Developing Academic Writing of ELLs:

Areas for Future Research

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To succeed in school, English Language Learners (ELLs) need to learn academic language: the specialized vocabulary, sentence structures, and grammar used in academic disciplines, which include science, social studies, math, and English literature. (Huang & Morgan, 2003). ELLs need to be taught academic language because the basic English commonly taught in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes does not enable ELLs to perform on the same academic level as their peers (Baker et al., 2014; Bunch, Lotan, Valdés, & Cohen, 2005; Huang and Morgan, 2003; Kong & Hoare, 2010; Montelongo & Herter, 2010). Academic vocabulary, an important part of academic language can be further divided into general academic terms and content-specific academic words (Baker et al., 2014). General academic terms are used in all subject areas and may have different meanings based on context, whereas content-specific academic words are only used in specific academic disciplines (Baker et al., 2014). ELLs need to learn how to use both types of words to understand and communicate using academic language, especially through academic writing.

There are various approaches that researchers have investigated to improve the academic writing of ELLs. Explicit instruction requires teachers to use student-friendly definitions for academic vocabulary and analyze language in texts, rather than expect students to learn academic language just by being exposed to it (Baker et al., 2014). Content-based language teaching (CBLT) teaches students academic content in a second language, which requires teachers to understand content, language, and the relationships between the two. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL), a framework in which different grammar choices are linked to social context, can also be used to teach academic language by teaching students how to use grammar to affect the meaning of their writing (Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin, 2008; Gebhard,
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Teachers can also use a combination of these approaches to teach ELLs academic writing. Although some research has been conducted to support these methods, not enough research has been done to determine the most effective methods for teaching academic writing (Baker et al., 2014).

Current research suggests that CBLT, SFL, and explicit academic language instruction can improve the academic writing of ELLs based on student writing samples that show improvement after teachers use these methods. However, most of this research is based on case studies, which are limited because there is no way to account for variables in the classroom such as class, race, ethnicity, support from administration, and quality of instruction. Therefore, more research needs to be done to explore the effectiveness of these methods using a larger variety of schools. Some of the studies are theoretical with no application in the classroom, so there is not enough proof to show that the theories within these studies are effective. Nearly all of the research on this topic was conducted in ESL classrooms, meaning that hardly any research has been done on writing instruction in bilingual classrooms. Therefore, researchers need to do more work in bilingual classrooms to develop strategies that utilize the students’ first languages and English. There has also been little research regarding the effectiveness of technology in academic writing instruction, but what little research has been done highlights its potential benefits, so it is worthwhile for researchers to explore this area further. Researchers can improve upon current research to find the best ways to teach academic writing to ELLs.

ELLs need to learn academic language to succeed on state tests, especially the New York English Language Arts (ELA) tests. These tests are based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and these standards include academic language as a crucial component of student
success. According to the sixth standard in the Language section of the ELA/Literacy standards, students must “acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level” (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010). If ELLs cannot learn how to listen, read, and write using academic language, then they will not be able to pass these tests. Passing these tests is especially difficult for ELLs because the ELA test is designed to be difficult for students who speak English natively, so ELLs will have even more difficulties if they are not given extra support in learning academic language.

Unfortunately, ELLs are not learning the skills that they need to pass these ELA tests. In 2014, about 3% of ELLs scored proficient or above proficient on grades 3-8 ELA tests, compared to 33% of English-proficient students (NYSED, 2014b). These scores demonstrate that ELLs are doing much more poorly on tests, so they need extra support in developing their academic language compared to what is being given to native English-speaking students. For most ELLs, exemption from taking these tests is not an option. In New York State, ELLs must take the ELA test if they have been in the United States for over a year (NYSED, 2014a). Even if the ELL is at a low level of English proficiency after living in the United States for over a year, that student must still take the test. Because the standards are so high for ELLs, teachers and researchers must do more research into methods that help ELLs learn academic language so they do not fail these tests.

One way to help ELLs develop their writing is through combining content and language instruction with explicit instruction. In a middle school science class, Huang and Morgan (2003) directly taught ELLs linguistic tools such as nominalization (turning verbs and adjectives into nouns) and nominal groups (modifying nouns using subcategories as in the phrase “feathered
creatures with two legs and two wings”) to help them produce better scientific writing. If Huang and Morgan had not explicitly taught students how to use scientific language, the students would not have learned it on their own, especially because these students were at an intermediate proficiency level in English (Huang, 2004). Huang and Morgan also strengthened their students’ content knowledge through group discussions and connected these discussions to the content and language of the students’ early drafts of their writing (Huang, 2004). Between their first and third drafts, students increased the average number of scientific terms they defined by about nine (Huang and Morgan, 2003). Students also increased the number of times that they used scientific linguistic tools by statistically significant amounts. Once students learned the language for defining scientific words, they were much more able to elaborate on their scientific knowledge. Thus, they improved the content and language of their writing at the same time.

Bunch et al. (2005) also combined content and language instruction at the same time to teach ELLs in a social studies class how to write persuasively about the Reformation. Students needed to learn how to write persuasive essays using explicit instruction because they had limited experience using academic language. To teach persuasive writing, the teachers used rubrics that told students strategies they needed to use in their essays, including “stating facts,” “providing reasons,” and “appealing to emotions” (Bunch et al., 2005). The teachers also created group activities, such as analyzing a political cartoon and creating a skit that would require students to think critically about the themes of the Reformation and develop their own responses to these themes. Based on samples of student writing, Bunch et al. found that after students learned persuasive writing strategies and social studies content, they effectively stated their argument, supported it with details, and used content vocabulary properly in their persuasive writing. One limitation of the Bunch et al. source is that it did not include samples of student
writing from before the unit took place, so it is impossible to see how much these students
improved their persuasive writing over the course of the unit.

Huang and Morgan (2003) and Bunch et al. (2005) both use similar instructional
techniques, but their studies also have similar weaknesses because they are both case studies.
Case studies are limited in scope, so their results cannot always be applied to larger populations;
this problem is evident in both case studies because each one only studies classes within the
same school. Huang and Morgan (2003) studied only two classes, whereas Bunch et al. (2005)
studied six. The results of these studies could have been different if they had been conducted in
different school districts, so it is hard to differentiate between the benefits of these methods in
particular and the benefits of other possible factors such as dedicated teachers and administrative
support. If these studies had been expanded to include different school districts, the researchers
would have been able to determine if these methods would work better or worse in different
environments. For example, Bunch et al. mention that one of the limits of the teachers’
instructional methods is that there was limited time for students to work on their writing in class.
If the instructional methods used in this study had also been implemented in a school with longer
class periods, researchers could have determined the effect of longer periods on the effectiveness
of these methods.

Researchers have used theoretical studies to suggest that teaching students knowledge
structures and text structures can improve their academic writing. Based on Kong and Hoare’s
(2010) definitions, knowledge structures are universal relationships between concepts that can be
illustrated without using language, whereas text structures are the language of knowledge
structures used in specific content areas. For example, a sequence is a knowledge structure which
uses chronological order to organize details; some corresponding text structures are process
Students need to understand the relationships between the structure, language, and content of their writing to write effectively in academic fields. Kong and Hoare apply their theory to a science lesson by identifying the knowledge structures and text structures that would be taught in each part of the lesson and describing how they would be taught along with the content. Even though Kong and Hoare’s ideas fit in with the other research that has been conducted on academic writing, they do not test their ideas by using them in a classroom setting to see if they are actually effective in teaching students how to use knowledge structures and text structures in their writing. Therefore, these methods may not actually be effective in the classroom, despite how effective they may seem on paper.

Out of all of the methods discussed in this paper, SFL has been studied the most thoroughly as a way to improve student writing of ELLs in a variety of genres. Those who use SFL to teach academic writing focus on field (the text’s subject matter), tenor (the writer’s relationship to the text), and mode (how the text is written) to teach ELLs how to write in ways specific to different genres. These genres include personal account, expository (persuasive) writing, and procedural writing. The terms field, tenor, and mode are used universally among applied linguists who study SFL, but some scholars have created teacher and student-friendly terms to make these concepts easier to learn, such as “what’s going on” for field, “point of view” for tenor, and “textual structure” for mode (Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin, 2008). These modified terms can be used to introduce SFL to teachers and students because the modified terms are more appropriate for a classroom setting than the applied linguistics terms, which could be seen as jargon by students and teachers. With the modified terms, researchers can more easily work together with teachers to create methods that can then be tested by studying
how effective they are on actual students. Even though SFL has been researched and applied to a variety of contexts, more research needs to be done to expand the scope of these studies and apply research to different contexts which require students to write literary, informative, and argumentative texts.

SFL researchers have applied their research to real life through lesson plans that meet Common Core standards, which require students to write in literary, informative, and argumentative genres (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010). Brisk (2015) uses SFL to create elementary-level lesson plans for different genres, including procedures, recounts, reports, explanations, arguments, and fictional narratives. Because this book contains a wide variety of genres, teachers can use this book to create different instructional approaches for different types of writing. Once teachers know how to teach different types of writing, they can prepare students, especially ELLs, to learn how to write well for the ELA state tests, future content-area classes, and the various types of writing they would need for their future college education, careers, communication, and personal enjoyment.

Brisk’s (2015) book of lesson plans provide some possible areas of further study and exploration for teachers and researchers. The lesson plans are designed for students in grades K-5, so most of them are not relevant to secondary education teachers. However, middle school teachers could modify some of the lessons designed for fifth graders to meet the needs of older middle school students. To develop better educational materials for ELLs, secondary teachers and curriculum developers could create their own content-specific lesson plans based on the principles that Brisk uses in her lesson plans. Most of the lessons that Brisk provides could be adapted to meet the needs of secondary school ELLs by incorporating an age-appropriate level of content, vocabulary, grammar, and audience awareness while still using similar methods to teach
all of these things. Researchers could also use some of these lesson plans as a basis for research in classrooms with ELLs.

Based on several case studies, SFL can be used to teach ELLs how to write in a variety of academic genres. Researchers prove this by analyzing student writing to evaluate how well students write in specific genres. Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin (2008) use student writing samples to show the effectiveness of a teacher training program based on SFL. They compare student writing from classrooms where teachers used their training to create genre-based writing instruction with writing from classrooms where teachers did not create this type of instruction. On the other hand, Huang and Morgan (2003) and Gebhard, Dong-shin, and Seger (2011) compare the progress of students before and after they received SFL-based instruction. In both cases, students demonstrate a greater awareness of the conventions of different genres after instruction than beforehand. In all of these studies, teachers who were well-trained in SFL helped their students improve their genre-specific writing. To provide even more proof that SFL is effective, researchers could take the instructional methods and teacher training programs from these case studies and bring them into different school districts. That way, there would be more student writing samples that could be compared to one another to see if student writing as a whole is improving, or if the number of students who are improving is actually relatively small.

One case study shows a school in which teachers tried using SFL unsuccessfully to teach students how to write using different academic genres, but this study is flawed in ways that undermines its results. Brisk (2012) studied 13 ELLs in grades 3-5 in six different elementary classrooms, two of which were sheltered English immersion (SEI) classrooms specifically designed for students bilingual in English and Spanish. All six of these teachers were trained in
SFL for two days in the week before classes started, then given an hour once every two months to learn more about SFL instruction (Brisk, 2012). Brisk found that in these classrooms, ELLs learned how to write in a variety of genres, but they had trouble knowing which genres they should use for which writing tasks. For example, when students were asked to write about an experience they had with their favorite person, students often wrote a description of or a report on the person instead (Brisk, 2012). Therefore, the SFL instruction that the teachers gave did not help the students learn how to differentiate between different genres. However, these results should not be used against SFL as a whole because the teachers in this study did not have much time to learn how to teach SFL correctly. As a result, they did not know how to explain the purposes of different types of writing to their students, which could explain why students were confused about which types of writing they should be using. By studying a variety of schools with better SFL-based teacher training, researchers and teachers could determine which concepts are too difficult for elementary ELLs to learn, and which ones they can learn from a teacher with the right training.

Schleppegrell (1998) studied the writing of students who had not been instructed in SFL to identify the strengths and weaknesses in students’ genre-specific writing. She analyzed the writing of 128 seventh and eighth graders from an assignment to describe an animal in a photograph. She found that students writing this description wrote using first person (I, we) when they should have written in third person (it, they), used past tense instead of present tense, and wrote about their process of choosing the picture instead of the animal itself. Schleppegrell uses a fairly large writing sample from five different science classes in the same school, which contains both ELLs and students who speak standard English as a second dialect. Compared to researchers who base their analysis on writing samples from one or two classrooms,
Schleppegrell can more accurately detect trends in the kinds of mistakes that students make in their writing because the writing samples come from different classrooms and include students with various language backgrounds. Schleppegrell can improve her analysis even further by having teachers in other schools conduct the same task in their classrooms and compare the results from different schools.

To learn even more about the effectiveness of SFL in teaching ELLs academic language, researchers could repeat Schleppegrell’s (1998) study with a few modifications. Instead of simply measuring how well students write with no SFL instruction, researchers would train teachers in SFL and test students to see how much their writing improves after they are taught using SFL-based instruction. The description writing task from Schleppegrell’s study could be used as both a pretest and a posttest because this task tests how well students can write in a difficult academic genre before and after they learn how to write it. This study would even be an improvement on Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin’s (2008) study because that study did not include a comparison of student writing before and after instruction, perhaps because the focus of the study was on teacher training rather than student success. If possible, researchers could use more than one school in the study to create a larger sample of students than the one used in Schleppegrell’s study. This new study would combine the scope of Schleppegrell’s study, the teacher training used in Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin’s study, and the analysis of student progress used in Huang and Morgan’s (2003) study.

Analyzing texts other than student writing is uncommon in SFL research, so researchers would have plenty of opportunities to develop new research in this area. A study conducted by Walker (2012) in Hong Kong differs from other studies because it analyzes model texts provided
in ESL textbooks rather than student writing to see the potential for students to improve their academic writing. Walker finds that the texts did not show a consistent progression between grade levels, partly because only four texts met the requirements for this study, and partly because there was no research-based cumulative writing curriculum in Hong Kong. American researchers would not find the results of this study useful, not only because the low number of model texts make it impossible to draw any definite conclusions from this study, but also because ESL education in the United States is different from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Hong Kong. However, American scholars may want use Walker’s quantitative methods as a foundation to conduct their own analysis of American textbooks. Even though new textbooks are being designed based on the Common Core standards, which create a cumulative progression in reading and writing between grade levels, teachers should still analyze their textbooks because they may be outdated. If teachers find that their textbooks do not provide a consistent progression between grade levels, they can supplement their textbooks with additional reading materials that teachers can use to teach students how to write at an age-appropriate level.

Bilingual education can help ELLs learn academic language (and thus academic writing) more quickly than they do in ESL classes. Collier and Wayne (2002) find that ELLs with at least four years of bilingual education developed this academic language within four years, whereas ELLs in ESL classes typically take five to seven years. Because of this, Collier and Wayne (2002) advocate for bilingual education to teach ELLs academic content and language. Although bilingual education may be better for ELLs than ESL programs, most research has focused on developing English-based methods that can be used in both ESL and bilingual programs. Baker et al. (2014) specifically state that they do not discuss bilingual education because they want
their source to be useful to anyone who teaches ELLs, not just bilingual teachers. Methods based on teaching academic English can be modified to work in bilingual classrooms, but methods developed specifically for bilingual classrooms may not work in ESL classrooms because ESL teachers may not be qualified to provide support in students’ native languages. However, more research should be done specifically within bilingual classrooms because bilingual teachers can develop methods that help ELLs in ways that English-only methods cannot.

I could only find one source that specifically focused on developing ways to teach academic writing in bilingual classrooms using the students’ native language and English. Horn-Marsh and Horn-Marsh (2009) taught deaf students academic writing skills using both ASL and English. These students created a first draft by recording themselves signing, then translated their ideas into English and revised both the ASL and English drafts (Horn-Marsh and Horn-Marsh, 2009). Students learned academic vocabulary and other conventions of academic language in both ASL and English, which makes it easier for students to express their ideas because they have the necessary language to do so in both of their languages. According to Horn-Marsh and Horn-Marsh (2009), this bilingual composition program was hugely successful because between 2006 and 2008, the percentage of high school students who “met or exceeded state standards in reading” increased from 39 percent to 73 percent. Unfortunately, this article did not provide any student writing samples or specific quantifiable data to demonstrate that this program helped to improve student writing or compositions in ASL. Therefore, more research needs to be done to see if the methods used in this study would be effective in other bilingual classrooms.

Although Horn-Marsh and Horn-Marsh (2009) do not provide enough evidence to prove that students improved both their ASL compositions and English writing after going through the bilingual program, their study provides a solid starting point for future research on bilingual
writing instruction. In an English and Spanish bilingual classroom, students could create their first drafts in Spanish, then work in both English and Spanish to create their later drafts. To show the progress that students have made over the course of the instructional period, teachers could collect writing samples in both languages from the students and compare the quality of the students’ writing before and after their bilingual academic writing instruction. With this concrete evidence, teachers and curriculum developers would be able to create the best instructional methods for teaching academic writing to bilingual students.

Another possible area for future research is the effect of technology on academic writing instruction for ELLs. Research on using technology to teach academic writing to ELLs is extremely limited. However, the few scholars who have researched this topic suggest that using technology in this manner can provide benefits that teaching writing using pen and paper cannot. According to Gebhard, Dong-shin, and Seger (2011), technology makes SFL-based instruction more effective by giving students flexibility to comment on each other’s writing outside of class, helping students write more fluently, and expanding their audience to include their parents as well as their classmates and teachers. This case study took place in an elementary school, so the research from this study cannot be directly applied to secondary education. There is also no comparison in this study to similar quality instruction without the blogging technology, so there is no way to tell how much of the success of this program is due to high-quality SFL instruction and how much is due to unique benefits of blogging. Because of this, it is impossible to draw any definite conclusions from this article. To test the effectiveness of blogging in teaching academic writing, researchers would have to compare the writing of students who learned SFL using blogging with that of students who learned using traditional instructional methods.
In a theoretical article, Montelongo and Herter (2010) modify a science lesson designed to teach students how to write informational texts using computers and the internet to support their lesson. They suggest that using the internet would make the lesson more effective because the activity of writing a paragraph would be more interactive, students would have more freedom to experiment with paragraph structure, more resources would be available for students to learn background information about their topic, and ELLs could use bilingual dictionaries to strengthen their vocabulary. This theoretical study is limited because there is no definite proof that this approach is more useful than pen and paper. In addition, the lesson is designed for a mainstream classroom with limited modifications for ELLs. However, the lesson is similar to those designed for ELLs in other articles, and the lesson is appropriate for secondary students, so article is still relevant to discussion about using technology for academic writing for secondary ELLs. In the future, researchers could compare classrooms that use technology to support their academic writing instruction with classrooms that do not use technology to see if technology makes these methods more effective.

Overall, more research needs to be conducted on academic writing instruction for ELLs. Most of the studies that have been done are case studies or theoretical articles, so it is difficult to see effects of these approaches when they are used in different schools. Baker et al. (2014) provide minimal support for their writing recommendation based on the lack of research that exists on this topic, but they provide strong support for teaching academic vocabulary based on existing research. I could not find any case studies in which either ELLs or mainstream students in secondary schools used technology to learn academic writing, but Gebhard, Dong-shin, and Seger’s article suggests that further research in this area could prove fruitful. More research needs to be done on this topic in order to learn the most effective ways to use technology to teach
ELLs academic writing. Teachers and researchers need to work together to conduct quality research to find the best methods to teach academic writing to ELLs so these students will have the best opportunities to succeed in school and in the rest of their lives.
References


