improve her paper.

Future Considerations

For these teachers, overwhelmingly, writing is a recursive process in which effective communication is the primary outcome. Their reflections highlight their process as writers, rather than the development of a single text or piece of writing. Writing is kairotic, for they note the importance of the journey to the message, that it can be timely and discoverable; more importantly, their writing, their journey to the message, is rarely linear. Critical feedback from peers is central to both the development of a piece of writing as well as to their overall development as writers, for these teachers prize the give-and-take between reader and writer as a key to achieving purpose in writing. In short, being a writer, becoming a writer, is a recursive, critical, and reflective practice that they develop for themselves over time. And yet, it is evident in some of their reflections that their writing is about strategies they use, but not necessarily based on an understanding of the thinking behind those strategies.

At the same time, while these teachers view the development of their own writing from within, they appear to have a very different perspective on teaching writing. While their instructional practices are grounded in good intentions, their responses to the reflective prompts indicate a necessity for oversight, that a teacher should seemingly control every stage of the writing process. Rather than co-constructing examples and rubrics with their ELs, these teachers overwhelmingly believe in establishing appropriate writing topics, but also determining prompts and invention activities. They do not describe providing opportunities for students to write about things that are important or relevant to them, a known pedagogical strategy for effectively developing ELs into better writers; instead, they provide students with outlines, paragraph starters, even paragraph frames, to use in drafting a specific piece of writing that targets essential essay requirements. In this respect, they establish strict content parameters and dictate criteria for evaluating writing

quality. Any revisions, or, more accurately, any edits, are prescribed by the teachers to aid students directly in producing a polished piece of writing.

As we used teacher reflections to modify and plan our PD, we began to see teachers grappling with the apparent contradictions between teaching *writing* and teaching *writers*. They began to reflect on their personal development as writers and their practices in developing writers. They began to question and to wonder how to create meaningful recursive writing opportunities for ELs who are struggling to attain higher levels of English proficiency.

Although our time with teachers and research data was limited, we find it compelling enough to warrant future research. While teachers held positive views of their students, why was the revision process focused primarily on lower-order concerns? Was the revision process focused on lower-order concerns because the writing process was linear and teachers were looking towards a "clean" finished product? Was the revision process focused on lower-order concerns because teachers looked at student writing from a deficit view due to developing English proficiency? Could teachers not see beyond the grammatical errors? Does standards-based instruction and a focus on accountability influence the way teachers teach writing to ELs?

Given the large number of teachers who feel ill-prepared by their institutions to teach writing, especially to ELs, this PD opportunity also empowered us to look closely at our preparation programs. Do we ask teachers to reflect on their own writing practices and self-efficacy as writers? Do we prepare them to create recursive writing programs for the range of academic and linguistic abilities they will have in their classrooms? Do we teach future teachers how to allow students to be in control of the writing process in an era of standardized testing and high levels of accountability?

Undoubtedly secondary ELs across the nation are struggling to develop as writers. We opened with a challenge that we, as writing teachers, evaluate our assumptions, our practices, our pedagogies, and our personal attitudes about writing. And we close with a

challenge for those preparing writing teachers—what are our assumptions, our practices, and our pedagogies in preparing teachers to develop ELs as writers?

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