



## Engaging Elementary MLEs in Writing in the Digital Era

by [Nabat Erdogan](#) and [Jason Carter](#)

Writing is one of the most critical literacy skills for success in schools and colleges. Yet, it does not get the attention it deserves in pre-K–12 education. Research suggests that 70% of students in Grades 4–12 in U.S. schools are low-achieving writers (Persky et al., 2003). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment results showed that only 27% of 8th and 12th grade students scored at the proficient level or above in writing in 2011 (NCES, 2012), and the preliminary analyses of NAEP 2017 writing assessments revealed that 8th graders demonstrated lower performance in writing in 2017 compared to 2011 (NCES, 2019).

The problems associated with inadequate writing skills become even more severe when combined with insufficient language proficiency because writing is the most complex and difficult skill to acquire when learning a new language (Richards & Renandya, 2004), in our case, English. There are numerous reasons for writing to be the most challenging domain to acquire for multilingual learners of English (MLEs). Some of the factors that directly or indirectly affect these learners' acquisition of writing include the following:

- A lack of importance given to writing in pre-K–12 schools
- Under-preparedness of pre-K–12 teachers to teach writing
- Scarcity of research on effective writing instruction for MLEs
- Inadequate reading skills of MLEs
- A lack of relevant writing resources to provide all of the necessary linguistic supports to MLEs

Schools and educators should look for ways to eliminate or at least reduce the negative impact of the aforementioned problems and help MLEs overcome the challenges associated with writing in the second language. Making writing practice fun, meaningful, and relevant for today's generation of students—digital natives—should be an important task for all teachers, including the teachers of MLEs. Research suggests that digital media constitutes important learning contexts for language learners and provides interconnected reading and writing practices that are collaborative, authentic, and learner-centered (Hafner et al., 2013). One such digital platform that can help MLEs improve their writing skills while interacting with their teachers and peers is the blog.

## Blogging With Elementary MLEs

This article reports on the blogging experiences and attitudes of young MLEs toward blogs and collaborative learning in a public-charter elementary school. MLEs in Grades 1–3 used blogging in their English as a second language (ESL) pullout classes for a year. The implementation process of blogging with elementary MLEs included four important components:

### 1. Clear Goals, Guidelines, and Expectations for Blogging

- being respectful and responsible
- being consistent and committed
- reading and commenting on other blogs
- dos and don'ts of commenting
- no plagiarism; proper citation

### 2. Use of 7 Writing Traits

- We used the seven writing traits (see Figure 1) as a framework to guide and evaluate student writing.

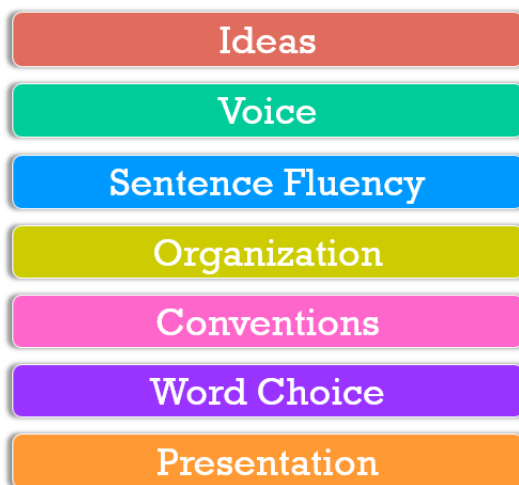


Figure 1. Seven writing traits. Based on *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* (p. 36), by R. Culham, 2005, Scholastic.

- We simplified the rubrics for each trait to make them less teacher-centered as well as give the students language to use when discussing their own and their peers' writing.
- To help teach the traits and make them more accessible for the young writers, we had them focus on only one trait for each writing task.
- We determined the level of proficiency with each trait by having students answer yes/no questions. For example, when thinking about the sentence fluency trait, a student would

ask, “Can I read my writing aloud?” The student can then actually try to read their own or others’ writing aloud to determine if a piece of writing does have sentence fluency.

- We chose traits to accompany different writing tasks based on the nature of the task or depending on the needs of the students in the room. For example, the voice trait might be paired with poetry to emphasize the nature of the writing task, or students might focus on the word choice trait if that is the area in need of improvement.

### 3. Use of the 5 Levels of Digital Writing Rubric

- We created the Five Levels of Digital Writing rubric (see Figure 2) to help the students assess their own and their peers’ blog writing.



Figure 2. Five levels of digital writing.

- Following are the descriptors for each level:
  - **Level 5 – Reaching**
    - The writer writes with an audience clearly in mind.
    - The writing has a clear beginning, middle, and ending.
    - The writer is willing to take risks and knows how to use words accurately as well as convey original ideas.
    - The piece has varied types of sentences and correct punctuation, capitalization, and grammar.
    - The blog is appealing to the eye with excellent formatting, choice of color, and relevant images
  - **Level 4 – Bridging**
    - The writer writes to a specific audience at times and is beginning to show their thinking.
    - The writing has a strong beginning or ending.
    - The piece is descriptive with few repetitions.
    - Punctuation, capitalization, and grammar are mostly applied correctly.
    - The blog uses good formatting and at least one relevant image.
  - **Level 3 – Developing**
    - The writing has a clear beginning with some simple conjunctions to connect ideas.
    - The piece contains some originality with mostly understandable word choice, basic subject-verb agreement, and few repetitive sentence structures.
    - The blog has some punctuation, capitalization, and/or grammar errors.
    - Formatting is good; however, the used image is not relevant to the content of the blog.
  - **Level 2 – Exploring**
    - The writing has some semblance of order but without clear transitions.
    - The general purpose of the writing is understandable.
    - The writer is beginning to form words and phrases, although they don't generally flow well together.
    - The piece has punctuation, capitalization, and grammar errors that hinder comprehensibility at times.
    - The formatting is inconsistent, and the blog does not include any image.
  - **Level 1 – Emerging**
    - The writing is without a clear order and purpose.
    - The writer can form lone words, but it is difficult to find connections between these words.
    - The piece is incomprehensible because of many punctuation, capitalization, and grammar errors.

- The blog is not appealing because of sloppy formatting, a dull choice of color, and the lack of an image.
- Along with using the language and line of questioning from the traits, the students were to assign a number to evaluate the level of writing. This urged the students to commit to their ideas about a piece of writing in just the same way a teacher has to. The student assigned a number score and justified their score using the language from the rubric. Within this framework, students always strived to find what a writer can do and to show each other their successes and abilities.

#### 4. Teacher-Selected Topics, Fiction and Nonfiction Texts, and Poems

- In this scenario, the topics or texts used to anchor the writing tasks were always teacher-selected. The main reason for this was to make sure each text, trait, and model were consistent and intentional with showing the writers what was expected.
- We created the written teacher example before the lesson took place to show the students the teacher's ideas and for the teacher as a writer to explain their thinking.
- For every class, the students had a text and a written example to refer to when composing their own piece.

The consistent implementation of the aforementioned components yielded several benefits to the MLEs' learning; these are summarized in the next section.

### Benefits of Blogging for Young MLEs

We observed the following benefits during the implementation of blogging with elementary MLEs:

- Blogging allowed for **collaborative, interactive, and learner-centered** reading and writing practices. In class, students engaged with a text. It was read and discussed as a whole group. Language learners were given an opportunity to begin formulating and expressing their ideas collaboratively within a small group setting. The teacher encouraged learners to interact and comment on each other's texts, especially those written by students in other classes. Students were given freedom to format the text and include different images within their writing as well as to decide which entries by other students they wanted to read and respond to, which helped to make the blogging experience learner centered.
- Blogging led to increased **engagement** in and **positive attitudes** toward writing. Young MLEs looked forward to reading responses to their own work and put more care into what they wrote because they knew others would read and respond to it. Students practiced giving positive and constructive feedback to others' responses, which consequently improved their own as well as their peers' positive attitude towards writing.
- Blogging provided **authentic experiences** relative to postsecondary literacy expectations. Whether online or in a hybrid format, interactions between students within an online educational learning system are increasingly ubiquitous in higher education. Writing

blogs at a younger age helps language learners gain skills and the practice necessary for postsecondary education. The students wrote for an audience, knowing that not only the teacher but also their peers would be reading and commenting on their blogs. That urged the learners to be active readers along with being engaged writers.

- Blogging improved students' **critical thinking skills**. Learning how to respond critically and positively to another student's writing was the most important feature for improving critical thinking skills while blogging.
- Blogging facilitated more **formal peer interaction**. Any time we are writing, we are removing context. We are without gesture, facial features, and other aspects of our surrounding environment. Therefore, interaction through writing necessitates a more formal interaction. We encouraged the students to provide constructive feedback on each other's work, discouraging the leaving of basic and nonspecific comments, such as "It's good!" or "Nice post!"
- Blogging helped students take **ownership of the writing process**. Each student had their own blog with their name. They had to login with their credentials. They owned every part of what was displayed through their page.
- Blogs served as a **showcase of student accomplishments**. A parent or an administrator could look at the students' work and progress at any time. Some students accessed the blog site from home. In this situation, days', weeks', or months' worth of work could be easily showcased to parents by their children.
- Blogging allowed for the creation of a living, **digital portfolio** for each student. It was clearly organized, labeled, and time stamped. Years later, both the teacher and students would be easily able to access all of their work.
- Blogging contributed to improved **digital literacy and digital citizenship**. Students gained valuable experience being conscientious and positive about how they respond to each other. They took time to read other students' work and construct a thoughtful response that was meaningful and highlighted what was done well.

## Tips for Teachers for Blogging With MLEs

In conclusion, we would like to provide some tips for teachers who are considering using blogs with MLEs in their classroom.

- Set norms and expectations before implementing blogging with your students.
- Select meaningful, interesting, varied, and age- and language-appropriate texts for your students to reflect on in their blogs.
- Always have language resources, such as sentence stems, word banks, grammatical structures, and dictionaries available to your MLEs when working on blogs.
- Facilitate interaction, collaboration, and peer review among your language learners when blogging.
- Encourage your students to be creative in blogging, for example, by adding pictures, audio, and video to their blogs.
- As a teacher, become an active participant of the blogging community by posting blogs and responding to students' blogs.

- Keep MLEs' blogs in their digital portfolios and refer to them to track the students' writing progress.

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***Nabat Erdogan**, PhD, is an assistant professor and the coordinator of the MSE in ELL program at the University of Central Missouri. She has 23 years of experience in TESOL. Dr. Erdogan's research interests include comparative typological linguistics, applied linguistics, syntax, phonetics, and second language literacy. She is the recipient of the 2022–2023 UCM Faculty Scholar Award for her recent publication titled "Applied Linguistics for Teachers of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners."*

***Jason Carter** began teaching MLEs in 2013 in a KCMO elementary school. During this time, with Dr. Erdogan, he learned about the administrative side to English language development while becoming a more fluent educator to young learners. In 2019, Jason moved to a South Korean university. Half a world away and a half generation difference in age, Jason learned empathy and compassion translate in equal measures with learners. Again in KC, Jason teaches at Park Hill High School.*