An Island of English
Teaching ESL in Chinatown

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When talking about helping beginning ESL students write, I am often confronted with the following questions:

- How can we help ESL students write when they are just beginning to develop their basic language skills?
- Should we wait until those students have developed their reading and speaking skills before teaching them to write?
- How can they start to write when they barely know their ABCs?

Since Alice became the principal of IS 131, writing has been emphasized in the school and the search for the best method to teach writing to ESL students has never ceased among the literacy faculty. This has become a most interesting, challenging, and exciting experience for all of us; we have learned more about our students—and about teaching writing to students with little to no English proficiency. But there are no absolute keys to those puzzles.

Now all students in IS 131 are required, encouraged, and helped to write from the first week they arrive in the classrooms, no matter how limited their English proficiency. When Maureen was helping the teachers teach more writing and rely less on worksheets in their teaching, she suggested reading such authors as Shelley Harwayne, Linda Rief, and Nancie Atwell and introduced various types of writing into classrooms. She demonstrated poetry teaching and reading and writing connections (“Change My Life Forever,” Barbieri 2002). When I came, I joined her in searching for effective methods to help beginning ESL students learn to write. Ever since, writing has become
a major focus in every classroom. In this chapter, I will share how our teachers
helped our beginning English language learners grow as writers and develop
their literacy and language skills through writing.

**Writing in Their First Language**

In the teaching of writing to emergent writers, we encourage students to write
how they speak. This includes allowing them to use invented spelling to express
their ideas before they learn how to spell the words needed in their writing. But our beginning ESL students don’t have their oral language as a base for
their English writing, so it is impossible for them to use the invented spelling
strategy to write. However, what they do have is their primary language. All
our Chinese new immigrant students can speak Chinese properly, and most of
them can write and read, even though many may not be at their grade level. In
order to continue their overall writing development, I encouraged our teachers
to let the students read and write in Chinese before they could do so in English.
I believe thinking (reasoning and imagination) and the ability to organize ideas
are equally, or even more, important than language skills in learning to write.
If we let our students express themselves and present their ideas in their pri-
mary language, we give them opportunities to continue the development of
their thinking. With this development uninterrupted, they are able to write well
in a second language once they develop proficiency in it. If we let them wait
until their English is good enough, their thinking and writing skills will not
only have stopped developing but will have diminished—especially damaging
for those students who don’t yet have good writing skills in their first language.

Shirley, a seventh-grade ESL teacher, shared: “At first, I didn’t let them
[the students in the beginners class] speak or write in Chinese, but only in
English. They couldn’t write or speak up. They refused to talk. Then I let them
use Chinese. They began to speak and write more, or write in mixed language.
Now [in the spring] they write mostly in English with a few Chinese words,
but their writing is very Chinese English.” Shirley thought, as I did before,
that by forbidding her students to use Chinese in the ESL learning, she would
speed up their English learning, but soon she realized that didn’t work. Through
working with Chinese students for many years, all our CLA teachers realized
that those students who can write well in Chinese learn English faster and
write better in English once they learn the language.

All our students are given time to write each day in class from the first week
they arrive, either in ESL or CLA classes, despite how proficient their English
is and how recently they arrived in the United States. Susan, a sixth-grade ESL
teacher, had twenty-seven brand-new students in her class, some of whom had
been in America for only a few days. During my visit, I saw the students work-
ing in three groups: six at the listening center listening to the book *From Head
to Toe by Eric Carle; one group of six with Susan doing shared reading of Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? by Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle; and the rest of the class silently reading books written either in Chinese or in bilingual languages (Chinese and English) or writing in their journals.

Susan doesn’t understand Chinese. When I asked her how she checked her students’ Chinese writing, she responded: “I just check if they wrote, how much they wrote, but not what they wrote. I wish I could, but I assume as long as they read and write, they will continue to develop their skills as readers and writers. Sometimes I ask them to illustrate what they wrote. From the pictures, I could guess the basic content of their stories.” Susan is not just keeping the students occupied with Chinese reading and writing; she understands that their reading and writing in Chinese will help them develop their English reading and writing skills.

In Betty’s sixth-grade beginning ESL class, she had her students write in their reading journals every day. They took English books home to read with dictionaries and each made his or her own Chinese-English dictionary. They started to read simple pattern books (one sentence on each page) and later moved to high-level pattern books (with three or four sentences on each page). By November, many of them could read simple picture storybooks. After reading, they had to write a reading journal in Chinese every night. At first, they would draw a picture and write a caption underneath. Later, when their reading had more complicated plots, they would draw a group of pictures with captions (see Figure 5–1). Betty explained her purpose for these journal entries: “I want to make sure they read every night and they understand their reading. And also, I want them to form a habit of reading and learn to write reading responses.”

When her students started to read picture storybooks, Betty modeled how to write reading summaries and responses. She modeled to her English beginners how to make personal as well as text-to-text connections in the reading responses. Being bilingual herself, Betty was able to teach and respond to her students’ writing in Chinese. In addition, from very early on, Betty pushed her students to insert any English words they knew into their Chinese writing. She read their reading responses every day and pushed them in every piece to include the English words they knew in their writing (see Figure 5–2). She believed: “By allowing them to write in Chinese and also pushing them to write as much English as they can, I helped them learn how to write reading responses and at the same time helped them develop their English skills—learn to use the English words they learned in a context. In three months, many started to write their responses in all English.”

The students wrote frequently in CLA class. All our English beginners had to attend CLA class, where they developed their reading and writing skills mostly in Chinese through learning about America. With each CLA teacher having 100 to 120 students, he or she could barely work with the students
individually. Requiring frequent reading and writing was the only way to develop the students’ reading and writing skills in the CLA class. During an interview, Jian explained how he helped his students develop their writing skills:

I have my students write two pieces each week, mostly essays. Many students never learned how to write essays in the Western way in China, so I have to model how to write essays, like with an introduction and a conclusion. I showed them many examples and worked with the whole class for
the first few weeks, then most students would eventually get it. About 20 percent would always have problems. They are probably at third- or fourth-grade level in their Chinese, and now they are in eighth grade. Both the content and writing requirement are hard for those students. I spread those students in each group and pair them with strong students each. I wish I could work with those struggling students individually more. But with 115 students, and with such a heavy content I have to cover, I hardly have any time to work with the individuals. What I could do is to give those students more writing samples to follow. Each year, I keep some good students’ writing samples and use them as writing models. Sometimes, I talk to them while others are working in groups. But I hate to take them out of group discussion because it is important for them to hear their peers. I also pair the
struggling students with strong students. Before they turn in any work, they have to give it to their partner to check it. I give those helpers some extra credits. With writing frequently in this way, the struggling students gradually develop their writing skills. Now they can write at least three paragraphs cohesively, while the others can write three pages.

Through producing two pieces each week in their CLA class throughout the year, all of the students developed their writing skills gradually. Their continuous growth as writers in their first language will help a great deal when they are able to write in English.

Writing in their first language not only provides them with opportunities to continue to develop their writing and thinking skills but also gives us a chance to understand them as literate persons or a channel through which to reach them as individuals, which their current limited English proficiency doesn’t enable us to do. I happened to read a piece written in Chinese by a new student whose English was very limited. His writings in Chinese have made me reach a profound understanding of all the Chinese students like him. This piece is titled “The Unforgettable Day.”

The first day of a person’s new life in a new world would always be unforgettable memory.

Four months ago, I boarded the airplane to America, to my new homeland. Filled with all the hope and excitement, I was approaching America, my new world. But I was sad, and feeling lost at the same time as the airplane took me farther and farther away from the land where I was born, and the people who took care of me since my birth. It was so hard to leave behind all my families and friends. The fact of not knowing when to see them again hurt me terribly.

We arrived in New York at night. I looked down at the city. Wow, this is America! Its streets and gigantic buildings were all brightly lit. My heart was lifted up as if the lights lit up my body too. I saw cars endlessly running through the street like a lantern-lit river or a fire dragon. Every building was tall and beautiful, and the lights made it look so magnificent. I saw the American suspended bridge, with cars running on the top and trains going through in the middle. All these incredible views excited me, and gave me great hope and expectation for America.

On the way to my new home, it started to rain; the raindrops hit the car windows, and blocked the view outside. I quietly dropped into thought of my home, my families, and my friends in China, what we did together, as if I heard us playing and laughing together. It was like a movie. I missed them so much at that moment.

When we arrived at our apartment building, I was shocked. When we walked into the apartment, I was shocked even more. I couldn’t believe my eyes: the room was tiny and old. I thought it was only the living room, but
my mom told me this was all we had. At that moment, all my hope and excitement for America was shattered. This building was as old as the wood storage we had in China, and the whole apartment was just like a sitting room at home. I didn’t have my own room, and my bed was the tiny one in the corner. While my parents were unpacking my luggage, my aunt was telling me about their life in America. I was led to face the truth.

That was a very unforgettable day for me. I felt sad, homesick and loss for all I had in China. I saw the magnificent view of America, but I realized my life in this land had nothing to do with those magnificent lights, skylight buildings, endless running cars, and suspended bridge. I went through all kinds of feelings and thoughts in one day, but I could never forget the American lights.

Writing in their first language enabled these new immigrant students to express what was deep in their hearts and helped them make the transition into this new world, but it also gave them a personal meaning for their school learning. But this student, like many, was not able to do so in his English writing. The following is one of his daily journals that he wrote in English:

This morning I mother said, tomorrow go to the uncle home eat lunch. I am very happy. Because I am like to uncle home, morning, I watch News T.V. Yesterday I am very happy. Yesterday, I third teacher absent. The yesterday is no home work.

Contrasting what this student was able to write in English and in Chinese, I realized more how important it was to let the students write in their first language. His limited English proficiency didn’t allow him to demonstrate his real literacy or express his ideas. Letting new immigrant students write in their first language has given them a chance to continue to develop their thinking and literacy skills and an opportunity to express themselves and search for their new identities, and it has also been a channel for us to understand them as individuals.

**Having Freedom in Their Writing Styles**

In our English beginners classes, by November, we begin to see the students write in different language styles, which often represent their different stages as English language learners. Some write only in Chinese, some in Chinese with a few English words and phrases, some in English with Chinese words here and there, some in Chinese English, which is English words in Chinese syntax, and still others in nearly Standard English (see Figures 5–3a and b). These stages of writing development demonstrate the students’ progress in their English language learning. It is similar to the way people learn to speak in English as a second language: They have to speak their first language before
**Figure 5–3a** Stages of Chinese ESL Students’ Writing Development

- Writing in Chinese
  - I like China.
  - because I like in china. what I like china.
  - because I am china's. they I like china, they are China.

- Writing in Chinese mixed with English
  - I like China.
  - because I like in China. what I like China.
  - because I am China's. they I like China, they are China.
  - they have some good friends. I also don't forget this several
  - good friends. because China has some friends. they.
  - I like China. I have many good friends in China. because they.
  - they are very nice. they have some good memories. they.
  - I like China.
Figure 5–3b

Writing in English with Chinese syntax and expressions

“I am glad to see America.
In my school I teach this and my very good
friend. He is my in school very very.
only friend, in school he want me originate.
Friend, he is some very grammatical,
and is with, his English completely sound.
My friend, he make, some very time to
in teach. My teacher, homework. Go home.
I go and my friend, play Chinese everyday.
We play, some play sometimes we
elective sometimes we be with play, we
be play, very angry. He is my best
friend.”

Writing in acceptable English close to Standard English

“I like China, because in China, I have many friends. We eat, they forget in school, we are
beginning playing. But in the America, I only have four friends.
I don’t know where are their hands, they don’t have some
in my friend.”

“I like China, because in China, everyone speak
Chinese. I can understand, but in the America,
American people all speak English. I don’t understand.
If I can speak English, I will happier, too.
I wish me I can speak English, because I like America,
for so, I want learn English.”
they can express themselves in English. Later, they mix a few English words in their talk. After they study English intensively for a while, they speak English mixed with some words from the first language. Gradually, they try to speak English, but they still think in their first language, so their speech tends to sound very foreign, such as Chinese English. With much practice in English listening and speaking, they develop their speech in Standard English. This gradual development in English speaking occurs on the condition that the learners never stop speaking and intentionally try to use English as much as possible in their speech.

In our ESL and CLA classes, our students develop their writing skills in the same way people develop their English-speaking ability. They never stop writing. Once they learn some English—either individual words, phrases, or some simple sentences—they are encouraged to utilize them in their writing. Our teachers are used to reading their students’ writing in different language styles and have learned to look through the facade to get to the meanings. Most of our ESL teachers cannot read or write in Chinese, so they check their students’ work as Susan described earlier. They check their students’ actions and efforts: if they wrote and how much they wrote, rather than the content and quality of their writing. When the students write more English than Chinese, teachers can guess the meaning of their writing and carry on a conference with the writers. Bilingual teachers like Betty, John, and Shirley were able to push their students very hard in developing their writing skills in both Chinese and English. Because these bilingual teachers are able to help the beginning ESL students write in both Chinese and English, they are often assigned to teach the beginning ESL classes.

Our teachers let students choose the way they wanted to write at any time. Our ESL teachers showed their students examples of writing with different language styles and encouraged them to use English whenever they could, but their writing was never graded based on how much English they used in their work. Newcomers usually started to write in Chinese. One or two months later, they would insert English words and phrases in their writing (Betty’s students started to do this during the second week in her class) because it was natural for them to do so when they were immersed in English learning every day with reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities.

In CLA class, though the students usually did more writing in Chinese, many of them also took any opportunity to practice writing in English whenever they could. Most of them did their assignments in CLA classes in two mixed languages, such as the work in their notebooks, the posters on the walls, the papers they turned in, and their classroom publications. In the spring of 2000, the hallway of Jian’s sixth-grade class displayed the students’ works on the topic of spring written in four different styles: in all English; in English
mixed with Chinese words; in bilingual languages (parallel Chinese and English); and in all Chinese, such as the following four examples:

**Example 1: Spring (written in English)**

Spring is very beautiful. It is very warm when spring comes. The farmers plant the vegetable in the farm. The animals come out from spring and come out to get food. There is much fresh water in the mountain. And the air smells very fresh. When it was in China and it is spring I always go to the mountain to play or go the swimming. But in America when it is spring I was in school. When spring come it make me feel cheerful. Everyday I weak up I see the sun shine at me. Many animals were born in the spring. I wish every day were spring.

**Example 2: Spring (English mixed with Chinese words)**

Spring is the first of a year, the spring make the mother earth. When the spring was come there have the beautiful flowers and the tree and it also have the birds come back to our city, and everyday we can hear the bird singing and the cat dancing and dog. When we go outside we can the tree and the flower that are in the sky and the spring make us very happy.

**Example 3: Spring (bilingual)**

When the spring is come the beautiful flowers are come and the children who play in the park to play and the people who wear the less clothes and many birds come and the school are close and children who do not go to
school and people who was very happy that are go to play because in summer people who play in the beach.

Example 4: Spring (my translation from Chinese; see Figure 5–4 for the original)

Spring is here. Everywhere is filled with new life. In the morning, I wake up and open my eyes, see the whole earth as if it were just opening its eyes and waking up like me, fresh and energetic. Water fills up the lake, where fish swim back and forth as if they are announcing: “Spring is here. Spring is here.”

I walk by some apple trees. They are standing straight on the ground, with leaves washed clean without any dust by the spring shower.

I walk further and pass by some willow trees by the lake. They are also showered by the spring rain, with dustless leaves and shining green buds. Their branches wave in the warm spring wind, as if they are dancing to welcome the coming of spring.

In the lake, there are beautiful lotus flowers, which are wearing a pretty hat. Frogs are jumping back and forth among the flowers, as if they are happily dancing.

I walk farther and arrive at the traveling road. From there, I look up, seeing vast green rice field, where farmers are busy planting at this time of the year, Spring.

Then I continue to walk, and walk into the edgeless woods. The trees there have a green and healthy look after being rinsed by the spring showers.

My final walk takes me to a village, where houses are dusted by spring shower as if they are newly built.

Oh, Spring is so beautiful!

I love Spring.

But I love even more the beauty and life Spring brings to us.

According to the teacher, the students who chose to write in Chinese were not necessarily weaker in their English skills than the students who chose to write in English. Some students who were able to write in English in their reading responses and writer’s notebooks would sometimes choose to write in Chinese for certain assignments. Their choice depended upon topics or the content they had to write. The writer of the piece shown in Figure 5–4 was unable to produce the same quality in English with his current limited English proficiency. His English skills, according to his teacher, were at a similar level with many others who chose to write this assignment in English. When we evaluate ESL students’ writing, we tend to judge their English ability based on how much they can write in English. Now from these students’ work, I have realized that our adjustment might not be accurate, and my analysis of the stages of ESL writing could sometimes be artificial, rigid, or even oversimplistic.


Spring

春天到来了，大地到处都充满了生机。阳光
刺到眼睛，微风一吹，一切都似乎被唤醒
来，春天的气息，弥漫在空气中。乡间的
小路上，鲜花盛开，绿草如茵，一切都
变得如此美丽和充满活力。

在这些草木上，春暖花开，草木繁盛
。山坡上，野花竞相开放，色彩斑斓，
让人目不暇接。

野花的颜色非常鲜艳，像火一样
燃烧，像霞一样绚烂。这些野花
在春天的阳光下，显得格外
美丽。

树上的叶子也开始变绿，新生
的叶子嫩绿嫩绿的，充满了
希望。

春天真是个好季节，万物复苏
，生机勃勃。

Figure 5-4 A Piece of Chinese Writing About Spring
I was glad that our students were given the freedom to choose the way and the language they would write in, or they would have suffered limitations in presenting themselves. I found this to be true when I read through students’ portfolios, in which the selected pieces were arranged chronologically. In the portfolios, there was a variety of writing samples, including reading responses, personal narratives, essay presentations, summaries of reading, charts, and graphs. They were written in the various styles, as shown earlier. The works written in English were not the most recent products but usually were short pieces with simple content; however, the lengthy pieces, which presented more complicated ideas, tended to be written in Chinese. I began to realize that it was the topic or the complexity of a piece of writing that determined what language our students chose to use in their writing. This shows that our students were able to use language freely as a tool to express themselves and they knew what language they needed for what topics and how they would like to present themselves as writers. As thinkers and writers, our students are given the kind of freedom that students usually don’t have when they are learning to write in a new language. With the opportunity this freedom provides, I find our English language beginners not only have few limitations as student writers but also can express themselves freely in writing when they barely know their ABCs, or when they are just beginning to develop their basic English language skills.

Creating Their Own Pattern Books

Pattern book writing is the first type of writing our beginning ESL students do purely in English. In the same way as we develop our beginners’ English language skills in their oral language and reading, we use pattern books to develop their English writing skills. Writing development parallels oral language development. From reading and listening to pattern books, our students learn English grammar and vocabulary in the repetitive sentences in meaningful contexts. Creating their own pattern books, our students not only review their newly learned knowledge but also apply it to a new context.

For instance, here’s the repetitive pattern in Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?

Brown Bear,
Brown Bear,
What do you see?
I see a red bird looking at me.
Red Bird,
Red Bird,
What do you see?
I see a yellow duck looking at me.
After the students fluently read these patterns, the teacher helps them work out an original pattern with different vocabulary, and they produce a different book with the same pattern orally as a class. Then the students have a similar writing assignment. An example of a student’s own text looks like this:

Smiling flower,
Smiling flower,
What do you see?
I see green tree looking at me.
Green tree,
Green tree,
What do you see?
I see a cute squirrel looking at me.

By producing a text like this, our English language beginners master the frequently used sentence patterns such as “What do you see?” and “I see somebody doing something” and meanwhile expand their English vocabulary.

Using pattern books, students build language sense before they learn grammar rules. They should be able to understand and automatically produce a question like “What do you see?” in speaking and writing before they study the structures of interrogative sentences in the English language. Through creating many kinds of pattern books, our students learn to read, understand, and write simple books and to express their daily life in English.

There are different levels of pattern books, and our students produce their own pattern books according to levels they are reading. Betty started her sixth-grade beginning class with one-sentence pattern books. One example is the book called *Off to Work* by Rom Bacon and Kelvin Hawley. The repetitive pattern in this book is “I put on my (yellow) (hat) to work.” After the class became familiar with this pattern through a practice of speaking and writing with different color adjectives and nouns of clothing (shirt, pants, gloves . . . ), Betty introduced them to similar sentence patterns with different verbs, like “I bring my . . . to the school” and “I take my . . . to the park,” and some adjectives like beautiful, lovely, and nice to replace those for colors, and other nouns that fit in the context. The students created their pattern books with all these newly learned patterns and vocabulary to express themselves, such as “I bring my green book bag to the school” and “I take my brother to the park.” Betty’s students produced two or three pattern books like this a week and practiced reading aloud their own pattern books.

Then, she moved her students to the next level of pattern books, with two- or three-sentence patterns on each page, such as *Jon Sleeps On* by Peter Sloan and Sheryl Sloan. After the students learned the sentence patterns and vocabulary the book introduced, the students used the pattern they learned to
create their own pattern books with drawings (see Figure 5–5). By November, many of the students in Betty’s beginning class started to read simple picture storybooks and to write summaries and personal connections as the reading response. But three or four students in her class, who started with ABCs and had little concept of phonetics, even in Chinese, had to stay behind in the pattern books for a much longer time than the rest of the class.
Because students learn at different rates, our teachers often have to move their students to the next level individually. Some students may stay at one level longer than others, and the teachers do not keep anyone at the pattern book stage once they are able to read picture storybooks. John, a seventh-grade ESL teacher, explained that, except for newcomers and one or two students in his class, most of his students in the beginners class grow out of pattern books by Thanksgiving. Because new students come in year-round, pattern books never leave his room and are always part of reading, writing, and oral language activities for the group(s) of newcomers and some struggling students. By December, the writing in John’s class starts to diversify in language styles depending upon the reading levels at which individuals are.

Writing with Drawings, Pictures, and Photos

Drawing is a good way for English language beginners to tell their stories. But at first, some of our middle schoolers refused to draw. They thought it was for young children. After much modeling from their teachers, our Chinese students learned to love using drawing to express their ideas. The teachers were amazed by how well their Chinese students could draw, a talent that may result from writing Chinese characters. Chinese is an image-based language, and learning to write each Chinese character is like learning to sketch an image. In our ESL classes and later in their art class, the students drew to retell the stories they read, to express their ideas and feelings in their journals, and to write their own stories (see Figures 5–1, 5–5, and 5–6). Before they could write in English, their drawing was the main text of the stories, with Chinese captions. Gradually, their captions included more and more English words.

Selina, a sixth-grade ESL teacher, used pictures to help her students present their reading comprehension. After the class studied a picture book, she would make copies of the pictures and cut out the text. Then she would ask the students in the writing group to arrange the pictures according to their understanding of the story and write captions for each picture. Originally, she used this strategy to help her students retell the story they learned. After I observed her teaching, I suggested that she let her students say more about each picture, adding their own interpretations of the pictures and enriching the story. In this way, the students not only gave a retelling but also created a new story of their own. Selina was fascinated by the stories her students could tell with the copied pictures. Later, she decided to have the students use the pictures to tell stories before she read a book to them. When she read the story to the class, the students compared their stories with the one read aloud. Sometimes they liked their stories better.
Photos are a big part of our students' lives, past and present. When they tell their stories, they love to share their photos of the grandparents who raised them and of their relatives and friends in China whom they miss every day. They used photos to write their autobiographies and to compare and contrast their lives and their schooling in China and in New York. When they did a theme study on immigrants, they took pictures around Chinatown and wrote about how people lived there. Among their stories, they showed the playgrounds, with many children climbing slides and running around; the restaurants, with roasted ducks hanging upside down in the windows and packed with diners inside; and the
apartment buildings, with laundry flying in between. There were also pictures of big trash containers overflowing with garbage on sidewalks and of stores filled with varieties of fresh seafood, meat, and vegetables and crowded with anxious customers. Before they could express themselves with written text, our students used pictures to present their views of Chinatown and their new experiences in America and to tell their stories about their families.

Our students took quite a few field trips every year. They went to museums, to zoos, to Broadway, to uptown Manhattan, and to just see more of New York. Alice purchased disposable cameras with the art project or new immigrant budgets. During field trips, our students would take pictures and notes. Back in class, they would share and talk about their photos and present their learning with individual or group photo books with captions. They could use the language they chose in their caption writing: Chinese, bilingual, or English. With pictures and photos, the monolingual English teachers could figure out what the students tried to say. Drawings, pictures, and photos were, at first, the major texts of our beginning ESL students’ writing, when they could write a few words and one-sentence captions. Gradually, when they could write more, especially in English, their written work took more of a front role and their artwork was much reduced in size. Students often preferred their own picture or photo books to commercial ones, because theirs were not only personal but also revealed their creativity and imagination.

### Narrative Writing

After Thanksgiving, the teachers started to teach their students narrative writing. The writing topic was usually more controlled and sometimes even assigned by the teachers. In this way, the teachers felt that they could go through the process and work on the language the students needed for their narrative writing. For instance, before Shirley had her students write “My Life” as their narrative piece, she worked with her class for days to fill in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>In China</th>
<th>In New York</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ jobs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things you like</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things you dislike</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Then she taught them the language they needed to express their lives: words, phrases, and sentence structures. After the students wrote their first drafts, she taught them how to use transitional words to make their writing cohesive.

Before Betty had her students write their narratives, she let her students write their weekend journals for a month or two, where they wrote in Chinese or mixed languages. From reading their writing, Betty learned what English language she had to teach her students to express their lives. Each week, she introduced them to the English vocabulary and phrases they needed to express their lives, such as “watch TV,” “go to the library,” “read with my sisters,” “do homework in my room,” and “play with my friends in the park.” After they learned these English phrases, the students had to use them in their weekend journals. After weeks of writing their weekend journals in this way, the students were instructed to choose one of their weekend journals to expand into a narrative piece titled “My Life in America” or “My Life in China.”

In their first drafts of the narrative writing, most of the students in Betty’s class tended to record moment by moment and end their stories with going to bed. In teaching the students how to revise their work, Betty modeled how to choose a moment or a special incident (zoom-in strategy) to make their writing have a focus and more interest. Going through much revision and editing for three to four weeks, each student in Betty’s class contributed a piece to make a story quilt with illustrations on the individual pieces. The following are two pieces out of this story quilt:

**Burning Eggs**

I felt sad because my eggs turned black. I want to watch T.V. and I didn’t watch the eggs. I smelled something awful and the eggs turned black. I didn’t know how to cook anything else. But I just know how to cook eggs. I tried to cook again. This time I watched the eggs, and it came out good. It looked as golden as a sun. Now I know I need to watch the eggs and not to go away.

**My Story Quilt**

I was a baby when my mother went to America. I stayed in China with my grandmother and grandfather. I was very happy because I went with my grandparents to the hills. We sang songs going up the hills. My grandmother said, “I am very happy to have I my husband and Meng Ying going to the hills with me.”

I wished next year I can go back to China and go to the hills with my grandmother and grandfather again.

The beautiful story quilt hung on the wall of the classroom and the students were proud of their first class publication.

Helping his students learn to write, John required his students to write a short narrative piece describing their lives every other week starting at the
beginning of the school year. They started their writing in Chinese and then progressed to mixed languages (Chinese with English words). Many students began to write their narratives in English after Thanksgiving. A student produced the following piece in John’s class after three months in the United States:

My Life New York

I am in New York now. I am I.S. 131 Middle School. There are many different country people in it. They are very funny, so everyday I am happy. Because I have many good friend. They are always play with me.

In my classroom friend a often kidding, So do I were so happy in this school, because we have many good teachers.

I like New York. Because there are many tall buildings, I like my good friend, I hope we can be friend ever!

After Thanksgiving, John instructed his class to read and write biographies. In teaching the students to write them, he first let his students interview each other according to the list he provided: name, birthday, birthplace, appearance, when the person came to the United States, family, hobbies, favorite things, wishes, and a special talent. During their interviews, the students took notes in either Chinese or English. Then they looked for the English words they needed from their Chinese-English dictionaries. After the students worked on their first drafts, they gave the persons they interviewed their writing to read and confirm the information, and they helped smooth each other’s writing before they typed it and turned it in to the teacher. John would do some editing, but not word by word, as he stated, “At this point, I want them not to be afraid to write in English, rather than being right.”

A struggling student in John’s class wrote the following biography:

I am writing a biography on Q. His birthday is on October x, 1990. He was born in Fuzhou, China.

Q. come to America on June 13, 2001. His mother and father with Q. His likes to play computer, watch T.V. and read a book. His favorite subject is ESL.

Q favorite teacher is Ms. Joyce because she can teach student to know a Social Studies. He grow up want to be a doctor. Q wishes is want to fly, have superpowers, and a good brain.

His very special talent is acting.

He has short hair and his favorite color is blue.

Most of the newcomers and struggling students wrote their pieces just like this student, strictly according to the list the teacher provided.

Through their teachers’ careful guidance and scaffolding, all the students could produce pretty good writing, including even the most struggling students.
After guiding the students in writing four or five pieces this way, the teachers would give them more freedom in terms of choosing their topics and writing styles. Many students were able to produce readable pieces in English, except a few struggling students, such as the student who produced the piece above.

To work on the writing assignment “My First Time,” the student who produced the above piece in John’s class struggled for days to think of what to write, then when he finally decided what to write, he took a week to complete it. He typed the following piece on the computer and didn’t want anything more to do with it.

My First Time

My first time see look like dog big mouse run for street I and my father was very shocked.

Its teeth are 3 inches long, its tail are 20 inches long, Its 4 legs are 5 inches long. Its eyes are red color and one people run for this mouse. My father walk for this people talk this people and I run to this people listen my father say, “This big mouse one day eat who many food.” This people say, “This mouse one day eat 15 pound for food.” My father say, “This big mouse 1 hours run who long.” This people say, “This mouse 1 hours run 80 miles look like a car the miles.” I say, “This mouse live in where.” This people say, “This live in dog house.” I and my father to this people talk so long.

This people go home. I and my father walk to home, I say, “My first time see this big mouse.”

The teacher let this piece be as it was, as he stated: “If he didn’t want to work on this piece anymore, I didn’t want to push it. To have him just complete a piece is my goal at this point for him, as he struggled so much just to complete a piece in English. If I pushed him to work more on this piece, he might just stop writing. Hopefully by continuing to write piece by piece, he will improve his writing overall.”

Reading this work, I realized that this student had a lot to say and it could be an interesting piece. But what he wanted to express was beyond what his English proficiency allowed him to do. In this piece he used specific details to describe a mouse he saw that was “as big as a dog.” He used the dialogue to give specific information about the humongous mouse (rat) that he saw for the first time in his life. This piece had a good organizational structure, an introduction and an ending, with a definite focal point. But, it is written in such strong Chinese English, it sounds very broken. I agree with John’s decision for students like this one, letting them continue to write piece by piece in English while learning to write and develop their English proficiency will allow them to gradually improve their English writing. (In Chapter 7, I will specifically
discuss how to help students improve their writing from Chinese English to conventional English). For the struggling ESL writers, we have to learn to accept their writing in broken English (at the developmental stage), just as we accept their broken English in speaking, with the belief that they will improve their English writing as long as we continue to provide them with writing opportunities, guide them to write, and help them develop English language skills.

**Poetry Writing**

Poetry writing took place late in the spring for the English language beginners, after they gained much English proficiency to express themselves through reading many pattern books and simple storybooks and creating their pattern books and narrative writing. Most pattern books are written in poetry form and sound like chanting poems with short beats and repetitive rhythm. Through reading and constantly listening to those language patterns, and also writing their own stories, our English language beginners became comfortable writing their own poems.

The difference between creating their own pattern books and writing poetry is that the former is more for language practice and the latter is for self-expression. In short, simple, and repetitive poetry format, our students expressed their personal feelings and views. Susan taught her students to use time lines, five senses, and descriptive words to talk about their memories of their childhood and express their views about their lives in Chinatown and about their old and new homelands.

To write their own poems, they were taught first to choose the topics they cared about the most and then to list the words (nouns, verbs, and adjectives) with which to express their ideas. Later, they were instructed on how to break the lines to create certain rhythmic patterns. With much modeling, Susan’s newcomers published their first poems. For example:

**My Childhood**

I am four years old.
I fall down in the water.
When I get up, I do not see
My mother, I start to cry . . .
I am five years old.
I fall down from the chair . . .
I am six years old.
I fall down from the tree
And break my hand.
Why am I always falling
Down from somewhere?
Chinatown
I’m in Chinatown,
You are in Chinatown
We’re in Chinatown!
I see Chinese people.
I touch chopsticks.
I hear Chinese.
I taste tofu.
I smell roasted ducks.
I wonder if this is in America.

China
China
Old, beautiful, big, noisy
Has many parks
Has many different people
USA

These were the poems published in the class anthology, where every student had a page with two or three poems that had gone through many drafts. Susan helped with editing and typing and the students made the cover and the illustrations. The class was proud of their first poetry publication and gave me a copy as a present.

Janet Wong, a well-known Asian American poet, came to our school nine times a year, working with teachers and children in poetry reading and writing. She read the students her poems and shared her thoughts and techniques in poetry writing. She encouraged the students to speak out their emotions and write what they cared about the most in their poetry writing. Janet Wong made a great impact upon our teachers and students, and her writing about her Asian American experience in her simple language and down-to-earth expressions drew great interest among our students. In poetry reading and writing workshops, our students read numerous poems and learned to choose what they cared the most to write about, how to create the rhythm by making each line the same length, and how to stress the meaning by repeating certain lines. Weeks later, they proudly published their first poems in English, as the following:

Seat
I want to change my seat
To talk to girls.
I want to change my seat
To talk to David
About girls.
I want to change my seat
Cause Zhan Zhou bothers me
About girls.
I want to change my seat
To ask Ms. Moulino
About girls.

If You Are in Love
If you are in love,
Your Da and Ma shouldn’t know.
You will be very happy.
You will not ask your Da and Ma.
But if your Da and Ma know that,
They will be angry with you.
If I fall in love,
I will do the same.

Sad
I’d like to say
But I can’t
Time stops between you and me.
Nothing can stop us.

Wish at Chinese New Year
At Chinese New Year, 2001
I have one wish
To go back
To China
Before Chinese New Year
Is over
I waited,
I prayed,
I prayed,
I waited,
I still can’t go back
I don’t have my green card yet.

These poems were revised and edited with the help of the teachers, and some even by Janet Wong personally, to be included in the class anthology that every ESL class publishes annually.

After Janet Wong, and their teachers’ examples and encouragement, our students learned to openly speak their minds. They realized that their limited English proficiency didn’t limit them from using poetry writing to express what lay deep in their hearts. They came to understand that anything they said and wanted to say could be a poem. I was surprised to see how freely these students learned to express their feelings, as if poetry was a path that led them to emotional freedom.
Conclusion

Just like any other students who are developing their writing skills, the beginning ESL students need frequent opportunities to write and need to write to express themselves through many ways and different genres in order to develop their writing competence and language skills. To achieve this goal, we first of all use the students’ first language to develop their writing competence in both CLA and ESL classes. In CLA class, the ESL beginning students learn to write essays to present their learning about America. Through the frequent essay writing practiced in CLA class, these students not only continue to develop their writing skills but also learn to present their studies in a new writing format, which is very different from what they learned to write in China. Also, in ESL class, through writing journals in their first language, these students not only are given opportunities to develop their writing skills but also learn to express their reading comprehension and themselves in a way that was unexpected in their formal Chinese schooling (such as personal connection in reading response and writing daily journals).

Second, in both CLA and ESL classes, these students are encouraged to write in mixed languages and choose to write in any language styles in which they feel comfortable. To enable the students to do so, the teachers systematically teach them the English vocabulary and sentences they need. In CLA, the academic English vocabulary is given in accordance with the content they are learning in the American studies; in ESL, the frequently used words, phrases, and sentence patterns are taught daily through pattern books and listening and speaking activities. From reading the students’ work written in mixed languages or in Chinese English, our teachers come to know what English skills (vocabulary and sentence patterns) they need to teach to help their students expresses themselves in English. Through encouraging their students to use as much English as possible in their writing and teaching what they need to express themselves, the teachers help them make transitions gradually (without limiting them) from writing in Chinese to writing in English.

Third, the ESL teachers systematically help their students develop their English writing skills. They first use pattern books to develop these students’ English reading, writing, and language proficiency. Pattern book writing is practically used for the students to develop their English vocabulary, sense of grammar, and idiomatic expressions. In this kind of writing, the students work on language more than content. After the students master a certain amount of English vocabulary and sentence structures, the teachers guide them to write their narratives and poetry to express their lives. They help them with what to write, what language they need in writing, and later demonstrate how to
organize their ideas into cohesive pieces. Gradually they give them more freedom in topic choice and writing styles, and students are required to complete a piece every other week.

Through writing in their first language, writing in mixed languages as a transitional stage, and finally writing in English of different genres, our beginning ESL students are growing as writers and gradually becoming able to express themselves in English. For the ESL beginning writers, allowing individual students to move at their own pace is a must. Among our ESL beginning students, there are always newcomers and struggling students whose first language literacy is three or four years behind their peers. This group of students is moving at a different pace from the rest of the class and needs much more individual attention. Rather than requiring less writing from them, our teachers help and encourage them to write at their current level and often give them more time than their peers to work on their writing. For these students, our teachers show their special sensitivity: when to help, when to push, and when to leave them alone (at their own pace of development as English writers).

For language beginners, speaking, reading, and writing are interwoven. These three skills must develop codependently and reinforce one another. Our students don’t wait to write until they’ve fully developed their reading and speaking skills. As John, an ESL teacher, expressed, we should push everything oral for these students, “to use their writing to speak, to read aloud, to practice using English in public.” Our students didn’t just write and publish their stories and poems but also read aloud their stories and recited their poetry in class and to the large audience in the library, where teachers, students, administrators, and school staff together celebrated our young authors as writers and poets and, most importantly, as language learners. All their writing, no matter if it is pattern book creation, or captions for pictures or photos, or narrative or poetry writing, should become part of their oral language practice and expression. Their writing is a way for them to express themselves and also prepares them to speak and helps them speak better.
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