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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *But Does This Work With English Learners?* by Mary Amanda Stewart and Holly Genova. This excerpt covers how to assess your English Learners writing abilities.

one would rather not eat gallo pinto every day for breakfast for 3 weeks. Without the cultural communication lesson, I might have just said, “Could I eat cereal a few days a week?” This more circular, less direct, yet far more polite way is the cultural communication style that some students have grown up in, so, naturally, their writing will reflect a more circular pattern as well. Explain to them the difference and provide graphic organizers to help them navigate this new writing style.

- What languages other than English (LOTEs) do you know about? How is the writing system the same or different?
- Imagine you were to move to a country with an alphabet different from English. What would you want to know about the language to help you learn?



LEARNING ABOUT OTHER LANGUAGES

Collectively, we’ve taught students from over 50 language backgrounds. As we continue to have the privilege to receive students who speak different languages, we need resources to be able to quickly learn about that language—its writing system at the very least. Although we hate to admit it, Wikipedia is often where we find quick information. Another great resource is this book that has information on the most common LOTEs spoken by children in U.S. schools.

Sundem, G., Krieger, J., & Pikiewicz, K. (2008). *10 languages you’ll need most in the classroom: A guide to communicating with English language learners and their families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Assessing Students’ L1 (All Home Languages) Writing Abilities

Many schools use the WIDA assessment for students’ native languages. Whereas your school might use this effectively, King and Bigleow (2018), the researchers who developed the assessment in the Native Language Literacy Assessment for Five Languages sidebar, studied how the results from this test were often misunderstood and misappropriated by those who were attempting to help students. You may also use our Language Inventory (see Appendix A) to guide you. There is no perfect assessment, but try some assessments out and see what gives you the best information. Essentially, an understanding of students’ reading

ability can greatly help you assess their writing ability. For reading, we discussed the Wonderopolis test where students have the option of reading in their language. We also discussed providing student access to various texts, online and hard copies, written in their language. As your students engage in these texts, provide them graphic organizers to take notes in their home language. This might help you understand their home language writing abilities.

Of course, if you really want to understand their abilities regarding grammar usage and sentence structure in their language, have them complete one of your quick-writes in their home language and find an adult in your school or community (you might look at universities) who could evaluate their language use. In the nearby sidebar, we present a simple way to give you information about students' LOTE writing abilities.

- How is learning about your students' proficiency in writing in their home languages connected to what you are already doing to learn about their reading proficiency in the same languages?
- How does information about one area inform the other?
- What additional action might you need to take to learn about their writing proficiency?

NON-ROCKET SCIENCE WAYS TO EVALUATE STUDENTS' WRITING ABILITIES IN LOTES



Provide reading material for your students in their home languages. Give them a graphic organizer to fill out where they would need to bring in information from what they had read.

Give students a low-risk inventory such as the one in Appendix B or by the researches at the University of Minnesota.

As you learn about students' language and educational experiences, talk to them about their prior writing experiences in their language.

When your students compose various items in English in your class, ask them if they would like to produce some of their work in their language as well.

Document what you are learning about your students. Do they use punctuation in their language? Capital letters if applicable? What has a speaker of that language said about students' writing? Does this match up with any other inventories or assessments you have about students' writing?

Assessing Students' L2 (English) Writing Abilities

Students' writing abilities in their home languages will surely affect their writing abilities in English, a language they are acquiring. How students are able to leverage their home language writing to help with English could depend on how closely their language is to English regarding various elements such as alphabet, syntax, and sentence structure. You could have students at the more advanced levels of English acquisition complete a contrastive analysis of English and their language. Basically, this is just a fancy way of saying that students will determine how their language and English are alike and similar. Have them consider these areas:

- **Alphabet:** Even if their language uses the same alphabet, which letters are different? (In Spanish the answer would be *ñ*.)
- **Directionality:** Is their language written right to left or left to right? Are letters combined top to bottom or side by side?
- **Capitalization:** Be aware that what is capitalized in one language is not always the same in others. What words should be capitalized in English? (e.g., proper nouns, days, months). How does that differ in their languages?
- **Sentence Structure:** How are sentences put together in English? What constitutes a run-on sentence in English? What constitutes a sentence fragment? How does that compare to their language?
- **Punctuation:** What punctuation exists in English, and at what places of the sentence is it used? Does their language use the same punctuation in the same way and places in the sentence as English?
- **Diacritical Marks:** These are symbols that are usually above or sometimes below a letter that denote a special pronunciation to the reader. In English, we only have these in words borrowed from other languages, yet they are quite common in some languages. Have students make a chart with the diacritical marks in their language with what they mean and an example of a word with that mark. This could be important information for you to acknowledge that the student possesses. In fact, when you read *Inside Out and Back Again* (Lai, 2011), Hà, the main character, mentions that she has great knowledge

of how diacritical marks are used in Vietnamese even though she is still making sense out of the basic English letters. She feels inadequate in English and wants her teacher and the other students to see her for how much she does know.

As a teacher, continue to be a learner to discover more about writing in other languages and cultures. I am constantly discovering so much from students when I take a learner's stance. For example, when my children were very young, I wanted us to learn Korean. I began with a kid's program where dinosaurs teach you (DinoLingo). The dinosaurs left me hanging, though, because I could not figure out how the letters I was learning in the Korean alphabet were making the words I saw. My kids didn't care, but as an older learner, that was killing me! I even tried to Google my questions to no avail. A Korean-speaking person, a nondinosaur, had to explain to me that the letters were being combined top to bottom to make a word; then the words were written left to right, like English. Wow! I finally got it, but I needed a flesh-and-blood human being to explain that to me. That's where our students come in. Use them as your teachers, and every year your knowledge of languages and their beautifully unique writing systems will grow. With even more advanced students, help them write bilingually, paying attention to not only the letter, word, and sentence level of their writing but also the overall discourse pattern of writing in one language in one culture compared to another language in another culture.

- Do you find learning about other languages interesting or overwhelming? What implications does this have for your students who have no choice but to learn English?
- Where is your go-to place to learn about a language?
- Develop a system, such as a chart, where you can write information about each student's language. Share this with your colleagues.

Second-Language Acquisition Regarding Writing

It is important to note that both writing and acquiring an additional language are processes. In a sense, we are juxtaposing multiple processes, yet we often treat writing in English as a second language as an end product. We collect a writing sample from students and analyze it to produce