

Brisk, M. E. (2021). *Language in writing instruction: Enhancing literacy in grades 3–8*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429397769>

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Elementary and middle school teachers who are riddled with how to integrate “language” into writing instruction without resorting to discrete-point grammar may find Maria Estela Brisk’s *Language in writing instruction: Enhancing literacy in grades 3–8* book to be an excellent resource. The book is aimed at young writers who are just embarking on their academic journey in primary schools. Brisk provides many language-focused lessons and activities throughout to address the common challenges students, including English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, in Grades 3-8 encounter in writing, whereby (writing) literacy is understood to be “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate..., using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” (Montoya, 2018, p. 2). The author uses less theory-oriented discussions and instead provides countless practical ideas about how language should be taught in context and explicitly, so children can learn how to use it meaningfully as they develop their writing skills.

The book is divided into six chapters, each focusing on an aspect of language that is critical for effective writing development. Chapter One provides an overview of language integrated writing instruction and introduces the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The author introduces key constructs for the novice reader about this theoretical paradigm and then situates writing instruction within the context of these constructs.

All chapters, with the exception of this first chapter, follow the same organization: the author first identifies typical challenges associated with the topics covered in the chapter, introduces the root causes of these challenges, and then discusses how to help students overcome them. Brisk provides specific lessons and pedagogical ideas about language integrated writing instruction for Grades 3-8 children.

Chapter Two focuses on linguistic aspects to expand on the topic of writing. Brisk deconstructs, for example, verb, noun, and adverbial groups needed in extended text construction and addresses various challenges learners face (e.g., verb types, use of pronouns). She provides numerous activities to illustrate how to address these issues. Examples include verb types in different genres such as action verbs for procedural recounts and relational verbs for reports. Additionally, the author uses sample texts by students to identify common errors, followed by exemplars to underline the importance of linguistic choices to achieve the desired communicative goals. Other activities include *joint revision* and *application* of the lessons learned and *conference* with students.

Building on the ideas introduced in Chapter Two, Chapter Three focuses on language use to express complex ideas. Brisk discusses the construction of various clauses and clause complexes. Specifically, discussions focus on packing and unpacking clauses, the use of connecting words or phrases to express intended meaning, and use of non-finite clauses. Using a personal recount text by a seventh grader, the author illustrates that young writers’ texts typically contain strings of simple sentences. Subsequently, she uses a series of mentor texts to exemplify both the purpose of packing information (e.g., to report, elaborate, extend, and enhance) and the process of constructing corresponding sentence structures. The author exemplifies how to pack information in different genres as well.

Other activities in the chapter include using student texts to identify challenges to express complex ideas, exercises on packing information, revising texts with students to pack information, and having students share texts with packed information.

Chapter Four focuses on audience and voice in writing. Brisk explores two broad areas: using language that is appropriate for audience and fully developing the topic for the understanding of audience. To illustrate how to support novice writers, the author juxtaposes two versions of a text: one for children and the other for adults. For activities, Brisk has students re-write a paragraph from a mentor text for peer audiences and read three different texts intended for three different audiences and discuss the differences among the texts. As well, she incorporates lessons on audience expectations in different genres and provides tips on how to help young learners write, meeting those expectations.

The focus of Chapter Five is language use in making texts cohesive and fluid. In this chapter, Brisk underlines the difference between oral and written language, particularly because, for children, these differences are not necessarily obvious. As such, she discusses strategies to support children to make their written texts cohesive without contextual referents. For example, she delineates the purpose and characteristics of written and oral language to underline the missing link in children's writing that is responsible for making the text cohesive and fluid. Brisk also focuses on how genre-specific text structures can be taught to students. Additional strategies include topic-focused structures of English writing and theme-new information structure in textual formation and progression, use of appropriate connecting words, and use of references. In-depth discussions covering these topics provide readers with tools that they will find useful in helping young writers make their texts cohesive and fluid.

In the final chapter, Brisk focuses on using appropriate language for disciplinary writing. She identifies text structures and specific characteristics of the genres that are most common in elementary writing. Deconstructing texts used in these genres, the author helps readers point to the aspects in which explicit instruction can be directed. She concludes by elaborating on the features of texts used in four subject areas, namely, Social Studies, English Language Arts, Science, and Mathematics. The textual characteristics drawn from these subject areas help readers further situate targeted writing instruction for young children.

Overall, both pre- and in-service teachers, graduate students, and researchers with a focus on early childhood literacy will find *Language in Writing Instruction* to be a helpful resource. One of the highlights of the book is the lesson plans the author provides in each chapter for language-focused writing instruction. The book includes numerous examples and activities from the author's years of experience as a teacher educator and researcher, making it a great resource with relevant and practice-oriented lessons. With an approach that is meant to target practical aspects of writing instruction, Brisk has done a fine job of putting together helpful tips and strategies that practicing teachers can consider using verbatim. For graduate students and researchers who are interested in furthering their understanding of elementary writing instruction, particularly using SFL principles, the book will be extremely insightful. It offers a blueprint of various sub-areas of language in writing instruction that can be taken up for further research and new insights that might be helpful for teachers.

Despite its many strengths, one area of the book that readers may find a little underwhelming is a lack of specific directions of writing instruction for children who do not have English as their dominant language. Although the author has used occasional

references to ESL and/or bilingual learners when discussing lessons and activities, it is not clear if ESL learners would require a different approach to teaching “language” in writing, and if so, what that would look like. A chapter could have been added to shed some light on this important issue. Since there has been much research pointing to the unique needs of K-12 ESL writers (e.g., Ortmeier-Hooper, 2013), a lack of information on this matter may make this book somewhat incomplete to some readers. Another minor concern relates to the examples and mentor texts used in the book being mostly excerpts rather than whole student texts. Using whole written texts produced by students would have provided a better contextualization of their writing and the corresponding challenges they encounter.

Despite these potential limitations, *Language in Writing Instruction* is an excellent addition to the scholarship in K-12 writing instruction. Anyone interested in research or practice in elementary writing contexts will find the book resourceful.

References

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