

CULTIVATING AND MAKING MEANING OF KINDERGARTEN MULTILINGUAL LEARNER MULTIMODAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Multimodal writing for kindergarten multilingual learners (MLs) is an important and fun way for students to demonstrate their understanding of their world, the stories they read, and their understanding of how to write in English. In our teaching and research into MLs' emerging writing, we learned several important features of how these young learners convey meaning in complex ways through their multimodal compositions. Here, we summarize those findings and share several tips for teachers who want to encourage more writing practice with MLs, as well as some guidelines for how to better understand all that students may be communicating through their work. We make the case that even kindergarteners writing at a basic, developing level, are able to communicate complex meaning when their writing is multimodal.

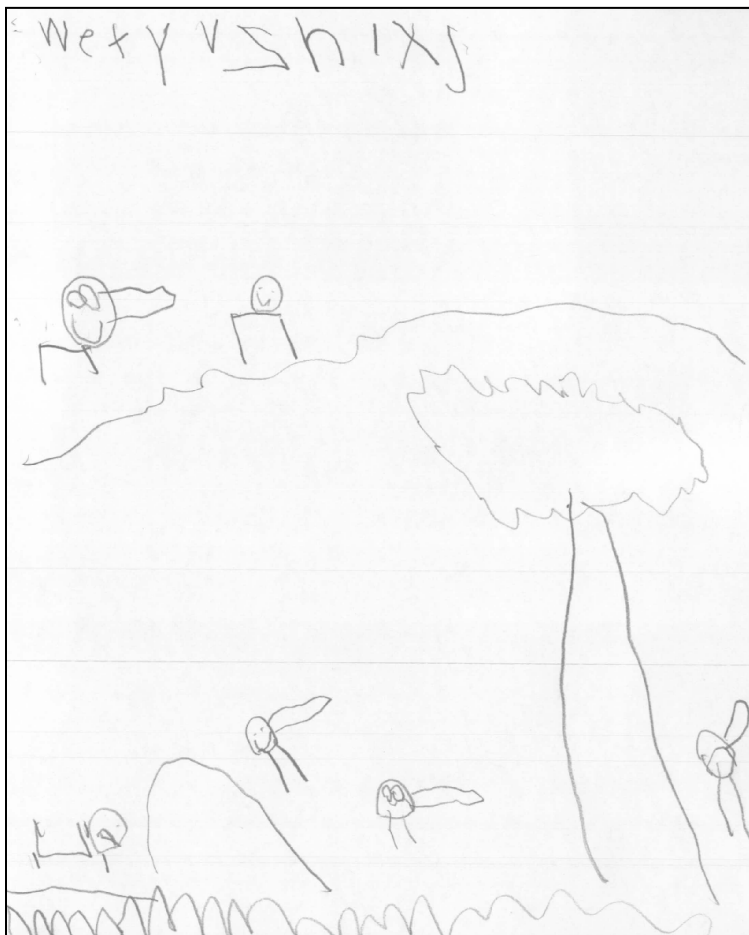
MULTIMODAL WRITING FOR KINDERGARTEN MLs

Writing is an important yet tricky skill to master, no matter one's age. Kindergarten ML writing is no different, as students are still acquiring the fine and gross motor skills to maneuver their pencils to form letters. They are also learning skills like when to capitalize, punctuate, and how to space words (Beatty & Pratt, 2011). Adding complexity, they may be learning and doing

all of this in more than one language—if not more than one alphabet—simultaneously! This means that writing is an important skill to regularly practice with kindergarten MLs because regular practice not only helps them develop an understanding of the rules for written language(s), it also helps them develop the motor skills they need to accomplish it. In this paper, we are looking specifically at how young learner writing is also multimodal. We define multimodal writing as writing that conveys meaning not only through the written words on the page, but also through the layout and drawings that are combined with the written words. In this sense, the drawings, layout, and written words would all be considered different modes that convey meaning.

UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY IN MULTIMODAL WRITING

Figure 1. “I saw my friend was gone.”



When you see kindergarten writing like this, what do you pay attention to? Inverted letters? The spacing (or lack thereof) between words? The picture they drew? Any errors in English writing aside, all of this can convey meaning in regards to what the student knows, understands, and can do. Much research has been done to understand children's writing development; however, most of that work has focused on mechanical features of writing (e.g., Coker & Ritchey, 2010; Kamii, Long, & Manning, 2001; Sturm et al., 2012), like sound/letter correspondence, punctuation, capitalization, and word spacing.

In line with more asset-based approaches to language teaching (e.g., García & Kleifgen, 2018), we wanted to take a broader look at how learners convey meaning when they write. To do so, we looked at a large set of ML kindergarten writing from an assessment where students were asked to write a story. In Figures 1 and 2, we see student stories that were written as a retelling of a short story they had just heard about two characters: Elephant and Hippo. When we got the samples, the importance of multimodality in their writing was reinforced for us. Although learners were not asked to draw pictures as part of their writing, approximately 30% did draw a picture as part of their writing. Further, all of the learners used layout features (e.g., text wrapping, list-like writing, grouping of characters and setting words, etc.) to convey meaning. We coded the samples to identify the types of multimodal features, like the types of cohesion that drawings and writing achieved, and layout features emerging ML writers were using in their compositions to convey more complex meanings.

In Figure 1, for example, we see a few things happening with multimodal features. First, we can look at layout and salience. In the sample, the student used written language at the top of the page, starting from the left corner and moving left to right. Additionally, the words are all together. Although it doesn't display sound/letter correspondence, the layout helps us understand

that the learner is aware of print concepts like the flow from left to right and the fact that multiple words go together on one line when writing in English. Other learners may not have mastered these concepts yet or understood their importance in conveying meaning.

Next, we notice that the written text is quite small and less complex than the drawing. We saw this pattern emerge often for learners at a more developing stage of learning to write. For those learners, drawings tend to be more salient (centered, larger, more complex) in conveying meaning than written language. In the drawing, we see several drawings of Elephant and if we know the story the child was writing, we see that those are actually different scenes, with Elephant looking in different places for his friend. The action conveyed in the drawing then becomes much more complex than the writing.

Figure 2. “The elephant found hippo / now the tree.”



Figure 2 also demonstrates those features of layout (this time more list-like than text wrapping, but the spelling of the words moves from left to right) and salience (the drawing is more salient). When we look at both Figures 1 and 2, we can see two different ways that the writing and drawing demonstrate cohesion. In Figure 1, we see what we call *extension cohesion* (Martinec & Salway, 2005), where the written language and/or the drawing extends the meaning of the other. The writing is “I saw my friend was gone,” and the drawing is of Elephant looking for his friend then in several different locations. The drawing provides an extension of the writing. For Figure 2, the words that the child actually wrote, “Elephant,” “Hippo,” and “tree” are all located right next to drawings of those things, like labels. We call this type of cohesion *reference cohesion* (Martinec & Salway, 2005). The written text describes the drawing, and both convey the same meaning (e.g., Elephant) but in different modalities.

In all cases where the learners used drawings and writing, doing so allowed them to create a more elaborate story and convey more complex meanings because the writing and drawing were cohesive.

Multimodal writing is powerful for MLs. For learners who are still in the early stages of language development especially, the drawings can act as a bridge between what the student is thinking and able to convey in words. In narrative writing, for instance, drawings can add details about the characters, setting, and plot to show deeper student understanding, as well as cohesion between the pictures and words (West, 2022; West & Beck, 2023a; 2023b).

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

In this article, we would not only like to encourage kindergarten EL teachers to write more with their students but also provide some tips to make the most of this experience. These

tips stem from our experience both teaching kindergarten MLs and doing research on multimodal kindergarten writing.

Tip 1: Keeping Physical Student Journals

Physical journals are great for the busy teacher as loose-leaf paper can be misplaced. While some states use English language proficiency screeners and summative assessments that are computer-based (Beck & Muhammad, 2021), at this age, students are still developing their fine and gross motor skills and can use regular handwriting practice (Beaty & Pratt, 2011). Journals are a great tool to use when instituting this regular handwriting practice in your classroom. Primary student journals, which have the solid and dashed lines kindergarteners are used to and have space for drawing, are a great resource.

These journals can be used for two or more years and can provide a fun snapshot of the student's writing development over time. Starting out, it can be helpful to have learners draw a picture before writing in the space for drawing. That scaffolds their planning process and also, as we saw above, helps them write more complex pieces. Once students are less reliant on drawings and lined paper as scaffolds for writing, be sure to give these journals to parents as a keepsake.

The journals can be purchased in packs of four or more with different colors and drawing to distinguish them easily. They can also easily be made using existing supplies of paper you have on hand and binding them together with staples or other materials. Be sure to write the date or have the students write the date at the top of each page if you are planning to use the journals to track the students' progress over time.

Tip 2: Vary Writing Tasks

Drawing on their direct experiences is important for young learners. Kids this age love writing about themselves, their hobbies, their family, and school so writing about these topics is

always welcomed. The day after a holiday, school trip, or school concert is the perfect time to ask students to write and draw about what they did, which will be fun to look back on later. All of these topics also offer students rich potential for drawings that support their writing as well.

Students can also write in response to books that they read in class as a different type of writing activity. After reading a story together in class, the students can retell what happened in the story, write their favorite part of the story, write to a character in the story, write another scene for the story, or whatever makes sense for the book in question. Like tasks that ask them to write about themselves, these activities based on books connect to direct experiences that the students have had and provide a strong foundation for their writing.

Tip 3: Integrate Classroom Content in Writing

Kindergartners are learning new sight words and rich content within their classroom that can be incorporated into multimodal writing practice. If your language teaching time is held outside of the kindergarten classroom, keep in touch with what new sight words and other classroom content they are learning and find ways to integrate them into the writing prompts. You may also find ways to use drawings and images to multimodally support the use and learning of sight words.

Tip 4: Transcribe Immediately After Students Write

Especially at the lower levels, when students may use inventive spelling or write strings of letters in lieu of words, transcriptions are vital if you or their parents want to revisit what they wrote weeks, days, or even hours after they wrote. When you transcribe, write your sentences either at the bottom of the page or on the next page, away from the student's multimodal writing. Transcribing can seem straightforward, but in our experience, it can actually prove tricky. The trouble is that when transcribing, we ask students to read back what they've written; however,

what they say they've written may not always match what there is evidence for. They may take that opportunity to elaborate on what they wrote and add more, or even to tell a completely different story that they didn't get a chance to while they were writing. The transcription in the description for Figure 2 offers a good compromise for this. In Figure 2, the teacher underlined the three words that were evidenced in the writing sample, while still capturing everything the learner said that they had written. This allows for you to see later what they are actually producing during the process and also what they wanted to produce.

Another thing to consider is jotting some notes on the drawings that learners produce with the writing. For instance, in Figure 1, it may help to note quickly next to a transcription that the drawing is actually capturing different scenes from the story and can be read chronologically rather than being one single scene. This can help you later to look through and understand where students may benefit from support in the types of details they are adding or in putting those details into written text.

Tip 5: Integrate Summative Writing Activities at Appropriate Times

After students have completed 4-5 writing activities in class, or whenever a given writing unit has ended, have the students write and draw a more substantial amount on special paper. If you have been reading bilingual books over the past few weeks, for instance, perhaps the students could write about which book was their favorite. A writing task like this may take more than one session to complete but is well worth the effort as their work can be displayed in the hallway to highlight the great things the MLs (and you!) are doing in the school and sent home to parents later. We recommend letting students know in advance that you want to display their work so that they know to use their best handwriting and drawing. The second author sometimes takes pictures of her students in front of their work in the hallway to show the students that she is

proud of them and as a way to highlight the English Language program in emails to parents (be sure when doing this to make sure all students have photo releases on file).

Tip 6: Understand That Not All Writing Is the Same

When thinking about emerging writing, one of the first things we practice with learners is name writing. Name writing seems to be a clearly distinct type of writing for young learners (West & Beck, 2023a). It is often learned as a memorized chunk, and in our research, the ability to write their names correctly did not predict the development of any other writing skills for young learners. While it is good for students to practice writing their names, name writing shouldn't be used to approximate overall writing development.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this article provided new ways of understanding and appreciating the complexity of emerging ML kindergartener writing through the examination of multimodality in writing samples. We looked at how layout features and the salience of drawings vs writing can help us learn more about the way learners convey meaning. We also looked at how drawings increase cohesion in different ways when young learners use them as part of the composition process. The tips we provided come out of our own teaching practice and the research that we have conducted.

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