Language Tree Online

RESOURCE

Teacher's Guide

Targeted Writing Support for Different Proficiency Levels

Understanding Proficiency Levels

Summative ELP assessment scores describe how much English a student can produce independently, not how much they understand or how capable they are as thinkers. Three broad bands drive the accommodations in this guide. Note that these are based on WIDA proficiency levels and descriptors, but these can be applied across different ELP frameworks, such as California, ELPA21, Texas, etc.

- 1–2.5 (Entering/Emerging): Usually newcomers. Students may understand far more than they can write, so accommodations should let them show knowledge without requiring full sentences yet.
- 2.6–3.5 (Developing): Students can attempt grade-level tasks but need accommodations available as a safety net, phased out gradually rather than all at once.
- 3.6–4.5 (Expanding): Students write in English but often need conferencing to polish clarity, punctuation, and organization rather than basic language support.

How to use this guide: Start with the accommodations table below to match support to a student's level, then use the classroom tips, instruction cycle, and frames throughout the rest of the guide to put those accommodations into daily practice.

Matching Accommodations to Proficiency Level

Level	Accommodation	What it looks like in class
1.0–2.5	**Multiple choice / true-false**	Instead of "Explain why the character changed," offer: "Did the character change because of (a) a new friend or (b) a hard event?"
1.0–2.5	**Pictures and visuals**	Pair a writing prompt with an image sequence the student can point to and label before writing.
1.0–2.5	**Reduction/simplification of text**	"The extremely frightened young boy quietly tiptoed away" becomes "The boy was scared. He walked away."
1.0–2.5	**Word banks**	Give 6–10 key words tied to the topic, e.g., habitat, adapt, survive, predator for a science paragraph.
1.0–2.5	**Sentence stems and frames**	"The character is ___." (See the Writing Frames tables below.)
1–2.5	**Connections to background/culture**	Let a student compare a story setting to their home country, or write in a home-language cognate before translating a key term.
1.0–2.5	**Cognates and translations**	Use cognates like animal/animal (Spanish) to unlock vocabulary; reserve full translation for essential instructions only.
1.0-2.5	**Support to speak up**	Sentence starters and low-stakes partner talk ("turn and tell your partner one sentence") to help students move out of the silent period.
2.6–3.5	**Trials (phased out gradually)**	A student who used a word bank last month tries the task without it; if they struggle, the teacher reintroduces it.
3.6–4.5	**Writing conferences**	One-on-one or small-group check-ins focused on clarity, punctuation, and organization.

Tip: Accommodations at the 2.6–3.5 level are meant to be temporary. Track which supports a student still needs so you know when to phase them out — and when to bring one back if a task gets harder.

Classroom Tips for Differentiation and Motivation

Strategy	How to apply it
Waiting time	After asking a question, silently count to 7–10 before calling on anyone.
Rate of speech	Slow down and pause between phrases; avoid idioms ("piece of cake").
Nonlinguistic cues	Use gestures, realia, or diagrams alongside verbal instructions.
Cooperative learning	Use "think-pair-share" or "write-converse-write" before students write independently.
Preview-view-review	Preview key vocabulary, teach the content, then review the same vocabulary at the end.
Different levels	Give the same prompt with leveled frames so every student engages with the same content.
Sentence starters/writing frames	Post 2–3 frames on the board matched to levels in the room.
Relatedness	Tie prompts to students' own lives before writing about a similar situation in the text.
Relevance	End each lesson with one summary sentence of what students truly need to remember.
Individual feedback	Give short, specific feedback on one or two things per piece, not a full correction.
Mistakes as opportunities	Normalize errors as part of learning before addressing accuracy.

Research backs this approach; drawing on multiple resources and allowing students to interact with their heritage language not only improves multilingual students' writing but also builds their identity and agency in the new language.

Building Student Agency

Multilingual students need real connections to make meaning and negotiate their voice in a new language. Agency grows when students make choices in how they express an idea, not just when they complete an assignment.

Before planning a writing task, ask: What do I need to modify or simplify to build independent learners — without doing the thinking for them?

In practice:

- Offer a choice of two prompts or two frames rather than assigning one, so students select what fits their thinking.
- Let students draft a key sentence in their home language first, then bridge it into English rather than skipping the idea entirely.
- Gradually widen open-ended choices as a student moves from Entering toward Expanding, so independence builds level by level.

A Writing Instruction Cycle

Use these steps together, in roughly this order, for a new writing task:

1. Give explicit instructions. Name the skill directly ("Today we're learning to write a topic sentence") rather than assuming students will infer it.
2. Model with your own life. Write a real example from your own experience on the board so students see the thinking, not just the finished product.
3. Write with students. Co-construct a class paragraph together before students write independently.
4. Scaffold the text. Break long readings or models into smaller paragraphs or chunks.
5. Let students write one paragraph at a time. Build stamina and confidence paragraph by paragraph, with feedback between each.
6. Confer with students. Short 3 to 5-minute check-ins on one or two goals — especially important for the 3.6–4.5 band.
7. Provide multilingual prompts, sentence starters, and organizers throughout, adjusting support as described above.

Guiding Students Through Self-Assessment

Before turning students loose on this checklist, model it once on your own writing (or a class-written paragraph) so students see what "checking the box" actually looks like in a real text.

Student self-assessment checklist — I can check that:

☐ I have a topic sentence in my paragraph(s)

☐ I have a thesis statement in my introduction

☐ I have cited evidence and added my own words explaining the evidence

☐ I have an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion

How to introduce it:

- Project a sample paragraph and think aloud through each checklist item as a class.
- Have students self-check their own draft silently, checking off only what's clearly there.
- Pair students to peer-check one item each — this keeps peer feedback focused.
- Use unchecked boxes to target your next one-on-one conference.

Writing Frames by Proficiency Level

Use the same prompt for the whole class, but hand each student the frame matched to their level.

Prompt	Entering/Emerging	Developing	Expanding
Describe and identify (main character)	The character is ___.	I think the character is ___ because ___.	I can infer the character is ___, since she ___.
Compare and analyze (plant/animal cells)	Plant and animal cells both have ___.	Like the plant cell, the animal cell also contains ___.	Some similarities between the plant and animal cells include ___.
Explain (how you solved the problem)	First, I ___. Then, I ___. Finally, I ___.	I solved the problem by ___. After that, I ___. My last step was ___.	My first step was to ___. Then I ___, in order to ___. To get the result I ___.

Application tip: As a student's writing shows they no longer need the frame's exact wording, move them to the next level's frame rather than removing support entirely — this mirrors the "trials" approach above.

Sentence Frames by Thinking Verb

Match the frame to the verb in your prompt or standard — this works well as a posted anchor chart that students can reference across subjects.

Thinking verb	Sentence frames
Evaluate	I think____ is_____ because_____. /In my opinion, _____ is_____ because_____.
Compare	There are several similarities between ___ and ___ such as __, ___, and ___. / _____ has _____, while ___ has _____.
Describe	___ has ___, ___, and ___. / ___ is ___, ___, and ____. / Some characteristics of ___ are ___.
Discuss	One perspective is from ___, who believes that ___. / Some believe ___, while others suggest ___.
Summarize	The main idea of ___ is ___. / Basically, this text/video/concept is about _____.

Application tip: Post this table (or a trimmed version) as a classroom anchor chart so students can self-select a frame whenever a prompt uses one of these verbs, in any subject.

Quick Reference: Planning a Writing Lesson

Before teaching a writing lesson, check that you have:

☐ Identified each student's proficiency band and the matching accommodation(s)

☐ Prepared the right writing frame level for each student (or a small set to choose from)

☐ Built in waiting time, nonlinguistic cues, and slower speech into your instructions

☐ Planned a moment to model your own writing before students write independently

☐ Scheduled at least one short conference per student, prioritizing the 3.6–4.5 band

☐ Built in a self-assessment checkpoint using the checklist above

☐ Planned one point of individual, specific feedback per student

Sources

Smith & Pacheco (2015); Smith, Pacheco, & Almeida (2017) on heritage-language interaction and multilingual identity/agency in writing.

Bunch & Willett (2013) on multilinguals' need for meaningful connections to negotiate voice in a new language.

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