Using Their Own Voices: Exploring the Writing of English Language Learners in a Mississippi Middle School

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USING THEIR OWN VOICES: EXPLORING THE WRITING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN A MISSISSIPPI MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

_Maw Maw & Cappy_
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ABSTRACT

GABRIELLE LYNN VOGT: Using Their Own Voices:
Exploring the Writing of English Language Learners in a Mississippi Middle School
(Under the direction of Dr. Denise Soares)

In the United States, and particularly Mississippi, the number of K-12 English Language Learners is growing rapidly. Writing scores are on a national decline, and ELLs are struggling to acquire the language and literacy skills to become proficient writers in English. However, there are various instructional approaches that provide ELLs the opportunity to use and expand their writing skills beyond a basic ability. Despite this, little is being done to give ELLs the opportunity to express themselves and their identities while also acquiring stronger writing skills. As a preservice teacher, I developed a mixed methods research study that explored the writing skills of adolescent ELLs in a North Mississippi middle school as well as the students’ attitudes and beliefs towards their experiences as ELLs. In order to participate in the research study, students turned in consent forms signed by their parents as approved by the University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board. After obtaining consent, I acquired a demographic questionnaire and four writing samples from the two participants. The participants also individually completed an interview. The participants were 7th grade, Spanish-speaking students who were currently receiving ELL instruction at the middle school they attended. The results of the study demonstrated that these students were balanced emerging bilingual writers. They both had the ability to successfully use their writing skills in both English and Spanish. Moreover, the results of the study supported the desire that adolescent ELLs have to express themselves and their identities through writing. Overall, the study indicated that educators need to continue exploring various approaches to ELL instruction that will ultimately allow ELLs to both strengthen and grow as bilingual writers as well as use their own voices to share their experiences with others.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Sfard and Prusak (2005) define identity as “a set of reifying, significant, endorsable stories about a person.” The authors demonstrate that rather than identity being expressed through story, identity is story. Therefore, identity comprises of narratives that people create for themselves and others. According to Danzak (2009), during middle school, students begin to really explore and develop their identities. This time is critical, and allowing students opportunities to develop and share their identities in the classroom is not only effective to their learning but also necessary to their personal growth. One population of students who need to be given the opportunity to use their voices, share their stories, and create their identities are English Language Learners.

The number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States continues to steadily increase. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were 9.4 percent or 4.6 million ELL students in U.S. public schools during the 2014-15 school year. The ELL student population was more than 10 percent in seven states: Alaska, California, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas, and the District of Columbia. The highest percentage of ELLs was in California with 22.4 percent. Between 2013-14 and 2014-15 the percentage of ELLs increased in 37 states and the District of Columbia. The percentage of ELL students is typically higher in more urban areas versus rural areas. For example, ELL students made up an average of 14.2 percent of total public school enrollment in cities versus 3.5 percent in rural areas (NCES, 2017).
The number of ELLs in public schools also steadily decreases from lower grades to upper grades. In 2014-15, the total number of ELLs was 16.7 percent in kindergarten, 6.5 percent in 8th grade, and 4.1 percent in 12th grade. This is partially due to the fact that students who entered elementary school with ELL status obtained English Language proficiency by upper-grade levels. The population of ELLs speaks a variety of native languages. For example, in 2014-15 77.1 percent of ELLs spoke Spanish at home with the other 23 percent of ELLs speaking various languages including Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Russian, Haitian, and Korean (NCES, 2017). ELLs typically participate in educational and language assistance programs to help them attain English proficiency and meet the same achievement standards as their English-speaking peers. These programs, if designed successfully, can improve educational outcomes for ELLs.

Developing writing skills is a critical aspect of learning for middle school students. However, writing scores have declined on a national level in recent years. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing examination in 2007, 88 percent of eighth graders scored at or above the basic level with only 33 percent of students achieving at or above proficient (NCES, 2008). In comparison, on the last NAEP writing examination in 2011, only 80 percent of eighth graders scored at or above the basic level with just 27 percent of students scoring at or above the proficient level (NCES, 2012).
What is equally disturbing is the writing scores of ELLs. On the NAEP writing examination in 2011, 65 percent of eighth grade ELLs scored below the basic level with just 35 percent of students scoring at or above basic and a mere 1 percent scoring at or above proficient (NCES, 2012).
Certainly, previous studies of ELLs have recorded that their literacy skills often fall well below those of their native English-speaking peers (Danzak, 2009). While research has called for a national improvement in the assessment and instruction of adolescent ELLs, policy changes, and increased funding for research of ELLs, the majority of research and progress has focused on the acquisition of early skills, including phonological processing, word reading, and vocabulary development. With such little investigation of ELL writing being done as well as the overall poor quality of ELL writing scores on a national scale, there is a critical need for an increased understanding of the development of writing of English Language Learners.

In comparison to other parts of the country, Mississippi does not have a high percentage of ELLs. However, as of the 2015-2016 school year, more than 34 percent of K-12 students were enrolled as ELL students. This percentage indicates that approximately 12,100 ELL students are in Mississippi public schools. There was also a significant increase of approximately 4,000 ELLs in the state since May 2015 (Wright & Benton, 2016). The achievement gap between ELLs and native English speakers also increased by 2.3 percent in Mississippi for the 2016-2017 school year (Wright, 2017). During the 2015-2016 school year, in the school district where the study was performed, there were 8 ELL students. This number more than doubled, increasing to 19 students for the 2016-2017 school year (School, 2016). During the 2016-2017 school year, the achievement gap between ELLs and native English speakers increased by 6.2 percent in the school district where the study was performed (Wright, 2017); Because of the recent increase in the number of ELLs enrolled in Mississippi public schools and the widening achievement gap, the state’s Department of Education has created formal guidelines for schools and administrators to follow.
Wright and Benton (2016) explain that the state of Mississippi is required, under the federal Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1964, to allow all ELLs to attend school while also assisting them in overcoming their language barriers. Mississippi complies with federal regulations to assess potential ELLs in all four domains of English - speaking, listening, reading and writing. Particularly, Mississippi uses LAS links, a fully online assessment system, when assessing potential ELLs. Once a student is identified as an ELL, a number of particular programs or methods of instruction may be used depending on their English Language Service Plan (LSP). For example, ELLs may be pulled out of the general education classrooms for intensive language instruction. In other cases, ELLs participate in a push-in model, where students are provided support within the general education classroom, and ELL teachers or tutors work in conjunction with the general education teacher. LSPs are continually updated each year until the student exits ELL status (Wright, Benton, 2016).

The authors of the *English Learner Administrator and Teacher Guide* note that while ELLs are monitored annually through the LAS Links assessment, students who have been in U.S. schools for two years or more are required to take state assessments, such as the Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP) exams in grades 3-8. When ELLs score either proficient or advanced proficient for each of the four LAS Links domains (reading, writing, listening and speaking) they are permitted to exit ELL status. They should continue to be monitored for two years and re-tested using LAS Links. If the student scores below proficient on any of the four domains, they are required to be designated as an ELL again. Even if students opt out of ELL programs, they remain designated as an ELL student, and schools must appropriately serve them (Wright & Benton, 2016).
Wright and Benton (2016) also address parental involvement in ELLs’ education. Information regarding any programs, services, and activities including the student’s LSP must be shared with parents in a language they understand. This may require the use of oral interpretation with translators or TransACT, a company that will provide forms and notices in multiple languages, and is free to all Mississippi district employees.

Another important topic Wright and Benton address is services for ELL students with disabilities. ELL students who have a disability under either the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 are required to receive appropriate services for their disability as well as the services and supports they need as an ELL. The district is responsible, through the IEP process, for determining how to best support the student. Districts are not permitted under any circumstance to identify ELLs as having disabilities simply because of their limited English proficiency (Wright & Benton, 2016).

In the high-performing school district in Mississippi where the study was performed, there are four steps that must be completed in order for a student to qualify for ELL services. First, a Home Language Survey will be distributed to students enrolling in the school district. According to the School District English Language Learner Program Plan, “The home language survey will be provided in a language the parent can understand, to the extent practical, or in an understandable and uniform English format.” Once the Home Language Survey has been completed and a language other than English is indicated as the primary language, students are given the state-approved English proficiency screener. If students do not score proficient in English, they qualify for EL services. During this next step, parents are notified within the first thirty days of school or within two weeks if the student enrolls after the first thirty days of school. The final step of the process is placement. Students are placed in the district’s ELL
program in addition to mainstream classes. According to the district’s plan, “If a parent or guardian waives ELL services the school district may choose to provide services in accordance with Title I Section 1001 if deemed academically necessary.” (School, 2016). When these initial steps are completed, students are able to start following the ELL curriculum.

While the school district follows this process, there are possible gaps in the enrollment system, particularly with the Home Language Survey. It is difficult to determine whether or not parents accurately complete the Home Language Survey. Bailey and Kelly (2013) argue that parents of undocumented immigrants and Native Americans may be hesitant to complete the Home Language Survey accurately if at all. Therefore, the validity of the Home Language Survey and the initial identification of students as ELLs cannot be relied on. Even though many school districts, including the one in this study, use the Home Language Survey it is not the most effective instrument for ELL identification.

The school district instructs ELLs using a research-based language instruction methodology known as sheltered English. Sheltered English combines both English language and content area instruction with a goal of increasing both English language proficiency and academic content knowledge of ELLs. As stated by the district’s plan, “The sheltered English language teaching method controls the English vocabulary and language structure so the student can understand the classroom content area skills and concepts while at the same time developing his/her English language proficiency” (School, 2016). Sheltered English is just one of many evidence-based instructional strategies for ELLs.

According to Baker and Wright (2017), sheltered English programs may require separation from first language English speakers for one or more years until the students are proficient enough to be placed in the mainstream classroom. While there are benefits to this
separation: greater opportunity for student participation, greater sensitivity among teachers to the needs of the students, and a collective identity among students, this instructional method may also result in social isolation, the labeling of these students as educationally inferior, and inequality in treatment of curriculum materials. Joan and Harper (2005) argue that many teachers believe that sheltered English is simply “just good teaching,” and therefore, sheltered English classrooms may be no different from mainstream classrooms.

After the passage of Proposition 203 in Arizona, which mandated sheltered English instruction, Wright (2014) discovered that initially, the mandated sheltered English program simply meant ELLs were only taught in English. However, when this methodology proved to be ineffective, the state implemented a rigorous four hour sheltered English model that emphasized grammar and vocabulary but lacked content (Lillie & Moore, 2014). This type of model prevents ELLs from receiving the full academic curriculum given to native English speaking students. While when implemented properly, sheltered English can provide students with opportunities for language development and academic content, this instructional method is a form of monolingual education that hinders ELLs from bilingual development and growth of their existing linguistic skills.

At the middle school where the study was performed, students receive ELL instruction for one class period each day. The class is led by a certified ELL teacher and is designed to teach language development in the core content areas of English, Mathematics, History, and Science while also meeting the individual needs of the ELLs. Students also receive differentiated instruction in their mainstream classes. Examples of differentiated instruction include giving copies of lecture notes, using bilingual dictionaries, translating instruction when practical, and using visual aids. With the exception of spelling tests, bilingual dictionaries can be used on all
classroom and state tests. According to the school district’s grading policies, “ELLs may receive a “Z” grade in place of a failing grade, (65 or below), because the student does not have enough language skills to meet the grade level requirements of the core curriculum.” These “Z” grades are determined on a case-by-case basis by the ELL team. While a “Z” grade does not affect the student’s grade point average, it also does not give the student credit for the class (School, 2016).

Adolescent ELLs face numerous obstacles while developing English proficiency and adjusting to middle school in the United States. According to Short and Fitzsimmons (2011), these students have to do “double the work” of their native English-speaking peers: learning a new language, understanding challenging content, and meeting assessment standards while also exploring social identity, self-esteem, and confidence.

While research is increasingly being performed regarding ELLs, the topic of ELL writing has yet to be studied in Mississippi. Because this study is the first of its kind in Mississippi, the researcher collected and examined information from studies on ELL writing from other parts of the country. Danzak (2011) argues that effective instructional strategies need to be paired with social and cultural access in order for ELLs to increase their interest in language learning as well as develop their social identities as bilingual adolescents. For students in middle school, social identity and literacy practices greatly impact one another.

A study performed by Moje (2009) on 1,000 Latino adolescents in an urban school district determined the critical roles of knowledge, interests, and identities in their process of literacy acquisition. The findings of this study reported that these students did read and write outside of school, literacy activities were frequently based on social networks and or affinity groups, and reading and writing provided them with social capital or “information and/or experiences that supported social networks, self-improvement, and identity.”
A different study by Meltzer and Hamann (2014) concluded that three different instructional strategies when used simultaneously supported motivation and engagement for adolescent ELLs: connection to students’ lives and background knowledge, responsive classroom environments that encouraged students’ opinions and also provided a variety of literary choices, and student interaction during literacy instruction that encouraged questioning, predicting, and summarizing.

In 2011, Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur proposed the idea of a translingual approach to writing that does not ask whether the writing’s language is standard but rather what the writers are doing with language and why. A translingual approach to writing supports the power of all language users to shape language to specific ends, recognizes the linguistic heterogeneity of all users of language both within the United States and around the world, and directly confronts English monolingualist expectations by studying and teaching how writers can work both with and against those expectations. For ELLs, a translingual approach to writing allows them to not replace knowledge of their native language with English, but instead, build on their existing language abilities.

A study conducted on middle school ELLs allowed them to narrate their families’ immigration stories in the form of comics or graphic novels. ELL students created journals using Comic Life software and incorporating family photos, clip art, and other images with written text. By providing adolescent ELLs with opportunities to learn language and literacy through multiple modalities and media, their engagement in schoolwork increased. It also provided them with a welcoming space to share their stories and use their voice when they are often silenced in traditional, monolingual English-speaking classrooms. These ELLs were able to not only express their identities but also advance confidently in their language and literacy abilities. While the
Mississippi Department of Education’s policies do not limit instructors from incorporating this approach of instruction, overall the emphasis on testing scores and proficiency leads instructors to develop and implement a more traditional curriculum (Wright & Benton, 2016).

After conducting their study, Armon and Ortega (2008) reported that autobiographical writing was an effective literacy tool that incorporated multiple literacies, students’ identities, and engagement. By incorporating structured, autobiographical writing into the curriculum of adolescent ELLs, literacy learning becomes not just an instructional method but also a cultural process that allows students to incorporate their prior knowledge, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and social identities into meaningful writing assignments. According to Bailey (2010), an exploration of what ELLs write in addition to an examination of how they write can provide educators with a method to better engage adolescent ELL students and meet their unique needs for both the development of English proficiency and social identities.

The purpose of this study was to explore through writing how the language learning experiences of English Language Learners in middle school have shaped their identity. With a steadily increasing number of English Language Learners in Mississippi, improving the overall quality of education of ELLs is critical. Also considering the national writing scores for ELLs and the lack of research on ELLs’ writing skills, this study incorporated both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the participants’ writing skills and explored ways of improving the quality of writing instruction for ELLs.
CHAPTER 2: Methods

Overview and Hypothesis

A mixed methods analysis was chosen as the research design for this study. The quantitative analysis compared the linguistic characteristics of the participants’ writing samples in both Spanish and English. Additionally, a qualitative analysis was performed to gain an understanding of how writing about personal experiences shapes middle school ELLs’ identities.

According to Danzak (2009), mixed methods research involves a methodology that unites quantitative and qualitative approaches throughout the research process. Danzak explains the benefits of this methodology: “the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides for a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone.” Creswell (2014) argues that mixed methods research provides a clearer understanding of the problem or question that can be gathered from individual quantitative or qualitative studies.

Several studies on ELLs that followed a mixed methods design demonstrated both Danzak and Creswell’s points. Cardenas-Lopez (2015) used both qualitative and quantitative data to determine the quality of instruction and educational experiences of ELLs. By incorporating this method of research, Cardenas-Lopez determined that without equitable and high quality instruction taught by well-trained and supportive teachers, ELLs would not be able to acquire the knowledge and skills in content, language, and literature necessary for a successful future. Salman (2017) followed a mixed methods research design for a study on ELLs in a Spanish Language Immersion School. By using this method while comparing ELLs to native English speaking students, Salman reported that when instruction was given in an ELL’s first
language, there was no difference in academic performance between ELLs and native English speaking students. Through the use of both qualitative and quantitative analysis, these studies allowed for more holistic and multifaceted results.

Considering the benefits of this approach, a mixed methods analysis was determined to be the most appropriate research design for this study. Because of the complexity of ELL writing, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data allowed for a deeper understanding of the linguistic and cultural background as well as the writing skills of ELLs.

The researcher hypothesized that the participants would have an easier time writing in Spanish versus English. It was also predicted that students would elect to write in Spanish when given the choice.

Participants

The study was conducted with two Spanish-speaking ELLs in 7th grade at a middle school in Mississippi. The researcher recruited students to participate in the study by speaking to the fourteen Spanish-speaking ELLs at the middle school and providing them each with a consent form in both English and Spanish outlining the study. Students were then asked to get signed parental permission to participate in the study. While the original intent was for as many of these students as possible to participate in the study, only two elected to participate. There were a few reasons for the limited number of participants including the researcher was not able to speak with parents directly and the writing samples collected for the study were not a part of the students’ required coursework. Despite the small sample size, the researcher was able to obtain a sufficient amount of data. In fact, the small sample size allowed the researcher to form an individual, detailed analysis of each participant.
Student A participated in the study while enrolled in the 7th grade and was twelve-years-old at the time of the study. He was born in El Paso, Texas, but grew up in Mexico. Student A completed grades Kindergarten through 5th grade in Mexico and began school in the United States in 6th grade. Student A has one eight-year-old sibling who was born in Mexico. Student A reported to have been speaking English since entering kindergarten and considers Spanish to be his first language.

Student B participated in the study while enrolled in the 7th grade and was twelve-years-old at the time of the study. She was born in Los Angeles, California, to parents from Mexico. Student B has completed all her studies in the United States. Student B has a twenty-year-old sibling born in Mexico as well as twelve-year-old and ten-year-old siblings born in California. Student B reported to have started speaking English when she enrolled in school at six-years-old. She considers Spanish to be her first language.

**Procedures**

During this four-week study the participants met with the researcher twice a week for twenty minutes. In the first week of the study participants completed a demographic questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information about the participants’ family, heritage, place of birth, and educational background. The questionnaire was given to the participants in both English and Spanish, and the participants completed the questionnaire in the language of his or her choice. Both participants chose to complete the questionnaire in English.

In the second week of the study participants completed a narrative writing task in both English and Spanish. The writing prompt for the narrative writing task was given to the participants in both English and Spanish. In English the prompt read as follows: “We all admire people for different reasons. Whom do you admire? It can be someone in your family, a friend,
or a celebrity. Describe this person with lots of details. What does this person do? What makes him/her special? Why do you admire him/her? If you could spend one day with this person, what would you do?”

The following weeks participants completed two more writing tasks in the language of their choice. Both participants elected to complete the writing tasks in English. These journal entry prompts were given to the participants in both English and Spanish.

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<th>WEEK</th>
<th>WRITING PROMPT</th>
<th>LANGUAGE PARTICIPANTS SELECTED TO RESPOND IN</th>
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<td>PERSON I ADMIRE</td>
<td>ENGLISH &amp; SPANISH</td>
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<td>HOBBIES</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>THREE WISHES</td>
<td>ENGLISH</td>
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During the final week of the study, participants completed an interview with the lead researcher in the language of their choice. Both participants elected to conduct the interview in English. The interviews were constructed around a pre-designed interview guide. The interview guide included open-ended, descriptive questions for the participants to respond to. However, the researcher maintained a flexible approach during the interviews, following up with additional questions when appropriate. All information from the study remained confidential and was only used by the lead researcher and her advisor.

The purpose of the interviews was to further investigate the qualitative research component about how writing about personal experiences reflected middle school ELLs as bilingual writers. In particular, the interview focused on the participants’ language and literacy learning experiences, language usage, and language and literacy practices for both English and
Spanish in the home, community, and school environments. The interviews also allowed for the researcher to investigate the participants’ attitudes and feelings toward their language learning experiences and bilingualism in general.

The interviews were conducted individually with each participant during the ELL class period and after all writing samples had been completed. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes with each participant. By introducing and explaining the interview process in both English and Spanish, the researcher made it clear that participants were welcome to respond in English or Spanish and that codeswitching was also allowed.
CHAPTER 3: Results

Qualitative Analysis

Data for the qualitative analysis of the study was acquired through the participants’ interviews and writing tasks. The interviews focused on the following domains: background, language usage, language learning, bilingualism, coming to the United States, education, and family and friends. Each of the interviews have been summarized and shared. Participant identifiers have been removed and students were assigned a letter in order to protect confidentiality. Ultimately, the goal of the qualitative analysis was to inquire how the participants’ language and literacy practices as well as their personal experiences affected their identities as adolescent bilingual writers.

Participant A

Participant A was born in El Paso, Texas, but his family moved to Mexico when he was three-years-old. He attended a school in Mexico where he learned both English and Spanish. According to the participant, he found learning English in Mexico to be “really easy.” Participant A came to the United States at age eleven just before entering the 6th grade. While he noted that school in the United States is not very different from his school in Mexico, the participant did say in his interview that it is hard to get used to school in the United States, and that he is often sad because he misses his friends back home.

In the interview, Participant A reported that he speaks only Spanish with his family, but speaks both Spanish and English with his friends outside of school. He also revealed that while he likes to listen to radio, television, and movies in both English and Spanish, he prefers reading
only in Spanish. Participant A reported in the interview that he does consider himself bilingual and feels proud to be able to speak both English and Spanish.

For the first writing task, Participant A was instructed to write about a person he admires. The participant chose to write about his dad. A transcript of his writing can be found below:

The person that I most admire is my dad because he does a lot of stuff for me, and he works very hard for my sister and me. Would do whatever to give my sister and I good education. My dad is a really hardworking person but at the same time he is funny and joyful he is very polite and likes helping others he also cares in our health and everything we need. He helps my mom too. I see him everyday from 6:00 to 10:00, but if I could spend a day with him, I would play football with him.

When given the same prompt in Spanish, Participant A chose to write about his dad again but changed a few details. The transcript of his writing can be found below:

La persona que mas admiro es mi papa porque el trabaja duro y trata de darnos a mi hermana y a my una muy buena educación. También, nos da lo que necesitamos a nuestra familia. Si pudiera pasar un día con el entero jugarla basketball con el.

For the next writing task, Participant A was assigned to write about his hobbies and interests. The participant was given the option to write in English or Spanish but chose to write in English. A transcript of his writing can be found below:
My favorite thing to do is to play on my Xbox One and play with my friends. I learned this when I was four and I do this when I have free time or after school. I like doing this because it is fun, and I get to play with my best friend Sam. I bought my Xbox one last year and ever since this is my favorite hobby.

For the final writing task, Participant A was asked to write about three magical wishes. A transcript of his writing can be found below:

I will wish to have infinite wishes than. I wish that there would be no illness in the world. Then I would use my infinite wishes to make the world more united so people wouldn’t have to fight.

Participant B

Participant B was born in Los Angeles, California, and has lived in the United States her entire life. She has qualified for ELL status because her parents are from Mexico and only speak Spanish. Participant B reported that she moved to Mississippi when she was five-years-old and began attending school. During the interview Participant B claimed that she finds it somewhat hard learning English. She stated that she likes reading in English along with the whole class, but prefers writing alone. “It was hard to learn to write in English,” Participant B reported. Although Participant B has lived in the United States her entire life, she stated that she was nervous to
begin school in Mississippi because meeting new people makes her nervous. She also claimed that she had to get used to “a lot of homework.”

In the interview, Participant B reported that she speaks only Spanish with her family, but speaks only English with her friends outside of school. She also revealed that while she likes to listen to radio, television, and movies in English, she prefers reading in Spanish. Initially Participant B did not understand the term “bilingual” and stated that she had never heard of the word before. After an explanation by the researcher, Participant B noted that she does consider herself bilingual, but she does not know “all the words in English and what they mean.”

For the first writing task, Participant B was instructed to write about a person she admires. Participant B chose to write about her family and friends. A transcript of her writing can be found below:

I admire my whole family. My two brothers are there to help me with problems. My older sister helps me with my homework when I am having trouble. My mom and dad help me be better in soccer so I can get on a team.

I admire my two friends, Margie and Mary Kathryn. Margie helps on studie guides in Social Studies. She’s a really great and fun friend. She makes me laugh. Mary Kathryn makes me laugh, too. She is taller than me. She likes talking to me, and so does Margie.

If I could spend one day with my family, I would go with them to California and visit my cousin. And if I could spend one day with my friends, we would hang out and study for tests or quizzes we have for classes.
When given the same prompt in Spanish, Participant B also wrote about her family and friends, but changed a few details. A transcript of her writing can be found below:

Yo amo a mi familia y 2 a mi amigas. Mi familia ayude mi con mi taraja para mi clases. Mis dos irmanos y irmana ayude mi asade mi tarajas.

Mis dos amigas. Margie y Mary Kathryn, son dos amigas que ayos hasan mi felis y Margie fue mi premida amiga in el 5th grado y Mary Kathryn fue mi primida amiga en esta grado.

For the next writing task, Participant B was assigned to write about her hobbies and interests. Participant B wrote about her love of yoga. A transcript of her writing can be found below:

My favorite hobby is doing yoga with my mom. I learned how to do this when my mom told me we are doing yoga today. I became interested in this because I had fun doing yoga with my mom. When I was nine years old, I was here in Oxford, I did practice with my mom. I would, my brother, because it seems fun, and I wanted him to try some of the fun with me and my mom!

For the final writing task, Participant B was asked to write about three magical wishes. A transcript of her writing can be found below:
My first wish will be to help my family with English and Spanish, because I want to how to speak more Spanish so I can go to Mexico with my family and speak Spanish and have fun! My second one is for people to stop cutting down trees so we can have more oxygen to breathe! My last one is to buy really good supplies for my dogs because my dogs are suffering outside in the cold, and I don’t like that. One wish I would want to give it to my family because I want them to have anything they want from me.

**Quantitative Analysis**

Data for the quantitative analysis of the study was collected from the participants’ writing samples in both English and Spanish. Four domains were analyzed from the participants’ writing samples: word count, number of sentences, word choice/code-switching, and accuracy of grammar. Overall, the goal of the quantitative analysis was to find and address patterns in the participants’ writing samples, making connections to their identities as ELL writers whenever possible.

**Participant A**

In the first writing task, Participant A answered the prompt “A Person I Admire” in English as instructed by the researcher. He wrote a total number of 104 words in the allotted time. Participant A’s paragraph consisted of five sentences. There was one error in word choice when the participant used the word “in” instead of “about” in the following sentence:

“He also cares in our health and everything that we need.”

Participant A’s first writing sample contained three run-on sentences due to errors in punctuation, one sentence fragment and one spelling error. The run-on sentences were the result
of commas being left out before conjunctions. The spelling error resulted from a misplacement of the letter “h” in the word whatever. These examples can be found below:

The person that I most admire is my dad because he does a lot of stuff me, and he works very hard for my sister and me. Would do watever to give my sister and I good education.

My dad is a really hardworking person, but at the same time he is funny and joyful he is very polite and likes helping others he also cares in our health and everything that we need. He helps my mom, too. I see him everyday from 6:00 to 10:00, but if I could spend a day with him I would play football.

After completing the initial writing task, Participant A wrote on the same prompt in Spanish. He wrote a total number of three sentences in the allotted time. The total number of words in his writing sample was forty-six.

When Participant A had to complete the same writing task in Spanish there were two examples of code-switching, but no grammatical errors. The participant wrote the English word “my” instead of the Spanish form “mi.” He also used the English word “basketball” in place of the Spanish word “baloncesto.” This use of codeswitching and the change in content from “football” in his English writing sample to “basketball” in his Spanish writing sample is possibly a result of the Spanish cognate “futbol” actually referring to “soccer” and not American football. All of the mentioned examples can be found in the transcript below:
La persona que más admiro es mi papa porque él trabaja duro y trata de darnos a
mi hermana y a my una muy buena educación. También, nos da lo que
necesitamos a nuestra familia. Si pudiera pasar un día con el entero jugarla
basketball con él.

For the second writing task, Participant A elected to write about his hobbies and interest
in English. The participant wrote a total number of three sentences and eighty-seven words in
the allotted time. There was an error in word choice when the participant used the present form
“is” when the past participle for “has been” was needed. Participant A also wrote the numerical
number “4” instead of writing out the word “four.” There was one grammatical error that
involved capitalization. The proper name “Sam” was not capitalized. All of these examples can
be found in the transcript below:

My favorite thing to do is to play on my Xbox One and play with my friends. I
learned this when I was 4, and I do this when I have free time or after school. I
like doing this because it is fun, and I get to play with my best friend sam.3 I
bought my Xbox one last year and ever since, this is my favorite hobby.

For the third and final writing task, Participant A chose to write about his wishes in
English. The student wrote three sentences and thirty-eight words in the allotted time. There was
one grammatical error in which the student wrote the word “than” instead of “then.” A transcript
of his writing can be found below:
I will wish to have infinite wishes than. I wish that there would be no illness in the world. Then I would use my infinite wishes to make the world more united so people wouldn’t have to fight.

Participant B

For the first writing task, Participant B wrote in English on the prompt “A Person I Admire” as instructed by the researcher. The participant wrote a total number of 157 words and twelve sentences in the allotted time. Participant B’s writing sample contained one error in word choice. The participant used the preposition “on” instead of “with.” There was one spelling error. The word “study” was incorrectly spelled “studie.” There were also two run-on sentences in the writing sample. These examples are all indicated in the sample below:

I admire my whole family. My two brothers are there to help me with problems. My older sister helps me with my homework when I am having trouble. My mom and dad help me be better in soccer so I can get on a team.

I admire my two friends, Margie and Mary Kathryn. Margie helps on studie guides in Social Studies. She’s a really great and fun friend, she makes me laugh. Mary Kathryn makes me laugh, too. She is taller than me, she likes talking to me, and so does Margie.

If I could spend one day with my family, I would go with them to California and visit my cousin. And if I could spend one day with my friends, we would hang out and study for tests or quizzes we have for classes.
After completing the first writing task, Participant B wrote on the same prompt in Spanish. This writing sample contained five sentences and sixty-four words. There were three mistakes involving word choice. First, the participant wrote the singular “mi” in cases where the plural form “mis” should have been used because the nouns in which the possessive modifies are plural. Participant B also wrote “taraja,” which is not a word in Spanish. The student was writing about the help she gets with her classwork or homework so the Spanish words “tarea” or “trabaja” would be appropriate word choices. The student also wrote “asade,” which is not a word in Spanish. She most likely meant “hacer” which means “to complete” in Spanish. There was also one occurrence of code switching in the writing sample. Participant B used the English word “in.” There were four spelling errors in the writing sample. She spelled “hermanos y hermana” as “irmanos y irmana.” The participant also misspelled “hagan” as “hasan.” She also spelled the word “primera” meaning “first” as “premida,” the Spanish word for prize. There was also one run-on sentence in the writing sample. A transcript of these examples can be found below:

Yo amo a mi familia y 2 a mi amigas. Mi familia ayude mi con mi taraja para mi clases. Mis dos irmanos y irmana ayude mi asade mi taraja.

Mis dos amigas, Margie y Mary Kathryn, son dos amigas que ayos hasan mi felis y Margie fue mi primida amiga in el 5th grado. Mary Kathryn fue mi primida amiga en esta grado.

For the second writing task, Participant B elected to write about her hobbies and interest in English. The participant wrote a total of seventy-nine words and five sentences. There was one run-on sentence. She also did not include a verb in the final sentence.
My favorite hobby is doing yoga with my mom. I learned how to do this when my mom told me we are doing yoga today. I became interested in this because I had fun doing yoga with my mom. When I was nine years old, I was here in Oxford, I did practice with my mom. I would my brother because it seems fun, and I wanted him to try some of the fun with me and my mom!

Participant B completed the final writing task on three wishes in English. The participant wrote 105 words and five sentences in the allotted time. The only errors in this writing sample involved leaving out words. These examples can be found in the writing sample below:

My first wish will be to help my family with English and Spanish, because I want to how to speak more Spanish so I can go to Mexico with my family and speak Spanish and have fun! My second one is for people to stop cutting down trees so we can have more oxygen to breathe! My last one is to buy really good supplies for my dogs because my dogs are suffering outside in the cold and I don’t like that. One wish I would give. I would give it to my family because I want them to have anything they want from me.

Discussion

The results of this mixed methods study revealed that while these adolescent bilingual writers made some mistakes while writing in English, writing in their native Spanish language
was not without error. The results of this study are unique because these two participants have experiences as ELLs that are not common.

Participant A learned both English and Spanish while attending school in Mexico. This educational background definitely showed in his writing. However, he struggled to write a substantial amount in the allotted time. This could not only be a result of his ELL status, but also how often he receives instructional practice with writing in his English Language Arts classes.

Participant B had received an English only education in the United States her entire life. This came across in her writing. She was able to write a significant amount of words in English in the allotted time without a lot of code-switching or grammatical mistakes. When writing in Spanish, Participant B struggled more as evidenced by the errors in her writing. This is most likely because Participant B never learned to formally write in Spanish. Her writing in Spanish contained errors that were due to the fact that while she speaks a lot of Spanish she does not write a lot in Spanish. The results from Participant B led the researcher to question the accuracy of the participants’ identification as an ELL. The participant would benefit from a new and more thorough evaluation of her ELL status aside from the Home Language Survey and test scores that are used to determine identification.

An interesting result of the study was that both participants elected to write in English for their writing tasks. They also chose to conduct their interview in English as well. While spending time in the ELL class conducting the study, the researcher noticed that the students were asked to refrain from speaking Spanish in class. The middle school where the study was performed instructs using Sheltered English, which ultimately aims to build English vocabulary and proficiency without the use of the student’s first language. While this instructional approach does
have some benefits, it seems that restricting the students’ use of their native language in the classroom may have adverse effects on their growth as bilingual writers.

There were several limitations of the study that affected the results. Participant size was limited to two students. These participants attended the same school and were in the same grade. Both participants also were the same age. A future study with a larger sample size is necessary to further prove and support the results of this study.

Another limitation of the study was that the researcher decided that the participants were not allowed to use Google Translate while completing the writing tasks of the study in order to get an accurate result of their writing skills. However, these participants use Google Translate in their classes to complete classwork and communicate with their teachers and peers. Giving these participants the opportunity to use Google Translate would have most likely led to different results. Further research on the use of translation software such as Google Translate in ELL classrooms should be explored.

A further limitation of the study was the number of writing samples collected. A study done over a longer length of time with numerous writing samples would offer a more in depth analysis. Lastly, both participants spoke the same native language, Spanish. This was done purposely because the researcher is most familiar with this language. However, results from students at the same school whose native language is different could lead to different results.

Overall, the results of the study suggest that both ELL participants were able to apply skills from both their native language and their knowledge of English writing skills to create texts that were similar in both Spanish and English. Even though these students participate in a sheltered English program model in school, they have retained some language and literacy skills from their first language, most likely due to the fact that these students speak Spanish with their families.
outside of school. The participants had acquired the skills necessary to write in either English or Spanish and were able to apply the skills from one language to the other. While the participants in this study produced writing samples with only a few errors, the results of this study suggest that if students write poorly in one language then they would do so in the other. The results of this study demonstrate that ELL middle school students’ writing skills are shared across both languages, and therefore, there is an interactive relationship between both languages and their lexical and syntactic components.

While both of the participants of the study had different experiences as ELLs, the data collected throughout this study supports the idea that these students would be considered balanced emerging bilingual writers. Participant A received instruction in both English and Spanish while attending school from kindergarten to the sixth grade in Mexico. Participant B has only attended school in the United States where she learned English, but only speaks Spanish at home. Both participants considered themselves to be bilingual and demonstrated their bilingual identity through their writing samples in both English and Spanish.

These participants should be encouraged to continue their proficiency in both languages particularly with regards to writing skills. Students like the ones in this study could also serve as a resource for other ELLs who have yet to become emerging bilingual writers by collaborating on writing or serving as a peer editor.
CHAPTER 4: Summary and Implications

Through this mixed methods study, the researcher was able to explore the writing skills of Spanish-speaking ELLs in middle school. The quantitative analysis of the study provided insight into ELL’s lexical and syntactic proficiencies in both English and Spanish and revealed the interactive role both languages play in ELL writing development. The qualitative analysis of the participants provided insight into their identities as adolescent bilingual writers and their educational experiences as ELLs.

While this study demonstrated that adolescent middle school ELLs were able to successfully use their skills in both their native language and English to complete writing tasks, further research is needed on the writing skills of adolescent ELLs. Perhaps, the ability for students to write in both their native language and English can improve with a translingual learning approach rather than the sheltered English program model. By providing students opportunities to write in both their native language and English, they may have the ability to compare and contrasts the linguistic features across both languages and thus, improve the overall quality of their writing.

The qualitative analysis of this study conveyed that when given the opportunity to write about their own personal experiences, adolescent ELLs are enthusiastic to share how they feel about themselves and their identities as ELLs. Further research is needed to explore how opportunities to write and share personal stories leads to growth, proficiency, and motivation for adolescent ELLs.
This study was performed with native Spanish-speaking ELLs. Further research should address the relationship between the language and writing skills of ELLs in English and other native languages such as Arabic and Mandarin for example.

In a Mississippi Department of Education Board Meeting held on January 18th, 2018, feedback was presented from the US Department of Education on the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act plan. The US Department of Education requested for some changes to be made in the state’s accountability model. The current state accountability model gives points to schools and districts based on students’ performance on the state subject tests. Then, schools are rated on an A-F scale. A portion of these points come from the percentage of students scoring at or above grade level while other points are derived from students who show growth or increase their performance level from the previous year. That score is then broken down into two sections. The first section shows the overall growth among all students in each subject. The second section reveals the growth of students in the bottom twenty five percent (Mississippi Department of Education, 2018).

After reviewing this accountability model, federal reviewers indicated that the current model does not consider the performance of all students. One change the state is going to have to make to have a more inclusive model involves ELLs. The Mississippi Department of Education already had a plan in place to assign districts a plus or minus based on how ELLs perform on the state exam beginning in 2022; however, the US Department of Education is asking that the state put this plan into action for the 2017-2018 school year. This notice comes just a few months before the state tests. The new plan greatly affects the middle school in which the study was performed. Now, the performance of ELLs on the state tests will account for thirty-five percent of the total allotted points the school earns (Mississippi Department of Education, 2018). Further
research on ELL instruction in Mississippi will be extremely valuable as the state and schools begin to make adjustments in instruction as a result of the new accountability model. As greater emphasis is placed on standardized testing in education, writing skills in K-12 have been pushed aside. Even when writing instruction occurs in the classroom, it leads to more formulaic writing rather than creativity or personal expression. Therefore, now more than ever educators should desire to seek out opportunities for their students to express themselves through writing. Moreover, by giving adolescent ELLs the ability to use their own voices through writing, these students are able to not only demonstrate and foster their skills as emerging bilingual writers, but also express their personal identities. Opportunities to develop writing skills in this manner not only benefit the learning outcomes of ELLs, but all adolescent students craving for the chance to share who they are and who they hope to become with the world.
References


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Appendix A

Participant Questionnaire

Today’s date: __________________

Name: _______________________

Grade:_________________

Date of birth (month, day, year): ______________________

Place of birth (city/state, country): _______________________

Parents‘ place of birth (country): Mom: ________________ Dad: ________________

Do you have sisters and/or brothers? List each sibling, their age, and country of birth below (for example: Francisco, 15, Mexico):

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Circle the grades when you were in school in the United States:

Kindergarten  1st  2nd  3rd  4th  5th  6th  7th  8th

Circle the grades when you were in school in a different country:

Kindergarten  1st  2nd  3rd  4th  5th  6th  7th  8th

Where did you go to school outside the US? (country) _____________________

When and where did you start speaking Spanish?

________________________________________________________________________

When and where did you start speaking English?

________________________________________________________________________
Cuestionario

La fecha de hoy _____________________

Nombre ___________________________

Grado __________
Fecha de nacimiento (mes, día, año) _____________________

Lugar de nacimiento (ciudad, estado, país) ________________________________

Lugar de nacimiento de tus papás (país): Mamá _____________ Papá ____________

¿Tienes hermanos? Nombra cada hermano/a, su edad, y su país de nacimiento (por ejemplo, “Francisco, 15, Mexico”)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Circula los grados cuando asistías a la escuela en los Estados Unidos:

Kinder  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

Circula los grados cuando asistías a la escuela en otro país:

Kinder  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

¿Dónde asististe a la escuela fuera de los EEUU (país)? ________________________________

¿Cuándo y dónde empezaste a hablar el español?

________________________________________________________________________

¿Cuándo y dónde empezaste a hablar el inglés?

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B

Writing Prompts

A person I admire (Family/friends)

a. We all admire people for different reasons.

b. Whom do you admire? (It can be someone in your family, a friend, professional, or celebrity). Describe this person with lots of details.
   i. What does this person do?
   ii. What makes him/her special?
   iii. Why do you admire him/her?

c. If you could spend a day with this person, what would you do?

Una persona que yo admiro (Familia/amigos)

a. Todos admiramos a alguien por alguna razón.

b. ¿A quién admiras? (Puede ser alguien en tu familia, un amigo, un profesional, o una persona famosa). Describe esta persona con muchos detalles.
   i. ¿Qué hace esta persona?
   ii. ¿Qué tiene de especial?
   iii. ¿Por qué admiras a esta persona?

c. Si pudieras pasar un día con esta persona, ¿qué harían?

Sports/hobbies

a. We all have hobbies and interests.
b. Tell your journal about your favorite activity to do for fun?
   i. When did you learn to do this activity?
   ii. How/why did you become interested in it?
   iii. When, where, and with whom do you practice this activity?

c. Would you recommend this activity to someone else? Why/why not?

Three wishes

a. We often wish to change our lives or the world.

b. Imagine you have a magic wand and can have 3 wishes, whatever you want! Explain each wish and why you wish it.
   i. Will the wish help you, your family, or other people?
   ii. Will the wish improve the environment or the planet?
   iii. Why is this wish important to you?

c. Now imagine you have one extra wish to give away. Who will you give it to and why?
Participant Writing Samples

Participant A – Prompt 1 (English)

The person that I most admire is my dad because he does a lot of stuff for me and he works very hard for my sister and me. Would do whatever to give my sister and I good education. My dad is a really hard working person but at the same time he is funny and joyful. He is very polite and likes helping others. He also cares in our health and everything that we need. He helps my mom too. I see him everyday from 6:00 to 10:00 but if I could spend a day with him I would play football with him.
La persona que más admiro es mi papá porque el trabaja duro y trata de darnos a mi hermana y a mí una muy buena educación. También nos da lo que necesitamos a nuestra familia. Sí pudiera pasar un día con él, jugaría al basketball con él.
My favorite thing to do is to play on my Xbox One and play with my friends. I learned this when I was 4, and I do this when I have free time or after school. I like doing this because it is fun and get to play with my best friend, Aidan. I bought my first Xbox last year and ever since this is my favorite hobby.
I wish to have infinite wishes than
I wish that there would be no
illness in the world. Then I would
use my infinite wishes to make
the world more unite, so people would
have to fight.
I admire my whole family. My two brothers are there to help me with problems. My older sister helps me with my homework when I am having trouble. My mom and dad help me be better in soccer so I can get on a team.

I admire my two friends, Veronica, and Hamran. Veronica helps on study guides in Social Studies. She is a really great and fun friend, she makes me laugh. Hamran makes me laugh too. She is taller than me, she likes talking to me, and so does Veronica.

If I could spend one day with my family, I would go with them to California and visit my cousin. And if I could spend one day with my friends, we would hangout and study for tests or quizzes we have for classes.
Yo amo a mi familia, y a mi amigas. Mi familia ayude mi con mi tarea para mi clase. Mis dos irmanos y hermana ayude mi asude mi tarea.

Mis dos amigas, son dos amigas que aypa hasan mi feliz y hamran fue mi primera amiga en el 5th grado, y Veronica fue mi primera amiga en esta grado.
My favorite hobby is doing yoga with my mom. I learned how to do this when my mom told me we are doing yoga today. I became interested in this because I had fun doing yoga with my mom when I was 9 years old, I was born in Austria, I did yoga with my mom. I would love to do yoga with my brother because it seems fun and I wanted him to try some of the fun with me and my mom.
My first wish will be to help my family with English & Spanish because I want to how to speak more Spanish so I can go to Mexico with my family and speak Spanish and have fun. My second one is for people to stop cutting down trees so we can have more oxygen to breathe. My last one is to buy really good supplies for my dogs because my dogs are suffering outside in the cold and I don't like that. One wish I would give is to give it to my family because I want them to have anything they want from me!
Appendix C

Interview Guide

I. Background Information

1. Participant name:
2. Age:
3. Grade:
4. Place of Birth:

II. Language history/use:

1. At what age and where did you begin to study/learn Spanish, English?
2. Do you or your family speak any other language(s) besides Spanish and English?
3. What age/grade were you in when you came to the US?
4. What language(s) do you speak to your parents? Siblings? Grandparents, extended family?
5. What language(s) do you speak with friends in/outside of school? Phone? Email? Text?
6. What language(s) do you prefer for TV/radio/movies at home/with friends?
7. What language do you prefer reading for fun?

III. Attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about language and literacy:

1. What do you most remember about school in your home country? Tell me about it. What did you like/not like?
2. Tell me about your experiences learning to read and write in your home country. What did you like/not like about it? What did you find difficult/easy?
3. Did you study English in your home country? Tell me about that experience. What did you like/not like about it? How was it different/similar to learning English now?

4. How did you feel when you came to the US? How is it different from your home country? What was most difficult/easy to get used to?

5. Tell me about your experience learning English here. How does it feel to speak another language?

6. How did you learn to read and write in English? What was most difficult/easy?

7. What do you think of when I say “bilingual”? Do you consider yourself to be bilingual? Why or why not? How does this make you feel? How does it make other people feel?