



# Adolescent English language learners' stances toward disciplinary writing

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## ABSTRACT

Since adolescent English language learners (ELLs) are facing increasing demands to engage in advanced disciplinary writing and this type of writing is oftentimes one of the most challenging academic tasks they encounter, this study investigated their experiences with writing in English language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics classrooms. Rooted in a social-constructivist conception of writing, which foregrounds the relationship between individual agency, engagement, and disciplinary discourse, this study asked: 1) What are adolescent ELLs' stances toward content-area writing and how do they differ by grade level? 2) To what factors do adolescent ELLs attribute their stances toward writing? 3) How do adolescent ELLs' stances vary across content areas and by type of writing? A micro-level discourse analysis approach was used to analyze interviews with 26 ELLs in different school contexts with varying emphases on writing in the core disciplines. The analyses revealed generally positive stances toward source-based writing tasks, even when students viewed these as challenging, yet negative stances toward writing in which literary texts provided the source material. This study is timely in light of the increased emphasis on the development of advanced disciplinary writing competencies among adolescent ELLs. Implications for pedagogy are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite an increasing awareness of the relationships between writing competence and academic success (Graham & Hebert, 2011), many adolescents in U.S. schools continue to perform poorly in academic writing. This is particularly true among multilingual students for whom English is not their native language, referred to here as English language learners (ELLs). The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing exam (a nation-wide assessment last administered in 2007), revealed an ongoing trend of ELLs' low levels of performance on writing tasks as compared to their native English speaking peers: only 1% of 12th grade ELLs scored at or above proficient in contrast to 24% of the general population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). These results represent performance trends that have persisted for decades and contribute to deficit perceptions of ELLs with regard to their academic abilities (Harklau, 2011).

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The relatively poor standardized assessment results are not surprising considering the context for writing instruction that has pervaded U.S. secondary schools for many years. While students in U.S. secondary schools have not been reported to engage in much writing beyond a paragraph in classes other than English language arts (ELA) (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Jeffery, 2009; Wilcox, 2014; Wilcox & Jeffery, *in press*), this is likely to change as a result of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Although the CCSS are not national curriculum standards, in the states where they have been adopted they call for a focus on preparing *all* students for postsecondary academic and professional writing expectations *in core content classrooms*. Social studies is one such core class that typically covers a range of academic subjects, including geography, government, and economics; science is another core class and includes earth science, biology, and chemistry; finally, mathematics is considered a core that encompasses algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus. Unfortunately, the CCSS initiative offered little specificity regarding how increased expectations for disciplinary writing should be approached for students with different language backgrounds. The CCSS emphasis on writing in disciplines other than ELA in conjunction with ELLs' relatively low performance on writing measures raises questions as to what supports for ELLs might be necessary to engage successfully in the kinds of advanced disciplinary writing tasks the CCSS require. These tasks emphasize developing students' abilities to convey complex ideas clearly and accurately; produce writing appropriate to different purposes and audiences; and draw evidence from sources to support analyses (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

To inform efforts toward increasing all students' academic writing competencies, this study examined a diverse sample of adolescent ELLs' perspectives toward writing in ELA, social studies, science, and mathematics. In an earlier study (Jeffery & Wilcox, 2014), we focused on the perspectives of native English-speaking students using an analytic framework that we have extended here. The investigation of students' perspectives, or what we refer to as stances, was a central goal since students' perspectives toward academic tasks have been indicated as a factor related to performance (Carpenter, Falout, Fukuda, Trovela, & Murphey, 2009; Hyland, 2007; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; McCarthy & García, 2005; Murphey, Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Wilcox, 2011). We defined stance as "a display of a socially recognized point of view or attitude" (Ochs, 1993, p. 288), which includes students' expressions of how they feel about writing (affective stances) and what they know about writing (epistemic stances).<sup>1</sup> Prior research has shown that students' stances toward writing are highly variable and dependent upon the context in which writing occurs (McCarthy, 1998; Smagorinsky & Daigle, 2012). Another construct of import to this study is agency. We view students' stances as indicators of agency—defined as "the capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). In this view, agency is also seen as dynamic and related to context. This understanding of stance and agency as related, dynamic constructs, and a concern for the relationships of stance, agency and the development of academic writing competence informed the study's focus on adolescent ELLs' stances toward academic writing in the core content areas of ELA, social studies, science, and mathematics.

## 2. Related literature

Of the different language skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading, and writing), writing is often the most challenging for ELLs and the writing of some academic genres the most difficult of all (Cumming, 2013; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Several researchers have explored the challenges that adolescent ELLs face when attempting to meet the requirements of academic writing tasks. Kibler (2011), for example, has noted a disjuncture between ELLs and their content area teachers' understandings of academic writing expectations. She suggested that students' and teachers' conceptions could be better aligned through discussion designed at developing students' meta-awareness of how purposes for writing vary across academic contexts. Kibler's findings suggest direct discussion of disciplinary discourse norms may help ELLs to develop more agentic stances toward writing. She hypothesized that through such discussions students might better position themselves as members of disciplinary discourse communities.

In another study, Enright (2011) analyzed field notes and artifacts (e.g., students' written work, classroom handouts) collected from a variety of content-area classrooms to investigate whether and how ELLs learned to engage successfully in writing tasks. Grounding her analysis in language socialization theory, she found that students' responses to academic writing tasks were uniquely individual and informed by how they positioned themselves in relation to the power structures embedded in content-area classroom activities. One implication of Enright's study is that second language (L2) writing researchers need to take into account the multiple and changing positions ELLs take in academic contexts where they may be marginalized or perceive themselves to be. Furthermore, Enright's study, along with another study of adolescent ELLs' experiences with social studies writing (Franquiz & Salinas, 2011), point to the importance of what Cummins (2001, 2006) referred to as identity investment (i.e. personal connection to content and task). Cummins discovered through microanalysis of field notes and written artifacts that identity investment was foundational to ELLs' language use, both oral and written.

While relationships between aspects of student agency such as identity investment and ELLs' academic performance has been established by these researchers, few studies have investigated adolescent ELLs' stances toward writing required in their content-area classrooms other than ELA. The use of micro-level discourse analytic techniques to reveal ELLs' perspectives regarding disciplinary writing has been particularly rare. Strauss and Xiang (2006), a notable exception, studied extracts from

<sup>1</sup> While some research on stance refers to the writers' voice *in* their writing; we use stance to mean the positioning the writer takes *toward* writing and this is in alignment with the discourse analytic approach described in the [Methods](#).

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