

Handwriting Instruction and English Language Learners

By Ellen Riojas Clark, PhD, and Patricia Sánchez, PhD

Literacy Levels

It is essential to know your students' first language (L1) literacy levels. Students who are literate in their first language can draw upon those literacy concepts and skills as they learn to write English (L2). Even when the writing systems are different, research shows that concepts about the meaning and constancy of letters/symbols and skills, such as alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness, will transfer to another language (Cummins, 1992; Cisero & Royer, 1995).

Writing Skills

Handwriting instruction will give ELLs a tool for writing. **Zaner-Bloser Handwriting** and **Zaner-Bloser La escritura** use continuous-stroke vertical manuscript to teach the distinctive shapes and features of letters. This instructional approach will lead to mastery of basic writing skills (manuscript and cursive), improved letter recognition, and fluency in writing. Learning to write vertical manuscript—the letters children see in books and environmental print—strengthens the L2 reading-writing connection.

Letter Formation

ELLs need time and special techniques to acquire the proper handwriting strokes. Teachers can demonstrate the academic language used to teach handwriting (shape, size, spacing, and slant) through Total Physical Response (TPR) and other second-language approaches.

As you work with ELL students, implement the following:

- Have students watch you forming the letters. Use visuals to demonstrate proper stroke sequence. Say the stroke sequence aloud as you form the letter.
- Use TPR to describe letter formation. For example, point to your head when referencing the headline on the handwriting grid. Say, “Your **head** is the **top** of your body. The **headline** is the **top** line.” Similarly, you can demonstrate strokes with TPR. As you say “Slide right,” slide your feet across the floor.
- Ask students to describe and demonstrate the steps in creating the letter, whether in L1 or L2.
- Conclude the lesson by having students apply the new handwriting skill in a meaningful context.
- For a meaningful cross-cultural experience, be sure to invite volunteers to “teach” the class a few letters or characters from their first language(s).

Finally, as students practice their handwriting, guide your ELLs to

- access their prior knowledge (Jefferies & Merkle, 2001) about what to write about.
- write as a class, in pairs, or independently (Morahan & Clayton, 2003).
- use their first language when necessary.
- write about what they know.

Parallel Spanish Handwriting Instruction



La escritura for Grades K–6 provides parallel instruction to the English program so that emergent

bilingual Spanish-speaking students can progress in handwriting, a critical literacy skill, alongside their English-speaking peers.

A parallel **La escritura** Student Edition, Teacher Guide, and Practice Masters are available.

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