Systematic Review

Writing Strategies for Elementary Multilingual Writers: A Systematic Review

Bethany P. Lewis

Abstract: Because of the Common Core State Standards (2010), all elementary students across the United States, including multilingual learners, must learn to compose written texts in opinion, informational, and narrative genres. By nature, writing also plays many diverse roles in educational settings, and advanced writing skills are needed for students to reach interdisciplinary success. Specifically, writing can be incorporated into content-area learning in subjects such as science, social studies, and math to support genre-based writing development. While advanced writing can be challenging for any student to master, multilingual students may need additional support to develop these crucial composition skills because of the complexities of learning two languages simultaneously. Furthermore, while many educators understand that multilingual students have distinct literacy needs, not all teachers are prepared to meet these specific writing instructional demands. This article presents the results of a systematic review guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach. This study investigated literacy-based empirical research used to support multilingual learners since the inception of the Common Core (2010–2023) genre-based writing standards. In characterizing effective writing supports, seven themes emerged: (a) the role of the teacher, (b) writing mentor texts, (c) the creation of multimodal texts, (d) writing scaffolds, (e) authenticity, (f) specific teacher instruction, and (g) multilingual language approaches. While this body of research is literacy-focused, these findings provide elementary teachers with specific strategies to support developing multilingual writers when implemented into traditional literacy spaces or content-area instruction.

Keywords: multilingual learners; writing (composition); supports and interventions; genres (opinion/persuasive; informational/expository; narrative); elementary

1. Challenges Faced by Multilingual Learners and Teachers in Writing

Since the inception of the Common Core State Standards (CCSSs) [1], teachers in the United States have been under immense pressure to increase students’ literacy scores in reading and writing. As a sweeping initiative, the CCSSs in English and Language Arts were originally adopted by 41 states and outlined specific expectations for students’ literacy acquisition [1]. Today, these rigorous standards still widely hold teachers accountable for the writing performances of their students and have repercussions for both educators and students, including multilingual learners (MLs).

To further complicate matters, the population of multilingual learners in public school classrooms is rapidly increasing across the United States [2]. The most recent U.S. Census [3] reports that, for the youth population, people of color now comprise the majority, and nearly 53% of Americans under the age of 18 identify as a race other than White alone. This population often includes multilingual learners or students learning English simultaneously with another language. Because diversity is increasingly a characteristic of those under 18, schools must be prepared to knowledgeably serve and educate culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners.

Despite this population’s rapid growth, linguistically diverse students struggle to score at proficiency levels comparable to their monolingual peers in reading and writing [4].
While the CCSSs [1] acknowledge that multilingual learners need unique instruction and that all students must have opportunities to “access the knowledge and skills necessary in their post–high school lives” (p. 6), the Common Core also states it is “beyond the scope of the Standards to define the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners and for students with special needs” (p. 6). Herein lies the challenge. It is crucial that multilingual students receive an equitable education, and the CCSSs have clear ramifications for MLs and teachers nationwide. However, educators are not provided with specific strategies to incorporate into their instruction, and teachers are traditionally underprepared to support culturally and linguistically diverse learners [5,6]. In other words, a significant portion of students in elementary literacy classrooms face standardized assessment pressure and a lack of teacher knowledge, both of which can block the path to literacy success for multilingual students.

While there is a need for research on successful instructional methods for compositional writing among all student populations, there is a pressing need for research with a specific focus on multilingual students. This study begins by acknowledging a gap for practitioners. Even if educators seek instructional measures to support their multilingual learners, they may not have full access to materials or have the extended time needed to explore potential resources. Furthermore, while previous systematic reviews and meta-analyses have investigated writing instruction [7] and the relationship between writing and MLs [8], no studies could be located that focused on multilingual compositional writing abilities while also considering the Common Core writing genres and standards. Nevertheless, these broadly used standards are a reality for teachers and multilingual students within the United States, so researchers must investigate effective instructional practices and scaffolds that work within these writing-genre expectations.

2. The Importance of Writing Skills

It is potentially overlooked how much writing is a part of our daily lives as adults. However, in post-school contexts, like careers, workplaces, and higher education, sophisticated writing skills are a necessity [9]. From composing emails and grocery lists to drafting briefs and presentations, writing is a tool for communication, memory retention, and emotional well-being. In addition to being an essential aspect of higher education, careers, and daily life, a robust body of research suggests that students must write effectively to reach academic success [10]. Primarily, when students receive instruction for specific writing skills, corresponding skills in reading likewise improve [11]. However, writing also has a crucial interdisciplinary role when students use writing to support content learning in areas such as science, social studies, and math. Proficient writing skills become more integral as students progress through elementary schools and into secondary spaces, where students are required to engage with and compose more complex texts [12].

Given the paramount importance of nurturing successful writers in elementary settings [10], it is crucial for teachers to be equipped to integrate evidence-based writing instruction throughout the school day for all learners, including multilingual learners. In particular, incorporating genre-based writing tasks can be a powerful tool for enhancing learning in both literacy and content areas. For example, when students undertake writing tasks, such as crafting informational research in science or expressing opinions about social studies topics, writing enables learners to process information. Writing offers opportunities for learners to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of the content-area material while enhancing and improving literacy skills. However, despite the need for students to develop robust writing skills, studies show that teachers are often underprepared to teach writing, and writing instruction in many classrooms is limited [13].

Because difficulty in writing could impact success in school and beyond, this study seeks to investigate the current body of research and illuminate strategies that elementary teachers (K-5) can incorporate into their classroom instruction to support multilingual learners as they compose texts in opinion, informational, and narrative genres. Despite the importance of this topic, there are significant gaps in the current research, particularly in
identifying clear, effective instructional strategies for teachers of MLs. This study aims to address these gaps while guiding scholars to new avenues to further investigate supportive measures for MLs as they develop into proficient writers based on the standards outlined by the Common Core [1].

3. Theoretical Framework

Grosjean’s [14] holistic bilingualism perspective guided this literature review. Holistic bilingualism acknowledges both the complexities of multilingual language acquisition and focuses on the totality of language development. Rather than viewing language development as separate monolingual processes, this perspective emphasizes that literacy development is a unified, entwined process [14]. Cross-language transfer theory is also central to holistic bilingualism [15]. This theory postulates that learning in one language scaffolds learning in a second language, as well as the inverse [16,17]. Holistic bilingualism favors using all of a child’s linguistic repertories to support literacy development and encourages movement away from monolingual instructional practices. Thus, the intentional integration of meaningful writing opportunities to develop all of a student’s languages is vital for the acquisition of literacy skills for young readers and writers. Furthermore, monolingual views can limit educators’ understanding of their students’ literacy abilities. Since the goal for students is biliteracy, evaluating students’ literacy abilities through more than an English-only lens is necessary [18]. Holistic bilingualism frames multilingual language use through an asset lens and directly counters the dominant deficit perspectives on multi-language use in classrooms and schools. This perspective provides a lens for understanding instructional practices that can be incorporated into literacy and content-area spaces for students’ multi-linguistic literacy development.

However, despite the importance of holistic bilingualism, political and social constructs have long played an essential role in defining language and its usage in educational settings, significantly impacting the education MLs have received [19,20]. Students who speak multiple languages have traditionally been viewed through an English-only deficit lens rather than through the asset lens of multilingualism [21,22]. A historical focus on English acquisition has been predominant, and additional language skills have been seen as a secondary goal or even a hindrance to English language learning. Today, it is still extensively standard for multilinguals to experience solely monolingual literacy pedagogies that do not fully support the development of a ML’s writing abilities.

4. The Current Study

This systematic review focuses on supporting elementary (K-5) MLs as they compose genre-based texts in the CCSS genres of narrative, informational, and opinion genres. Thus, the following questions guided the analysis:

**Research Question 1:** what research has been completed since the inception of the Common Core State Standards [1] about multilingual learners and genre-based writing?

**Research Question 2:** within this research, what strategies and insights have been identified that can help elementary educators support multilingual students with their development of compositional writing skills?

Answering these questions offers insight into the practices that educators can incorporate into their instruction to support linguistically diverse students while additionally highlighting future avenues of research that are necessary to explore for a deeper understanding of elementary MLs as developing writers.

5. Methodological Approach

For this systematic review study, the PRISMA (preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses) approach was employed for the reviewing process [23,24]. The
selection process involved several steps, including predetermined criteria that guided the inclusion process. Specifically, studies were required to:

1. be peer-reviewed with original findings and written in English;
2. be participants that were multilingual elementary-aged children (K-5);
3. be completed in a United States context;
4. include data collected between the years 2010 and 2023;
5. have multilingual genre-based writing (e.g., opinion/persuasive, informational/expository, or narrative) development as the focus of the study.

The initial search focused on electronic databases with publications in education and psychology. These included the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO databases. Broad search terms were used to ensure the inclusion of all available peer-reviewed studies on writing in elementary schools. The Boolean search terms included: (ELL or “English Language Learner” OR bilingual OR multilingual) AND (writer OR writing OR write) AND elementary.

These beginning search terms generated 677 results from the three databases. Out of a concern that “elementary” could have limited the results, the exact search was recompleted; however, the term “elementary” was replaced by a list of grade levels, including kindergarten OR grade 1 OR grade 2 OR grade 3 OR grade 4 OR grade 5. This secondary search uncovered an additional 265 studies that aligned with the selected search terms.

After removing the duplicate studies (n = 147), a total of 795 results were transferred to a Microsoft Excel chart for further evaluation.

As displayed in the PRISMA flow diagram (see Figure 1), each study was first evaluated at the abstract level during the screening process, and 638 articles were eliminated during this first step, leaving a subset of 157 articles that were marked as needing further evaluation. For each potential study, the full text was downloaded and read so that the article could be evaluated. Any studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were eliminated. A substantial portion of the studies (n = 202) were excluded because the participants were not identified as elementary MLs—for instance, secondary contexts (e.g., [25]) and higher-education research-focused studies. Furthermore, studies completed in international settings (e.g., [26]) were excluded. While these articles could give insight into instructional practices that support ML writers, the CCSSs only have direct implications for students within United States contexts. Additionally, because of the interdisciplinary nature of writing, a significant number of studies (n = 255) used writing to investigate other phenomena. Many studies used writing to explore reading comprehension, evaluate scientific understanding, or assess mathematical instructional methods. Because these studies did not provide insight into supporting compositional writing, they were excluded from this systematic review. After a close reading of each empirical article, 43 studies were identified as meeting the outlined inclusion criteria.

Data Extraction and Analysis

To understand the characteristics of the research at the intersection of MLs and genre-based writing instruction, the selected studies were coded using Saldaña’s [27] conception of first- and second-cycle coding. During the first coding round, each study’s discrete characteristics were recorded. Specifically recorded were the theoretical framework, if included, the research methodology, the grade level, the number of participants, the focused writing genre, characteristics of the intervention, and the outcomes for students. Analytical memos were recorded during this process, and commonalities across the corpus were noted. For the second analysis phase, pattern coding occurred to derive meaning from similar codes, condense the data, and identify cross-data themes [27]. Each code was recorded into the digital coding frame, and the codes were later collapsed into seven thematic categories presented in the subsequent section. Example subcodes for each identified thematic category are presented in Table 1.
**Table 1.** Themes, descriptions, example subcodes, and the corresponding relevant research studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example Subcodes</th>
<th>Relevant Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Teacher</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where the teacher played an impactful role in the multilingual learners’ writing development.</td>
<td>teacher’s understanding, responsive to students, facilitate student learning, asset-based perspective, co-construct curriculum with children, encourage bilingual practice, repositioning language beyond English, praise, teacher transformation, resistant, bilingual educator, shared values, modified curriculum songs, example texts, family poems, bilingual books, children’s literature, previous students’ writing, mentor texts, picture books, “author studies,” explore genre multi-media presentation, pictures, drawings, PowerPoint, photography, color choice, visual composing, design, research posters, text features, advertisements, eBooks, audio recordings</td>
<td>[28–40]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Mentor Texts</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where mentor texts were used to impact the multilingual learners’ writing development.</td>
<td></td>
<td>[28,33–37,40–43]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of Multimodal Texts</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where students used diverse semiotic modes to create texts.</td>
<td></td>
<td>[29,31,33–35,40,42,44–51]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Scaffolds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Language as a Scaffold</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where oral language skills were used or encouraged to support the multilingual learners’ writing development.</td>
<td>collaboration, oral language skills, “buddy pairs,” talk, requesting help from peer, relying on others, translilingual talk, partner talk, oral code switching, discuss vocabulary, brainstorming, sharing of work, feedback discussion</td>
<td>[28,30,32,34,37–40,46,48,52,53]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Scaffolds</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where technology was used to support the multilingual learners’ writing development.</td>
<td>dictation, Google Translate, speech to text, typing, digital writing assessment, blogging, imperfect technology</td>
<td>[38,49,50,54–57]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example Subcodes</th>
<th>Relevant Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Targeted Scaffolds</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where a specific scaffold was used to support the multilingual learners' writing development.</td>
<td>graphic organizer, &quot;Thinking Maps,&quot; writing outline, idea collection, five-part essay structure, sentence frames, writing posters, joint text construction, goal setting</td>
<td>[28,33,37–39,43,48,50,58–61]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Writing Purposes</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where students wrote for authentic and real-world purposes to support their writing development.</td>
<td>pen-pals, letters, topic choice, showcase personal experience, explore emotion, communication, exploration of self, narratives of disruption, address issues, authentic argument</td>
<td>[32,35,37,40,46–48,57]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Worlds: Communities, Families, and Authentic Audiences</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where students were encouraged to build upon their experiences outside of school settings to support their writing development.</td>
<td>funds of knowledge, older siblings, family literacy contributions, outside writing context, authentic audiences, &quot;real readers,&quot; audience awareness, community cultural wealth, responsiveness, parents, write to family, pets</td>
<td>[29,30,39,41,44,46,56,62]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Teacher Instruction</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where specific instruction on a topic or strategy was taught to support the multilinguals’ writing development.</td>
<td>self-regulated strategy development, Integrated Reading and Writing Instruction (IRWI), vocabulary, lexical diversity, writing productivity, small group instruction, phonological awareness translanguaging, reluctance beyond English, deliberate language choice, negotiation of language, bilingual text, translation, need for formal second language instruction, inventive second language spelling, dual language programs, biliteracy assessment</td>
<td>[36,53,59,60,63–67]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual Language Approaches</td>
<td>Instances within the studies where students deployed their full linguistic repertoire to support their writing development.</td>
<td></td>
<td>[28–31,39–42,44–46,49–51,53,62,63,68–70]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Findings

The following section presents an overview of the characteristics of the 43 studies included in this systematic review. A synthesis of each theme is outlined, and a discussion of how these instructional approaches can support MLs in classroom writing contexts is provided. This review readily addressed the research questions, highlighting tangible strategies that elementary teachers can incorporate into their classrooms as multilingual students become proficient writers.

6.1. Overview of the Articles

Presented in Table 2, the studies in this systematic review used various methodological approaches, including quantitative \( (n = 11) \), qualitative \( (n = 28) \), and mixed methods \( (n = 4) \). While many studies \( (n = 15) \) investigated writing instruction across age levels, some investigated individual grades. First, second, and fifth grades were the most common elementary contexts \( (n = 6) \), while fourth grade \( (n = 2) \) was the least common context. As for writing genres, the studies were diverse and included narrative \( (n = 14) \), opinion/persuasion \( (n = 9) \), and informational/expository texts \( (n = 8) \). Three additional studies had the student participants compose poetry. The final studies \( (n = 9) \) incorporated a mixture of writing texts spanning the CCSS’s three genre categories. The following sections discuss the seven themes identified across the studies that were selected for the current review: (a) role of the teacher, (b) writing mentor texts, (c) creation of multimodal texts, (d) writing scaffolds, (e) authenticity, (f) specific teacher instruction, and (g) multilingual language approaches.

Table 2. Overview of studies included in the review.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Frequency ( (n) )</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>65.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion/Persuasion</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2. Role of the Teacher

Because of their considerable role in classrooms, teachers’ knowledge of identity-affirming literacy practices is crucial for multilingual students. In these studies, the educators either chose to create spaces that supported multilingualism and multilingual writers, or they disregarded the advantages of multilingualism and viewed linguistic diversity through a deficit lens (e.g., [32]).

As seen in Machado and Hartman’s [35] work, many teacher participants in these studies were committed to building upon students’ cultural and linguistic resources within the classroom spaces. With the educator’s willingness and guidance, students experienced diversity-supportive instructional practices to evolve as writers because their identities and experiences were welcomed foundations for their writing compositions. In the majority of the reviewed research, the teachers intentionally pursued methods that were in the best interests of their multilingual students (e.g., [30,31,33]). These teachers deeply considered their classroom practices and strove to select pedagogies that moved beyond the dominant monolingual instructional tactics. Specifically, the teachers welcomed bilingual literacy practices into the classroom by incorporating multilingual mentor texts, encouraging translanguaging, and providing technology that supported bilingual language development. Additionally, the practitioners provided students with choices on writing topics, saw families as linguistic experts [30], and prized multilingual genre-based compositions.

However, teachers were only sometimes prepared to support the development of students’ multilingual writing skills or view dual language skills as assets. For example, during Fisher-Ari and Flint’s [32] qualitative study, the scholars’ “early conversations with the teachers indicated that they (the teacher participants) felt their ELs (English Learners) were coming to school with linguistic, cultural, experiential, and familial deficits” [32] (p. 359). Yet, after three years of collaboration, the practitioners better understood their students’ multilingual writing competencies, and they conceived the benefits of initially developing students’ multilingual literacy abilities within classroom spaces. This transformation for educators was complex, and the process highlighted a need for professional development, which was apparent in three other studies included in this systematic review [33,36,37]. Access to professional development or higher education gave teachers the instructional support to visualize their MLs’ lives as “complex and rich” [32] (p. 369). The teachers could see students’ lived experiences as valuable for guiding writing compositions and instruction.

This first theme was an essential underlying principle for the subsequently discussed themes. For linguistically diverse students to reach their compositional writing potential, teachers must actively choose to incorporate multilingual writing practices into their classroom spaces. The following themes outline specific strategies from the reviewed
research studies that content area and literacy elementary teachers can incorporate into their classrooms to support multilingual genre-writing development.

6.3. Writing Mentor Texts

Another theme that emerged was the usage of mentor texts to guide multilingual writers as they composed genre-based compositions. However, the incorporated mentor texts varied by type and implementation usage, and included published literature, student-authored texts, wordless picture books [28], and teacher-modeled texts [33]. For example, the focus teacher in Hong’s [34] study used both children’s literature texts and a previous student’s authored text to guide multilingual students to craft their own poetry. In DeNicolo et al.’s [41] study on testimonios, undergraduate students wrote model compositional texts to influence third-grade narrative writing. These exemplary texts gave students insights into the power of testimonial narrative writing and encouraged the children to make connections with the mentor pieces as they crafted their own compositions.

Specifically, students experienced the mentor texts through the lens of a writer. The texts were engaged with to study the author’s craft, familiarize students with particular genres [43], or help students visualize the structural components of the texts [36]. Several studies deconstructed the mentor texts, guiding students to investigate how advanced writers structured their poetry and prose. For instance, in Machado and Hartman’s [35,42] studies, the mentor texts provided by the structured curriculum were replaced with bilingual poetry. When students encountered these poems during instruction, it reframed translingual writing as an intentional craft move and showed the children avenues for incorporating bilingual writing in their own compositions.

Equally important, while mentor texts can be a route to assist multilingual compositional writers, O’Hallaron [37] highlights an additional salient note for educators. The thoughtful selection of mentor texts used during writing instruction is vital. These texts must be evaluated to ensure they align with writing instructional goals and are accessible to students. In particular, mentor texts may limit a child’s ability to guide their writing if the text is too difficult to comprehend. Because of this, teachers should consider a broad range of texts and text types to support young writers in both content areas and during literacy instruction. Additionally, teachers should be open to crafting their own exemplary texts for MLs to emulate. Texts composed by teachers can serve as effective writing models and demonstrate the importance of writing when one becomes an adult.

6.4. Creation of Multimodal Texts

In thirteen of the research studies, the multilingual participants crafted multimodal genre-based compositions. According to Alvarez [44], multimodality “represents all the resources and tools that contribute to children’s sense-making processes and forms of expression; these can be language domains, visuals, movement, artefacts, digital technology, etc.” (p. 98). While the five-paragraph essay has been the dominant structure for genre writing [71], creating multimodal texts allows students to utilize all their linguistic resources to compose narrative, informational, and opinion writing pieces. When teachers encourage multimodal compositional writing, multilingual students can demonstrate their learning through a combination of sensory and communicative modes. Because the creation of written text can be cognitively straining for young writers [13], visual literacies and multimodal compositions can provide teachers additional insight into MLs’ storytelling and composing abilities beyond just the written words [34,44]. In other words, encouraging different representational modes can contribute to MLs accurately expressing their thoughts and conveying meaning [49].

While hand-drawn images depicting compositional text were the most common form of multimodal work, some studies had students create informational projects, narrative presentations, and persuasive advertisements. Two studies incorporated photography into the writing instruction [46,47]. Handing students a camera before crafting personal narratives presented a unique classroom writing opportunity. As seen in Haines’s [47] work,
photography can guide students’ writing and be a source of motivation. Furthermore, the photographic images were an avenue for incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogies as students brought their outside worlds, including their families and communities, into literacy spaces.

Rowe [50] showcases an additional strategy for teachers seeking to incorporate multimodal texts into elementary writing classrooms. Second graders in her qualitative study composed eBooks by adding visual images and audio recordings to their stories and became “enthusiastic composers” [50] (p. 339). Overall, these studies illuminate the possibilities of transforming classroom spaces through multimodal composition, pointing to how these literacy practices can support emerging multilingual students. Educators should seek to shift what constitutes legitimate composing in traditional English literacy classrooms and welcome storytelling in diverse modes, including visual, linguistic, and audio representations.

6.5. Writing Scaffolds

A significant percentage of these studies (n = 14) emphasized the usage of scaffolds to expand multilingual students’ writing development. These articles provided insight into potential instructional practices that can be used with multilingual writers in three subcategories: oral language as a scaffold, technology scaffolds, and targeted scaffolds.

6.5.1. Oral Language as a Scaffold

Oral language proficiency has long been known to impact multilingual developing writers [53], and the results from this corpus further reveal how particularly ongoing and collaborative oral dialogues can assist multilingual writers as they compose. Eleven studies used oral language as a writing scaffold for MLs. Throughout the writing process, students utilized oral language to aid in planning, drafting, and editing their compositions. Peer-writing partnerships, also referred to as buddy pairs, were present in a subset of the studies [28,32,38,39]. For instance, Gort [52] investigated students’ pair-writing-related talk when first-grade students composed narratives. She found that, most often, MLs used their partner pairs and combined language repertories to reflect on, evaluate, or regulate their own writing or peer’s compositions. This oral code-switching allowed students to solve problems and address questions they encountered while completing the writing task. Hong [34] echoed the importance of oral language as a scaffold of the writing process. She argues that incorporating oral discussion opportunities motivated students “to observe, talk and think like poets” and work through the idea-generation process (p. 176).

An underlying premise of these studies is that promoting oral language usage in writing-classroom spaces can allow linguistically diverse students to boost both their writing and verbal language repertories. As Durán [30] states, “What children can do collaboratively today; they can do on their own in the future” (p. 88). This evidence should motivate teachers to shift away from silent independent writing times and alternatively create collaborative spaces where students can orally communicate using their full linguistic repertoire to support their writing development.

6.5.2. Technology Scaffolds

A small group of studies (n = 6) gave insight into technology scaffolds that could be incorporated into instruction to support ML writers. For instance, Arcon et al. [54] tested the impacts of dictation (DT) and speech-to-text (STT) software on the quality of MLs’ written composition. They found that, relative to handwriting, STT produced significantly higher holistic quality writing and a lower error rate in students’ compositions. STT also potentially lowered the cognitive effort students needed to apply to create persuasive writing texts.

Technology also allowed students to enhance their writing and served as a means of communication between individual students in classroom spaces. For example, in Squire and Clark’s [38] research, fourth-grade opinion writers used Google Translate as an assistive
technology when their heritage language was divergent from their classroom writing partners. Translation support allowed young writers to collaborate verbally, move through the writing process, and further enhance their written texts. Google Translate was also the focus of Rowe’s [56] research, and students utilized the software to write informational writing compositions. Specifically, the translation service encouraged the exploration of new languages, including those beyond a student’s native language. Students used the resource to communicate with classroom peers and to incorporate bilingual elements into their animal informational texts.

Digital literacy practices combined with technology scaffolds were also noted as promising routes for supporting MLs as they created genre-based texts. In another study by Rowe [50], second graders created multimodal eBooks as an approach for composing narratives. Likewise, Shin’s [57] qualitative case study investigated how blogging in diverse genres developed a multilingual student’s academic confidence. Because of the technology scaffold, the child began to visualize himself as a “capable peer” and confident writer (p. 76). The focus child of the study used writing and blogging to increase his social recognition among his peers, especially his social standing among boys, which allowed him to provide feedback to others and grow individually as a writer.

Across these studies, translation technologies were one promising pathway for teachers to develop writers’ bilingual skills and increase communication between multilinguals when they have different first languages (L1). However, researchers also noted the limitations of technology scaffolds. For example, Kim et al. [55] observed that technology inhibited younger students from showcasing their full linguistic abilities. When asked to write in a digital format, the students stated they enjoyed the typing element, yet students “generally performed best on the paper task compared to the online tasks” (p. 494). Thus, this study implicates paper–pencil composing as still developmentally appropriate for young first- and second-grade MLs. In another limitation example, Rowe [56] acknowledged that Google Translate was an imperfect tool because it failed to fully capture the complexity of named languages. Instead, the students saw the tool as knowledgeable, even when their understanding of their language was more accurate.

6.5.3. Targeted Scaffolds

One strategy apparent in this literature is to implement targeted scaffolds to support multilingual writers, such as graphic organizers (e.g., [28,60]). Specifically, Squire and Clark’s [38] usage of graphic organizers for fourth-grade opinion writing helped students focus, organize their thoughts, and capture their ideas before writing. “Thinking Maps” were used as a targeted scaffold during the prewriting stage in Cooks and Sunseri’s [58] work. These writing scaffolds positively impacted students’ expository rubric scores, increasing growth in the organization and idea-elaboration categories.

Like the previously discussed writing supports, educators should thoughtfully select targeted scaffolds. Wiley and McKernan’s [61] research shows that some scaffolds, such as sentence frames, that exceedingly focus on a sole writing concept can restrict students’ creativity, impact their language usage, and lead to formulaic writing compositions. In addition, teachers should acknowledge that, when students can complete writing tasks without the scaffold, then gradual removal of the implemented support is necessary. Gradual withdrawal of the scaffold transfers the learning responsibility back to the multilingual student [13].

6.6. Authenticity

A portion of the studies (n = 13) indicated the importance of authentic writing instruction for MLs. Writing for authentic purposes and audiences and incorporating the students’ outside worlds were encouraged in these classroom spaces.
6.6.1. Authentic Writing Purposes

Several publications presented evidence of how writing for authentic purposes, such as positioning writing as a form of communication or writing for an intentional goal, influenced students. Authentic writing experiences engaged and motivated multilingual students, further encouraging them to envision writing as a necessary and influential aspect of their own lives. Additionally, giving students the choice to self-select topics was a sub-theme. Personal topic choices also expanded the students’ perspectives of writing, making the writing experiences more authentic for the learners. For instance, in Fisher-Ari and Flint’s [32] study, when educators shifted their pedagogical practices, it opened the door for students to explore their own lives and backgrounds through genre-based writing. This instructional shift created a sense of authorial ownership, and teachers “came to appreciate and acknowledge the rich diversity of student’s lives and experiences” (p. 369). Similarly, Machado and Hartman [35] posit that authentic topics, such as transnational experiences, can demonstrate students’ awareness of audience and linguistic flexibility. The findings in Zisselsberger’s [40] case study are also particularly compelling. Because of humanizing literacy practices, “students began expanding their definition of writing, from the idea of ‘expressing oneself’ to ‘[taking] action’ and ‘getting what you need’” (p. 132). The fifth-grade MLs realized persuasive writing could serve the vital purpose of writing for social justice. Another implication highlighted in Zisselsberger’s [40] study was how writing for an authentic purpose allowed students to experience writing in a real-world context, motivating the learners to use rhetoric to portray their opinions and ideas effectively.

6.6.2. Outside Worlds: Communities, Families, and Authentic Audiences

In these studies, the practitioners and researchers encouraged students to bring their outside worlds, communities, and families into their writing experiences. Haine’s [47] noted that, when her MLs were encouraged to incorporate their outside lives into their writing through photography, the student’s motivation and enjoyment of writing increased. The students “wrote prolifically and willingly shared their writing with the classroom community” (p. 26). Likewise, DeNicolo et al.’s [41] analysis found that, during authentic narrative writing experiences, “students found their linguistic capital meaningful because of its connection with other forms of community cultural wealth” (p. 235). Sunseri and Sunseri [39] also highlight the importance of mindfully choosing writing activities that build upon background knowledge and students’ funds of knowledge to help learners see the value of writing experiences.

Also aligning with this theme, three studies encouraged the students to write for authentic audiences in ways other educators can emulate in their own educational context. Two of Durán’s included studies [29,30] have pertinent examples. In her 2018 study, students had opportunities in the classroom to re-write and translate Spanish-language texts after parents were invited to send in poems and songs that families were willing to share. In doing so, families were positioned as literacy and linguistic experts, which validated home literacy practices. Durán [29] also developed an audience-focused writing unit, and students used message journals to build literacy skills through written communication with their families. Comparably, in two studies, multilingual pen pals served as an authentic audience [29,46]. Written conversations between multilingual peers encouraged students to internalize and adapt to their audience’s perspectives and gave the children a compelling reason to write. Overall, when the students’ outside worlds are connected to classroom writing compositions, children can conceive the value of proficient writing skills, and families are positioned as biliteracy experts with valuable knowledge to contribute to classroom instruction [30].

6.7. Specific Teacher Instruction

Nearly a quarter of the studies (n = 9) exclusively measured the effects of individual writing approaches or instructional topics. For example, three studies [64,66,67] analyzed vocabulary breadth and its effect on the quality of compositions. While it is unlikely that
simply increasing vocabulary instruction would solve all ML writing challenges, the results from these studies implicate a connection between multilingual students’ vocabulary and their writing quality. Direct vocabulary instruction improved ML’s compositional texts in multiple areas, including word choice and holistic writing quality. Thus, teachers should consider incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction into both their literacy and content-area contexts to strengthen the emerging multilingual student’s writing.

Wood [65] also examined a potential instructional focus when investigating transitions or transitional words and their predictive relationship with writing quality scores, finding that increased usage of transition words predicted higher scores in quality on the scoring rubric. Since connective word usage significantly predicted the quality of ML’s writing, explicit instruction in transitions could improve an ML’s writing compositions.

The need for specific instruction was also addressed in Kim and colleagues’ [63] study. The researchers pointed to the influence of higher-order cognitive skills and their relationship with advanced writing. Students with progressed cognitive abilities correspondingly had more advanced biliteracy skills when their writing was evaluated.

6.8. Multilingual Language Approaches

Biliteracy instruction has been associated with increased literacy achievement and greater cognitive flexibility. Many studies (n = 20) demonstrated how multilingual language practices empowered students, encouraging them to utilize their full multilingual repertoires for composing writing pieces and, thereby, advancing their writing abilities. Code switching, code meshing, and translanguaging in both the oral and written forms progressed the students’ biliteracy development, and students strategically employed their first and second languages to navigate the writing process. Velasco and García [51] found that students used translanguaging approaches to adapt to their audience and writing purpose. Translanguaging served as a writing scaffold, and its usage motivated the students to advance their own learning with self-regulation tactics during the writing process. Axelrod and Cole [46] also found that encouraging translanguaging during writing opportunities allowed elementary authors to incorporate their own voices into the compositions and build knowledge together as a classroom writing community.

Another effective strategy for supporting students’ writing development within this literature was their placement in dual language or biliteracy programs [69], such as Literacy Squared. For instance, in a study by Montanari and colleagues [70], the researchers investigated the relationship between first and second languages and the influence that both languages had on students’ writing quality. Their findings show that students in biliteracy classrooms parallelly develop their heritage language and English. Moreover, the colleagues postulate that “advanced writing ability in one language was associated with advanced writing ability in the other and limited writing ability in one language was also associated with limited writing ability in the other” [70] (p. 54), further supporting the theory of cross-linguistic transfer [15]. Escamilla et al. [68] assessed students’ writing using a holistic bilingual rubric in another study completed in a biliteracy context. They found that, by evaluating students’ writing production in both Spanish and English, educators could better understand the student’s full literacy proficiency. Overall, these studies imply that, by encouraging translanguaging and dual language genre-based writing, teachers can better evaluate both students’ writing abilities and knowledge of the content material.

However, although the advantages of multilingual composing were apparent, three studies [29,31,42] addressed that elementary students were initially reluctant to compose in both languages. Machado and Hartman [42] posit that this hesitation could be due to the “dominant language ideologies present in children’s lives” (p. 499). Moreover, some students may not see writing classrooms as places where bilingual language use is “allowed” [31] (p. 419). Therefore, educators should not be discouraged if students are not naturally deploying their biliteracy skills for learning and writing purposes. Modeling—possibly with mentor texts—and direct instruction may be needed to encourage students to use their full linguistic knowledge [41].
According to this body of research, literacy skills acquired in one language are closely linked to literacy abilities developed in another [45, 63, 68]. Therefore, teachers should not fear students using multiple languages in their writing and content-area classrooms; instead, motivating students to read and write in multiple languages is a powerful tactic to support learning and development rather than being a hindrance to English acquisition.

7. Discussion

Given the increasing need to support multilinguals as they develop their writing skills in elementary settings, this review is a valuable resource that synthesizes the strategies and tools from recent research studies. These research-based methods are specifically designed to assist elementary practitioners in supporting their linguistically and culturally diverse students as they compose texts that meet the expectations of the Common Core genre-writing standards. The following insights from the review are particularly noteworthy for elementary educators.

First, this study reinforces that teachers play a vital role in supporting multilingual students in elementary classrooms. Though teachers might not have all the instructional answers, as Wiley and McKernan [61] state, “Our role is not providing “perfect” tools or answers but instead . . . to test new ideas in the classroom” (p. 167). Teaching MLs to write is a complex process, but explicit and thoughtful experimentation can help educators identify instructional methods that assist their multilingual writers. Educators must consciously select evidence-based pedagogical practices to use with multilingual students in their classrooms if MLs are going to reach their full writing potential.

Second, these findings reiterate the necessity of providing multilingual students with unique instruction and intentional supports to help them become proficient writers. Cultivating learning environments that offer authentic writing experiences and encourage the use of multiple languages is essential. Educators should strive to promote and nurture biliteracy skills in classrooms as students engage with texts and process content-area information. Specifically, the incorporation of bilingual mentor texts, writing scaffolds, and the use of technology can facilitate this process, enabling students to leverage their full language repertories to write genre-based texts.

Third, reconceptualizing restrictive definitions of what writing is or is not is crucial for multilingual success. Intentionally moving away from monolingual and monomodal writing compositions is essential for disrupting restrictive views of genre writing. Instead, classrooms and assignments should be reconfigured to welcome translanguaging and multimodality. The written texts of our world are diverse, so classroom practices must reflect genuine writing experiences beyond those of traditional school assignments.

Fourth, providing opportunities for students to build upon their cultures, languages, and experiences to process content-area information and develop advanced writing skills is vital. When writing activities and prompts are tied to students’ outside worlds, these experiences become assets and resources for learning and creating texts. Students can see the connection between their classroom experiences, visualizing how writing authentically fits into their lives.

Combined, these four key takeaways highlight an additional need for practitioners, namely professional development. While reframing writing spaces to support multilingual students is necessary, it is not an easy undertaking. Teachers need access to robust, empirically based professional development that provides insight into multilingual supportive literacy pedagogies. Specifically, the research has emphasized that teacher coaching could provide necessary opportunities for feedback as new instructional strategies are implemented into classroom spaces [72].

8. Future Research

Although informative, more than just the findings of this systematic review are required to ensure that multilingual students reach their full literacy potential. The current state of education presents a complex landscape for teachers who are under immense pres-
sure to boost literacy scores while navigating district and state-level oversight. Research must delve into methods that cater to the needs and identities of multilingual students while also acknowledging the realities of the CCSS and the current assessment era. This way, educators can envision how these practices can realistically be integrated into their literacy and content-area instruction to support their students’ achievement.

One opportunity for future research this review highlights is a deeper investigation into self-regulated strategy development (SRSD). While this strategy has previously been considered beneficial for struggling writers [73,74], including exceptional learners [75], only one study in this corpus [59] investigated the strategy with elementary MLs when composing genre writing. If implemented in elementary writing classrooms, SRSD could potentially support ML’s writing development to meet the genre-writing expectations outlined by the CCSS.

Furthermore, most studies investigated during this review process used qualitative research methods. There is significant room for quantitative studies, specifically longitudinal studies, in the field of ML elementary writing. Research that quantitatively measures the impact of writing modifications on students’ performance using standardized writing measures could provide a more robust understanding of how these strategies can improve students’ writing abilities.

9. Conclusions

This systematic review has the potential to inform the development of more effective instructional practices while also providing practitioners with avenues for fostering the development of ML’s genre-writing abilities. Specifically, this research body showcases that linguistically inclusive practices can encourage students to visualize themselves as writers, motivating students to compose texts. Engaging multilingual students in writing opportunities in both content areas and literacy spaces can help learners process pertinent information and improve their writing abilities; however, when these opportunities are combined with thoughtful pedagogical supports, authentic experiences, and intentional instruction, students can grow as writers and see writing as necessary for their future lives. It is essential to authorize students to negotiate their linguistic writing abilities to ensure students meet rigorous academic writing standards, such as those outlined by the Common Core.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References


43. Pavlak, C.M. “It is hard fun”: Scaffolded biography writing with English learners. *Read. Teach.* 2013, 66, 405–414. [CrossRef]

44. Alvarez, A. Drawn and written funds of knowledge: A window into emerging bilingual children’s experiences and social interpretations through their written narratives and drawings. *J. Early Child. Lit.* 2017, 18, 97–128. [CrossRef]


49. Ramos, L.B.; Musanti, S.I. “I don’t like English because it is jard.” Exploring multimodal writing and translanguaging practices for biliteracy in a dual language classroom. *NABE J. Res. Pract.* 2021, 11, 32–45. [CrossRef]


65. Wood, C.L. Connective use in academic writing by students with language learning disabilities from diverse linguistic backgrounds. *Commun. Disord. Q.* 2020, 43, 51–60. [CrossRef]


**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.