Workshop Guide

Andie Cunningham and Ruth Shagoury

Conferring with Young English Language Learners

CHOICE LITERACY PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Contents

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Introduction

Write from the Start is designed to be used flexibly in workshop settings. Our goal with this guide is to give workshop leaders plenty of suggestions for possible uses of each video conference segment, without locking you into one progression or plan for using the materials. Each school community is different, and we know you will need to adapt the video viewing to a host of time constraints and a wide range of workshop formats.

You might start any workshop by having participants view the introductory four-minute sequence on the DVD, which gives important background information on the classroom and how Andie and Ruth work together. As an alternative, you can distribute the "Commonly Asked Questions" handout (pages 17–18) which provides much of the same information but with greater depth. If time doesn't allow either viewing or reading these materials, you'll want to keep the "Commonly Asked Questions" sheet handy so that you can answer the questions as they arise.

There are three workshop formats with support materials in this guide:

I. "One Child" Workshops

The individual conferences can be viewed and discussed in twenty- to thirty-minute short workshops, depending upon how much time you devote to writing, reading, and talking through the sequences. Student conferences can be mixed and matched according to issues and concerns that are arising in your individual school. Each of these workshops is tied to one child's conference, and includes focus questions and classroom extensions.

II. Special Topics Workshops

These one-hour workshops cover a range of topics, which include basic conferring principles, understanding boys' writing, observation and assessment, and listening strategies.

III. From Theory to Practice Workshops

These one-hour workshops explore one theory in greater depth, through focused viewing, reading, and discussion. Workshop topics include Krashen's "silent period" for English language learners, and using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development to understand emerging sound-symbol correspondence.

Our one-hour workshop designs usually include

- ten minutes of reading;
- ten to fifteen minutes of video viewing;
- ten minutes of silent writing to a prompt or question; and
- twenty to twenty-five minutes of discussion and wrap-up.

WORKSHOP 1

Anna (First Language: Vietnamese)

Cue the DVD to segment 1: Anna, and distribute copies of Anna's information sheet (page 19).

Questions for Discussion

- How does Ruth build upon Anna's past work to nudge her into new writing?
- What parts of the conference are review of past writing and conferring?
- What questions does Ruth ask Anna? (You might ask workshop participants in advance to keep a running list of these questions as they view.)

Potential Classroom Extension

Distribute copies of the ABC Sheet (page 37), and have everyone test out its use in a conference the following week.

WORKSHOP 2 Eddie (First Language: Cantonese)

Cue the DVD to segment 2: Eddie, and distribute copies of Eddie's information sheet (page 20).

Questions for Discussion

- How does Ruth include Eddie's home culture in the conference?
- Why does Ruth spend time observing Eddie write?
- What role does Ruth's history with Eddie play in the conference?

Potential Classroom Extension

Ask participants to change the pace of a conference next week, pulling up a chair and spending most of the conference observing a child. Have everyone bring their notes from the observational conference to the next meeting and discuss what they learned.

WORKSHOP 3 Cristian (First Language: Spanish)

Cue the DVD to segment 3: Cristian, and distribute copies of Cristian's information sheet (page 21).

Questions for Discussion

- Andie refers repeatedly to Cristian's "brain" in the conference. Why do you think she does this?
- Why does Andie allow Cristian to overwrite the *F* on the *N*?
- How do you track the letters or sounds students are learning?

Potential Classroom Extension

Ask everyone to bring in writing from a child who is in the midst of learning early sound-symbol correspondence, with writing on the page that might be viewed as a "mistake." What do you learn from the approximations made by the child?

WORKSHOP 4 Leonela (First Language: Spanish)

Cue the DVD to segment 4: Leonela, and distribute copies of Leonela's information sheet (page 22).

Questions for Discussion

- Ruth notes that the first conference gets off to a "slow start." At what point does the conversation between Leonela and Ruth become more energized? Why do you think this is?
- Ruth notes that she will need to follow up with her teaching of the *B* sound to Leonela. How do you ensure follow-up of direct instruction?

Potential Classroom Extension

In conferences this week, ask participants to have at least a couple of English language learners teach them a word in their language. Share how that changes the dynamic of the conference.

WORKSHOP 5

Larisa (First Language: Russian)

Cue the DVD to segment 5: Larisa, and distribute copies of Larisa's information sheet (page 23).

Questions for Discussion

- What questions does Ruth ask Larisa?
- What nonverbal strategies does Ruth use to communicate with Larisa?
- What experiences do you have with children who are in the silent period?
- Are you comfortable with silence in conferences? Why or why not?
- How do you define a "failed" conference? Can you give an example?

Potential Classroom Extension

Record the nonverbal behavior of a silent child in your classroom as you observe them working with peers. What do the observations teach you about this child?

WORKSHOP 6 Luis (First Language: Spanish)

Cue the DVD to segment 6: Luis, and distribute copies of Luis's information sheet (page 24).

Questions for Discussion

- Luis leaves soon after the start of his conference and returns later. What quirks do your students have as conferrers? How do you support these different learning styles or work habits in a busy workshop?
- Andie highlights the motion marks in Luis's draft. How do you confer over drawing?

Potential Classroom Extension

Ask a student who loves to draw to give a detailed explanation of his or her drawing, and write down the narrative. What did you learn about meaning-making through this conference?

WORKSHOP 7 Emily (First Language: Hmong)

Cue the DVD to segment 7: Emily, and distribute copies of Emily's information sheet (page 25).

Questions for Discussion

- What connections do you make to students in your classroom who write in two languages?
- What strategies do you use to learn more about students' language use in the home?

Potential Classroom Extension

Interview the parent or parents of an English language learner. Try to determine the parents' hopes and dreams for their child. What will you do differently in the classroom knowing what you know now?

WORKSHOP 8

Vita (First Language: Russian)

Cue the DVD to segment 8: Vita, and distribute copies of Vita's information sheet (page 26).

Questions for Discussion

- How does Andie mime words and action to communicate with Vita?
- Can you remember a moment when you had a breakthrough with a child in the silent period? What was the catalyst for the breakthrough?
- Andie notes that conferring with Vita is "hard" for her. Think of a child you struggle to confer with daily. What is difficult about those interactions?

Potential Classroom Extension

Try miming with a silent child. How does it affect the conference?

WORKSHOP 9

Kyle (First Language: Vietnamese/ English)

Cue the DVD to segment 9: Kyle, and distribute copies of Kyle's information sheet (page 27).

Questions for Discussion

- What do you learn about what Kyle values through his drawing?
- How does Ruth nudge Kyle toward storytelling through his drawing?

Potential Classroom Extension

Audiotape a writing conference with a student whose storytelling emerges through his or her drawing. Transcribe the tape, looking carefully at your role in encouraging the storytelling. What did you do well? What might you do differently? Share transcripts with others at your school or other workshop participants.

WORKSHOP 10 Conference Principles Workshop

Distribute copies of the handout "Writing Conference Principles" (page 30). Ask everyone to read the pages silently, highlighting with a star the principle or principles that are easiest for them to follow. At the same time, ask everyone to highlight with a checkmark the principle or principles that are hardest for them to follow. Discuss as a group, comparing items that were highlighted as easy or difficult principles.

View any three of the conference segments, stopping after each one to discuss as a group which principles were most clearly evident in the conference, and which could have been stronger.

Have each participant select a principle to work on next week while conferring with students. You can schedule a follow-up workshop to discuss what participants learned through these conferences, or share findings at a regularly scheduled staff meeting or on in-house e-mail.

WORKSHOP 11 Keeping Track: Observation, Assessment, and Record-Keeping Strategies

Distribute copies of "Tracking Young Children's Writing Growth and Development" (pages 28–29), and have everyone read through the essay silently for five minutes. After reading, have each participant jot down what notes and records they use to track student writing development.

View the Cristian (segment 3) and Leonela (segment 4) conferences, having participants note when the ABC sheet is used and when Andie and Ruth take notes.

After viewing, have participants discuss with a partner or in teams of three what adjustments they might make to their recordkeeping during writing conferences, based on the handouts and the video segments. Share plans among the whole group.

WORKSHOP 12 Action! Boys' Storytelling Through Drawing

Distribute copies of Kyle, Luis, and Eddie's information sheets (pages 20, 24, and 27). Have everyone read these sheets silently. Discuss with partners or as a whole group what connections you see among the boys.

View the conferences with Eddie (segment 2), Luis (segment 6), and Kyle (segment 9). Stop after each segment and briefly discuss the following questions:

- How does Ruth or Andie highlight the boy's writing?
- How does the child express action in his drawing?
- What connections do you make between these writers? How are they different?

After viewing the segments, have participants look closely at the writing samples from each child on the fact sheets. Discuss what connections they make between these boys and boys in their classroom who do much of their storytelling through drawing.

WORKSHOP 13 Native Spanish Speakers

Distribute copies of the Cristian (page 21), Leonela (page 22), and Luis (page 24) information sheets. Have everyone read them silently before viewing the segments.

View each child's conference, pausing after each one to talk about them. You might discuss the following questions:

- Is it possible or advisable to generalize about Spanish language learners?
- What strategies do Ruth or Andie use for working with each child?
- What are key differences between the writing of each child?

Ask participants to reflect on what they do differently in their conferences with different Spanish-speaking students. You might say, "Bring to mind two specific students in your classroom. Ask yourself these questions: What verbal frames do I use with these students that are the same? Which are different? What changes do I notice about where I sit or stand, and what happens to my voice when I work with each student? What about proximity, or voice tone?"

In small groups, create a list of interview questions about the immigrants in your community to discover the range of beliefs about bilingual education. Share questions, and if possible generate a usable list for your school. (Even creating the interview questions will reveal differences and similarities in belief systems among the teachers at the workshop.)

For teacher participants who are not Spanish speakers: If computers are easily available for the workshop site, experiment with translating some conference phrases into Spanish through *Babblefish* (www.babblefish.com) and *Free Translation* (www.freetranslation.com).

WORKSHOP 14 The Art of Listening

Distribute copies of "The Art of Listening" (page 31) and have everyone read it silently. In groups of three or with the whole group, discuss what gets in the way of close listening to students during conferences.

Show the Anna (segment 1), Vita (segment 8), and Kyle (segment 9) conferences. Pause after each one, and discuss what strategies Ruth and Andie use from "The Art of Listening" with each child.

Give participants ten minutes to write about one student they have a hard time listening to, describing that child and their interactions with him or her. Then have them take turns practicing the "art of listening" in a conference with a partner, using the writing they have just completed. Make time for a quick five-minute reflective writing on what it felt like to be the interviewer and the writer being listened to. Have participants share these reflections with the whole group.

As an extension, suggest the following to participants:

Study your own silences as you confer with students in your classroom. For a few conferences, make special notes or reflections about

- how many questions you asked;
- what affected your wait time;
- how you might extend your wait time;
- what worked; and
- your next steps in conferences with these children.

WORKSHOP 15 Early Sound-Symbol Instruction and the Zone of Proximal Development

Distribute copies of the handout "Conferences in the Zone of Proximal Development" (pages 32–33). Ask participants to share what they know about it, and whether they have ever encountered this term in professional literature.

Show the Anna (segment 1), Cristian (segment 3), and Leonela (segment 4) conferences. Pause after each one and ask participants to spend a few minutes jotting down what they think the child is ready to learn with assistance from the teacher, and whether or not they thought Andie and Ruth were working within the child's ZPD.

Distribute copies of the handout "Examples of Conferences in the Zone of Proximal Development" (page 34) and have participants read through it silently, comparing their notes with the examples on the handout. In groups of three, discuss insights and connections from the viewing, note taking, and readings. In the whole group, have everyone share how they will use the concept of the ZPD with a student with whom they struggle to confer daily.

WORKSHOP 16 Understanding the "Silent Period"

Distribute the "Understanding the Silent Period" handout (pages 35–36). Have participants read silently, highlighting key points.

View the Larisa (segment 5) and Vita (segment 8) conferences. Pause after each segment to have participants note what strategies Ruth and Andie use to communicate with these girls. After both segments are completed, discuss them as a group.

Have each person select one student they have now or have worked with in the past who is in the silent period, and spend three to five minutes quietly writing about that student. Ask them these questions: How are you trying to communicate with the student? What is most frustrating? What breakthroughs, if any, have you had? Based upon what you saw on the video, what might you try?

If time permits, view the conference with Eddie (segment 2)—a student who is moving past the silent period. Talk about what Ruth does to foster more talk from Eddie.

Commonly Asked Questions

Andie Cunningham and Ruth Shagoury

What are the demographics of the school in the video?

Our school is in a northwestern U.S. urban area. It has the highest poverty numbers in the district, with seventy-nine percent of students qualifying for free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches. We have six half-day kindergarten classes in our 540-student K–3 school, each one with twenty to twenty-five students. Instructional assistants are sometimes available to come to our classes for thirty-minute stretches. We have at least twenty identified languages, and only two full-time in-house translators (for Spanish and Russian families).

Students in Andie's classroom this year spoke six different languages: Hmong, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Spanish, Russian, and English. Andie speaks some Spanish, and it is improving every year as she uses it more and more in her interactions with the children and their families. She invites the class to count in many languages when we do our calendar work, and asks the parents to help her learn and write the counting numbers in their native languages.

What is the schedule for writing workshop?

The district has a half-day kindergarten program, with children in the morning program working with Andie from 7:50 AM till 10:25 AM. We typically have writing every day of the week except Wednesdays, which is a shortened session when the kindergartners are in school for only ninety minutes.

The daily schedule for writing workshop is predictable. Andie begins with a brief five- to ten-minute mini-lesson (which might be on the author's craft, word craft, student strategy, or publishing). Then students pick up their writing folders, which house their writing journals as well as any loose papers they have chosen to write or draw on, and small stapled books they might have constructed. For the next thirty-five to forty minutes, the children write and draw, and Andie confers with them. Ruth also confers on the days she visits Andie's classroom.

Some days, we have publishing conferences, where small groups of children (usually about five) meet in groups with an adult, sharing a piece of writing they want to publish on our Writer's Wall. Each student shows the small group their page and explains it, and then the other children tell the author their favorite part of the writing. Even the children in the silent period participate in these writing conferences, pointing to the words or part of the picture they like best. At the end of class, we detach these pages from the writing journal and post them on the Writer's Wall.

What is Ruth's role in the classroom?

Ruth Shagoury has worked as a researcher in Andie's classroom for four years. She comes to class one day a week, conferring with students, analyzing their reading and writing with Andie working as her co-researcher, and helping Andie develop and reflect upon her emerging literacy curriculum. We are the co-authors of a book derived from the research data and our experiences together (*Starting with Comprehension,* Stenhouse 2005), as well as numerous articles in scholarly and practitioner journals.

Why is the writing workshop noisy?

Writing is a social activity for learners in primary classrooms. We have found that at this age, writers need other writers. This can be especially important if children are English language learners and need to be able to speak to others in their first language. Writers in the classroom get ideas from the conversations in multiple places: what happened last night at home, life experiences, stories from a friend writing at the same table, or mini-lessons from the teacher.

Many of the stories that they write are constructed from the words they have shared with others. They need talking time when they can try out their ideas orally as they put them on the page. Even if children are talking in regular conversation-level voices, the sounds of twenty-five speakers can seem very loud to teachers used to quiet classrooms of children working alone. We want our young children to be language users. As teachers, we can expand our sound bound-

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aries for writing workshop and notice the rich opportunities the classroom talk provides.

What are other children doing while the teacher confers?

While we confer with students, the other children in the class work on their writing or share drafts with classmates. You will notice there are no assigned seats in the classroom, and children are free to move about the room, finding a comfortable place to write. Some will move near wall displays of words or classmates' names so that they can refer to them as they write. Others cluster in groups of friends who might have the same first language, or share some of their interests. This talk is vital for both their written and oral language development, as they test out ideas in English and, for many, their home language.

Why don't you always correct the children when they make errors in conferences?

Sometimes children put down letters to represent sounds that are approximations. In other words, the sound they are searching for is not yet connected to the corresponding letter in English. For example, in Ruth's conference with Anna, she was writing her friend Lily's name. She wrote an *L,* then an *I.* She struggled with what letter to write next. When she said, "*O*?" Ruth said, "Sure!" because she didn't want to interrupt the flow of Anna's writing, especially when Anna had been hesitant at the start to attempt to write the name *Lily.* In addition, Anna is showing she knows there are more sounds left to represent.

We help children most when we encourage them to continue to take risks and explore the possibility of an accurate guess. Other times, we might celebrate any letters a child is forming and writing because it shows they understand that letters are a symbol system. Some are letters familiar to us from the English alphabet, whereas others might be approximations of Cyrillic, Chinese, Arabic, or other symbol systems.

In some situations, it might be appropriate to teach a child a new letter sound, as Ruth did with Leonela, showing her how to make the letter *B* for her writing about a butterfly. As in all writing conferences, it is important to know the history of the child and the history of the piece of writing when making decisions about how to respond to children's approximations.

Anna

Age: 5

Language Background: Vietnamese is Anna's first language and the language spoken in her home.

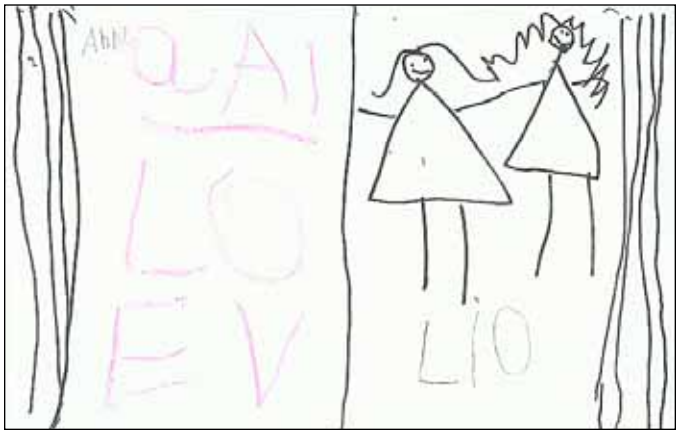
Literacy Progression: In September, Anna came into school strong linguistically in Vietnamese and speaking a few words and phrases in English (*hello, good-bye, yes,* and *no*). She was comfortable telling her stories through drawings and paintings, and she could write her name. Early in the year, her writing topics were usually some variation of her playing with her Barbie. (We remember when we extinguished a candle during end-of-the-class ritual, Anna sniffed the air and told us, "Smell like burned Barbie!")

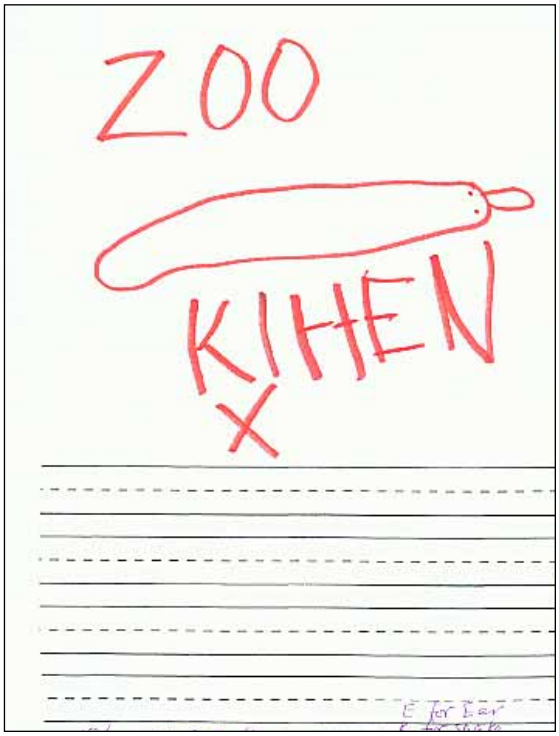
By the end of February, she was adding marks and letters to her drawings and speaking in English more often in class with her friends and with adults.

Now, in May, her written and oral language skills are exploding. She talks frequently and comfortably in English, adding to small-group discussions (such as table talk with friends) and experimenting with whole sentences in English. In writing, she still tells her stories by using pictures with details, and now she adds letters to represent sounds. She writes on many topics, from experiences with her family, to what she has seen on TV, to the books the class is exploring.

Insights: Anna uses everything at her disposal to communicate: facial expressions, hand gestures, body movements, writing, drawing, and speaking. She is a quietly confident learner who is delighting in her own expertise and growth as a writer and communicator.

Writing Samples:





Eddie

Age: 6

Language Background: Eddie and his family speak the Cantonese dialect of Chinese. His parents speak a little English, but require translators at conferences. Eddie's father graciously provided us with a tape counting to thirty-one in Cantonese to add to our calendar time.

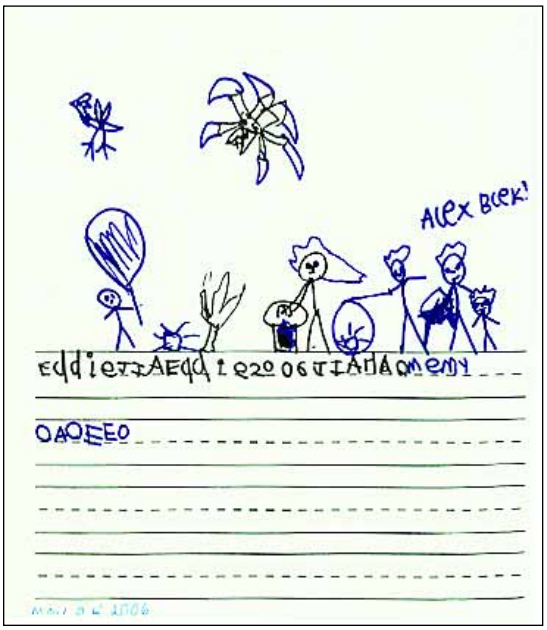
Literacy Progression: At the beginning of the year, Eddie spoke no English, and rarely spoke in Cantonese either. But he was by no means silent! He often "spoke" to us using strings of sounds that were not English but were made up of sounds that must have seemed similar to what he heard us communicating in. He also used this kind of babbling/jabbering to sing wordless songs.

By early fall, Eddie was labeling the colors and numbers, and writing his name in English. Since that time, his English skills have grown so rapidly that he often speaks to adults and children around him in English. Though he still uses mostly one-word labels, he works to get his meaning across.

Now, in May, Eddie creates elaborate drawings in his writing journal, telling tales about Pokémon and *Star Wars* as well as stories of his family. He writes the names of his family members and strings of letters across the page to represent what he wants to communicate.

Insights: Eddie has the advantage of involved and caring parents who want him to be truly bilingual. His spoken vocabulary in English is growing quickly; he is moving beyond one-word labels to two-word sentences and is willing to take risks with his communication to make himself understood. His writing skills are growing along with his oral language, and we predict that he will continue to progress at his current fast rate.

Writing Sample:



Cristian

Age: 7

Language Background: Spanish is Cristian's first language and the language that his family speaks at home.

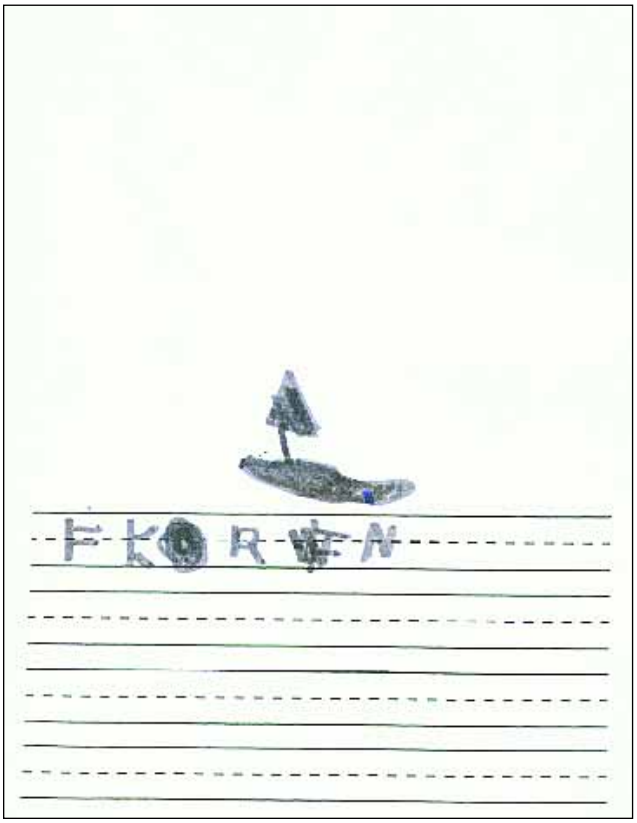
Literacy Progression:

Cristian is a little older than the other children in the room; he spends the morning with us in kindergarten, then goes to first grade for the afternoon. Yet at the beginning of the year, he struggled to write his name, relying on a name card to copy. Now he writes his name clearly and confidently and is making huge strides in the letters he knows and words he attempts. He loves writing numbers—celebrating with his friends the newly learned patterns to 100.

Over the year, Cristian's progress has been slow and steady. His mischievous grin shows his sense of fun, and sometimes he would rather play than do the hard literacy work required in reading and writing workshops. But when he is interested in the book we are reading, or the story he is writing, he can be immersed in his work, committed to push on and keep going.

Insights: Cristian has a big personality and a gentle, sweet soul. He has the willingness to persevere, making himself understood in both English and Spanish. He is often surprised by his own work; in May he wrote a response to the book he was reading, drawing a character who was afraid "but don't want to show it because he too macho." Every time he shared this insight, he chuckled and repeated it, to the delight of his classmates.

Writing Sample:



Leonela

Age: 6

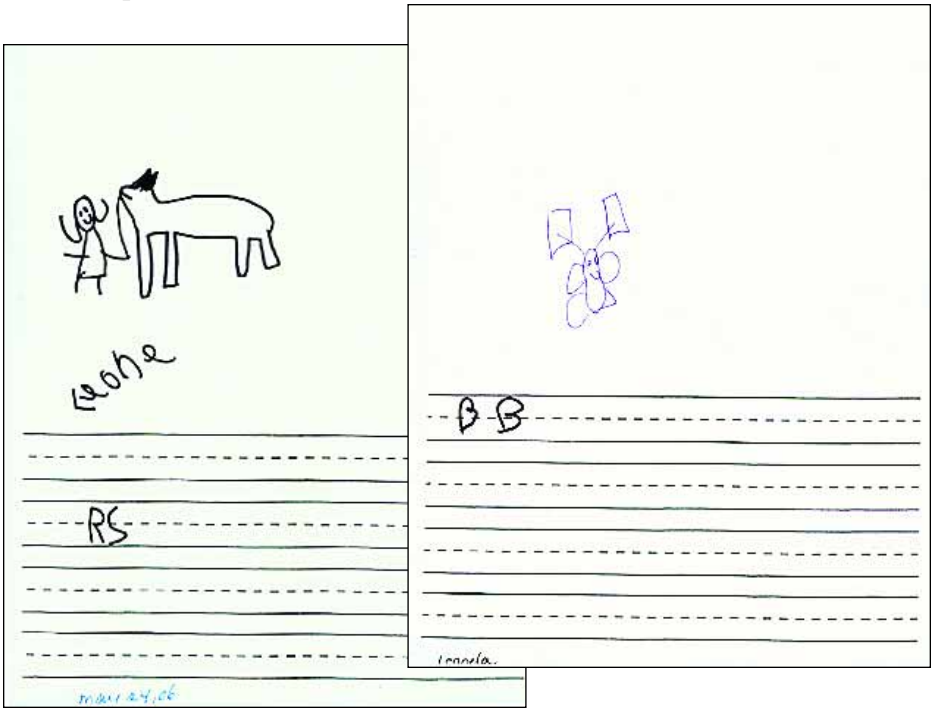
Language Background: Spanish is Leonela's first language and the language spoken in her home.

Literacy Progression: Leonela came into school in September speaking Spanish with other native Spanish speakers in the class. For the first half of the year, she needed frequent translations in class. Leonela spoke some isolated English words when communicating with both adults and fellow students. She was an eager writer from the start; she loved newly-sharpened pencils, crisp white paper, and a special place to write. She would tell long stories in Spanish to explain her drawings and wanted to record her words. Even before winter break, on her own, she was making sound/symbol connections in both English and Spanish (e.g., *M* for *Mom* and *C* for *Corazon*).

By January, Leonela was a Spanish language leader. She helped other Spanish speakers translate their messages and write their words in both languages. In her writing, she began using initial consonants for words more regularly. (For example, she made a map to her house, labeling a Fred Meyer store with *F* and *M*.) Now, in May, she is recording stories from her Mexican homeland with enthusiasm. Leonela continues to learn letters and sounds and frequently reads her writing. She is particularly proud that *leon* ("lion") is part of her name and makes it the focal point of many of her stories.

Insights: Leonela has a strong foundation in two languages and the potential to be a fluent bilingual speaker, reader, and writer. Her family welcomes the school's initiative in providing material written in Spanish. She will need ongoing opportunities to continue to build both languages, supplementing school readings with take-home books in Spanish.

Writing Samples:



Larisa

Age: 6

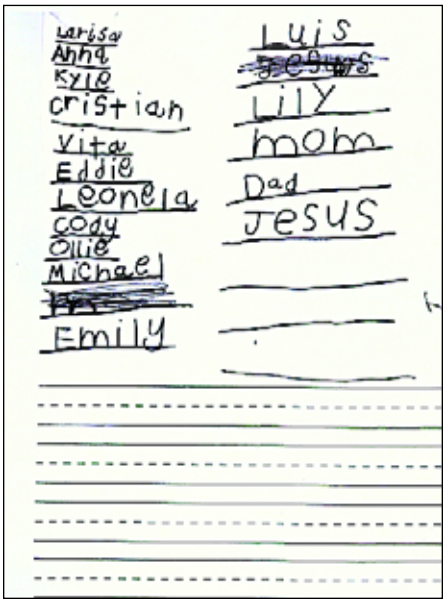
Language Background: Russian is Larisa's first language and the language her family speaks at home.

Literacy Progression: Larisa is still in her "silent period." Though she occasionally says a few Russian words to the other Russian speakers in the class, this speaking is rare. She is a quiet child. Though she seldom speaks, Larisa understands a lot of the English that is swirling around her. Much of Larisa's progress is invisible, but we feel confident of her growth. She is a very happy and affectionate child, smiling when she shares her writing with friends and adults. And it matters to Larisa that people understand her writing. She shakes her head and nods to respond to questions about her written work, and is able to draw pictures about the books that Andie reads in class, showing her understanding of parts of the readings. In May, she softly spoke her first word in English to label her drawing: "boy." At this point in the year, she is beginning to add letters to her pictures; they are mostly strings of letters, or copied alphabets, but occasionally, she writes an initial consonant, such as *M* for *Mom.* She loves to write the names of her friends, copied from name lists or name labels by the coat rack. In writing conferences with her friends, she is able to participate by pointing to the part of the story she likes best.

Insights: Larisa is a happy, well-adjusted child who is soaking up the learning in her classroom environment. She understands a great deal. It helps to follow Larisa's lead, guessing her meaning and sticking with it until she nods and you know you have it right.

Postscript: At the beginning of June, Larisa starting speaking to many of us in English! She read to Heather, one of the ELL teachers, she identified several letters, and she counted to fifty-one in English. She's beaming about her growth. We need to remember to celebrate this growth quietly so we don't scare her with our enthusiasm!

Writing Samples:



Luis

Age: 6

Language Background: Spanish is Luis's first language and the language his family speaks at home.

Literacy Progression: Luis is very close to his family, and it was difficult for him to separate from them during the first few weeks of school. Yet we knew he wanted to be here. He slowly carved his own home in the classroom, opening up to new friends who spoke different languages.

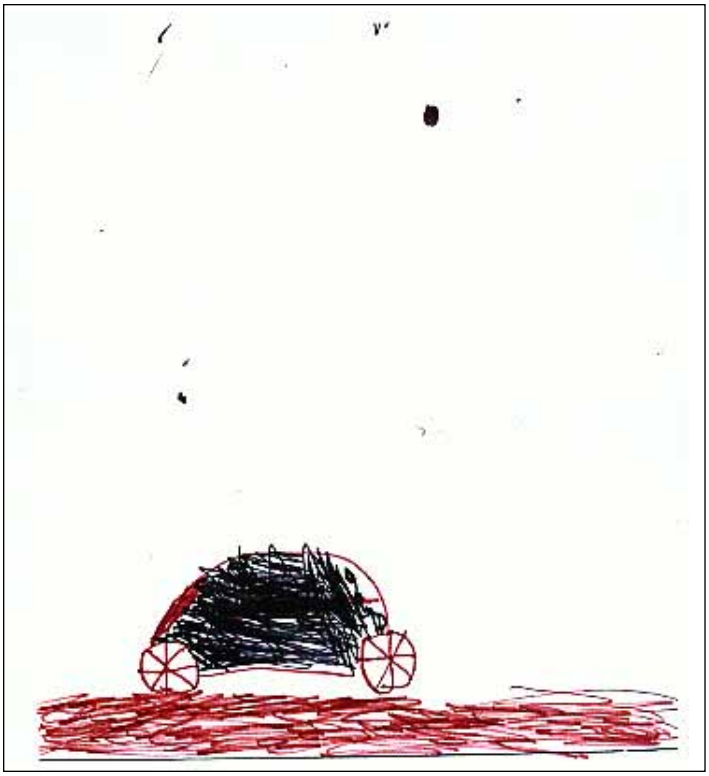
Luis wrote his name from the beginning of the year. His work is always intentional, and in the fall, he methodically entered into writing workshop time. He is quiet and thoughtful during these times, intent upon his drawings.

Luis came back from winter break more confident about our work together. He digs deep into the reading strategies, understanding how to bring his schema to his reading, reflecting on his reading process, and working with intention with inferring and synthesis.

His drawings are a place for him to add the details that are part of his thinking process. He will work over a drawing until he has all the pieces that he intends to include clearly on the page.

Insights: With his quiet joy in learning, Luis draws others to him. He is generous in his encounters with others, helping them with Spanish or English as necessary, and explaining his ideas about the books we read. He is intrigued by the natural world, and the worlds he sees in the books he chooses.

Writing Sample:



Emily

Age: 6

Language Background: Hmong is Emily's first language and the language that her family speaks. Emily sees written Chinese characters at home and seems to know some Cantonese. Her family has strong enough English-language skills that they do not need translators at conferences. Her mother taught the class how to count to thirty in Hmong, providing us with a tape of her counting in her native language.

Literacy Progression: Emily came into the classroom in the fall speaking a few words, phrases, and English expressions. She was by no means silent—and though often quiet, she would willingly speak with classmates and adults with whatever English she could use. She now speaks simple sentences and uses gestures as well as oral language to get her meaning across. Early in the year, she drew many pictures and made a gradual transition to adding letters to go with them. She copied letters from the words she saw in the class environment. Now, in May, she loves to experiment with whatever Andie demonstrates in mini-lessons: spaces between words, exclamation points, and voice bubbles. She is just beginning to use letters to represent sounds, such as *R* for *water.* Emily just started writing strings of Chinese characters, which she tells us is the writing her parents do. We were excited to discover this aspect of Emily's literacy and look forward to learning more about it.

Insights: Emily takes her learning seriously, investing time and care in the writing and drawing in her journal. There are no other Hmong speakers in the class, and no ethnic Hmong aides or translators at the school, so English is the way she communicates with all her friends. Emily is invested in what goes on in the classroom, and the other children enjoy working with her.

Writing Sample:

Vita

Age: 6

Language Background: Russian is Vita's first language and the language that her family speaks at home. Her parents speak some English.

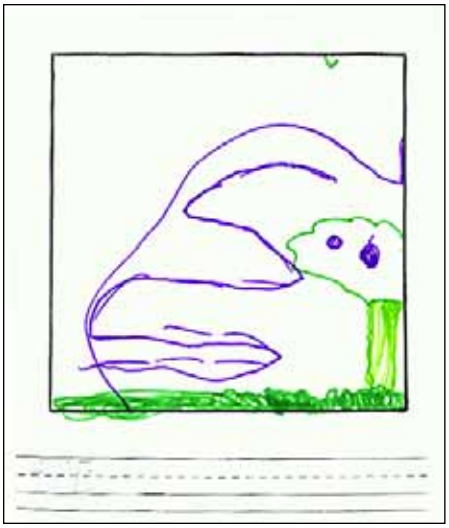
Literacy Progression: Vita began the year with a constant classroom companion, Vika. These two spoke Russian together throughout the day. Though silent with the other children and the adults in the room, Vita could be downright chatty in Russian with Vika. When Vika moved away midyear, Vita became a quieter presence in the classroom, committing her knowledge of Russian and English to her daily writing work.

Vita entered school able to write her name, and her literacy continues to grow quickly. Her invented spelling is in both English and Cyrillic letters. Vita loves to make tiny books, mostly about her family, and the pages often alternate between Russian and English. Christina, a teacher-visitor to the class, was a Russian speaker. What a gift she was to Vita! After a long conversation with Christina in Russian, Vita's writing that day told the story of her mom drying the clothes out in the sun. She wrote *sun* in English, using one set of symbols, *CAO,* and *CONYUE* for *sun* in Russian, written using Cyrillic. *Clothes* and *drying the clothes* were both written in Russian, too, using invented spelling.

Vita is also growing in her English-language speaking. On some days, she is still silent, but often, she will tell us words to label her stories: *sister, father,* and *Christmas,* for example.

Insights: Vita loves to write and draw, using both languages to support getting her ideas down on paper. She also loves the Russian picture books in the classroom, and often chooses to linger over them. We wish there were more Russian speakers in the class and more than one Russian aide in the school, so Vita would have more chances to communicate in Russian at school. Because of her parents' commitment to Russian literacy, we see Vita becoming truly bilingual if she continues to receive encouragement in Russian as well as English at home and school.

Writing Sample:



Kyle

Age: 6

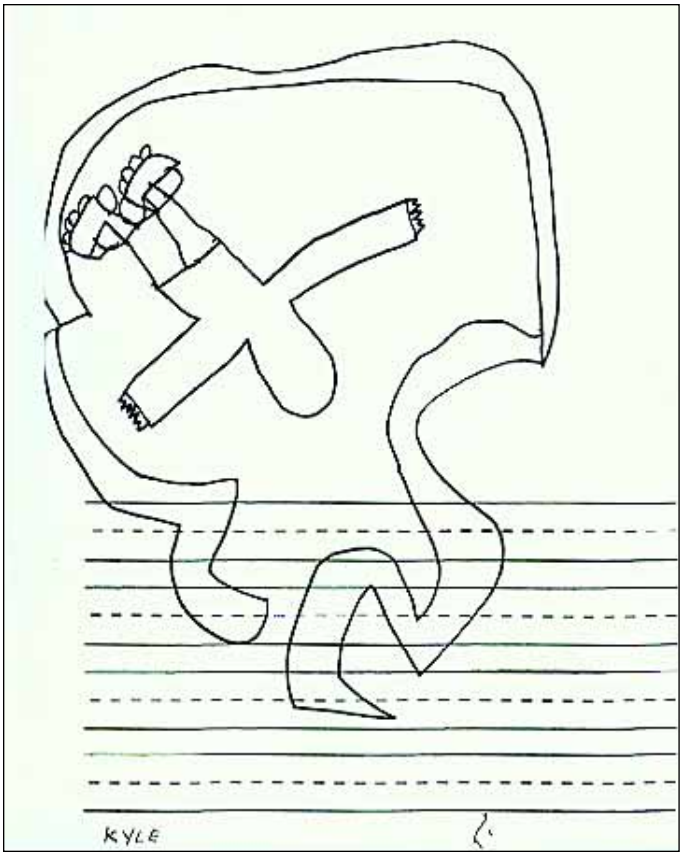
Language Background: Kyle's family background is Vietnamese, and his parents speak Vietnamese, Mien, and English at home.

Literacy Progression: Kyle speaks English with confidence, and never speaks Vietnamese in class. From the beginning of the year, he has enjoyed writing workshop time, drawing out his elaborate stories and filling the page with movement and motion. Some of his pieces in early fall looked a bit like scribbles, but in conference, he would explain the action of his story through the marks on the page. By winter, Kyle was doing representational drawings, still showing a great deal of movement. For example, he drew a complex story of a basketball game, complete with several players and the ball drawn and redrawn to show how it moved through the hoop.

Now it is May, and Kyle is beginning to add letters that represent the sounds of the words in his stories, using letters for words such as *volcano* (*VNO*) and *sand* (*C*). His stories are still alive with motion and movement.

Insights: Kyle is growing daily as a writer. His drawings are a wonderful vehicle to record his detailed stories, and serve as a conversation starter to allow him to use his oral language in class. He is "cracking the code," making sound-symbol connections that will help him with his reading as he moves into first grade.

Writing Sample:

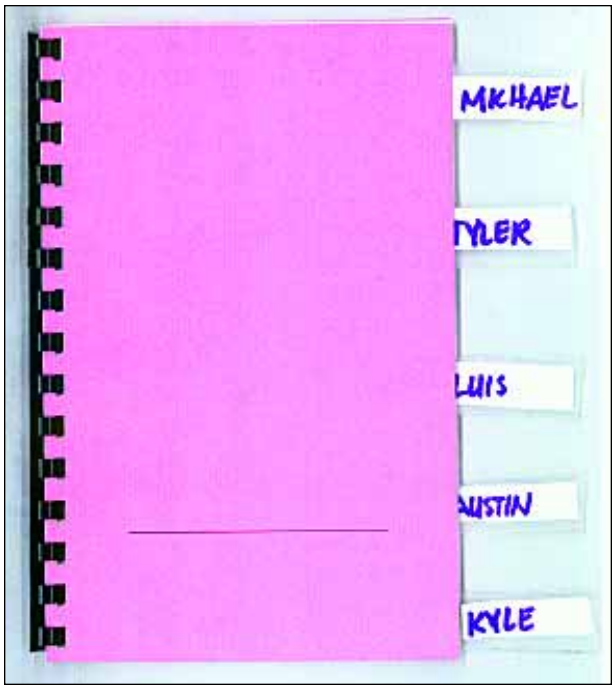


Tracking Young Children's Writing Growth and Development

It's important to us to be aware of each child's writing growth as they progress through the year. Knowing what a child is attempting, experimenting with, and mastering helps us plan appropriate instruction. Understanding what they are writing helps us build on children's needs and celebrate their strengths.

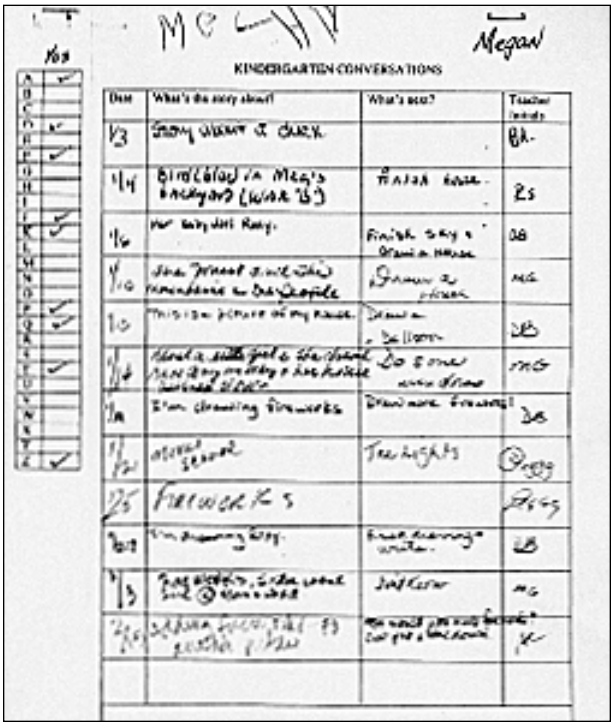
We often write reflections in one-page memos, or hand-write our recollections and ideas after class in our teaching journals. But in class, we have four basic strategies for keeping track of children's writing progress:

Teacher's Writing Conference Notebooks. These five booklets are small and easily portable. Each booklet has a five sections to record conference notes with five different children (see example). Any adult who is in the class during writing workshop time uses these booklets to record what the child was writing or drawing and the conversation that made up the conference. It is important to capture the child's explanation of his or her work, and to do so in their own words as much as possible. We also include reminders of what to revisit and reconsider. These portable notebooks allow the classroom teacher a window into the conference, whether she was sitting there during it or not.



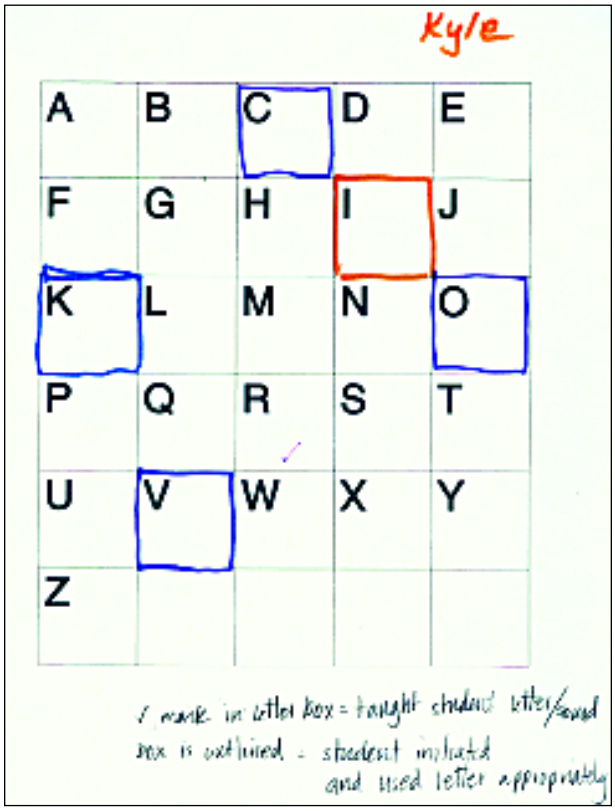
Kindergarten Conversations. The writing conference booklets are new this year. In the past, we have also had success with a page attached to the end of the children's writing journals. The data we collected on these sheets was for a slightly different purpose; it was to help set a predictable structure for the writing conference for both adults and children. It also provided an ongoing record of the child's process and planning. Each sheet has columns for the date and for children's responses to two questions: What's the story about? and What's next?

The teacher or aide who confers with the child then initials the entry. Stapled to the sheet is an alphabet list, so that the adult can check off letters the child is using in his or her writing journal. We found these sheets useful for quick conferences and noting patterns in children's topics, as well as a quick way to check on the letters they were using in context. But it was often distracting to flip to the back of the children's journals to record the information in conference, and we wanted more complete records. We have found that some teachers really like this method as a quick check—and a way to work with other adults in the classroom.



Student Writing Folders. Within each writing folder are at least two things: a writing journal and an ABC chart (see sample). The writing journal is a place for students to record their writing and drawing. Students might write on one page per day—or six; it depends on the author and the content they are producing that day. Students also know that when they fill their journals, they can get another one and just keep working.

The alphabet sheets are used solely to document students' letter and sound usage. On these sheets, we can record the letters the child uses in the context of his or her writing. We also make note of any letters we may have taught the child. All letters taught in conference are based on a student's readiness, need—and usually, request (see sample). We learned this particular strategy from the Fairfax County teachers featured on the Ralph Fletcher/JoAnn Portalupi video series *When Students Write,* available from Stenhouse Publishers.



Writing Sample Use. The writing folders themselves are a rich collection of data that can demonstrate a child's writing growth. Primarily, the information guides the teacher in knowing what writing strategies to teach next. One additional way we use the actual samples evolved when we were collecting writing with jotted notes to share with parents at parent-teacher conferences.

Rather than tear the pages out of the children's journals, we decided to photocopy them and attach sticky notes that describe the children's words about their work. This provides added information because the actual sample is available to examine and discuss with others. During writing workshop, it is easy for a teacher to carry around a stack of sticky notes and quickly jot notes on them with the child's name and the date. After class, we photocopy the student samples and attach the sticky notes to them. Besides sharing these samples with parents, we also use them to discuss patterns we are seeing in the class, helping plan instruction. (See sample.)

Writing Conference Principles

The core principles we use for successful writing conferences with English language learners are really no different than those used with any learner, of any age. These simple ideas guide us in every writer's workshop. And when a conference goes wrong and we reflect upon how we might have responded differently, we often find we have violated one of these principles:

Let the child lead. We lean in and listen to any child as we confer, trusting that they can begin by helping us understand where they are in their writing and possibilities for what they might learn next.

Know the history of the child and the history of the piece of writing. We know the passions of each child in the classroom, with many children repeating a few crucial themes in their writing—family, favorite hobbies, friends, animals, toys. When we are stuck in a conference, we can often find a way into the writing through these passions and our shared history as writers.

Assume the child has something to communicate. There is always logic behind a child's writing, words, and ideas, no matter how confused we might feel when we read a particular draft—it's just a matter of finding out what in the child's experience has led them to their current thinking, talking, and symbol-making on the page.

Be patient, and respect silence. It is hard for us at times to slow down and be "in the moment" with an individual child—often there are other children tugging at our sleeves, no matter how often we admonish everyone to respect the space and time of their classmates in conferences. But we need to slow down, listen, and most important, give the child all the time they need to formulate thoughts or think through just the right word, picture, or phrase to capture their new ideas.

Write down the child's ideas in a notebook or at the bottom of the page. This isn't taking dictation as much as it is our attempt to ensure we remember the child's narrative in their own words.

Look for the teaching moment. It might be as subtle as nudging a child toward including more details in their drawing, or as explicit as guiding a child to write a new letter. Some of the most important teaching moments for us celebrate what the child has done well. Success breeds success, and children aren't always aware of the new skills and strategies they are mastering and might use in other contexts.

Keep it short. We try to meet with as many children as possible each day, circulating through the room and checking in as they write. Some conferences are just a quick sentence or two of support. Others include a few minutes of pulling up a chair and watching as a child writes, asking questions about his or her drawings or words. It is a rare thirty-minute conferring session where we don't manage to check in with all twenty children in the class.

Include follow-up. When we leave a conference, the child and teacher both know what is coming next—continuing in a draft, starting a new piece, fleshing out a drawing, or publishing the writing in some form.

The Art of Listening in Writing Conferences with English Language Learners

Listening looks easy, but it is not simple. Every head is a world.

—Cuban Proverb

Researchers have studied the physiology of listening and speaking. One of the things they have discovered is that it's much harder to listen than it is to speak. Listeners' heart rates and body temperatures go up slightly as they lean in and try to make sense of what the speaker is saying.

Listening to individual children in active writer's workshops is especially challenging, and trying to understand the words of students who speak a different first language than yours can be downright daunting. Here are some tips for mastering the art of listening in conferences with English language learners:

Repeat what the child says to you. We unconsciously and automatically translate any speaker's words into the idioms of our language and culture, and this often means we lose the meaning the child is trying to create. By repeating the words, we can ensure we've got them right, as well as the ideas the child is attempting to convey.

Try to establish eye contact. Some cultures discourage children from making eye contact with adults, so this can be a difficult task. But eye contact allows you to communicate so much nonverbally with any child—that they have your attention, respect, and interest. When a child turns away from you, either from distraction or shyness, a gentle touch on the arm or back will often bring them back to eye contact with you.

If you are having trouble establishing eye contact, point to words or images on the page and prompt the child with "tell me about this" or "what's this?" Sometimes English language learners are more comfortable talking while looking at the page they have written, at least at first, rather than directly to you.

Pull up a chair and watch as the child writes or reads. You might narrate the "action" as the child writes, guessing what is being drawn or what word is being attempted. But letting the child work at their pace while you sit on the side and listen sends a strong signal that you respect the student's process and are ready to listen when they have something to say to you.

Avoid asking yes/no questions. If your questions require only a one-word response, you'll be spending far more time talking than the child. Open-ended questions also encourage more reflection for both you and your students. The exception, of course, is for English language learners in the silent period, who can make themselves known by nodding or shaking their heads to your guesses, and can work toward one- or two-word responses.

Respect silence. When you ask a question, wait till the child is ready to answer. Then wait some more. Give your students time to sort through what you've asked in their native tongue and English, and let them take all the time they need to formulate a response. It feels unnatural to break the hectic, noisy pace of many writer's workshops by encouraging these long pauses in conferences, but they are vital for children to sort through their thoughts and develop a reflective stance.

Celebrate approximations. It's tempting when a child writes an *F* for a *P* sound to launch into a lesson on sounds and symbols. But with young writers and readers, it's often more important to get them writing, comfortable with taking risks. If you teach them that you must approve the correctness of every letter, they will be hesitant to experiment, instead relying on your presence or copying words off the walls or from books.

Don't allow other children in the classroom to distract you. Send away any child who interrupts with a quick, kind word that conveys the importance of giving the child with whom you are working your full attention.

Take good notes. Pausing to write down what you are noticing the child accomplish verbally and nonverbally will open up more time for the child to speak in the conference, and it will give you wonderful fodder to refer to in launching the next conference with the child.

Conferences in the Zone of Proximal Development

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a concept developed by the Russian language researcher Lev Vygotsky nearly a century ago. Simply stated, the theory is that each child is in a learning "zone," with tasks they are capable of completing with assistance from their teacher now. These are tasks they will soon be able to do on their own, without assistance. Vygotsky put it simply: "What the child can do with assistance today, he can do alone tomorrow." Vygotsky's ideas have been adapted by many language researchers, notably Tharp and Gallimore (1988) and Pearson and Gallagher (1993) in stage models, with individual children moving from assistance from teachers or peers, to practice on their own, to internalized or automatic completion of the task.

The primary aim of a teacher in any conference with a student is to determine where the ZPD is for that child, and then to work within it. Teachers find the zone by referring to their previous notes from conferences with the child to determine what they have completed with assistance or on their own in the class. The teacher might note what letters the children have written successfully, with sound-symbol correspondence, on a master sheet. In addition, teachers are aware of what might come next as students move successfully through their ZPD and into new learning. Here are some "what's next" possibilities for children in various zones:

"Scribbling" to Recognizable Letters

Researchers including Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1985) note that "scribbles" from children of different cultures aren't just random marks on the page. Children with English as a first language often scribble left to right on the page; children from a Hebrew culture will scribble right to left, reflecting the movement of print in their culture. Likewise, the random curlicues of an American preschooler have the shapes of the English alphabet in them; a preschooler in China will make marks that look like the pictographs of their written language. The following are good questions to ask a child who is scribbling, in order to find his or her ZPD:

- What have you written here?
- What are you going to write next?
- How did you get the idea to write this?

Often the first letters children write are from their names, and those letters serve as good anchors for building new letter knowledge.

Pictures to Labels or Beginning Narrative

Children who are drawing pictures of themselves, family members, houses, and flowers present two possibilities for work in the ZPD. Children will draw the same image over and over again, and often a story is beneath the image—perhaps a favorite event that took place in that scene. A child may be ready to label the picture with one or two letters, or they may be starting to understand that writing is about telling stories and recording events. The following are good questions to ask a child who is drawing pictures with no script:

- Why did you write this?
- What is happening in your picture?
- Do you know any sounds in that word? (Repeat a word from the story, such as *mom* or *house* or *play*.)
- Would you like to try to write it?

Beginning Sound-Symbol Correspondence

Most children in the first year or two of schooling experiment with sound-symbol correspondence. They might begin by recognizing the sounds and letters in their names or those of their friends. Children are more likely to recognize consonant sounds first (from anywhere in the world). Over time as they master the alphabet, they will move from writing initial consonant sounds to middle or final consonant sounds, with digraphs and vowels being the most difficult to master. If a child is starting to label drawings, or write some strings of letters, here is what you might ask to extend their knowledge:

- What sounds or letters do you hear in that word?

- Do you know how to write that sound or letter?
- What other words do you know with that sound or letter?
- Do you want to learn how to write that letter?

It is easy to get bogged down in a conference teaching a child one letter. Children in the midst of cracking the code will learn most efficiently if much of their time is spent continuing to write. By practicing their letters, and being encouraged to take risks in their writing, they will naturally pick up many letters without much assistance. Children are also then more likely to ask for assistance when they truly need it, and you can be assured you are working within their ZPD.

The following are some of the writing learning zones young children might be in and may need assistance:

- Making the connection between sounds and symbols
- Understanding that writing is about recording events or telling stories
- Mastering the page—where drawings go, where print goes, which direction to begin writing
- Sustaining writing through an entire workshop
- Initiating new writing topics

If you're stumped in figuring out a good ZPD for a particular child, just sit and observe them writing for a few minutes. By quietly noting what they write, and asking a question occasionally as they work, you will almost always find some zone in which they are ready for assistance and eager to learn.

References

Harste, Jerome, Virginia Woodward, and Carolyn Burke. 1985. *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Pearson, P. David, and Margaret Gallagher. 1983. "The Instruction of Reading Comprehension" *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 8: 132–136.

Tharp, Roland, and Ronald Gallimore. 1988. *Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, Learning, and Schooling in Social Context.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vygotsky, Lev. 1978. *Mind in Society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Examples of Conferences in the Zone of Proximal Development

Anna

When Ruth met with Anna, she was fairly certain from her previous conferences that Anna was ready to write some of the letters in the name *Lily,* even though Anna hadn't labeled that picture. Ruth gently pressed her to write, and Anna learned she did know some of the sounds in the word.

But the zone isn't just about producing letters—it is also about a child's willingness to try new things and take some risks. Anna demurred at first when Ruth asked her to label *Lily.* When Anna included *O* in the label, Ruth encouraged her to write the letter down. If she had corrected Anna at that point, Anna might have reverted to not writing labels for pictures. By celebrating her attempt, Ruth is encouraging Anna to make guesses and attempt more writing when she isn't present.

Cristian

When Andie met with Cristian, she waited for him to start writing, and stopped herself from interjecting a couple of times as he worked. He began by drawing a shark fin, and then wrote an *F.* Cristian said this represented *shark,* and Andie wasn't sure if the *F* represented the *sh* sound in *shark* or the *f* in *fin.* As Cristian wrote, she observed the moment he realized the *f* sound came before *n*—he first wrote the *f* right on top of the *n,* and then moved on to write a new *f* before an *n.* If Andie had corrected Cristian when he first overwrote that *n,* she would have missed her insight into his learning about initial and final consonant sounds.

In the interview after the conference, she noted that "Cristian taught himself" about these initial and final consonant sounds in this instance. In considering his ZPD, he is likely ready to have that new knowledge reinforced and extended in work in other texts. But Andie also showed awareness of the limits of his zone—he clearly is not ready to learn complicated digraphs like the *sh* in *shark.*

Leonela

In the first conference with Leonela, Ruth observed her referring to her alphabet guide before writing *RS* for *horses.* Because Leonela recognized multiple consonant sounds, Ruth felt confident she was in a zone where she would be comfortable having a teacher help her fill in some of the gaps. In the conference the next day, Ruth asked Leonela if she wanted to learn the *B* sound in *butterfly,* demonstrated how to write the letter, then had Leonela practice it twice.

What is interesting in this second-day conference is that the zone Leonela and Ruth worked in involved alphabetic knowledge. The conference could have proceeded far differently if Leonela had chosen to continue to work on her horse story from the previous day. If Leonela had continued that story, Ruth might have worked with her around the concept of story or beginning narrative, nudging Leonela to include more details in her pictures, or sequential pictures telling different aspects of the events. There are always different literacy zones a child is working in and might need assistance with. In this case, the easiest and most obvious zone Leonela needed support in was sound-symbol correspondence, and she took the lead in revealing this by her choice of a new topic in her writing that day.

Understanding the "Silent Period"

If you have a new English language learner in your class who is not speaking, don't worry. According to language researcher Stephen Krashen (1982), most new learners of English go through a "silent period," where they are unwilling or unable to communicate orally, even though they understand much of what is going on around them. They are not comfortable speaking in the new language, because it is difficult for them to express their thoughts orally. Children in this silent period should not be forced to speak before they are ready. They need time to listen to others talk, digest what they hear, and observe their fellow classmates' interactions with each other. Their silence doesn't mean they are not learning the language.

It is easy to understand the concept of the "silent period" if you look at the language learning of babies. Babies in any culture can understand far more than they express. In a class of children who speak many languages other than English at home, you will often have children in the "silent period." They are learning many English words, ideas, and idioms, but they are not comfortable speaking as part of the group or individually.

The length of the silent period can vary greatly for students in classrooms, from a few days to a year, simply because their experience with language, their personalities, and their emotions about learning a new language can vary so greatly. Because the child is silent in the dominant classroom language, it can be hard to know where they are in acquiring English.

When conferring with English language learners in our kindergarten classroom, we use these strategies to communicate verbally and nonverbally:

We ask questions that allow the children to respond by nodding or shaking their heads. These prompts include guesses of what they are drawing or about the marks they are making on the page (e.g., "Is that your mother?" "Is this writing in Russian?" "In English?").

We accept as response facial expressions such as smiles. Nonverbal cues from children in conferences include establishing eye contact, flipping through pages of writing for us, pointing to specific pictures or letters, or grabbing our hands to touch the page or help the child draw a letter.

We share a word or two in the child's language. This might be the Spanish word for *butterfly* if we are studying butterflies in science, or the Russian word for *mother* if we think the child has drawn a picture of their mother. Because there are so many different first languages in our classroom, we rely on bilingual dictionaries and suggestions from native language speakers. If the alphabet is the same as the English alphabet, simple Web translators (*Babblefish* (www.babblefish.com) and *Free Translation* (www.freetranslation.com) can be helpful. These are useful only for basic literal translations, but children appreciate the attempt. (These websites will also translate several sentences into another written language such as Vietnamese, Russian, or Chinese, which can be helpful for brief notes to parents.)

We ask the child to teach us words in their language. They usually know the word *Chinese* or *Spanish* when you ask how to say something such as *pencil* or *book* in their language.

Many children draw pictures of their families. When this occurs, we point to each figure and ask questions. We ask if this is the mother, or sister, or brother, and if they nod, we ask the name of the family member. The first words of children in the silent period are often related to family.

We watch the child on the playground. If there is no verbal communication in the classroom, there are often early words around play.

We ask children to mime the action of what they are trying to convey, using their bodies to communicate. If we mime in conferences, they can often understand this request.

We ask the child to draw a picture of what they are trying to tell us.

The silent period at any age can last many months—even children who understand a tremendous number of words and concepts are overwhelmed at the thought of trying to speak in the language. But if we

convey through our verbal and nonverbal cues that we want to communicate and trust the communication will come, children eventually speak. Classrooms that are engaging and nonthreatening, and that honor a child's native language and culture, can help each student's motivation, risk-taking, and ability to learn.

Reference

Krashen, Stephen. 1982. *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition.* New York: Pergamon Press.

ABC Sheet

A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H	I	J
K	L	M	N	O
P	Q	R	S	T
U	V	W	X	Y
Z				