

FREEMAN AWARD WINNING ARTICLE: Planning for Writing Instruction in a Middle Years Immersion/Partial Immersion Setting



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ABSTRACT

Based on a literature review and the reflective practice of a second language teacher educator, this paper discusses three categories of planning for writing instruction for middle-years students in an immersion or partial immersion context: planning for long term balance, planning for daily implementation, and planning for task success. It highlights five considerations that may help reduce student anxiety and improve both the experience of writing and the product: selecting topics, making the writing task as authentic and communicative as possible, providing the language supports necessary for success in a second language context, choosing forms with an appropriate amount of text, and choosing forms governed by an appropriate number of rules. A template for planning writing tasks is included, along with several examples.

In any classroom, the variety of students, interests, abilities, and background knowledge is broad. Yet teachers are expected to pull together learning activities or tasks to meet the needs of all students. In an immersion or partial immersion context, these needs are compounded. In addition to diversity, children will also have a range of second language (SL) skills—a range of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing abilities in the language of the classroom, all of which must be taken into account when planning for subject area instruction.

Teachers often see at least three ability levels in their classrooms. In most classrooms, there is usually a group of students who have learned how to work independently and can easily interpret instructions and expectations for an assignment, even if these are not all made explicit. They have a wide range of problem-solving skills and comfortably apply them in and out of the classroom. These children confidently ask for clarification and easily complete the task well without teacher assistance. Another group of students needs clear instructions, a concise breakdown of steps of the task, and adequate learning supports (such as vocabulary lists, grammar charts, graphic organizers, background knowledge, and the teaching of learning or problem solving strategies) to com-

plete assignments well. Then there is a third group of students who need even more structure, explanation, and guidance. Their chances of completing a task, even with increased time, reduced expectations, and learning supports are slimmer. Without close teacher surveillance, they may not fully succeed.

These differences in ability often manifest themselves in writing assignments. Some students will get right down to writing, write a lot, self-edit, and eagerly share. Without formal instruction, they will add titles, authorship, illustrations, tables of contents, indexes, maps, book jackets, copyright information, etc. (Graves 1983; Atwell 1987, 1990). Others will follow suit after having been told to include such components or having seen a model, or, as Graves (1983) reminds us, from having eavesdropped on a conversation between peers or peers and teacher. These students will also successfully complete the writing task, even though they may write less and need a clearer structure or framework in which to work.

The writing of the final group of students is noted for its brevity or lack of completion. Peetoom (1986) argues that in “most average” mother tongue (MT) classes there are “five or six less able readers.” In reading as in writing, these children often have little idea why they are reading, have a small vocabulary, and don’t seem interested in words. They read aloud haltingly, with little intonation or phrasing; cannot respond very well to questions about their reading; and do not remember the content of what they read for very long. Further, they think that reading is saying words and pleasing teachers. They seldom (or never) read for their own pleasure (1986, 8). Many second-language (SL) learners exhibit similar traits. They have a small vocabulary in the SL and difficulty reading aloud with full expression due to a lack of comprehension of vocabulary, syntax, organization, and cultural nuances.

This paper does not contend that all classrooms include all groups of students, nor that any classroom has an equal distribution of these ability levels. Rather, from the perspective of a second language teacher, consultant, and reflective teacher educator, it maintains that some children need more guidance in order to learn skills and concepts and that the number of these children increas-

es in a SL setting. With this assumption, this paper addresses some of the planning considerations second language teachers must bear in mind to help students better understand writing tasks and achieve greater success when engaging in them.

Writing skills are a key functional component in achieving proficiency in a SL. Learning to write is not just a natural extension of learning to speak. It is not simply speech written down on paper. In a second language, writing must be taught more explicitly than in MT (Raimes 1983, 4). For example, phrases of comparison, contrast, or connection, which are commonly used in print but less often heard in oral language, may be completely new to SL learners.

Skilled SL writers explore and clarify ideas first, and attend to language-related concerns later. Children in a middle-years partial immersion or bilingual setting are not yet skilled language users. They are expected to write in a language that is not their mother tongue, and to do so as they are mastering the oral form of the target language. Many students experience minimal linguistic input outside the classroom. Most do not watch TV in the second language, listen to radio programs, or read newspapers, even when available, or chat in the second language outside the classroom (Wu and Bilash 1997). Yet, with exposure to the second language for 30 to 80 per cent of the school day, children will have developed both an oral and a written language base on which to build increased competency. To help them succeed as second language writers, certain concessions or structures must be made available to them on an ongoing basis. Teachers must plan carefully to ensure that each student receives the support s/he needs.

Planning for writing instruction in a second language falls into three categories: planning for long-term balance, planning for daily implementation, and planning for task success.

Planning for Long-Range Balance in Writing Tasks

Over the course of a school year, considering the writing done in all subject areas in the second language, a writing program should offer learners ample opportunities to explore a variety of writ-

ing, i.e., writing for different purposes or functions and about different topics. Law and Eckes (1990) describe the importance of teaching structure, such as rhetorical modes (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, comparison and contrast, and so on) in order to help SL students focus directly on organization and better shape their writing products. Britton et al. (1975) define function as the demands that different tasks or forms (a story, a poem, a history essay, a science report, etc.) make upon the writer. The function is the purpose for writing. Britton et al. have categorized written language according to three functions: expressive (closest to thought and feeling), transactional (informs, advises, persuades, instructs), and poetic (exists for its own sake, to please or satisfy).

The following are sample forms that fit functions described by Britton et al.:

Expressive writing: freewriting, friendly letters, learning logs, personal diary entries.

Transactional writing: research or lab reports, business letters, newspaper articles, and ads.

Poetic writing: poems, stories in all genres.

A regrouping of popular taxonomies put forth by Britton et al. (1975), Hedge² (1988), Tompkins³ (1994), and others yields the following functions as representative of a good and more broad balance of writing for different purposes: descriptive, persuasive, expository, narrative, expressive, and poetic. Sample forms that fit with these functions are:

Descriptive writing: autobiography, postcard, epitaphs, logs.

Persuasive writing: advertisements, want ads, critiques, propaganda.

Expository writing: bulletin boards, agendas, headlines, instructions, interviews.

Narrative writing: cartoons, stories, drama, vignettes.

Expressive writing: diaries, greeting cards, graffiti.

Poetic writing: songs, rhymes, haiku, limericks, poems.

Ensuring a good balance of writing in the elementary classroom requires a periodic stepping back from one's plans, reflecting on what has already been written by students, and analyzing/categorizing those tasks. The following checklist may help a teacher avoid getting into the rut of stressing only a few written forms (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

This table helps teachers monitoring the writing functions and forms students produce in all subject areas over a month or term in bilingual or immersion Second Language settings, to better balance writing assignments.

	Language Arts	Science	Social Studies	Other
Descriptive writing: Autobiography, postcard, epitaphs				
Persuasive writing: Advertisements, want ads, critiques, propaganda				
Expository writing: Bulletin boards, agendas, instructions, interviews, headlines				
Narrative writing: Cartoons, stories, drama, vignettes				
Expressive writing: Diaries, greeting cards, graffiti				
Poetic writing: Songs, rhymes, haiku, limericks, poems				

Students need to be encouraged to compose in all functions of writing in order to develop the various thinking skills, expressions, and forms required of each (Britton et al. 1975).

Planning for Daily Implementation

In planning for implementation, teachers need to consider factors such as adaptations to the writing process necessary for SL learners, adjustments to the time needed to complete different phases of the writing process, timetabling, and the use of the mother tongue in writing assignments.

Adaptations to the Writing Process

In the last decade, the teaching of writing has moved away from concentration on the product to an emphasis on the process. This approach to writing, called the *writing process*, replicates what good writers actually do as they write. They jot down ideas at random, organize them, write first drafts, and revise (Hedge 1988). Teachers should be aware of the processes involved in good writing and be able to teach them to their students. The writing process in a second language replicates what successful second language writers do. The process of writing in a second language, especially before having mastered the language, differs from the process of writing in the mother tongue in that much more time and many more references are required, such as grammar books and dictionaries (unilingual and bilingual). Composing time, revision, checking grammar, looking up new words, and verifying the nuances of a

word are all regular and common activities of those who write in a second language without having mastered it.

Hall (1993) strongly suggests that any student writing that will be seen by others ought to be in a standard form of the second language because everything students see should serve as a good language model. This means that the teacher may need to shorten what could be a long and painful editing process in order to bring a composition to standard. The writer would first be expected to proofread and correct those elements that s/he has already learned. Then the teacher could use the writing to teach some new words or rules to the child in a conference setting. Finally, remaining errors could simply be fixed by the teacher, who may then type out a totally corrected copy for the student or have her/him copy it neatly (Hall, 1993). Or the teacher could proofread a disk copy before the final printout.

Adjustments to the Time Needed to Complete Different Phases of the Writing Process

Greater emphasis must be placed on both planning and editing in a second-language setting. Cavanagh's (1997) study of grade six francophone and French immersion students showed an increase in students' writing ability through the use of a "schema" or graphic organizer when writing a *texte d'opinion*. The four classroom teachers with whom she worked strongly recommend that teachers structure writing tasks with graphic organizers, especially at the plan-

ning or outline stage. The schema helps children see the whole picture of the text (Jolibert 1994).

Errors are more frequent and of a different nature in second-language writing (e.g., problems in conjugations, agreement). Thus proofreading must be done in small doses. "Students should be encouraged to check over all of their work, yet not be expected to polish every draft to perfection" (Hall 1993, p. 3). This will also add time to the process of completing writing tasks.

Timetabling

Hall (1993) advises that in an immersion/ bilingual setting, writing should be scheduled later in the day when students have been immersed in the second language for a few hours.

Use of the Mother Tongue

Hall (1993) also reminds teachers not to be alarmed if some of the daily writing process occurs in English or the mother tongue (MT). Many children think in English/MT while writing and sometimes English/MT is an asset in a writing conference.

Planning for Task Success

In addition to following a writing process approach to writing in the second language classroom, teachers need to plan for successful task completion. The following five considerations may help reduce student anxiety and improve both the experience of writing and the product: selecting topics, making the writing task as authentic and communicative as possible, providing the language supports necessary for success in a second-language context, choosing forms with an appropriate amount of text, and choosing forms governed by an appropriate number of rules.

Choosing Topics

Katrina Hall (1993) advises that instead of asking students to talk or write about whatever happened to them outside school (as could be done in the mother tongue), the catalysts in a second-language setting should come from within the classroom setting. Thus, the second-language teacher needs to spend more time creating and drawing upon class experiences (in order to build and then practice or apply SL vocabulary). As in MT settings, persuasive writing must ensure a knowledge of the topic. In addition, however, there is a need for vocabulary both of select words and phrases and of structures used in persuasive discourse. For these reasons, prewriting can take three times as long in

the second-language bilingual or immersion classroom.

Making the Writing Task Authentic and Communicative

When planning the writing task, teachers need to define the audience (identify the readers) and describe the task so that it fulfills some kind of communicative purpose, either real or simulated. "Writers do their best when writing is truly a communicative act, with a writer writing for a real reader" (Raimes 1984, 9). The writing must draw upon real experience and plausible settings in order to draw out honest and personal ideas. When teachers establish a context and a task they should tell the writer *what* is going to be written, *why*, *for whom*, and any other pertinent information necessary for completion of the task (illustrations, number of words, format, etc.). A teacher may, for example, introduce the following task to the class:

For three months you will be hosting an exchange student who comes from a place where the second language is spoken. The student is in your class and will be taking all the same subjects as you. It is your responsibility to make sure that your guest has all of the supplies s/he needs for every subject in school. Use the charts in the classroom, your dictionaries, and any other resources needed to write a list of everything that should be in your exchange student's backpack on his/her first day of school. Don't forget lunch!

Providing the Supports Necessary for Success in a Second-Language Context

Teachers planning writing activities must additionally consider the supports children need to succeed at the writing task. These include: lists of high-frequency words (including nouns, adjectives, words of movement used as verbs, proper names), picture dictionaries that grow from the children's own language, and school dictionaries (Sampson et al. 1991), as well as appropriate graphic organizers (Cavanagh 1997). When writing in a second language context, Hall (1993) recommends that teachers create and display lists of theme-related words, question words, and verb conjugations, and then have the students sort or alphabetize the lists; sing/read songs and poems, and use the lists or songs to discuss specific sentence structure. Easy access to correctly spelled vocabulary and commercial and personal dictionaries are also necessary tools of the second language writer.

Choosing Forms (for the Task) with a Reasonable Amount of Text Governed by a Reasonable Number of Rules

"The form of a composition is the medium through which information is presented" (Moore et al. 1986, 117). The fourth and fifth pedagogical considerations focus on the selection of a writing form for the assigned student task. While choosing the form, teachers must keep in mind several factors: Will it keep student motivation high, yield success, and provide a balance of overall writing functions? Is it congruent with the abilities of students? The more confident a student is in the SL, the more risks s/he is willing to take. Less linguistic confidence results in a high "affective filter" (Krashen 1984) or the "mental block" that prevents "comprehensible input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition" (22). The affective filter may come "up" when "affective conditions are not optimal; the student is not motivated, does not identify with speakers of the second language, or is over anxious about his/her performance" (22).

Since reading and writing are often considered opposite sides of the same coin, the characteristics of the print that is read by children can inform us about the characteristics of print to be considered when asking children to write. Barrett describes three levels of reading, each represented by

the burden of print or, put another way, the demand made on the reader. In Level One, the illustrations carry much of the story, with the print often little more than a caption. . . In Level Two, the print carries about as much of the story as the illustrations, but the latter are necessary to clarify and confirm. . . In Level Three, the print carries the story, with the illustrations dropped at key spots to add appeal and to push the story forward (Barrett 1988, 47).

After observing that emergent readers in MT will seldom select a book that has very small print and no illustrations, Barrett (1988) recommends that "children need (reading material) that guarantees success, (material) that is easy but satisfying to read independently." Since children are older when they begin SL reading than MT reading, it is even more challenging to satisfy their reading needs. Texts must be attractive and easy to read—high interest, low vocabulary, with visual supports for comprehension. Yet they cannot look too primary. Even though the size of print can decrease as children mature, as can the amount of space devoted to illustrations, it is important that SL books be attractive and not too diffi-

cult to read. This is especially true for children who do not read well. It is probably safe to say that in a program that stresses oral competency, as SL programs do (since oral language development precedes and is the basis for literacy in both MT and SL), SL teachers must be very conscious of providing students with readable materials/texts.

Amount of Text

Just as the sight of many words on a page can be a psychological deterrent to many readers, so, too, can the amount of text act as a motivator or inhibitor to a beginning second-language writer. Far more second language ability and confidence are required to write an essay than to prepare a menu. For a weaker second language user, the task of an essay may be an inhibitor, no matter how motivating the topic, simply because he/she is still finding simple labeling (that a menu requires) a challenge. In order for children to feel that they can accomplish the task as described, certain forms will be more inviting to them than others. The following diagram charts the progression of forms based on the number of words they require on a continuum (see Table 2).

Although minimal text is a relative term, it is an important pedagogical consideration. Some forms will keep the affective filter low, even though preferences may vary from student to student and grade to grade. For example, writing a grocery or supply list or a wish for a greeting card are far less daunting than writing a major essay or research paper for any writer. In the same way, a beginner second-language reader experiences both success and the desire to read when reading a text with one SL sentence and an illustration per page, but frustration when asked to read one paragraph before s/he is ready. Forms with an abundance of text may include novels, speeches, essays, and reports. In between the two is a variety of forms. Some use print and illustration, wherein illustrations help support meaning, like Barrett's level-two texts (1988). They include an advertisement, comic strip, or poster. (See the quadrant diagram, Table 4, [at right] for examples of additional forms categorized by the amount of print.)

Complexity of Rules

The second critical factor influencing selection of a form for a writing task is the schematic structure of the form, i.e., the amount and complexity of rules that must be kept in mind in order to complete the writing assignment. This can include straightforward rules, such as punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, indentation, or

TABLE 2

A continuum of forms based on the number of words they require.

Minimal Text		Lots of Text	
Family trees	Announcements	Directories	Parodies
Questions	Recipes	Diaries	Tributes
Slogans	Applications	Pamphlets	Story
Lists	Menus	Puppet Plays	Reviews

quotation marks, as well as more complex ones, such as syntax, text organization, and other grammatical rules.

Writing forms that require a minimal number of rules include schedules, captions, postcards, posters, and bulletin boards. Forms that require the application of many rules include contracts, newsletters, biographies, editorials, folk tales, and essays. In between the two are forms with a varying number of rules, from journals and brochures to puzzles, rhymes, and bibliographies. These forms may be governed by distinctive rules in different languages and cultures (see Table 3 below).

By intersecting these two continua (forms ordered by the amount of words required and forms governed by increas-

ingly more complex schematic structure), four quadrants or gradations of forms are created (see Table 4). The quadrants include forms that range from those requiring minimal words with minimal rules (A), more words with fewer rules (B), and more rules with fewer words (C) to forms requiring both many rules and many words (D). The quadrants are meant to be used as a guide for teachers when planning writing tasks for second-language students. They are meant to be used by teachers as planning checks for reducing the affective filter. Furthermore, forms representing the six main functions of writing (descriptive, persuasive, expository, narrative, expressive, poetic) can be found in each quadrant. "Students need opportunities to practice various forms and functions in writing and within these

TABLE 3

A continuum of forms based on the number/complexity of rules involved.

Minimal Rules		Many Rules	
Lists	Menus	Folktales/pattern stories	Editorials
Cards	Catalogs	Bibliography	Minutes
Graffiti	Itinerary	Interview	Contracts

TABLE 4

Four Quadrants-Gradations of Form

Forms with Few Rules			
Forms With Few Words	A <u>Few words & few rules</u> graffiti, applications, menus, headlines, logs, proverbs, riddles, telephone messages, greeting cards, cartoons, questions, family trees, labels	B <u>More words & fewer rules</u> diaries, quizzes, song directions, skits, friendly letters, wanted posters, questionnaires, story models	Forms With Many Words
	C <u>More rules & fewer words</u> autobiography, book jackets, calendars, class anthology, dialogues, puppet shows, invitations, recipes, want ads, travel poster, vignettes, experiment, TV commercials	D <u>Many words & rules</u> adventures, allegories, legends, animal stories, game rules, explanations, pen pals, haiku, minutes, myths, propaganda, limericks, class newspaper	
Forms with Many Rules			

TABLE 5

Applying the four pedagogical considerations when planning writing assignments.

Task	Form C Amount of text and D Possible rules	Function B	Supports Necessary
A Communicative task (What/Topic, why, for whom, and other requirements)			
You will be hosting a student from _____ until the new year. It is your responsibility to make sure this exchange student has all the supplies he/she needs for every subject at school. Make a list of everything that should be in your exchange student's backpack.	LIST (Quadrant 1)	Expository	Display school object, poster, vocabulary lists, songs and poems about school to be recited and sung, and verb conjugations. Allow students to talk about the list, or do it as a group activity.

TABLE 6

The people of your hometown want to hear about your summer holiday. The local newspaper has agreed to publish your story. They want a pictorial and written account of one of your adventures.	COMIC STRIP (Quadrant 2)	Narrative	Display vocabulary lists and verb conjugations. This may be a good format for pair work. Lots of class talk should be allowed.
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TABLE 7

When you went shopping with your best friend, the two of you became separated. You reported this to those in mall security. They asked you to complete a form describing your friend, what s/he was wearing, and where you last saw her/him.	A MISSING CHILD REPORT (Quadrant 3)	Descriptive	Display posters and vocabulary lists of body parts and clothing. Brainstorm for and display adjectives and verb conjugations. Provide 2 or 3 sentence starters or questions for those who need them.
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TABLE 8

Your best friend has decided to run for class president. S/he has hired you as her/his speech writer. You are to write her/his campaign speech. List the many special attributes and qualities that you have learned about her/him from your friendship. Then in a speech tell how these will help her/him to be the best president for the class.	CAMPAIGN SPEECH (Quadrant 4)	Persuasive	Brainstorm and display posters of previous dialogues, vocabulary lists, and verb conjugations. Provide samples of campaign speeches. Include a graphic organizer to plan. This may be a partner project. Allow time for class discussion of political strategies and issues.
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to develop the different skills involved in producing written texts" (Hedge 1988, 12). In other words, each function of writing involves both simple and complex forms.

Since students' attitudes toward an assignment influence the quality of the outcome, teachers must ensure that the writing assignment in the SL is one that the students believe they can successfully complete. In addition to making the writing task as authentic and communicative as possible and providing the supports necessary for success in a second language, the actual form chosen can reduce, or ideally, eliminate the affective filter. These factors should also be kept in mind when planning instruction for multilevel classes. Samples of how the four pedagogical considerations can be applied are found in Tables 5, 6, 7, and 8 (at left).

Writing tasks in a second language classroom can be a positive, creative experience for children. Without careful planning and consideration of needed supports, however, they can also raise the affective filter of children. By beginning with the writing process that would be conducted in MT and then carefully adapting it to meet the unique needs of SL learners — extra time, more language references and supports, more carefully structured tasks — more children will benefit from writing. Teachers must carefully plan for daily implementation, for long-term balance, and for task success.

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Notes

1 Many of the ideas presented in this paper have evolved from a project conducted for the Ukrainian Language Education Centre to develop an instructional design and resource to be used for Ukrainian Bilingual Education in grades 4-6. In Canada "bilingual" education refers to a partial-immersion context for mainly English speakers who wish to learn a heritage or international language. Children in grades K-6 follow the same provincial curriculum as in mainstream English classes, but take art, health, physical education,

music, language arts, and social studies in Ukrainian.

2 Hedge (1988) puts forward the following purposes of writing: personal, public, creative, social, study, and institutional.

3 Tompkins (1994) includes the following in her taxonomy of writing functions: journal, descriptive, letter, biographical, expository, narrative, poetry, and persuasive.

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