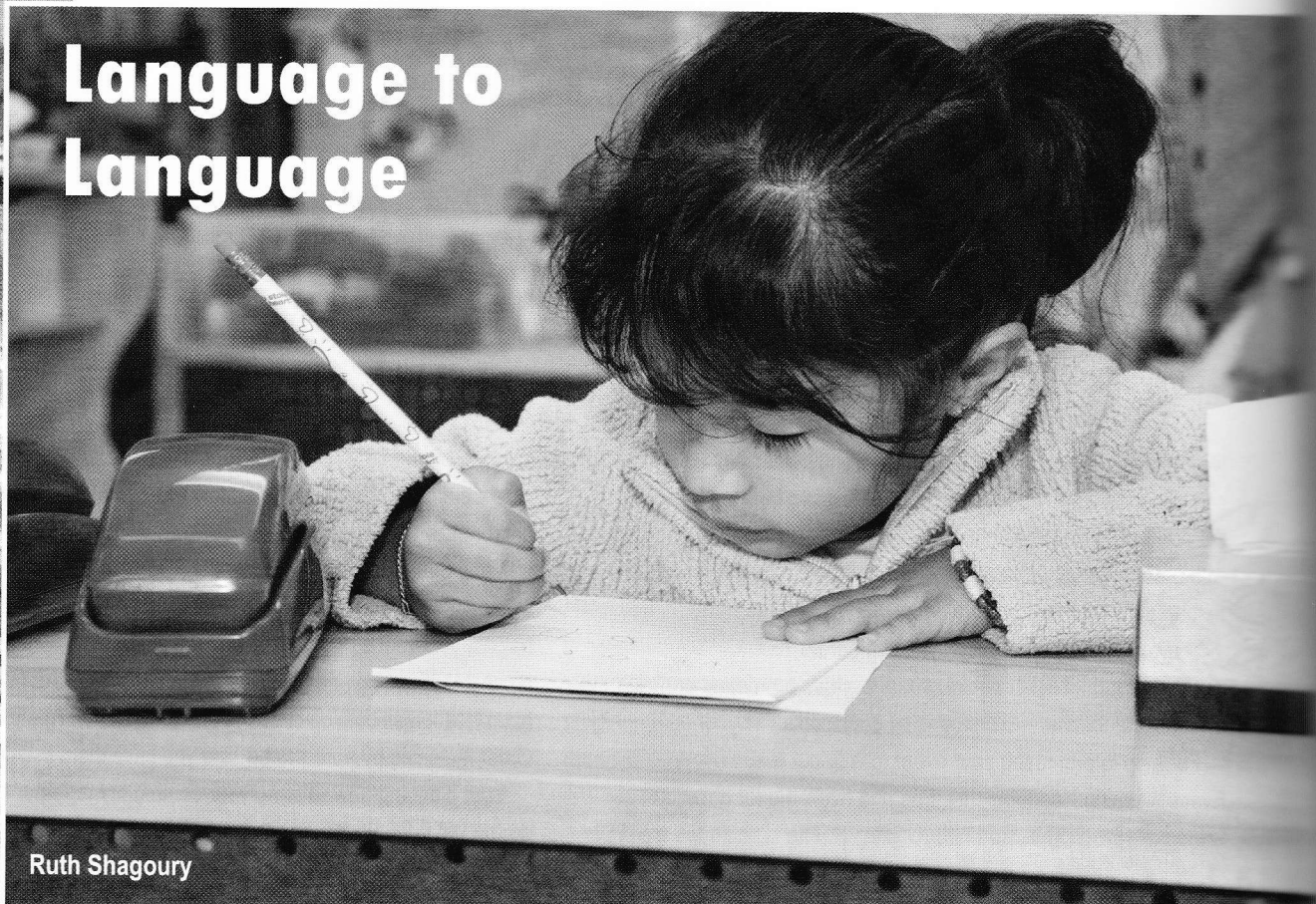


# Language to Language



Ruth Shagoury

## Nurturing Writing Development in Multilingual

I sit in a small circle with several 5-year-olds as they pore through their writing journals to share pieces that are ready for publication on the writing wall. The children have created a thoughtful process for inviting two mostly silent friends into the conversation about writing. One of those students, Mariaevelyn, rarely ventures words even in her native Spanish. The other child, Lyuba, just now beginning to mouth a word or two of either Russian or English, smiles her way through the day.

Nonetheless, they actively participate in the group conference. As Alma, David, and Tonia share their writing, they pass their journals over to Mariaevelyn and Lyuba. Each of these girls, in turn, ponders the page, and then points to a section of the journal with a detail that she likes.

"Oh, you like the words?" Alma asks, as she follows Lyuba's pointed finger.

Lyuba nods.

Mariaevelyn likes the big yellow sun, and points to the upper right-hand corner.

"I like the sun part too," Alma confirms. "And I can make a rainbow."

**naeyc**® 2, 3, 4

**C**ommunity—one of the intangibles that make a classroom run smoothly—helps welcome all learners into the daily work. As children with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and languages come together in learning environments from preschool on, it is vital that each person initiate actions that invite others' voices into the mix.

Creating a literate classroom environment that nurtures the writing development of dual language learners (DLLs) requires more than presenting a series of skills to learn or academics to master. Classrooms should also be dedicated to building on children's knowledge, experience, and needs and to assisting in their acquiring shared knowledge and understandings about what literacy is and how it can be a gift for communicating and learning.

## Classroom context

As a university literacy researcher, I have been investigating what is possible for dual language learners as they acquire literacy skills. For four years, I was embedded in Andie Cunningham's multilingual kindergarten class,

a classroom in which children typically spoke at least six different languages (Cunningham & Shagoury 2005). As I looked more closely at the children's beginning reading skills, I came to appreciate the importance of written language to their overall literacy growth, thus shifting my focus to written language acquisition and development. To extend my research, I spent two years in Head Start classrooms with preschool multilingual students. These young learners taught me what is possible for preschool children to

accomplish in terms of written language development.

The majority of research that focuses on children's writing is based on native English-speaking children. But more specific study of young dual language learners as they develop as writers is beginning to take place. In her recent book

*When English Language Learners Write*, Katharine Samway concludes that "the most current research shows that non-native English-speaking children are capable of much more than is

generally expected of them" (2006, 22).

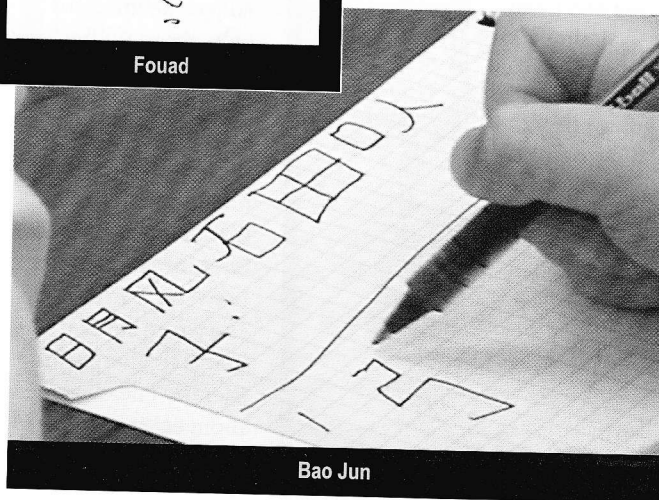
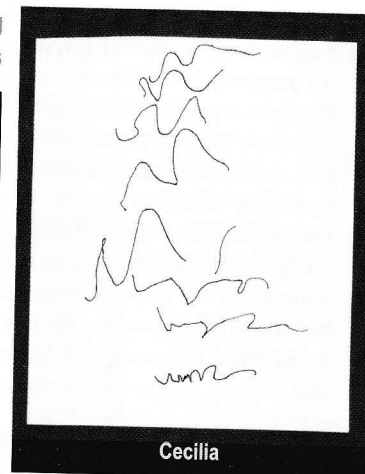
## Young dual language learners' awareness of print

Young children across languages and cultures reveal an awareness of the particular written features of their first languages (Harste, Woodward, & Burke 1984). Four-year-old Fouad's Arabic writing, for example, has lots of dots and squiggles, which he reads back in Arabic. Five-year-old Bao Jun's Chinese writing shows logographic characteristics. Both children also make shapes that represent the English alphabet that they see around them. Even very early scribble writing, such as 3-year-old Cecilia's, is reflective of cursive English (see "Children's Writing Samples").

**Ruth Shagoury, PhD**, is a literacy professor at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches, researches, and coordinates the language and literacy program. She works with students of all ages, from preschool through adult. [ruth.shagoury@gmail.com](mailto:ruth.shagoury@gmail.com)

Photos © James Whitney.

## Children's Writing Samples



Bilingual children immersed in dual languages at home since birth sort out the two languages, creating hypotheses about how to speak both. In the same way, young dual language learners actively figure out the way written language works in their first and second languages. Katharine Samway (2006) stresses the need for dual language learners to have access to what she calls "the creative construction principle" to allow their writing to emerge. In other words, children need the chance to explore and actively figure out the ways that written language works in different situations, continually trying out their hypotheses. Another researcher of bilingual developing writers, Emilia Ferreiro, advises, "Children have shown us that they need to reconstruct the written system in order to make it their own. Let us allow them the time and the opportunities for such a tremendous task" (1980, 56).

**Five-year-old Song enters kindergarten in the fall, speaking a few words, phrases, and expressions in English. Hmong is her first language and the language her family speaks at home, although their English language skills are strong enough that they do not need translators at parent conferences.**

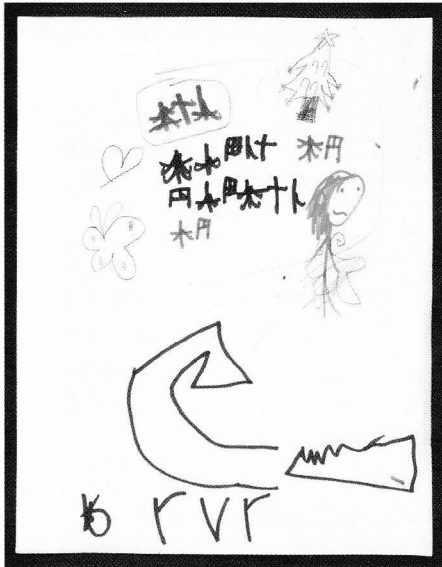
**Since there are no other Hmong speakers in Song's class, nor ethnic Hmong aides or translators at the school, English**

**Children need the chance to explore and actively figure out the ways that written language works in different situations, continually trying out their hypotheses.**

## Classrooms

is what Song uses to communicate with her friends at school. She is by no means silent, although often quiet. She relies on gestures, pictures, and simple phrases and sentences in English to get her meaning across.

Song's literacy grows steadily over the school year. In the fall, she draws many pictures and makes a gradual transition to adding letters to go with them. She also copies letters from the English and Spanish words she sees in the classroom environment. By May, Song begins to use letters to represent sounds. In her drawing of the water in a river [see "Song's Writing"], she uses an *r* for the /r/ sound. And on the very same page, she uses a string of Chinese characters, which, she tells us, is the kind of writing her parents do.



Song's Writing

Song's growing literacy in two languages seemed to help shore up her confidence to share her at-home writing with us in school. By June she experimented with exclamation marks, voice bubbles, and spaces between words, and she wrote several books to share with friends. The classroom environment allowed Song the time and space to be an active and creative written language user.

### Writing right from the start

Song is not an exception. Dual language learners can write before orally mastering a second language (Edelsky 1982, 1983; Huddleson 1989; Taylor 1990; Samway 2006). Just like first language-speaking children, dual language learners write before they can read and use drawing to explore their ideas and thinking.

Russian-speaking Kostya comes to kindergarten speaking no English but is very willing to use gestures and facial expressions to communicate with adults and classmates. He usually looks very serious when he opens his writing journal and sits down to write—with intention.

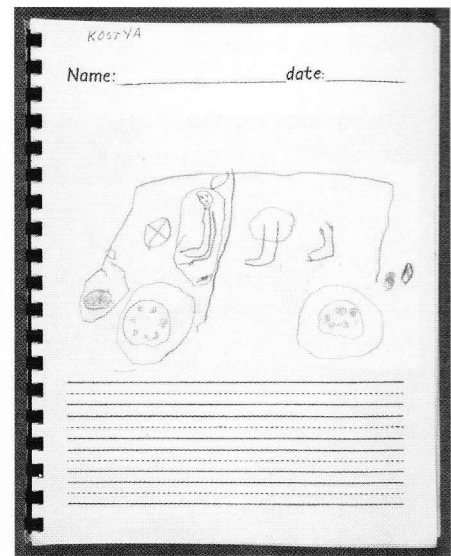
One morning, his story is about the truck his father drives [see "Kostya's Writing"]. Like all good writers, Kostya uses detail in his piece—from lug nuts in the tires to the steering wheel, to the exhaust floating out at the vehicle's rear. He even includes the passengers' arms dangling out of the windows.

When asked about his drawing, Kostya explains in Russian, but knowing I cannot understand, he supplements

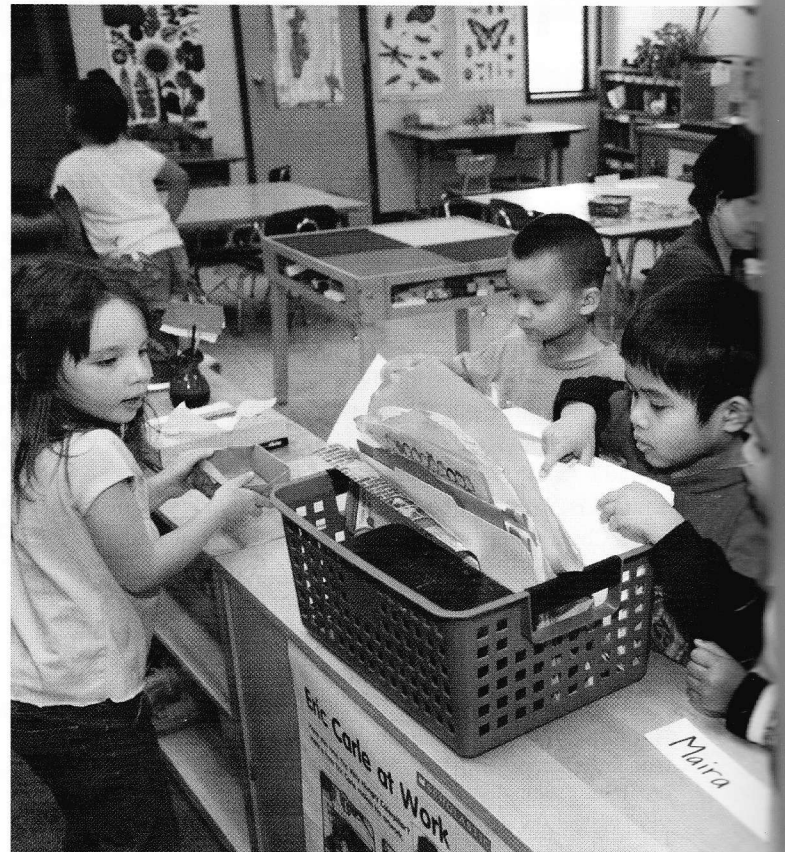
his verbal explanation with pointing, movement, and gesture. Our exchange of conversation helps his language development, as I continue to guess his meaning, supplying English words for *car* (he shakes his head no), and *bus* (no again, but with a smile this time). But then I am rewarded with an emphatic yes when I offer the word *truck*.

"Yes, truck!" he repeats, which draws his neighbors, Luis and Tony, into our conversation, sparked by Kostya's writing.

What is the role of talk in developing dual language learners' emerging literacy? Researchers Ernst and Richard (1995) found that talk is indeed an important influence on preschool and early elementary children's developing oral and written fluency in English. Writing/drawing are conversation starters that help children share their interests and stories in response to each other (Hubbard 1985).



Kostya's Writing



## The role of home languages in writing development

Bilingual programs have an obvious advantage. Research shows that children who learn literacy in their first language do not need to relearn these skills. Dual language learners who learn to read in their home language do not need to be taught to read in English; they simply transfer the skill to their second language. The same principle holds true for writing (Schechter & Bayley 2002; Freeman & Freeman 2003).

In diverse schools in which children speak many languages, it is not feasible to create bilingual programs for every language. But whenever possible, it is beneficial to find speakers of second languages to talk and write with young children in their home language.

Kindergartner Alma writes a complex story one day, in pictures. She starts to write out sounds to label the story. *Cat* and *twins* are the two English words that stand out in her story. In an attempt to help her, a classroom helper dictates letters to her. These are not words she can read back, so she turns from this story in frustration. But the classroom's bilingual aide encourages Alma to tell her story in Spanish, and the words pour out, a story of a girl who had a twin who died in Mexico and how the other twin thinks of her. (*Una niña tiene una gemela que una vez se murio. Ahorra la gemela esta pensando en ella. Ella esta en el cementaria.*) Sounding out words in Spanish helps Alma to write her story.

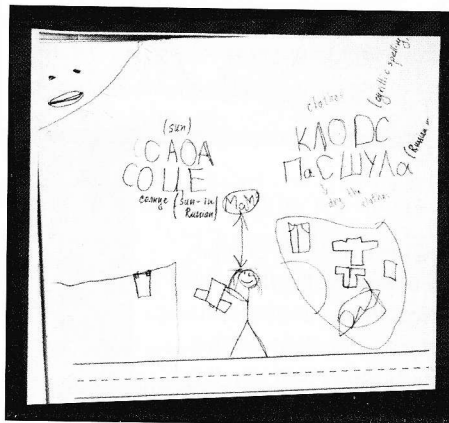
Marina, a 5-year-old Russian speaker, appreciates every chance she has to speak with Luba, the Russian aide and translator at her school. On her own, during writing workshop, Marina creates a little book with some writing

**Writing/drawing are conversation starters that help children share their interests and stories in response to each other.**

in English and a few Cyrillic letters and words like *CPMAS* for *Christmas*. She felt comfortable taking the risk of speaking to me and to others with a few words of English.

When Christina, a visiting teacher, spends the morning in the classroom, Marina discovers that Christina reads and writes Russian, and a quiet child becomes a chatterbox.

Marina writes a story of her mom drying clothes in the sun [see "Marina's Writing"]. She writes the word for *sun* in English, using one set of symbols (CAOA) and then another set (COLIE) for the Russian word for *sun* (*conyue*: teacher transla-



Marina's Writing

tion) in Cyrillic. The Russian words for *clothes* and *drying the clothes* are written in Cyrillic, using invented spelling.

Because Christina was able to talk and write with Marina in both Russian and English, this encouraged Marina to speak and write in the two languages as well.

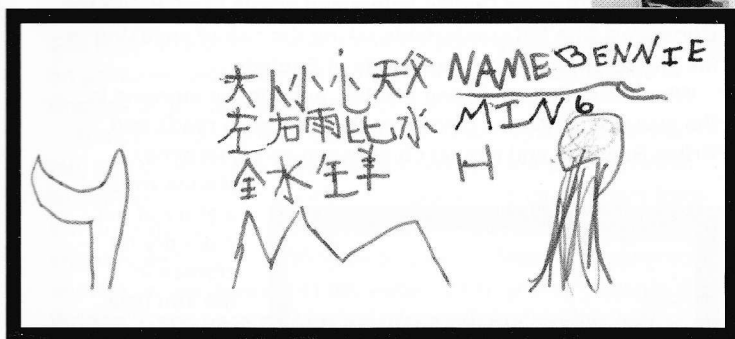
In the same class, Bennie makes similar strides in his writing. In the spring he reads his journal and explains his drawings in Cantonese when his mother comes for a parent conference. Although Bennie now speaks more frequently in English in class than he did earlier in the year and uses English phrases and gestures to tell about his writing, during the parent conference he expresses very complete thoughts about his writing, which we never heard him do before.

The same week, he shares two pieces of writing with me: the first is a kind of picture story about spiders, birds, and his brother and sister [see "Bennie's Writing"]. In English letters he writes *Ming*, his Cantonese name, as well



Bennie's Writing

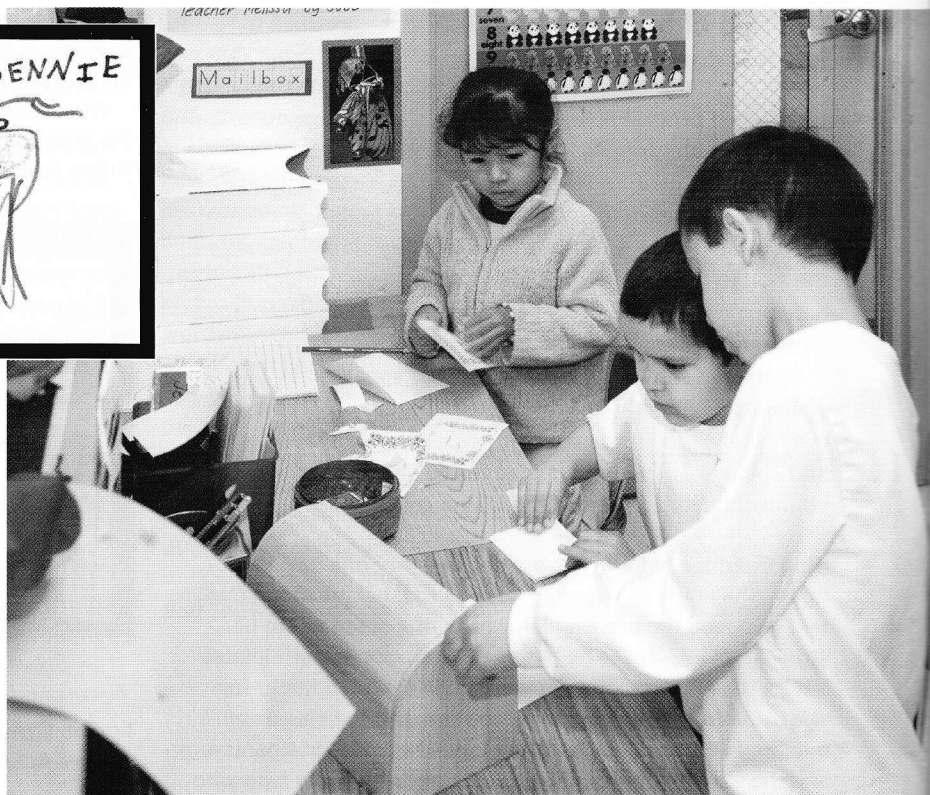




Bennie's Story

as *Bennie*. He includes his brother's English name, Alex, and a row of letters. On the same day, he writes a story in Chinese logographs—a skill we never saw him use in class before [see "Bennie's Story"]. At the end of the day, I see him tuck this writing into his jacket pocket to take home and share with his family.

Stories like these provide additional support for the research that shows dual language learners can write in both their home language and a second language without becoming confused. In a fascinating yearlong ethnography, Edelsky and Jilbert (1985) found that children learned both Spanish and English simultaneously without confusion, and they were able to differentiate between the two writing systems. In their Spanish invented spellings, the children used tildes (~) over the appropriate letters and never used the letter *k*, which the Spanish use only in foreign words. In any writing that the children read back in English, they omitted tildes and did not use the letter *k*.

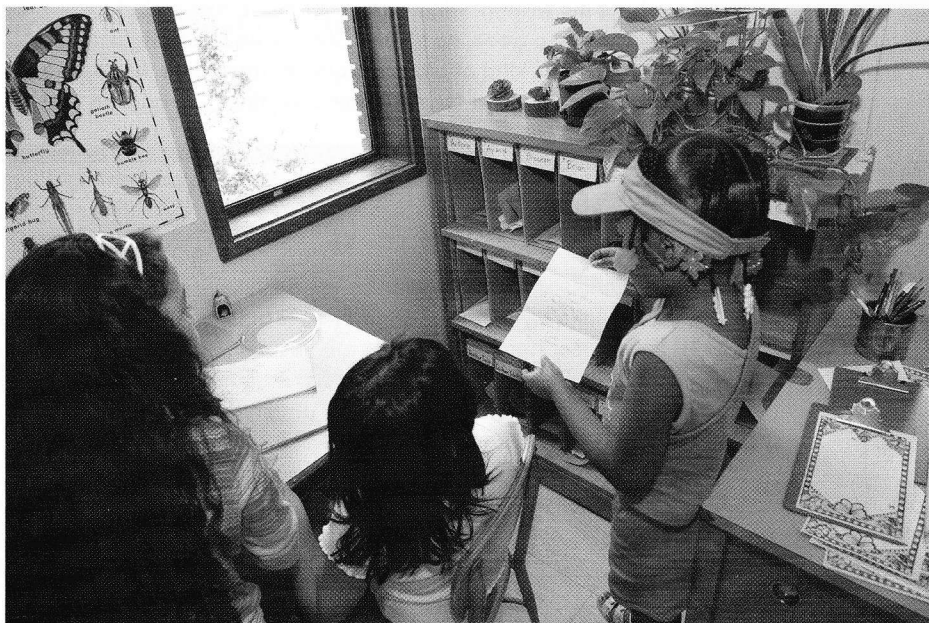


### Reviewing research findings

Writing processes for young children are very similar across languages (Samway 2006). Even children whose first language is logographic, such as Chinese and Korean, rather than alphabetic, like English or Spanish, invent spellings and writing symbols (Chi 1988). When the two written language systems that children are learning are very different, children still draw on their knowledge of their home language as well as their growing understanding of English, testing out hypotheses just as they do in their oral language (Edelsky & Jilbert 1985).

### Conclusion

All young children, whether English speaking or learning English as a second—or third!—language, blossom in environments that encourage genuine communication by whatever means work. Children need access to caring adults dedicated to making sense of what each child is trying to share through language, and they need to be a part of



a learning community that encourages children's reliance on each other. Rather than sitting at a desk, focused on individual learning tasks, a workshop atmosphere encourages children to determine what tools, peers, and mentors will aid them in their quest to make meaning.

## References

- Chi, M. 1988. Invented spelling/writing in Chinese-speaking children: The developmental patterns. In *Dialogue in literacy research*, eds. J. Readance & R. Baldwin, 37th Yearbook, 285-96. Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Cunningham, A., & R. Shagoury. 2005. *Starting with comprehension: Reading strategies for the youngest learners*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Edelsky, C. 1982. Writing in a bilingual program: The relation on L1 and L2 texts. *TESOL Quarterly* 16: 211-28.
- Edelsky, C. 1983. Segmentation and punctuation: Developmental data from young writers in a bilingual program. *Research in the Teaching of English* 17: 135-36.
- Edelsky, C., & K. Jilbert. 1985. Bilingual children and writing: A lesson for us all. *Volta Review* 87 (5): 57-72.
- Ernst, G., & K.J. Richard. 1995. Reading and writing pathways to conversation in the ESL classroom. *The Reading Teacher* 48: 320-26.
- Ferreiro, E. 1980. The relationship between oral and written language: The children's viewpoints. In *Oral and written language development research: Impact on the schools*, eds M. Haussler, D. Strickland, & Y. Goodman, 47-56. Urbana, IL: International Reading Association.
- Freeman, Y., & D. Freeman, D. 2003. *Between worlds*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harste, J., V. Woodward, & C. Burke. 1984. *Language stories and literacy lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hubbard, R. 1985. Write and tell. *Language Arts* 62 (6): 624-30.
- Huddleson, S. 1989. A tale of two children. In *Richness in writing*, eds. D.M. Johnson & D.H. Roen, 84-99. New York: Longman.
- Samway, K. 2006. *When English language learners write*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Schecter, S., & R. Bayley. 2002. *Language as cultural practice: Mexicanos en el norte*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Taylor, D. 1990. Writing and reading literature in a second language. In *Workshop 2: Beyond the basal*, ed. N. Atwell, 105-17. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

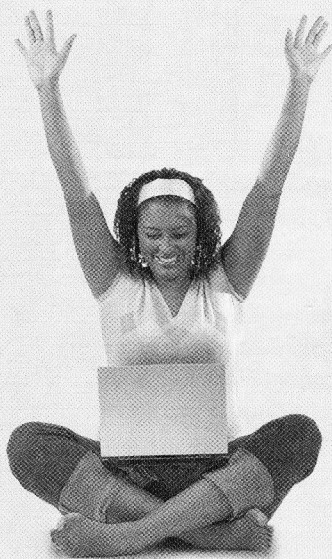


Copyright © 2009 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at [www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp](http://www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp).

## Nurturing Dual Language Learners' Writing Development

1. Look at each child as an individual. All writers are unique, and their writing development will reflect those idiosyncratic qualities. Get to know the children with whom you work, their interests, and their writing processes.
2. Encourage children to write and draw their stories right from the beginning, before they have mastered oral English.
3. Create opportunities for children to share writing with adults in the classroom and among their peers, young writers themselves.
4. Allow children the time and space they need to test out their hypotheses about written language.
5. Use each child's first language often and in as many different ways as possible in classroom activities.
6. Surround children with print in a range of languages and alphabetic and logographic systems.

## You're Busy.



As a child care administrator, scheduling time for professional development can be a challenge. Experience flexibility and convenience. Earn your six-course, 18-credit **Certificate in Child Care Administration online.**

Register Now for Courses Beginning in JUNE

- Administration & Supervision in Early Childhood
- Operations Management in Early Childhood

**Secure your spot today!** For complete schedule, admission, registration and tuition information, contact Shari Vinluan at 414-227-3223 or [svinluan@uwm.edu](mailto:svinluan@uwm.edu).

Offered by the Center for Early Childhood Professional Development & Leadership at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, an accredited university serving professionals like you for over 150 years.

[sce-earlychildhood/summer2.uwm.edu](http://sce-earlychildhood/summer2.uwm.edu)

## We're Flexible.



School of Continuing Education