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## Helping English Language Learners Develop Writing Proficiency Using the Thesis Evidence Model in the High School Social Studies Classroom

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Helping English Language Learners Develop Writing Proficiency Using the Thesis-  
Evidence Model in the  
High School Social Studies Classroom

Keith Fleming

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

School of Education and Counseling Psychology

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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May 1, 2015

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Program Chair

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## Abstract

English Language Learners (ELL) are struggling to develop literacy skills in social studies classes at the high school level in conjunction with the transition to Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and assessment. The researcher conducted a qualitative teacher action research study. Participants included freshman high school students in mainstream, college preparatory, World Cultures classes in an affluent, suburban, public school district in California. Through this teacher action research study, 34 high school grade students responded to a writing prompt used a pre-test evaluation. Students were then guided through a lesson sequence teaching writing strategies based in the Thesis-Evidence model. Upon completing these writing based lessons, students were evaluated again with another writing prompt, which served as the post-test. Both the pre-test and post-test were evaluated using a teacher created rubric aligned with the 9<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS for writing. Results indicated that the application of CCSS based writing strategies yielded improvement in all areas of academic writing for not only ELLs, but for the whole class as well.



## Chapter 1 Introduction

Teaching in a district with a sizable English Language Learner (ELL) population for the last six years has presented numerous valuable opportunities to meet the learning needs of ELL students in mainstream social studies courses. However, it was three years ago that the greatest challenge presented itself providing an opportunity to help ELL students succeed. This challenging opportunity presented itself through teaching a Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) course in the content area of US History.

Between numerous trips to Latin America, and studying abroad in Spain, I felt prepared to rise to this particular educational challenge. My linguistic and cultural familiarity with Latino groups would be the key to successfully connecting with my students and ultimately meeting their learning needs. However, one of the greatest challenges in teaching this class was that there were seven different languages spoken by the students. Instruction is required by state policy to be implemented in English, (California Department of Education, 2006) and the majority of students were Spanish speakers, so I felt comfortable in at least some areas in helping address the learning needs of some students. But what about the students who spoke Portuguese, Tagalog, German, French, or Mandarin? How were their learning needs going to be met and how was US History content going to be made accessible for this diverse group, many of who had no previous knowledge of George Washington, The Declaration of Independence or the Civil War?

It was a rough first semester as students struggled to attain the necessary amount of content to meet the required state standards ultimately measured by passing the STAR test. Students watched their teacher acting out the American Revolution with a red coat and a blue coat, while frantically switching costumes. Another day, students drew a plantation in their

binders with cotton fields, slaves and a cotton gin. They listened to music, watched videos, completed vocabulary sheets and graphic organizers, acted out historical events, and participated in arts and crafts projects. Students even marched outside to simulate the protests of the Civil Rights Movement. And then it dawned on me: is any of this actually getting through to the students? Are they actually learning US History? Are they actually developing the necessary skills in language proficiency and literacy?

### **Statement of Problem**

In one local high school in an affluent suburb of Northern California, a demographic shift occurred with an increase in immigrant students and ELL. Local teachers are struggling with the difficult challenge of meeting the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Perhaps the most difficult challenge for teachers is implementing effective teaching strategies that help EL students in literacy development in social studies classrooms.

This already complex challenge is complicated further with the introduction and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). EL students are struggling in social studies classes to obtain the necessary content while simultaneously developing literacy skills associated with CCSS.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what pedagogical practices and teaching strategies are effective in helping ELL students develop literacy skills in writing in 9<sup>th</sup> grade World Cultures classes in conjunction with the implementation of CCSS. This teacher action research study focused primarily on providing scaffolding supports for writing social studies

content based on the Thesis-Evidence Model for the purpose of developing literacy skills in writing while gaining access to the content curriculum.

### **Research Question**

What pedagogic practices and teaching strategies are effective in helping ELL students develop proficient writing skills in high school social studies classes in conjunction with Common Core Writing Standards?

For the purpose of this study several key terms must be defined. The students that participated in the study were 9<sup>th</sup> grade World Cultures students in a mainstream, college preparatory class. Therefore, the sample is an intact group, because all students participated in the study, even though the specific focus was placed on ELL students developing literacy skills in writing. The high school where the study was conducted lies within an affluent district consisting of a student population comprised of 51% Latino, and 16% English Language Learners at the high school level (Ed-Data, 2014).

The CCSS are new learning standards to the State of California, that were adopted by most states nationwide (California Department of Education, 2014). These standards place a strong emphasis on the development of literacy skills in reading, writing and technology. This teacher action research study focused primarily on one particular writing standard for 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders that focuses on making claims or thesis statements and supporting them with evidence. This standard is directly related to the Thesis-Evidence Model, which uses a writing strategy based on making a thesis statement and providing evidence to support that statement.

## **Theoretical Rationale**

Working with ELL students includes many aspects of cultural, linguistic and communicative skills. Therefore, this teacher action research project is framed within the context of Multiliteracies Theory. Multiliteracies Theory (Cazden, Cope, Cook, Fairclough, Gee Kalantzis, Kress, Luke, Michaels, & Nakata, 1996) states as its purpose to help make classroom teachers incorporate various aspects of cultural, linguistic, communicative and technological diversity into their teaching practices for the purpose of helping students become better prepared for a successful life in the global economy. The authors argue that the definition of literacy must be expanded to include a broad range of skills required for success in a world with greater linguistic and cultural convergence. (Cazden, et al, 1996) Growing levels of linguistic and cultural diversity in California schools challenge the goals of the CCSS. Teachers must engage in various forms of literacy pedagogy to overcome this challenge. Therefore, Multiliteracies Theory provides a relevant framework for this research paper.

## **Assumptions**

Moving forward, several key assumptions must be addressed. All students, including ELL, can achieve writing goals established by the CCSS. Another underlying assumption of this study is that in general teachers recognize the diversity of their students, and the subsequent diversity of their students' learning needs, and take all of this into account when planning and implementing instruction.

## **Background and Need**

Strang (1963) published research addressing the challenges facing education systems in the United States with regards to helping ELL develop literacy skills in mainstream classrooms. In reference to the struggles of ELL students in United State's classrooms, Strang (1963) points out, "for many of them, ineptitude in speaking, reading, and writing English is a serious educational, vocational, emotional, and social handicap" (p. 14). Nearly fifty years later, educational leaders and scholars alike are still grappling with the same issue. "The pervasive educational under-achievement of children of immigrant families continues to be a matter of serious concern, both for those families and the nation at large" (Haneda & Wells, 2012, p. 297).

Although research in the past fifty years has been helpful in understanding key issues around serving the educational needs of ELL students in high school classes, little research exists addressing how high school social studies teachers can best help ELL students develop literacy skills in writing in preparation for Common Core assessment. Therefore, addressing this issue is not only pragmatic and timely within the field of educational research, but also vital for the success of our ELL students.

## **Summary**

Within the California public school system, teachers have been struggling with the challenge of attempting to meet the learning needs of a growing number of ELL students while simultaneously adhering to the transition to CCSS. With the implementation of CCSS and assessments, educators may face their biggest challenge yet in achieving this goal. Examining this issue through the lens of Multiliteracies Theory provides a frame of reference, which other

teachers can draw upon for guidance in meeting the challenges ELL face in social studies classes as public school systems implement CCSS.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

The classroom struggle of ELL students in social studies is a topic that has received moderate attention over several decades. In the existing literature, there are several key publications that have highlighted important issues concerning this topic. Numerous studies in particular focused specifically on pedagogy, strategies and practices necessary to address the challenges that teachers face in secondary education with effectively helping their ELL students learn. These publications can be generally categorized into three broad groupings. The first category includes research focusing on the implementation of specific teaching strategies associated with helping meet the learning needs of ELL students in social studies content. The second category includes research and publications that focus on pedagogical and theoretical approaches associated with meeting the learning needs of ELL students in social studies content. The third category is less connected to the specific content area of social studies, and is rather associated with research focusing on the general challenge faced by all teachers in serving the learning needs of ELL students in developing academic and language skills in English.

When discussing recent publications that address ELL challenges in social studies classes, it is useful first begin with the research of Cho and Reich (2008), because in many ways it transcends all three categorical groupings. Through a survey study conducted in six ESL schools in a large district in Virginia, Cho and Reich (2008) captured information from the 33 social studies teachers surveyed. This includes the many challenges that social studies teachers face in teaching ELL while also analyzing accommodations that teachers were currently using. In addition, Cho and Reich's study addressed types of support teachers needed to effectively teach ELL social studies (2008). This study deserves primary recognition in the field of addressing the

learning challenges of ELL students in high school social studies classes, because of the broad scope of the research.

Findings from the Cho and Reich survey provide a keen observation into the attitudes and perceptions of ELL teachers in social studies content classes. Student challenges included a lack of background knowledge in the content area, and difficulties with academic language and vocabulary in social studies. In overcoming these challenges, teachers faced many obstacles themselves. Most notably were language barriers, lack of support and resources, and a general gap between the amount of time teachers would need to overcome these barriers and the amount of time they actually felt they could dedicate to this purpose (Cho & Reich, 2008). In addition, the researchers reported on the accommodations social studies teachers were already using to address the learning challenges of their ELL students. While these accommodations included a variety of strategies ranging from extra time on assignments to consulting with primary ELL instructors, there emerged a universal trend: the majority of teachers were not willing and/or unable to take the necessary time to provide effective accommodations to meet the needs of ELL students.

Because of the broad range of information provided by the Cho and Reich study, their research can serve as a basis for teachers and researchers to build upon in the future. Adding to and expanding upon this research, was a wave of publications between 2008 and 2013 that can be classified into three useful categories.

### **Strategies Focused on Helping ELL Students in Secondary Social Studies**

Under the first categorical umbrella of research there are several key studies that contribute to the scholarly field. When examining this first category, it is useful to start with the work of Coleman (2012) which emphasizes the importance of helping all students, including



ELL, acquire content and academic language to be successful in social studies classes. Coleman examines a variety of recent research that pertains to the various strategies used to achieve this challenging goal.

Coleman claims that “the foundation of an effective English literacy program for ELL is similar to that of an effective literacy program for English speakers” (2012, p. 5) To support this claim, Coleman elaborates on a number of useful strategies that can help all students acquire academic and content language. These strategies include: focusing on not only vocabulary but also on syntax and text structure, differentiating instruction by language proficiency levels, and providing opportunities for English language production, which includes interactions with fellow ELL students, native English speakers and the teacher, as well as opportunities to practice writing in English (Coleman, 2012). The work of Coleman serves as a reasonably comprehensive list of strategies that teachers can utilize to help their ELL students in acquiring academic and content language. Furthermore, the results of this study are useful in my own research by focusing specific strategies to help ELL students, particularly the necessity of providing students with frequent opportunities to practice writing.

Coleman compiled the work of other researchers. Therefore, Coleman’s research is a useful place to begin when discussing strategies used to help ELL students in social studies classes. However, there have been a number of studies that explore some of these strategies while expanding on other strategies as well. One such study is the teacher action research of Cruz and Thornton (2012). In this study, the researchers examine a variety of teaching strategies focused on the implementation of visual sources that can serve as useful tools in helping ELL gain access to social studies content. One strategy focuses on the increased use of photographs, pictures, illustrations, political cartoons and maps. Another strategy looks at having students

create picture books with definitions to help with the acquisition of content language. While yet another strategy focuses on having students use graphic organizers to make sense of complicated concepts. Regardless of the strategies used, the overall impact was significant gains in vocabulary and comprehension. According to Cruz and Thornton, these strategies “greatly reduce the cognitive load, while simultaneously exposing students to conceptually rich subject matter” (2012, p. 108). The effective use of a variety of visual sources is certainly a strategy that can be utilized to help meet the learning needs of ELL students.

Another critical study that examines a variety of strategies to help ELL students acquire academic language, skills and content in secondary social studies classes is the research of Sparza and Ahmad (2007). Their work is of critical importance to the field because of the breadth of strategies that are utilized to effectively help ELL students succeed in social studies classes.

These strategies are divided into three categories. The first category highlights strategies geared toward social and cultural support for students during the acculturation process. This includes, but is not limited to, providing materials and directions in students’ native languages and allowing students to engage in activities and projects that promote the use and value of multilingualism. The second category of strategies focuses on providing explicit instruction in academic strategies using the Cognitive Academic Learning Approach. This category emphasizes the need for teaching ELL important academic skills such as identifying key vocabulary terms, using glossaries, effective note-taking strategies and organizational skills. Lastly, the third category focuses on making social studies content more accessible by reducing the cognitive load without marginalizing the content. Strategies in this category include a shift in

the language and presentation of content such as simpler vocabulary, slower presentation of the material, and a reduced amount of text (Sparza & Ahmad, 2007).

Through a university sponsored partnership, the researchers worked with five social studies teachers at the high school level to implement strategies from all three categories. The goal of this study is to support content area teachers in increasing ELLs skills in comprehension of course content. The overall conclusions were that implementing a combination of strategies from all three of these categories caused increased academic accomplishment in social studies for ELL students participating in the study (Sparza & Ahmad, 2007). This research is of critical importance to the field because it highlights the need for effective pedagogy and strategies geared toward helping ELL students acquire academic language, skills and content, while providing strategies that teachers can utilize to achieve this goal. In addition, this study provides a valuable framework for strategies that can be utilized in my own research, particularly surrounding Cognitive Academic Learning Approaches.

Along similar lines, the publications of Jimenez-Silva and Gomez (2012) focus on the strategy of using cognates to help ELL students acquire content knowledge while gaining valuable subject based vocabulary in the social sciences. This study points out that 40% of social studies vocabulary words in English have overlapping cognates in Spanish. Some knowledge or access to students' native language is required for successful implementation of this strategy. (Jimenez-Silva & Gomez, 2012). This study supports the idea that cognates can serve as a pathway to English language development, and therefore contributes another helpful strategy to the general field of research dedicated to serving the needs of ELL students in social studies classes.

A recent study by Brodsky and Vahab (2014) lies within the thematic category of research that focuses on strategies used to meet the learning needs of ELL students in social studies classes. This work focuses on enhancing student learning with strategies that revolve around the effective implementation of technology-based instruction.

Through the teacher action research of Brodsky and Vahab conducted in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade World History course (2014), students were asked to use a variety of tech-based activities for the purpose of understanding content while simultaneously acquiring language and developing technology based skills. One strategy used was modeling how to make ibooks to create pages that each focus on a different aspect of an assigned country. Another strategy demonstrated to students how to create voice over pod-casts to accompany their ibooks. Students were then supported through the process of utilizing these tech-based learning tools to create an ibook and pod-cast for an assigned country. Brodsky and Vahab reported that students were highly engaged during these activities, and as a result, gained content knowledge, developed literacy skills and improved their understanding of how to use technology. (2014)

The research of Brodsky and Vahab serves a valuable purpose in the scholarly field of publications concerning helping ELL students achieve in the social studies classroom, because it is unique in focusing on tech-based strategies. Furthermore, this study provides valuable teaching tools that can be adapted and utilized in many subject areas and grade levels to help all students acquire content knowledge and language while developing critical tech-based skills.

### **Pedagogical and Theoretical Approaches to Helping ELL Students in Social Studies**

In addition to publications focusing on specific strategies used in social studies classes to aide ELL students, there has been substantial research addressing the pedagogical and theoretical approaches associated with meeting the learning needs of the same population of students. Under

this second broad thematic category, several relevant studies provide educators with a deeper understanding in this field of research.

One such study, conducted by Haneda and Wells (2012), sheds light on pedagogical approaches to help ELL students achieve in social studies. Through teacher action research conducted in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade World History class, Haneda and Wells focused on an intact sample of one class of students participating in a sheltered ELL World History course. Their goal was to address the dual task of helping ELL students quickly acquire language while simultaneously learning content.

By applying numerous teaching strategies while guiding the 7<sup>th</sup> grade sheltered class through a unit on Ancient Egypt, Haneda and Wells (2012) were able to arrive at four useful pedagogical principles that can be applied to help all ELL students and adapted for particular educational settings. These four principles include: 1) providing frequent opportunities to speak and write, 2) helping students connect curriculum to their own lives, 3) selecting broad themes and giving students choices on guiding and directing their own work, and 4) allowing students to work toward a tangible outcome that is both measurable and attainable (Haneda & Wells, 2012).

The researchers concluded that applying these four principles must be accompanied by a caring classroom community that emphasizes collaboration among students instead of a competitive one (Haneda & Wells, 2012). Moreover, this case study is a practical example of effective pedagogy that can be applied to not only other social studies classes of varying grade levels, but also to all teachers fighting the uphill battle of serving the learning needs of their ELL students. In particular, the results from this study provide useful pedagogical approaches that can be applied to my own research. Most importantly is the establishment of a cooperative learning environment in the context of multicultural classroom.

While the Haneda and Wells study focuses on valuable ELL pedagogy for social studies teachers, the research of O'Brien (2011) narrows in on the same issue in a different way.

Through mixed methods research, O'Brien surveyed all 344 social studies teachers in a large district in Virginia on their attitudes towards preparation and training that focused on meeting the learning needs of ELL students (2011). However, only 123 surveys were returned. Nonetheless, this research provides a critical window into the attitudes of social studies teachers toward teacher trainings, while shedding light on some of the reasons why the public education system is failing many ELL students.

The results from O'Brien's research were that only 34% of teachers felt their teaching preparation programs provided adequate training on serving the needs of ELL students (2011, p. 27). In addition, many teachers indicated in their surveys that district led professional development focusing on ELL students were of poor quality and only half of the teachers showed any interest in receiving additional training in supporting ELL students (O'Brien, 2011, p. 29-30).

O'Brien concludes that it is imperative that districts evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development provided for the purpose of creating high quality and useful training in helping teachers feel prepared to meet the educational challenges that accompanies teaching ELL students in social studies (2011, p. 32). As evidence of effective strategies used to help support teachers in this endeavor, O'Brien calls for greater emphasis to be placed in the hiring of "strategic school staffing" such as more ELL teachers, and reading coaches. In addition, he states that schools should also provide more collaborative time for teachers to share and compare test results, data, and effective strategies for the purpose of supporting all students in achieving their academic goals (2011, p. 31). While these are not the only effective tools that districts and

schools can utilize, O'Brien does provide some valuable strategies for how schools can better support teachers in serving the learning needs of ELL students in social studies classes at the high school level.

### **Broad Strategies for Helping EL Students Develop Academic Skills in All Content Areas**

While the first two thematic categories of research discussed thus far focused on specific strategies as well as pedagogy, a third and critical category of research also exists in the field of publications addressing the educational needs of ELL students. However, this third thematic category focuses less on the learning needs of ELL students specifically in the social studies classes, and more on the broader challenge faced by all teachers in helping ELL students develop academic language, content and skills.

When discussing the challenges that all teachers face in helping ELL students achieve academically, an important topic to address is how ELL students feel about their relative position and abilities in context of the American education system. In addressing this issue, the publication of Berg (2014) sheds light on several assumptions that ELL students have in regards to their own abilities and participation in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. As a basis for her research, Berg uses her personal experience with her ELL students in a middle school ESOL unified arts class.

The researcher found that ELL students held two major assumptions about their own education and academic skills that served as barriers to their learning and development. The first is that proficiency in English is associated with intellectual ability, and the second is that students believe that they could not learn content effectively until they are proficient in English.

To combat these assumptions for the purpose of helping ELL students develop academic skills, language and content, Berg (2014) utilized several effective strategies. The first was to

create safe and welcoming environments where all students feel supported and respected. To achieve this goal, Berg validated students' personal experiences by welcoming the diversity of cultural knowledge held by her students. Once students felt valued and supported, the researcher implemented strategies such as structured academic language support and the use of cognates in students' primary languages. Furthermore, the researcher encouraged students to approach their bilingualism as a valuable academic and cultural asset rather than a deficit. This allowed students to see themselves as learners and contributors in the education system they participate in, thus overcoming their original apprehensive assumptions.

As a result, Berg found several positive effects for her students. Not only did students develop academic language, content and skills, but also the number of students participating in English Honors, and advanced classes in their native languages upon entering high school increased (Berg, 2014). This study serves a valuable purpose in helping teachers understand, and ultimately overcome, the hindering assumptions held by their ELL students.

While the Berg study identifies strategies to help ELL students overcome negative assumptions about their own education and abilities, the research of Kay (2014) provides insight into how teachers can help ELL students develop reading independence and comprehension. This research focuses on ELL students' metacognitive awareness, as well as the reading strategies that students use, to see how these two factors contribute to standardized test scores in reading.

To address this topic, the researcher studied 96 ELL high school students, roughly 2/3 of which were below standard reading level. The results indicate that students with mid-level standardized reading scores utilized metacognitive reading strategies the most, while students scoring in the highest and lowest bracket in reading utilized these strategies the least (Kay, 2014).



These findings are in conflict with earlier researchers who found that generally students who utilize the highest level of metacognitive reading strategies also record the highest standardized reading scores (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

Regardless of this difference, the Kay study provides valuable insight into how teachers can help their students utilize appropriate metacognitive reading strategies to enhance reading comprehension and proficiency. To achieve this goal, teachers can model strategies for students, offer additional or alternative strategies, and most importantly encourage their students to utilize reading strategies that work best for them (Kay, 2014).

Within the field of educational research exists a wealth of publications dedicated to helping teachers effectively meet the needs of ELL students in secondary social studies classes. This wealth of knowledge can serve as a useful tool in guiding further research in the field, and certainly provides a background for framing the research of this particular study. While many studies address strategies and pedagogy to help ELL students in both the acquisition of social studies content as well as the general development of writing skills, no comprehensive study exists connecting these topics to the CCSS. The research of this study attempts to fill this void in the literature while helping teachers gain effective strategies for ELL students in social studies in conjunction with the implementation of the CCSS.

## **Summary**

The obstacles presented by meeting the diverse learning needs of a growing ELL student population are compounded by the persistent revolving door in educational policy at the district, state and national level. With high turnover in site and district administration, teachers and school district personnel often have a narrow window to develop effective teaching practices that

sufficiently meet the learning needs of their ELL students that simultaneously fit within the framework of current standards and pedagogy. There is an existing gap between what policy makers expect of ELL and what research shows to be most effective (Cho & Reich, 2008). As a result, many ELL students in the mainstream classroom are falling through the cracks of overcrowded classrooms.

In the midst of the demands of the public education system, it is clear that educational leaders must rise to the challenge of effectively serving the learning needs of all students. Being that “public schools have played a critical role as the primary institutions charged with educating and assimilating immigrant children” (Cho and Reich, 2008, p. 236) and with the emergence of Common Core Standards, it is essential that teachers are prepared to help their ELL students acquire language skills, attain content knowledge and, most importantly, develop literacy skills associated with these new standards.

### **Chapter 3 Method**

This study examines several teaching strategies that can be utilized in helping high school students develop writing skills in the transition to CCSS and assessment. Although the focus is primarily on ELL students developing a thesis-evidence based writing approach, the strategies explored in this study can serve to benefit writing development in all students. This teacher action research study relies on voluntary student participation and includes a lesson sequence including pre-test/post-test writing samples, scaffolding strategies for writing development, teacher observations and student self-evaluations measuring the effectiveness of each strategy in improving student understanding and use of the thesis-evidence writing model. Qualitative data was gathered by measuring the pre-test and post-test results with a teacher-created rubric, while quantitative data was collected through the student self-evaluations. The results were examined by the researcher to determine how effective various strategies were in helping ELL students improve their writing skills.

#### **Research Approach**

After receiving approval from the Review Board, the researcher provided the school principal with a letter informing him of the research goals, and briefly explaining the research procedures. Before research was conducted in the classroom, students were informed of the activities in class while their parents received a Letter of Informed Consent explaining the goals and activities associated with the study.

Research was conducted over three consecutive class periods. Initially students completed a "pre-test" sample by writing a paragraph based on the Thesis-Evidence model. To assess students' current background knowledge and writing abilities, little instruction or aid from

the teacher was given. The pre-test writing samples were evaluated by the researcher based on a teacher-created writing rubric that aligns with CCSS for 9th grade writing.

Students were then be guided through a series of writing strategies that are based in the Thesis-Evidence model outlined in the CCSS for 9<sup>th</sup> grade writing. Strategies included worksheets designed as academic scaffolding supports for teaching students to write a well-structured paragraph including a thesis, multiple pieces of evidence and analysis. Specifically, these scaffolding strategies were modeling, analyzing examples, and writing paragraphs using sentence frames. Through each step of the research, students were supported by the teacher/researcher.

After students were guided through these writing activities, they were asked to write a Thesis-Evidence based paragraph with no scaffolding support. This second piece of student writing was used as the "post-test" sample and was later evaluated by the researcher based on a teacher-created writing rubric that aligns with CCSS for 9<sup>th</sup> grade writing.

Once the "post-tests" were collected for evaluation by the researcher, the student participants completed a "self-evaluation." In this activity, students evaluated on a 1-10 scale how effective and effective each writing strategy was in helping them build towards the goal of writing a Thesis-Evidence based paragraph. These results were be compiled by the researcher to further evaluate the effectiveness of each writing strategy.

### **Ethical Standards**

This paper adheres to the ethical standards for protection of human subjects of the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally a research proposal was submitted

and reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved and assigned number 10343.

### **Sample and Site**

The participants in this research study included 34 high school World Cultures students in a public, sub-urban high school in an affluent community in the San Francisco Bay Area. The school as a whole is comprised of 38% Latino students, with 15% of the school classified as ELL students. Target subjects are primarily in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, however there are several students in grade 10, and one student in grade 12. Of these students, 20 are male and 14 are female. The subjects' ethnicity/race statistics breakdown as follows: 15 Caucasian, 15 Latino/Hispanic, 2 Asian-American, 1 African American, and 1 Native American. Ten students receive free or reduced lunch, while six students are classified as English Language Learners. Three of these ELL students' California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores indicate that they are at a beginner-early intermediate level, one student's CELDT scores range from an early-intermediate to an early advanced level, while two ELL students have been re-designated as English proficient.

### **Access and Permissions**

All students participating in this study are officially scheduled in the World Cultures course taught by the researcher who is assigned as the official classroom teacher. Research was conducted with the subjects entirely during their regularly scheduled class time over the course of several class periods. This includes the pre-test and post-test samples, all teaching strategies

implemented for this research, and the student self-evaluations. The teaching strategies in this study required participation that was part of regularly assigned classwork.

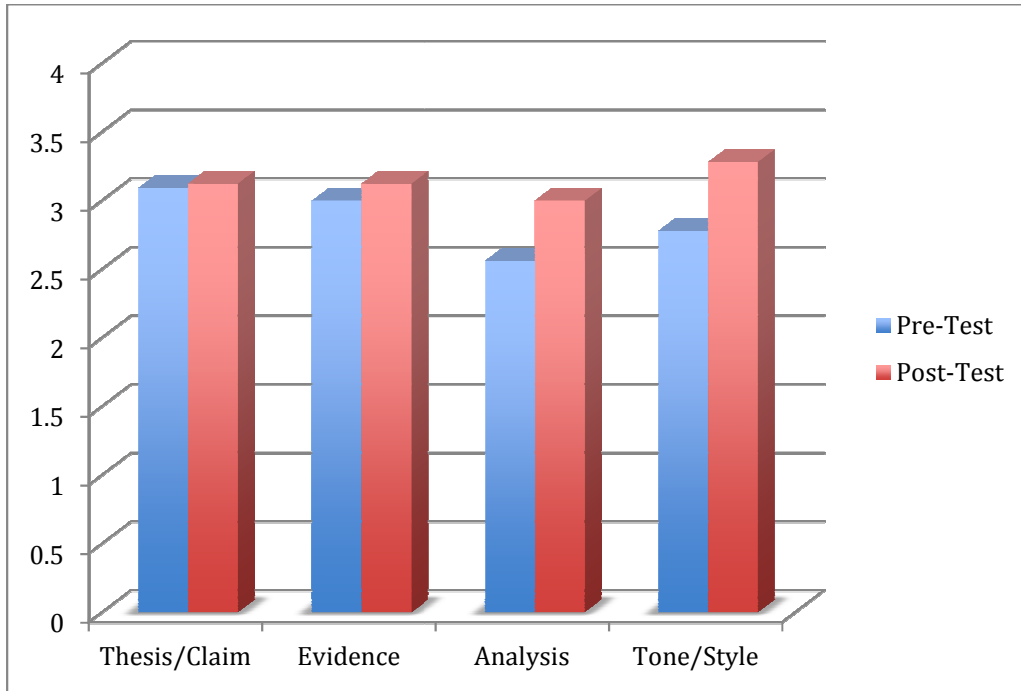
## Chapter 4 Findings

### Description of Site, Individuals, Data

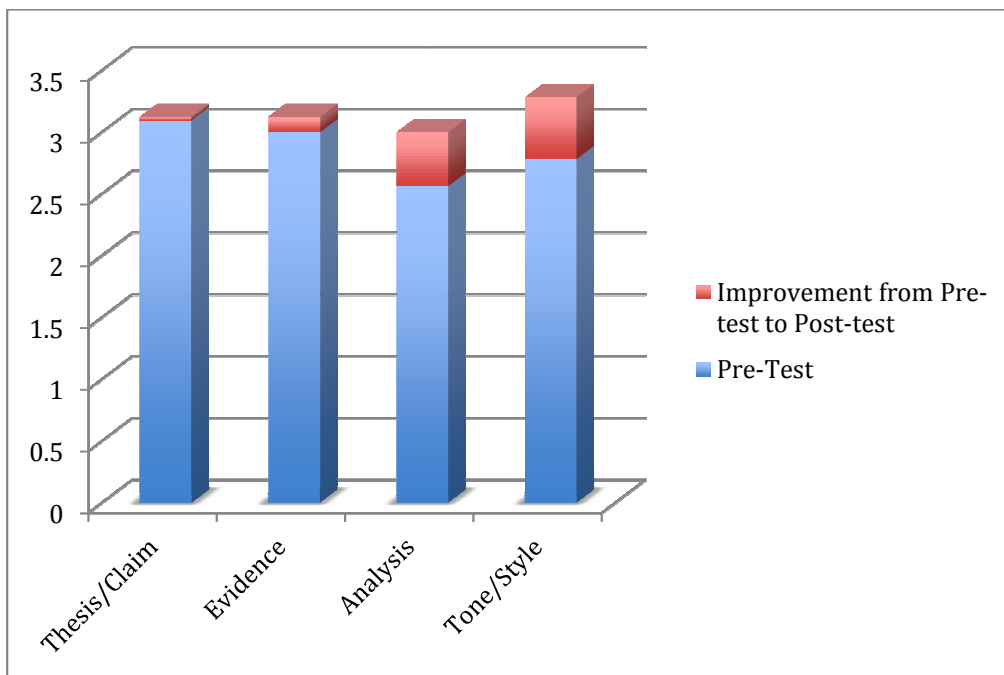
This section examines data gathered through teacher action research in a public high school in an affluent sub-urban community in the San Francisco Bay Area. Student participants were 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders between 14-17 years old. The data presented in this section was collected through pre-test and post-test student writing samples evaluated by the researcher according to a teacher created rubric based on the CCSS for 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade writing. In addition, further information was collected through student self-evaluation forms measuring the effectiveness of each writing strategy.

Through teacher evaluations of students' pre-test and post-test writing samples, findings indicate that students generally demonstrated improvement in writing skills as a result of the strategies that were implemented through this study. Based on the CCSS aligned writing rubric, there were four different areas where students could potentially improve upon as a result of receiving explicit instruction in writing strategies: thesis/claim, evidence, analysis, and tone/style. Although students showed only small gains in their thesis and evidence writing abilities, students showed substantial improvement in the development of their overall writing tone and style. However, post-test results indicated that students demonstrated the greatest improvement in the development of writing more effective analysis to explain how and why their evidence supports their claim or thesis statement.

Pre-Test and Post-Test Writing Samples for Whole Class



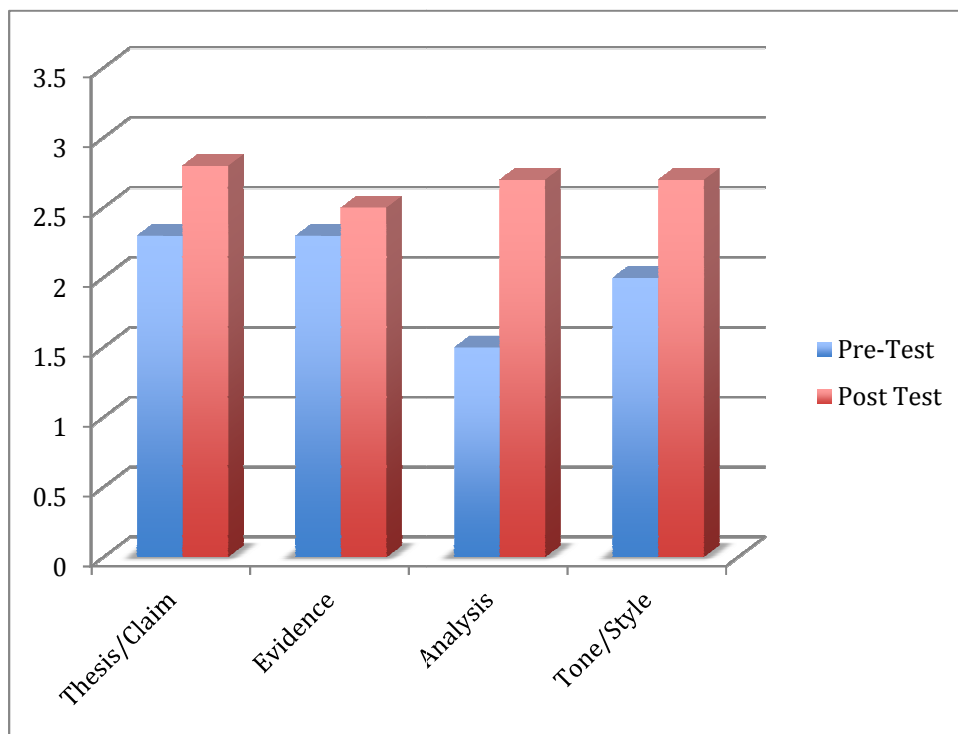
Pre-Test Writing Sample Plus Improvement for Whole Class



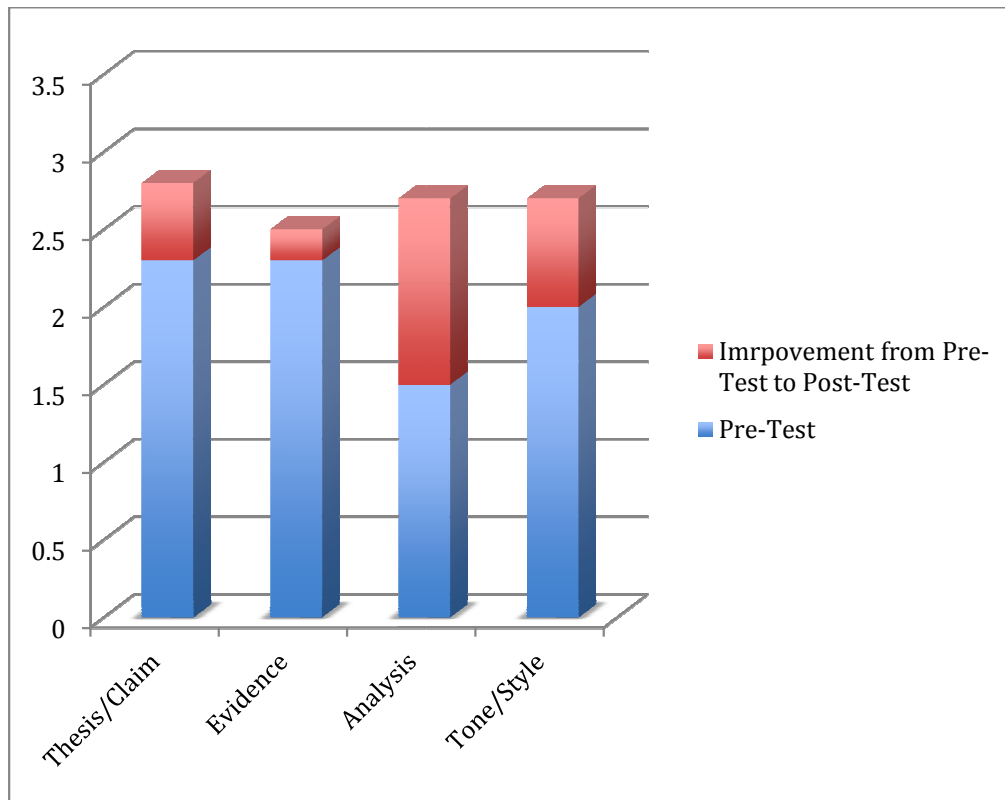


As indicated by the pre-test and post-test comparisons, students' improvement in the four areas of CCSS based writings skills for ELLs in particular nearly mirrored that of the class a whole. ELL students demonstrated the greatest improvement in their ability to analyze their evidence. In addition, ELLs showed moderate improvement in their ability to maintain an objective and formal writing tone. Where the ELL students differed the most in comparison with gains made by the class as a whole (on average) was in their improvement of writing a clear and precise thesis, as well as providing relevant and effective analysis. As a result of the writing strategies ELLs showed greater gains in their ability to write a clear thesis statement than the class average as a whole, while they improved moderately less on their ability to provide relevant and effective supporting evidence (compared to the class as a whole).

Pre-Test and Post-Test Writing Samples for ELLs



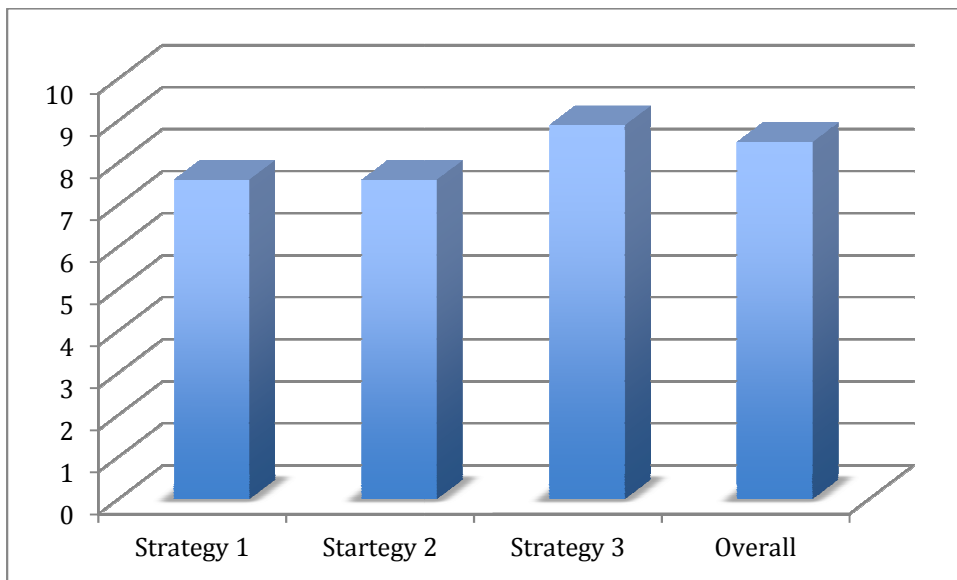
## Pre-Test Writing Sample Plus Improvement for ELLs



In addition to the findings generated from the data gathered from the pre-test and post-test writing samples, the researcher collected information from a student self-evaluation form. The purpose of the data gathered from these forms was to evaluate student perceptions of the effectiveness of each writing strategy implemented during this teacher action research project. The strategies were as follows: strategy one = modeling examples of thesis-evidence-analysis based paragraphs, strategy two = student analysis of thesis-evidence-analysis based writing, and strategy three = student writing of thesis-evidence-analysis based paragraphs using sentence frames.

Results from the student self evaluations indicate that the overall impact of the writers workshop was considerably effective, while each individual writing strategy proved to be helpful for students to improve their thesis-evidence based writing abilities. Results indicate that strategy three provided the most guidance and support for students in their development as writers. As a class average, students rated strategy three an 8.9 out of 10. In addition, strategies one and two also proved effective in helping students develop their writing skills. As a class average, strategy one and two were both rated a 7.6 out of 10. Meanwhile, the students rated the overall effectiveness of the writer’s workshop an 8.5 out of 10.

Self-Evaluations of the Writing Strategies for All Students

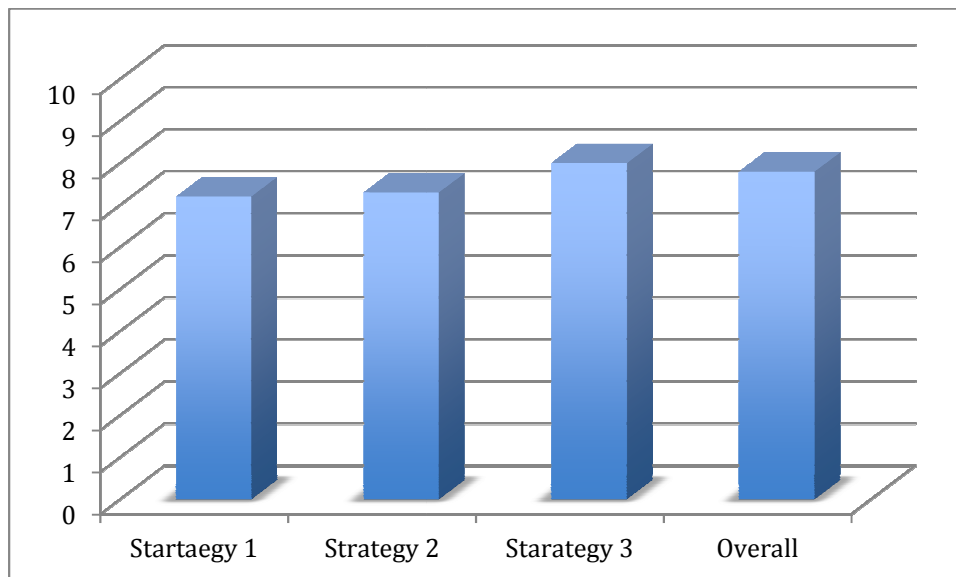


Results from ELL self-evaluations indicate that overall the writer’s workshop was effective in helping ELL students develop their thesis-evidence-analysis based writing skills. The

six ELL in the intact sample rated the overall effectiveness of the workshop at an average of 7.2 out of 10. However, this mark remains considerably lower than the class average of 8.5.

In addition, each individual writing strategy proved to be useful for the development of ELL writing abilities. As evidence by the ELL self-evaluations. Strategy three proved to be the most effective, with a average rating of 8.0 out of 10, which was only slightly lower than the class average of 8.9. Meanwhile, the ELL students rated strategy one a 7.1 and strategy two a 7.2, which were both only slightly lower than the class average of 7.6 for each strategy two and strategy three. This demonstrates that each strategy was effective in helping ELL improve their thesis-evidence-analysis based writing. However, overall, and individually, these writing strategies were less effective for the ELL than for the class average as a whole.

#### Self-Evaluations of the Writing Strategies for ELLs



**Themes**

When the sum of these results is examined collectively, several major themes become apparent. Most of the students improved their academic writing abilities. Of equal, or perhaps greater importance, is that all of the ELL improved their academic writing abilities. In addition, all students, (including all ELL) indicated that overall the writing strategies helped them improve their academic writing abilities. Along with these significant overarching results, there were several relevant themes resulting from this study.

Students learn best by doing. Out of the three strategies that students evaluated, both the class as a whole and the ELL subgroup identified strategy 3 as the most effective. Strategy 3 allowed students to use sentence frames to write their own thesis-evidence-analysis based paragraphs within the framework of a guided structure. While students indicated that all three strategies were helpful, this strategy rated the highest among the whole class and the ELL subgroup, indicating that students benefit from practicing the writing strategies.

In addition, students showed the greatest improvement in their abilities to effectively use analysis to explain how and why the evidence provided supports their claim. Post-test writing samples indicate that the ELL subgroup made the greatest gains in this category, while the class as a whole improved the most in this area of any of the three categories of writing (thesis/claim, evidence and analysis). However, the class as whole improved the most in maintaining a formal writing style and tone, while the ELL subgroup improved the second most in the same category.

Similarly, both the whole class and the ELL subgroup showed the smallest gains in the same category: stating relevant claims. This is largely because students already indicated

proficiency in this writing skill before the implementation of the writing strategies as evidenced by their pre-test writing samples.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis**

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The major findings from this study indicate that the implementation of CCSS based writing strategies helps all students improve their academic writing abilities. However, the implementation of these strategies helps ELL students improve their writing more than the average student. Students also demonstrate the greatest gains in writing development when they are provided opportunities to practice. In addition, students generally tend to demonstrate proficient to advanced levels of writing in stating claims and providing evidence to substantiate claims. However, the area where students have the most potential for growth is in developing the effective use of analysis to explain how and why their evidence supports their claim. This is especially true for ELL. It is the responsibility of teachers to ensure that effective writing strategies are being utilized in their respective disciplines that allow students to practice their writing skills in a guided and supported structure. With the arrival high stakes CCSS assessments, combined with a growing number of ELL in California's public education system, this obligation becomes an increasingly important task to ensure that all students will improve their academic writing abilities.

### **Comparison of Findings to the Literature**

The findings of this study align with previous research. This study supports the research of Haneda and Wells (2012), specifically with the first key pedagogical principle for helping ELL. This principle states that allowing students to write frequently will help develop academic

literacy skills in English. In addition, findings from this study support the research of Cho and Reich (2008), which indicates that providing English as a Second Language (ESL) targeted instructional strategies is useful for the majority of teachers in helping ELL develop academic literacy. Similarly, there are connections with the findings of this study and the research of Berg (2014), which concludes that structured academic language support helps ELL develop academic skills in English, which also promotes the idea that bilingual fluency is a valuable academic and cultural asset. Additionally, the improvements in students' academic writing abilities through the use of sentence frames support Sparza and Ahmad's Cognitive Academic Learning Approach (2007) by providing explicit instruction in academic strategies.

Where this particular study separates itself from previous research is by providing strategies that are specifically geared toward helping ELL students in preparation for CCSS and assessment. Although previous research is valuable in helping ELL prepare for CCSS and assessment, this is one of the first studies of its kind that was specifically aligned with CCSS and designed to help determine strategies that are helpful in preparing ELL for the new assessments.

### **Limitations/Gaps in the Research**

Although this study does support previous research, and provide valuable implications for future research, there are several limitations. The study is limited by the sample size. The research was only conducted in one class of 34 students, with only six ELL in the sample size. Therefore, the research is very limited to this specific group of students and may not be applicable to all students in all classroom settings. In addition, this study is limited by the location, and demographics of the school. By performing research in a very affluent community with a relatively small ELL population of 15%, results may be influenced by these factors.



Moreover, the study only took place over 95 minutes of class time, or what equates to about two standard class periods. The relatively short duration of the study limits the scope of the research by not providing longer, more sustained results. Lastly, the results of the student self evaluations may be slightly inaccurate, especially for the ELL, because despite teacher support, they may have not all fully understood exactly what was being asked of them in evaluating the effectiveness of each writing strategy.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Regardless of the limitations of the research, this study provides several important implications for future research, particularly with the transition to CCSS and assessment. Future researchers can further the results of this study by utilizing the successful writing strategies and expanding upon them by conducting longer and more comprehensive research to see the potential of long-term growth and development in students as academic writers. The progression of thesis-evidence based writing can also be expanded toward longer pieces of academic writing and ultimately help prepare all students (especially ELL) for Common Core writing assessment.

In addition, this study provides a useful collection of writing strategies that are particularly designed to help ELL develop academic literacy in preparation for CCSS and assessments. As the CCSS and assessments are implemented into schools across California, future researchers can expand upon these strategies, and adapt them in efforts to continue to support academic literacy among not only ELL, but among all students.

Lastly, the implications of this study provide a context for future researchers by shedding light on specific writing strategies that are rated most helpful by ELL in the development of their own academic writing. Future researchers can utilize the strategy of writing with sentence frames

as a building block for their students knowing that ELL in this study have demonstrated that that particular scaffolding strategy was extremely useful. Future researchers may also expand upon this skill to help prepare ELL for CCSS and assessment.

### **Overall Significance of the Study**

This study provides useful strategies in helping ELL develop academic writing skills in preparation for CCSS and assessment. Analyzing examples, and practicing academic writing with sentence frames are valuable tools that can help all students improve their writing skills. In addition to helping all students improve their academic writing abilities, these writing strategies were identified by ELL as useful scaffolding tools. Educators can apply this understanding by incorporating it into future instruction. Furthermore, social studies teachers can utilize these writing strategies to help all students develop academic literacy skills in preparation for CCSS and assessment. As the ELL population in California continues to pose unique instructional challenges for classroom teachers, the implementation of effective writing strategies remains an important piece of the instructional solution. This is especially critical in developing academic literacy skills for our ELL population.

### **About the Author**

Keith Fleming is a high school social studies teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area. His passion for education began with a commitment to social justice. Keith's mission statement as a teacher is to motivate and empower students through the transmission of knowledge and acquisition of skills for the purpose of creating positive change in the community and the world at large. Along these lines, Keith leads service trips with his students to Nicaragua each year, while volunteering locally for Beyond Differences, a non-profit committed to ending social isolation among teens and pre-teens. Keith spends his summers running a family owned white water rafting company in Northern California.

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