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Generous Reading: Seeing Students Through Their Writing

Lucy K. Spence

Generous reading as an assessment method provides a bridge to more formal writing for English-language learners who are not yet ready for a critical review.

To persuade her audience to make the world a better place, Delia (name is a pseudonym) wrote the following:

I belive that people Have to help
the world be a batter places. Lot
of animals are dieing of the water
because the water is polluted and animals
drink the water and they die

This third-grade student took a position in response to classroom discussions, reading, internet research, and writing in English, her second language. A superficial reading focuses on mistakes in punctuation, grammar, and spelling. In contrast, generous reading highlights meaning and reveals Delia's ability to communicate her concern for animals and pollution. Her message is clear, yet often we do not look beyond mistakes in spelling and grammar to hear a student's message. Delia's message and that of other young writers merit a careful reading. In this article, I propose a method of careful, understanding, and informed reading—a generous reading.

What Is Generous Reading?

Generous reading is a phrase used informally to describe readings of law, patient therapy, literature, and student writing. It expresses the act of uncritically

reading a text but does not denote a specific methodology for doing so. Literary scholars at times will take a generous, rather than critical stance in reading a novel, or a philosopher may take a generous stance in reading a philosophical work.

From this tradition, teachers of writing have adopted a practice of reading student texts closely, yet respectfully as described by Donahue (2008), "reading of student work *as writing*, that is, as legitimate text, with the assumption that it does make sense, carries its own internal logic, is justifiably studied as any other text, literary or expository" (p. 323). A close reading of student writing reveals purposeful thinking. Armstrong (2006) used descriptive and interpretive inquiry to demonstrate how students' writing follows the same purposes and procedures as literary masterpieces. He employs a close reading of their texts informed by knowledge of the contexts in which the students wrote. I argue that using generous reading as an assessment method provides a bridge for English-language learners (ELLs) when they are not yet ready for a more judgmental reading.

Why Generous Reading?

A student's culture, home language, history, and social settings are foundational to writing instruction and must be built upon before writing can be further assessed for competence. Students who speak more than one language draw from multiple cultures and language practices as they write (Coady & Escamilla, 2005), which influence choice of topic, words, organization, and many other aspects of writing. Most methods of writing assessment assume a homogeneous context for every piece of writing, yet in our increasingly diverse student population this is not a

valid assumption. Students bring many, varied contexts into their writing and until their context is recognized, assessing their writing using predetermined criteria is counter-productive and discouraging. This article presents a methodology that provides insights into the social and historical contexts of student writing. This knowledge is used to build a strong foundation, particularly for ELLs, who must learn to draw upon their linguistic and cultural knowledge in the process of writing.

Careful analysis of student writing entails expecting and revealing meaning in the text (Tobin, 2000). It requires seeing everything in the text as a part of the student's experiences and examining every phrase for significance, dismissing nothing by assuming it was by chance or error that the student used a particular word or turn of phrase. Careful observation (Carini, 1986) of students as they work and close analysis of their written and other texts focus attention on the message communicated through writing. Donahue (2008) stated that student writing should be approached "as any text would be, as textual works, created in a particular context to be sure, but studied with the same tools that help in identifying and localizing the movements scholars try to understand in any text" (p. 324). Following this tradition, this article describes my generous reading approach, which focuses on careful analysis by searching for influences on the written texts and uncovering how the student is relating to the world through language.

ELL Writing

There is a substantial body of research on ELL writing in the elementary school, providing a tremendous resource for generous reading. Although the theoretical frames derive from linguistics, cognitive psychology, and sociolinguistics, generous reading draws primarily from sociocultural theory and research. This scholarship describes how ELLs build upon their linguistic knowledge in writing.

ELLs have particular ways of forming sentences and discourse to create meaning in their native languages (Hickmann, 2003), which largely transfers from the native language to English writing (Barbieri, 2002; Edelsky, 1986; Hudelson, 1986). Edelsky's seminal study of bilingual writing found that students made hypotheses about writing as they used and transferred grammar rules. They used sophisticated

Reflection Questions

- Have you wondered if ELLs' writing should be assessed just like that of native speakers?
- Do you find some of the writing difficult to read?
- Do you wonder how to respond to their writing without overwhelming them with overcorrection?
- What is one way you can respond to their writing that would help them improve while encouraging them to continue taking risks in their writing?

construction, complex syntax, metaphors, stylistic devices, poetic qualities, and audience awareness. Their writing contained varied vocabulary, word usage, and genres. These findings challenged the belief that "poor children who speak non-standard varieties of one or more languages are language-deficient or semi lingual" (p. 59).

Students' cultural knowledge includes narrative forms used by families and communities. Valdés and Sanders (1999) analyzed Spanish speaking students' writing and found genres from Hispanic literature: *fabula* (fable), *novela* (novel), *racy cuento* (short story), folktale, and magical realism. Literary forms from additional languages and cultures have the potential to directly impact instruction and assessment when teachers recognize and respond to this cultural hybridity (Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

As students are learning English, they are also learning to write in particular ways based upon the communities of practice in which they are immersed. Classrooms that encourage inquiry, immersing students in examples and sounds of the genre, provide ELLs with necessary experiences (Smith & Edelsky, 2005). ELLs need extra time for composing even though the finished lengths of compositions may be shorter than fluent English speakers. They require more time working with sources, even though all of the work does not show up in their writing (Silva, 1993). ELLs should be given the following opportunities to meet their specific needs: to write while they

are still learning English, to have a choice in what they write, to write for a variety of purposes, and to use their home language resources (Hudelson, 1999).

Generous reading draws upon Russian philosopher and sociologist Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) concepts to analyze writing to find and highlight language, family, cultural, and personal meanings.

A Bakhtinian perspective on student writing was first applied at the college level using ideas such as heteroglossia—the many voices drawn upon in everyday language—and ideological becoming—as-similation of these voices to develop a view of the world. Generous reading focuses on how students draw upon all of their resources, linguistic,

rhetorical, social, cultural, and personal, to communicate meaning through writing, providing elementary school teachers a means of bringing this theory into classroom practice.



Bakhtin and Elementary Writing

Heteroglossia and ideological becoming are also used by elementary writing researchers studying writing workshop (Dyson, 2003; Hicks, 1998; Lensmire, 2000; Swaim, 2002). For example, Chapman's (2002) longitudinal study challenged the sequence of first learning to write personal stories before attempting other forms of writing and describes a student who learned multiple genres in his first four years of schooling. Chapman suggested genres are learned through participation in social dialogue, where writing is seen as a medium of expression and for communication of ideas. Bakhtin, as cited in Chapman (2002), argued that people learn genres through social interactions, "Each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres [oral and written] that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex" (p. 24).

Bakhtin and ELL Writing in Elementary Schools

Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia, ideological becoming, and speech genres are especially useful for exploring how linguistic and cultural diversity affect appropriation of language during writing, yet there are few studies which draw upon Bakhtin for ELLs in elementary schools. One study by Maguire and Graves (2001) discussed the concepts of speaking personality and identity development in multilingual children writing in multiple languages. This work on identity development intersects with ideological becoming as described in college writing research (Freedman & Ball, 2004; Halasek, 1999; Ivanič, 1998; Ward, 1994; Welch, 1993). Still there remains much more to be done in building a research base that completely describes young students who are writing in additional languages to move from theory to practice in the elementary school. While composition theorists also teach college composition classes, most researchers of elementary education do not regularly teach in elementary schools, making it more difficult to carry research regarding ELL writing to elementary classroom practice. The present study adds to the scarce literature linking Bakhtin's concepts to elementary level ELL writing while also providing a way of moving this theory into classroom practice.

Bakhtinian Tools for Analysis

Generous reading applies Bakhtin's concepts and literary tools such as heteroglossia—voices of others—and figurative language. Dyson (2003) uses the concept of heteroglossia in her studies of young students' conversations during the writing process. She found that students drew upon many voices surrounding them, such as songs, playground games, and sports, which entered into their talk during the process of writing. Dyson's work helps us to understand that students appropriate voices they hear at school and in daily life to form their own ideas, talk, and writing.

Our social world is made up of many and varied texts and voices of others that contribute to our own texts and give voice to our thoughts and ideas. As a social group, we share words, phrases, and ideas that are expressed in a meta-discourse across various social contexts. Some are typically American phrases embodying ideologies. "Controlling crime"

is a common phrase indicating a particular view of society and role for authority. Other phrases and ideas belong to more specialized social contexts such as phrases typically heard in elementary school contexts, “Say no to drugs,” for example.

Students may choose to use these phrases in their writing and in doing so participate in a stream of utterances shared by others before them. When they borrow the words and ideas of others, students link themselves to larger contexts and develop as social beings through participating in language use within a multivoiced social dialogue. The analysis of voices found in student writing frames the writing within larger social discourses (Gee, 1996; Lemke, 1995; Tobin, 2005).

Literary Tools for Analysis

Also included in generous reading are the literary elements of figurative language. Figurative language and metaphor may be used intentionally or arise out of the struggle to express ideas. Whether intentional or not, tropes reveal relationships between the student and the idea he or she is attempting to convey. Similar to voices of others, tropes are often common phrases spoken within particular social contexts. “Get into trouble” suggests a container (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and positions the mischievous behavior in a contained space, separate from other types of behavior.

Sometimes students create unique metaphors, combining ideas and relationships to communicate contextualized meanings (Ogden, 1999). An example of a unique trope comes from one third grade student, “I feel like I’m sitting on a high mountain or a giant twin tower.” Creative uses of language reveal much about how the student is relating to his world as well as the social, cultural, and historical dialogue into

which the student has entered. See Table 1 for sample questions showing how Bakhtinian and literary tools can be used to think about a piece of writing.

The Study Context

My interest in writing assessment grew out of experience as an elementary school teacher in a bilingual community. Most of my students were fluent Spanish speakers and many were in the process of learning English as an additional language. I found the state mandated English instruction and English writing rubric for annual assessment problematic for the ELLs in my classroom and in the classroom that I subsequently studied. I felt compelled to search for a way to help ELLs become better writers without discouraging them with low numerical scores. Teaching and assessing writing to fulfill rubric descriptors is at odds with a view of writing as a complex and recursive process where all aspects of writing improve over time. Add to this the developmental nature of learning to speak an additional language and you have a complex learning environment for teaching and assessing writing.

I studied a third-grade classroom in an urban school district in the Southwestern United States. Ninety-two percent of families spoke Spanish, and 60% of the students were ELLs. All of the students received free breakfast and lunch as part of a Federal pilot program. The school district language policy specified “English only” as the language of instruction, but Spanish was allowed to clarify concepts. I speak some Spanish, which contributed somewhat to my analysis. Even though the students wrote in English, their knowledge of Spanish contributed to their writing. All students wrote in English during my visits, which were during writing workshop once each week for the spring semester of the school year.

Table 1
Generous Reading Form

Voices of others	Figurative/descriptive language
What are the voices in this piece?	What figurative/descriptive language is in this piece?
What do they tell you about the person?	What does it tell you about the person?
What do they tell you about the writer?	What does it tell you about the writer?
What do they reveal about the writing?	What does it reveal about the writing?

The school was a Reading First school at the time of the study, and the teachers were required to use a commercial reading program for 90 minutes each morning. In spite of these constraints, the teacher in this study made time for writing workshop and used collaborative learning structures. She involved the students' families by inviting them to the school library to help the students with their research and encouraged family participation in many other ways.

I chose this classroom for my study because I could confidently predict seeing writing workshop on a continuous basis. I had worked with the teacher as her coaching teacher two years previously, and we shared an interest in writing workshop. During the visits I wrote observational notes, interviewed students and the teacher, and collected artifacts from the writing workshop throughout the school year for a larger research project focusing on how classroom teachers assessed student writing (Spence, in press).

To develop generous reading as an alternative writing assessment, I first focused on three students' final drafts of a personal narrative and a persuasive essay. The three students were all ELLs with varying degrees of fluency. Later I refined the generous reading process by analyzing 30 additional writings from 15 students in the same classroom.

I found similarities across the papers. Many students expressed a sense of responsibility, concern for families, investment in their topic, and personal concerns. As writers, the students appropriated particular discourses, internalized the language of the teacher and classroom discussions, and used persuasive language. Many of the writings evidenced introductions, repetition, and supporting details. Although the total of 36 writings included many of the same elements, individual students demonstrated unique qualities in their writing such as humor or including a subgenre within an essay or narrative.

To illustrate the findings from my comparison of qualities of writing across the 36 texts and to demonstrate generous reading, I highlight Delia, who spoke Spanish at home and was in the emergent stages of using English for academic purposes. Line breaks, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation remain as written by Delia.

1. Do not Litter
2. I belive that litter kills animals
3. and Animals move to place to place.
4. Stop Littering wet Land because fish
5. are drinking the watter and the watter

6. is polluted and They die by that.
7. I belive that people Have to help
8. the world be a batter places. Lot
9. of animals are dieing of the water
10. because the water is polluted and animals
11. drink the water and they die
12. Sometimes Litter is bad for everbody.
13. becace people outdoors. Sometimes
14. they eat the food that is in the
15. trash they eat it and die to.
16. Do not throw soda can holder
17. because little turtle get caught and
18. They choke in the water.
19. Litter is bad for ever body
20. even me so stop Littering.
21. ever body should recycle
22. because the stuff that you throw
23. away becomes a New thing
24. for Exp: Glass plastic, other, cans paper
25. metal.

Generous reading permits a deeper understanding of Delia as a person, of her writing process, and of her writing itself (see Table 2). The following sections will guide the reader through my generous reading by describing these aspects of Delia's writing.

Voices in Writing

Delia appropriated several voices in her essay including language borrowed from her teacher, classmates, and books. She tried out environmental language used by her teacher and classmates during writing workshop, telling her audience, "Do not throw soda can holder" (line 16), a concept brought up in class discussions when the teacher brought in plastic rings to demonstrate this danger. The students participated enthusiastically in these whole class discussions, which served to create common knowledge and a circulating discourse in the workshop.

Delia appropriated terms such as "wet Land" (line 4) and "little turtle" (line 17), expanding her horizons (she lives in a southwestern desert). The teacher and students read various texts about the environment as a class or individually, then shared their knowledge in a variety of grouping configurations. Delia's essay shows how she borrowed language from a library book with a description of the types of things that should be recycled, "glass plastic, other, cans paper metal" (lines 24–25) from the book, *Where Does the Garbage Go?* (Showers, 1994).

Delia experimented with lists of words by including the word "other" (line 24), revealing her attempt at

Table 2
Generous Reading Analysis of Delia’s “Do Not Litter”

Delia as a person	Delia’s writing process	Delia’s writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cares about her world ■ Concerned about animals and people ■ Believes people can do something ■ Concerned about homeless people ■ Concerned for herself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Uses language of teacher and classroom ■ Synthesizes two ideas ■ Uses language of environmental protection ■ Uses language popular in the United States ■ Experiments with prepositional phrases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduces different ideas in paragraphs ■ Cause-and-effect structure of the effect of litter on animals ■ Starts with big idea then narrows

emulating the practice of listing items in a sentence. Showers’s (1994) book furthered Delia’s interest in recycling, and she took notes verbatim from this textual authority. Rather than denigrating the practice as “copying,” generous reading acknowledges appropriation of words as an integral part of learning and communicating within a particular discourse.

In addition to appropriating from books, Delia engaged her audience in a dialogue of environmental protection. She tried out phrases such as “Do not Litter” (line 1), “polluted” (lines 6 and 10), “people Have to help the world be a better place” (lines 7–8), and “recycle” (line 21), incorporating this vocabulary into her own way of speaking.

Delia went further by addressing her audience, “everybody should recycle because the stuff that you throw away becomes a New thing” (lines 21–23). Writing about recycling was part of a dialogue with her teacher, who discussed recycling with her and gave her a book about recycling. Dialogic discourse always addresses an intended audience and answers the speech or texts of others who have spoken previously (Bakhtin, 1981). Not only do students engage with words of others spoken in the past, but they direct their words toward the future. Delia’s essay reveals a student who is taking on language related to a particular discourse and engaging in this discourse with others.

Noticing unusual language uncovers cultural and personal meanings as in “Because people outdoors. Sometimes they eat the food that is in the trash they eat it and die to” (lines 13–15). In this part, Delia describes “people outdoors,” or the homeless, suggesting they are in danger. Delia draws attention to the

plight of those who must live outdoors and ask for handouts or find food that has been discarded. Delia broke away from the usual concept of pollution and extended her thinking to the homeless. Noticing unusual language reveals how students use writing to relate to their world. On the first reading it may seem Delia misunderstood the effects of litter, yet by reading generously we can see the world as she sees it rather than as the teacher, textbook, or society portrays it.

Figurative or Descriptive Language

Delia described a “little turtle” (line 17), which can be seen as a symbol for vulnerable nature in a polluted world. Delia appeals to the reader by using the word “little.” She creates a tragic picture in the readers mind by writing, “little turtle get caught and they choke in the water” (lines 17–18). Delia’s call to action, proper disposal of plastic holders, will lead to a safer environment for turtles.

The little turtle may also symbolize Delia’s own vulnerability or sense of helplessness toward the prospect of a littered and polluted world. Looking for symbols in students’ writing highlights the premise underlying generous reading that these texts are read with the same respect and level of analysis we afford great literature (Armstrong, 2006; Donahue, 2008; Tobin, 2000). Attending to figurative language illuminates the artistry in students’ writing.

Delia as a Writer and a Person

In thinking about Delia as a writer, it is important to keep in mind that ELLs bring linguistic form and

function from their native language to the task of writing in English, necessitating a broader view when assessing. Delia used a structure of linked concepts to organize her essay, forming her thinking and style of writing. First she links fish with water pollution and

Students must be immersed in the language of the discourse in which they hope to write, and they must be invested in purposeful writing.

dying (lines 4–6), and then moves to “animals” that drink polluted water and die (8–11). Finally, she extrapolates that if animals can die from pollution then people must be affected by pollution and could die from eating discarded food (12–15).

When Delia writes “Because people outdoors” (line 13), she connects people who live outdoors, such as the homeless, to the animals that are affected by the environment. They are outdoors like the fish and animals. Finally, she narrows it to a specific person when she says, “Litter is bad for everybody even me” (line 19–20). In this way, she has brought her concept of littering and pollution from general to personal. Delia devised an organizational structure that made sense for her topic of pollution and littering.

Discussion

A generous reading of Delia’s essay advances our thinking about four important aspects of language development. First, students appropriate the language of particular discourses for writing. Second, engagement in purposeful communication fosters language appropriation. Third, students draw upon their linguistic and cultural knowledge to form their writing. Finally, through writing students appropriate the words of others to construct their personal identities.

Focusing on the writing rather than a rubric reveals Delia’s internal struggle with language. Rather than expecting her to be a particular kind of student, writing in a prescribed way, we see her as a student in the United States within a particular community and culture, writing for a purpose important to her, based in her experiences at home, in her community, and in her study of litter and pollution. A teacher who understands Delia as a person and writer within her

cultural context can facilitate her participation in many other discourse communities. Students must be immersed in the language of the discourse in which they hope to write, and they must be invested in purposeful writing.

Delia’s “Do Not Litter” is the result of many hours of reading, discussing, prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing on Delia’s part. During the process of writing she thought about sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling; received help from her teacher and peers; and appropriated words and ideas through this give and take. Generous reading reveals how Delia drew upon her discourse community through reading, discussing, and writing in meaningful communication. The many conversations and texts she shared with her inquiry group, teacher, and the whole class helped her to internalize vocabulary and concepts.

Generous reading looks beyond superficial mistakes to see what the student is doing with language. It illuminates Delia’s unique synthesis of sources, functions, and form. Generous reading acts as a bridge between an ELL’s language development and a more judgmental reading used with fluent English speakers and writers. By seeking out the social, historical, and language origins in their writing, teachers can give their students the basic foundation for English writing. Topics and purposes for writing can be found in students’ own experiences and interactions with the voices of others. This knowledge of how young ELLs draw upon their linguistic and cultural knowledge when writing is essential for a generous reading.

The procedure for generous reading offers a structure to think about students as people in the process of developing their own views of the world. Classroom teachers can benefit from this as an alternative to traditional assessment and gain a new perspective on how their students appropriate the words of others as they construct their personal identities. Freedman and Ball (2004) contend that as classrooms become increasingly diverse students bring a range of discourses that impact the ideological becoming of every student

I gained an additional perspective on Delia’s writing by sharing it with a colleague, and I recommend discussing generous reading among groups of teachers to gain additional insights into the writing of particular students. Further research must include such samples of teachers using generous reading with

their students. We can gain insights into the lives, thoughts, and writing process of students by looking carefully at how they socially construct their writing. Through writing they reveal something of who they are as individuals within a social context, responding to the world around them and contributing to the dialogue of a complex and interconnected world. Generous reading is a bridge to that world through the vehicle of writing.

Implications for Practice

Generous reading takes time. It took approximately 20 minutes a piece to analyze each of the 36 writing samples. Because a teacher's time is limited, I recommend using generous reading only occasionally, such as to look closely at the writing of a particular student. This would be especially helpful when a team of teachers gather to study the student and his or her work. After conducting a generous reading assessment, the teacher can use the information to design instruction that builds upon the student's strengths.

Another possibility is for the classroom teacher to assess several students to determine the effect of a unit of study. Because students draw upon texts they have read and class discussions, a generous reading would reveal the extent of these influences.

Perhaps the most promising use of generous reading is as a means to expand teachers' perspectives on ELL writing. Professional development or preservice education, including sessions where generous reading is explained and practiced with writing samples, provide opportunities for a new appreciation of ELL writing.

In summary, the following are some applications for generous reading:

- Looking closely at the writing of one child
- Using assessment information to design instruction which builds on strengths
- Assessing several students in the same class to determine the effect of a unit of study
- Gaining an expanded perspective on ELL writing

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