



WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR EMERGING BILINGUALS



Too often, writing instruction for emerging bilinguals emphasizes isolated grammar exercises or focuses on preparation for high-stakes writing exams. In addition to being less engaging and relevant, these approaches tend to measure reading comprehension as much as writing, since connected assessments often require students to cite evidence contained in texts that are incorporated into the test questions.

In a recent [study](#) published in *The Reading Teacher*, a peer-refereed journal, NEPC Fellow [Mileidis Gort](#) and [Molly Hamm-Rodríguez](#), both of the University of Colorado Boulder, explain their research into a different approach to writing, called Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) genre pedagogy. Systemic Functional Linguistics genre pedagogy centers on the subject matter of writing instruction—in other words, the “what.”

“SFL views language as a functional resource for expressing meaning, rather than a set of rules,” Gort and Hamm-Rodríguez write. “A functional perspective recognizes language as a situated activity embedded within and shaped by particular contexts of use . . . Through this lens, language users make choices to achieve different purposes within specific situational contexts.”

Rather than centering on isolated lessons on language use, Systemic Functional Linguistics incorporates grammar instruction as students learn to write in multiple different genres, including personal accounts/fictional narratives, reports, explanations, procedures, and arguments/texts that seek to persuade.

In their study, conducted at a high-poverty elementary school where students learn both Spanish and English, Gort and Hamm-Rodríguez paid particular attention to the Teaching and Learning Cycle. This approach incorporates four main stages:

1. *Building the field*: The first stage helps students build background knowledge and understand the roles of different types of texts. During this phase, one of the teachers included in the study prepared students to write opinion pieces about simple machines by reading books and viewing videos about the topic in Spanish, building their own simple machines, visiting a local museum with exhibits about engineering, examining toy cars to determine how wheels and axles are constructed, and connecting school and home life with explanations of simple household machines such as sink faucets.
2. *Text deconstruction*: In this stage, teachers and students study examples of their focal genres to “make explicit the structure and language of texts, to illustrate how language choices shape meaning, and to build a metalanguage for talking about language within and across genres.” In this stage, a teacher involved in the study deconstructed a report about Mexico with her class, showing them how to organize information by having them devise subheadings for the report.
3. *Joint construction*: Teachers and students work together to write in the focal genre. During this phase, students in one of the classes involved in the study took notes while watching a video about lions (selected for a jointly constructed class report), then divided up into groups, each of which focused on a subtopic of the video. These notes were then used to construct notes for the entire class. While guiding the construction of the class notes, the teacher taught grammatical rules related to the functions of verbs, nouns, and adverbs. Students also learned new vocabulary words that were incorporated into the notes.
4. *Independent construction*: Students write their own texts that incorporate what they have learned both about the topic and about the genre.

While Gort and Hamm-Rodríguez describe successful practice, they also note that the focus on authentic genre writing at times is “in tension with existing curriculum and standardized assessments.”

This does not, however, mean that their approach is a non-starter in the typical public school. Their suggestions to classroom teachers include teaching students to write (not just read) multiple types of genres, selecting strong examples of each genre that students can analyze as a class, and teaching lessons about language use and grammar in the context of the genre, focusing on “how word choices, language features, images, and other components of written language help authors achieve their purpose.”

NEPC Resources on Language and Learning

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <https://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces high-quality information in support of democratic deliberation about education policy. We publish original research, policy briefs, and expert third-party reviews of think tank reports. NEPC publications are written in accessible language and are intended for a broad audience that includes academic experts, policymakers, the media, and the general public. Visit us at: <https://nepc.colorado.edu>