

# **Helping Young Writers Working in Spanish: Informing Instruction Through Analysis of Writing in Spanish**

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## **Abstract**

Bilingual teachers can gain a wealth of information from their students who are writing in Spanish. The information gained from analysis of students' writing can be used effectively to inform instruction focused on helping students to improve their writing in Spanish. Writing process teachers who have students working in Spanish are realizing the importance of helping students in the United States improve the content and mechanics of their writing in Spanish as well as in English. Teachers can identify the strengths and needs of a student writer through analysis of their writing for content and mechanics. The writing of one native Spanish speaking third grader is analyzed here and instructional strategies are given for helping the writer to improve content and mechanics.

## **Introduction**

For those involved in the writing process it has become clear over the past few years that assessment of students' writing is a powerful vehicle for informing instruction (Goodman, Goodman & Hood, 1989; Graves, 1983; Atwell, 1987, among others). Analyzing children's writing gives us a window into their writing process. By looking closely at students' pieces we are able to see what their strengths are, what development they have made over time, and where they need guidance. This information then becomes a solid base upon which to make decisions regarding instruction (Calkins, 1986, Atwell, 1987). Bilingual teachers can gain a wealth of data from students who are working in Spanish. The information gained from students' writing can be used effectively to inform instruction focused on helping students to improve their writing in Spanish.

Students who are new to this country find comfort in being able to express themselves in their native language. Those who are well

on their way to becoming bilingual need opportunities to write in their native language to help maintain and value that language. As a result, teachers in Spanish/English bilingual programs are increasing the time spent on writing in their classrooms. Native Spanish speakers are being given the opportunity to write in Spanish during writer's workshop, a time during the school day when everyone has the chance to write on self-chosen topics. Along with their native English speaking peers they create drafts, conference with teachers and peers, revise, edit and publish their pieces, all in Spanish.

Writing process teachers are coming to understand the effectiveness of tying the instruction of writing to the students' writing needs. Bilingual teachers are also realizing that the same should be done with non-English language writing instruction. Giving students time to write is not enough. Teachers must facilitate writing growth and development through instruction to ensure that students learn to write well, both in Spanish and in English.

There are similarities and differences in the written conventions of Spanish and English. When focusing on the content of a piece, the questions a teacher may ask to guide clarification are virtually the same in each language. Questions such as: Does the writing make sense? Are particular audiences' needs addressed? Can the reader identify characters and their relationships to each other? Are the transitions from one event to another smooth? (For more detailed discussion of content questions see Calkins, 1986).

The mechanics of Spanish are quite different from English. Spanish uses accents, inverted question and exclamation points, tildes to create ñ's, distinct spellings, capitalization rules and signals for quotations. Latin American writers often tend to use long, involved sentences which might be labeled "run on's" by U.S. schooled readers. Spanish speaking students who grow up in the United States may not be surrounded by these conventions of Spanish writing which are normally modeled through environmental print (the print which surrounds us all on signs, billboards, cereal boxes, etc.), books and periodicals. At the same time, teachers need to understand that students who did grow up surrounded by written Spanish may tend to use style and mechanics based on the Spanish language conventions of their native country.

Although students living in the United States are not surrounded by environmental print in Spanish as are students in Spanish speaking countries, the bilingual classroom can become a place where students are immersed in Spanish language print from a

variety of sources. Teachers can use a variety of texts written in Spanish, such as literature, magazines, local and foreign newspapers, as well as the students' own writing, to help create a literate Spanish environment.

### **Analysis of Students' Writing in Spanish**

What follows is the analysis of one piece of writing by a native Spanish speaking third grader. This piece is used as a way of demonstrating how a teacher can identify the strengths and needs of a student writer and how to make instructional decisions based on those needs. The process is one which has been used by many writing process teachers, including myself, using both English and Spanish. This particular piece is one of a group of student writings in Spanish used to teach the process of analysis and instructional decision making to bilingual teachers.

The analysis will be done in two parts. First, we will look at the writers' strengths, what can the writer do? Teachers are encouraged to begin with positive aspects of the writing, letting the writer know what the reader understood and what they found interesting, signs of growth and demonstrations of ability. The point needs to be made that valuing what the writer has to say is an essential component in facilitating growth and development in writing. Students of any age need to know that what they have to say is valued and accepted. Second, we will move to examining where the writer needs help, first in content, then in mechanics.

Although we will discuss many areas in the piece which could use improvement, it is important for teachers to remember to move slowly. Instruction and guidance should be given in small doses over long periods of time. Students' knowledge of language conventions and their ability to use those conventions will increase steadily, though often in small increments, as long as they are not overwhelmed by the task (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986).

Possible strategies for addressing some of the identified needs of the writers will also be presented. Strategies for every identified need will not be provided due to space constraints. What will be presented is a way of looking at students' writing which will make direct and strong connections between what the writer is doing and the teacher's writing instruction.

### A Third Grader's Writing

The student's piece is reproduced here exactly as the student wrote it.

#### La Nieve

Avia una yes una niña Que se llama michelle. y vivia con su familia. y una yes michelle le dijo a su mamá. cuando. va vinr Ia nieve. y la mamá el dijo No Se miga. pero michelle no esperaba. pero una yes la nieve y esa ves. michelle villo pro. la ventana y villo la nieve. y michelle dijo mamá papá hermana vengan. a ver la nieve pronto vengan y michell salto en la cama. michelle Estaba contenta. Que la nieve pro le dijo su mamá no vas a poder salir pero michelle. Se Enogo mucho pero Que dijo por Que nunca te voy a dejar salir y se fue a su cuarto y michelle lloro y lloro y dijo por Que me pasa está por Que y lloro y lloro

#### English Translation of "La Nieve"

##### The snow

Once upon a time there was a girl named Michelle, and she lived with her family. and once michelle said to her mother. when. will the snow come. and the mother said to her I don't know my daughter. but michelle couldn't wait. but once the snow and this time michelle looked out. the window and saw the snow. And michelle said mother father sister come. to see the snow come quick and michelle jumped on the bed. michelle was happy. With the snow but her mother said you're not going to be able to go out but michelle got very angry but she said because I'm never going to let you go out and she went to her room and michelle cried and cried and said Why does this happen to me Why and why I cry and cry.

For those familiar with the conventions of written Spanish it would be very easy to begin by correcting the student's many spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. However, this would not be in the best interests of the writer. By looking carefully at this piece we can see demonstrations of what the writer knows and what she is able to do. The teacher's acknowledgement of what the writer

has to say as well as the abilities she demonstrates will do much to increase the writer's confidence, allowing her to take risks in order to express herself, her ideas, and feelings. As Simpson (1986) related:

There were times when I let the author know that the basic idea was good, even though changes were required. I helped the author to recognize a clever idea, but lack of development.. .I found that interchanging the roles of admirer and critic...required a genuine sensitivity to the needs of the student. (p. 681)

### **Focusing on Strengths**

What *can* this writer do? She has written a narrative which contains many elements of a good story. She has characters who are clearly identified: the girl, Michelle, her mother, father and sister. We know Michelle lives with her family and that she was waiting for the snow to come. Michelle, as the protagonist, has a wish and a problem. Her wish is that the snow would fall and the problem is that her mother won't let her go out to play. The author has also used dialogue extensively in the piece, both to establish a context for the story, "cuando va venir la nieve" (when will the snow come?), and to demonstrate Michelle's distress at not being able to play in the snow, "por Que me pasa esto por que" (why does this happen to me, why?). The reader can also see potential for various resolutions to the problem, although the author had yet to include these when the sample was collected.

If we were to create a list of identified abilities which could be used by the student and the teacher it might appear as the following:

#### Cosas Que Puedo Hacer

- Escribir un título que va con la historia
- Crear personajes bien delineados
- Identificar deseos y problemas
- Escribir un diálogo entre personajes

#### Things I Can Do

- Write a title which relates to the story
- Create well developed characters
- Identify desires and problems for those characters
- Write dialogue between characters

These lists are extremely useful to help teachers and students focus on the strengths of the writer (Graves, 1983). In addition, they act as documentation of growth and progress over a period of time. When lists are begun, and dated, then added to every 3 or 4 weeks, dating each entry, observers learn how writers are developing in strength and ability. This information is useful for teachers in evaluating writing development, deciding on further instruction for students and communicating growth and progress to parents.

A list of "Cosas Que Puedo Hacer" (Things I Can Do) is an effective way of helping students become responsible for their own learning. It is also useful to students as a means to facilitate their own self-evaluation and recognition of growth and development. The list, titled and completed in Spanish, can be made a permanent part of the student's writing folder. Together the student and the teacher will decide what areas the student dominates well enough to put on the list. Using the list as a guide, a student can reread and revise her piece before sharing it with anyone else. For example, when a student knows she has successfully used dialogue before, she will have confidence that she can do so again. A quick review of her list will remind her of areas she can refine on her own.

### **Helping the Writer Improve Content**

Now that we have identified some of the writer's strengths, where does the writer need help? It is important to begin with responses and suggestions regarding content in order to communicate that we value primarily what the student has to say. By first asking questions about content, the writer knows that we want to understand her message and also gains a sense of whether or not we understood what she had intended to say. A one on one conference between the teacher and the student provides the opportunity for teachers to ask questions of the student writer about gaps in information or wording which is confusing.

Conferences such as these can be held between students as well as between student and teacher. Students begin to internalize the routines when time is taken on a regular basis to conference with students and discuss conferencing as a group, thus increasing their competence (Langer & Applebee, 1986). They become effective conference partners who come up with pertinent questions and helpful ideas (Newkirk, 1982; Russell, 1983; Calkins, 1986).

Teachers do not need to conference with every student every day, especially when they are learning to conference effectively with each other.

When a teacher and a student hold a writing conference, a few well placed questions may be enough to get the writer talking about the piece and clarifying confusing points. For example, the piece about Michelle is missing pertinent information: Why didn't Michelle's mother allow her to play in the snow? Why was Michelle so surprised at this and upset? The piece may be a fictionalized personal experience and so, one question may be able to draw out much of the missing information. If the teacher asks, "What does this piece mean to you? Why is this event important to you?" the writer may begin to relate feelings and experiences which would enhance the piece for the reader. After listening attentively, the teacher should reiterate what she has heard and point out information which would help the reader better understand the story. It is then up to the writer to decide what she will or will not add to the piece.

This may also be an appropriate place to suggest reading material related to the writer's own story. By referring to literature in Spanish such as folktales and stories written originally in Spanish (see Appendix A), students have the opportunity to see how professional authors use this language to communicate ideas similar to their own. Many publications from Latin America and Spain are available in the United States. There is also a wealth of literature which has been translated into Spanish from the original English.

### **Helping the Writer Improve Mechanics**

Eye, hand, mouth and ear work together  
to aid a child to understand the process  
of putting words on paper. (Graves, 1983, p. 152)

In working with student authors we have seen that reading a piece out loud is an effective strategy for catching missing words, mixed up words and even misspellings (Rosen, 1987). It is common for writers, both children and adults, to mix up words or leave words out because their minds are thinking faster than their hands can write or type. The author of "La Nieve" seems to have difficulty deciding where to end a sentence with a period and begin another with a capital letter. Reading out loud can help her to hear the natural phrasing within the piece. In this way the writer can

work with the teacher or another listener to find where to end and begin sentences. For example, consider the following sentence:

Y una yes michelle le dijo a su mama. cuando.  
va vinr la nieve.

(and one time michelle said to her mother. when.  
will the snow come.)

The writer has inserted two extra periods, left out any dialogue signals, failed to insert initial and final question marks and omitted all capital letters. Written conventionally in Spanish the sentence might look this way:

Y una vez Michelle le dijo a su mamá --¿Cuándo va  
a venir la nieve?

If we attempt to point out all of these deviations from conventional mechanics (to say nothing of the spelling errors) our student is likely to feel overwhelmed by the information given and the task of correcting everything. However, if we focus only on endings and beginnings of sentences we can help her with phrasing, periods and capitals, and improve the clarity of the piece at the same time with a minimum of stress on her part. Helping children to use their ears to determine where sentences will end also helps them to gain confidence in their own ability to make such decisions. As Calkins (1980) describes the children in Beth Hoban's classroom, "More than half her class explained the placement of periods by the way the writing sounds" (p. 87). Other areas of mechanics can be left for another day or another piece of writing.

If we decide to focus on the dialogue we can use Spanish literature as a model, such as *Los Músicos de Bremen* by Zoraida Vásquez (1986). Books which originate in Spanish speaking countries, as well as books from the U.S. which have been translated into Spanish, such as *El Buho en Su Casa* by Arnold Lobel, can be used to show students how dialogue is handled in Spanish. By using literature, students will see first hand how Spanish uses colons and lines (see the conventionally written Spanish sentence above) to signal the initiation and termination of a quotation. (Note: quotation marks are sometimes used in Spanish

writing, but the traditional and more frequent convention is colons and lines.)

Using an overhead projector and a transparency of a piece with dialogue, a class or small group can work together to identify where dialogue signals should be inserted. Students can put the dialogue signals onto the transparency with marking pens, reinforcing the group's decisions. The transparencies can be made using student pieces from previous years, a copy of the teacher's own writing, or a piece from a book in which the signals have been deleted. Students who are using dialogue currently will then be able to look through their own writing and insert the needed marks. A follow up review the next day, having the students share what they found and changed in their own writing, would reinforce the process.

### **Spelling**

A brief word about spelling here. Judging by the many articles in professional journals devoted to the topic and the annual local newspaper focus on spelling bee's, spelling appears to be of great concern in the United States. We often judge a piece of writing, the author of the piece, and sometimes the publishers by the number of spelling errors we find in what we are reading. Teachers in the United States tend to spend a great deal of time asking questions about, looking for information on, and trying new methods for teaching spelling.

Students who are writing in Spanish do make spelling errors and invented spelling is certainly possible in Spanish. Students who write in two languages will often demonstrate influence from one language to another in their spelling (Edelsky & Jilbert, 1985; Nathenson-Mejía, 1989). This influence does not need to interfere with writing, but the students should become aware of the influence and learn to monitor their own spelling.

In the piece "La Nieve" the author has written *vio* ('saw') as *villo*, using the double *l* sound (as in *tortilla*, *tor-tee-ya*) to represent the double vowel found in *vio*. She has also used *v* instead of *b* and dropped the initial, silent *h* in the word *habia* ('there was', written by the student as *avia*). These are not uncommon spelling errors for Spanish language writers given the similarity in how the letters are pronounced (*ll* and *io*, *v* and *b*) and the fact that *h* is not pronounced at all.

As with English spelling instruction, it is important to give students strategies for dealing effectively with spelling. Learning to

identify misspelled words, using a variety of resources for finding the conventional spellings and gaining independence in correcting the spellings will serve them best in the long run. Memorization is not always an effective method for learning to spell words (Gentry, 1987; Buchanan, 1989).

Strategies for helping students become independent spellers can be found in a variety of books and articles, including Buchanan (1989), Gentry (1987) and Graves (1983). Our experience has shown that many of the strategies, though developed for English, are general enough to be appropriate and useful for speakers and writers of Spanish as well. For example, in learning to become independent spellers, students must realize that teachers are not the only source of information available. Independent spellers learn to experiment with spellings by writing the word a few different ways to see which looks more accurate, they know how and when to use dictionaries, and they know how to find the words they need in the literature which surrounds them. These strategies are not dependent upon the specific language of the writer and transfer easily across languages.

### **Finding the Time**

Finding the ways and the time to help students with their writing has much to do with establishing classroom routines. Definite routines become the underlying structure which allow students to work independently and with confidence. Mini-lessons, teacher-student conferences, peer conferences, questions and comments during sharing time, and editing checklists are a few of the effective instructional techniques which can be done with both individuals and groups. Through the routines set up around these techniques teachers can give students the help and support they need to grow as writers and learners.

The possibilities for helping writers during teacher-student conferences has already been discussed. Teachers can also take the opportunity during sharing time to gather information which will inform later instruction. While students are sharing their pieces, teachers can become a part of the group by sitting with the students and listening, not only to the author, but also to the questions and comments made by the other students. Student responses to the writer's piece demonstrate exactly what they are listening for, how well they are listening, and at what level they are able to express their reactions. Some students may respond to the content of the

piece, some to the language used, and some to the organization and structure. Knowing how students respond gives a teacher insight into how the students think and, possibly, how they approach their own writing. Notes kept during sharing time become valuable anecdotal records (Rhodes & Nathenson-Mejía, 1992) which teachers can use to inform subsequent instruction.

### **Summary**

Teachers of writing are learning to use assessment of their students' work to inform classroom instruction. By looking closely at the students' strengths and weaknesses in writing we are able to determine what specific instruction is needed and how growth is proceeding. In discussing the writing development of bilingual students, Edelsky and Jilbert (1985) remind us:

...with no guidance in learning to increase the purposes one has for writing, no help in learning what writing is for through actual use, and no instruction in expanding the repertoires of options for accomplishing one's own intents, children's growth as writers (will plateau). (p. 65)

A focus in the classroom on improving the Spanish writing of students will benefit all students in significant ways. The value of Spanish as a language will be raised and the potential for its use by all students will be increased. The underlying universal concepts and skills of written language use (see discussion of CALP in Cummins, 1980) will be improved for native Spanish speakers, thus improving their chances for academic success in both Spanish and English (Cummins, 1979).

It is especially important to work with non-native English speakers in their own language in order to provide them with opportunities to grow and improve language expression in their native tongue. In this way we help to ensure continued bilingualism and biliteracy for non-native English speaking students and hopefully we will encourage the same for native English speakers as well.

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## APPENDIX A SAMPLE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN SPANISH

### I. Longer Stories

Ortiz, Gilberto Rendón. (1983). *Pok a Tok: El Juego de Pelota*. Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Amaquemecan.

Puebla, Almudena María. (1980). *La Pequeña Estrella*. Madrid: Editorial Everest.

### II. Collections of Short Stories

Aymerich, Angela Figuera. (1985). *Cuentos Tontos Para Niños Listos*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

Matilda. (1982). *Los 100 Cuentos de Matilda*. México, D.F.: Fernández Editores, SA.

Ortiz, Gilberto Rendón. (1983). *Cuentos del Hierbazal*. México, D.F.: Editorial Amaquemecan.

Romolina, Tere. (1984). *Cinco Plumas de Colores*. México, D.F.: Editorial Amaquemecan.

### III. Folktales/Fairytales

Carreño, Mada. (1986). *Blancanieves*. México, D.F.; Editorial Trillas.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1987). *El Viaje del Joven Matsua*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1987). *Cheng y el Grillo*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1987). *Pulgarcito*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

Vásquez, Zoraida. (1986). *Caperucita Roja*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1986). *Los Músicos de Bremen*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

### IV. Poetry

(1983). *Versos de a Montón*. Selección de Esther Jacob. México, D.F.: Terra Nova.

(1989). *Quiquiriquí Cocorocó*. Selección de David Santiago. Bogotá: Editorial Norma.

(1985). *La Luciérnaga*. Compilación de Francisco Serrano. México, D.F.: Editorial Cidcli.

**V. Informational Books**

Flores, Guillermo Solano. (1985). *La Lluvia*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1985). *El Teatro*. México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas.

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González, Elisa Maria. (1986). *Los Bebés de los Animales*. México, D.F. Fernández Editores.

Sennell, Joles & and Salva, Frances. (1985). *Cometas Fantásticas*. Mallorca: Ultramar Editores.