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The First Six Weeks: A Writing Guide for Third Grade Bilingual Class

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Introduction and Academic Setting

In preparing this curriculum unit, I've had to look back at the year as objectively as possible, not an easy trick. What came to mind was the difficulty of the first few weeks of school. More specifically, organizing a writing program that fit the needs of children with DRA reading levels from two (kindergarten level) through 20 (second grade level) proved to be both challenging and frustrating. Consequently, it is important to have a philosophical and pragmatic attitude about the curricular demands made on teachers, demands that don't exactly jibe with the realities of the classroom situation.

I mention this in spite of my personal history. I've been teaching English as a foreign and second language to children and adults for fifteen years; my experience is significant. This, however, was my first year in a self-contained third grade bilingual classroom--an interesting tidbit that shows you're never too experienced or too old to learn.

During the beginning of the school year, new teachers experiment with class-management strategies and block out units for the whole year--daunting but challenging tasks. Therefore, solid but simple suggestions on how to get the children writing immediately could ease the load for the new bilingual teacher.

With this in mind, I have outlined a writing plan that I will use during the first six to eight weeks of school next year. The plan is designed for students learning English, some of whom may not be literate in their first language. The ideas I will be adopting could also work for regular education teachers who are unfamiliar with the special challenges involved in welcoming bilingual children into a mainstream program.

It contains suggestions and possible lessons that can be adjusted to the level of the student. I have based these lessons on the Higher Standards of the New Haven curriculum provided specifically for teachers of English as a Second Language and Bilingual Education. This guide outlines the four stages of language acquisition and what a child is able to communicate at each stage. These include social and personal communication, interaction in the classroom, and appropriate cultural interchange.

The Higher Standards booklet, a mere eight pages in length, provides a sort of benchmark for the teacher. It is a reminder that learning a language well enough, for example, to analyze information, categorize it, and

evaluate that information takes time. In fact, Rebecca Huss reminds us, in her article in the TESOL Journal, (Young Children) that "...becoming literate is a large undertaking for children."

The lessons begin with the most simple, controlled writing exercises, and proceed after a few weeks to exercises in narrative writing. Ideally, the writing should be linked with literature across the curriculum. The books that I have found most useful are listed in the children's bibliography at the end of this paper. There is also a new program of reading across the curriculum designed by the Bilingual Department, New Haven Public Schools; these books may also be included. Teachers may choose to pull material from some of the simply written science and social studies readers--these books are leveled in the same way as the regular texts used for the guided reading. The six-week plan includes the following components, including a weekly time line indicated in parentheses; they are explained more fully in the next sections of this paper:

- Print Concepts: what to do before writing (1)
- Rules of the Classroom (1)
- Personal Information: name, address, telephone number, etc. (2)
- Students prepare a self-portrait poster describing themselves (2)
- Journals (2)
- How to Encourage Low-Level Readers to Write (2)
- Dialogue Journaling (3 and 4)
- Pen Pal Journaling (4 and 5)
- Teaching the Past Tense and Reported Speech (5)
- Retelling a Story (5)
- Relaying Messages (5)
- Daily Routine (6)
- Narrative Prompt Writing: The Beginning (7)
- Sample Story Beginning (7)
- Prompt Writing: Using Suspense in the Beginning (8)
- Art Component of Prompt Writing (8)

Lesson plans are included for some of these lessons.

Rationale

At the beginning of the year, I found it difficult to motivate some of my students. One boy refused to write. He would look around the room at the other children and cross his arms. Gradually I realized what to a more experienced classroom teacher would be obvious: he refused to write in part because he could barely read and hadn't a clue about where to begin. Previously, I had worked with children who were all on about the same level in English or I had worked with children in small groups and could thus help them individually. Working with children at diverse levels was a new and confusing experience. And, teaching children who were unable to work for more than a few minutes independently was another challenge. Several had an extremely short attention span. This I understood. Learning a new language is mentally exhausting.

BICS and CALP

There is no question that the pressure for bilingual teachers to follow a prescribed curriculum designed for mainstream third graders adds to on-the-job stress. Third grade bilingual students have gaps in their knowledge when they're compared to mainstream students--this is normal. If these students were able to do third grade level academic work, they wouldn't be in a bilingual classroom.

Talking to another person, where the language learner can use gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and follow-up questions to be understood and to understand what's going on is referred to as BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills.

These basic skills are different from the skills needed to read a text on sharks, for example. This difference has been studied at length and documented in the English as a Second Language literature. A much higher level of language proficiency or CALP: Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency is required in order to reason cognitively, and understand nuance, for instance. Academic texts generally require a broad background and a mastery of at least some of the common linguistic clues and key words and phrases that are used to introduce an important point. Academic proficiency is often very demanding because of the lack of context.

Jim Cummins, a professor at the University of Toronto and an expert in the field of bilingual education and second language acquisition, feels that the "... individual differences in CALP are strongly related to academic progress whereas individual differences in BICS are largely unrelated to academic progress." ("The Entry and Exit Fallacy," p. 114) An earlier study that Cummins conducted among immigrants to Canada showed that "...it took (children)...after the age of six, between five and seven years, on the average, to approach grade norms in English CALP." ("The Entry and Exit Fallacy," p. 116) Cummins repeated this view in a more recent speech at a TESOL conference in 2002.

Is anyone out there listening?

Given this information--and it has been well-researched-- it is surprising that young children are drummed out of the bilingual program before they've had a chance to develop their language skills more fully. It is harsh but by state law, students are exited from the bilingual program after thirty months and placed in a mainstream classroom. Usually, there is additional support from the bilingual department.

Even with additional support, bilingual teachers find their students needy and frustrated, unable to grasp basic concepts or to write simple journal entries. How can these children complete a writing prompt where magic jelly beans, three wishes, a few adventures, and elaborative detail demonstrating sight, smell, and touch must all come together? In truth, how many adults can write a mildly interesting one-page scene that “shows” instead of “tells”?

Objectives

The New Haven school system has produced guidelines for the first six weeks of school and what teachers must cover. As the year progresses, teachers are trained in several writing programs--all designed ultimately to teach third grade children to do narrative writing as required on the CMT and thus achieve higher scores. As previously mentioned, it is unrealistic to expect these students to advance at the same rate as mainstreamed native speakers. Can a child who reads at first grade level be expected to sit for forty minutes and produce a coherent, organized composition? The standard writing program supposes that ESL students have reached a particular skill level that few have reached.

The truth is in the research which clearly indicates that “...writers will transfer writing abilities and strategies, whether good or deficient, from their first language to their second language.” (Friedlander, p. 109) Since writing is the last skill to be mastered and since reading comprehension and the strategies that good readers use in order to be successful precede writing ability, I was faced with the task of getting students who lack basic vocabulary to write. This is frustrating and exhausting for children and teacher. One student acted out each time we worked on a writing prompt until I told him to write whatever he could, using Spanish if need be. After that he settled down and as the year progressed, made more of an effort.

Although I “tested” these ideas throughout the school year, they are better used during the first six to eight weeks of school to get students writing. This is especially important in an ESL classroom where children are not only learning to read and write; they are learning to speak. It is a classroom where the strategies used by Special Education teachers are the very same strategies that work with children learning English as a second language. That is, writing directions down; making sure through repetition that instructions are understood; simplifying or “sheltering” the language; slowing the pace for some children; and doing examples on charts and the overhead projector.

It can not be emphasized strongly enough that every aspect of writing must be modeled again and again. These children may not be accustomed to writing in a journal. They have no idea what it means to write a scene or a description. They need to have superior writing as well as examples of dull writing at hand. They need to be allowed to express their opinions about what makes a story interesting and readable so this is where examples of superior children’s literature and the guided reading program are extremely helpful. These may all be aspects of teaching that a more experienced teacher takes for granted.

There is something less tangible at work here too. Donald Freeman, a well-known ESL researcher and longtime teacher believes that teachers “...have to know the story in order to tell the story.” He gives an example of a teacher reprimanding a student who has acted up; the teacher realizes that the student has just returned from gym class and is still overly-energetic. Freeman explains that this knowledge goes beyond knowing how to teach subjects in the classroom. “...it involves a cognitive dimension that links thought with activity centering

on the context-embedded, interpretive process of knowing what to do.” (“Redefining Research,” p.99) Freeman clearly understands that teaching involves more than knowing what to do, following a lesson plan. Teaching is a complicated process where personalities blend and clash. I call it being able to bond with your students.

This is never more true than in an urban bilingual environment. Over the course of a year, the teacher gets to know the personalities of the children better and better. Many children have few boundaries at home; it may be a home where the child sleeps four to a room; it may also be a home where drug use is evident or where a parent is absent. Such children are seldom independent workers in the classroom. This lack of independence is why, in a beginning writing program, it’s important to proceed slowly, modeling and repeating. It is useful to give children a sentence they may copy and a starter word or phrase they can use. This is a controlled writing lesson. However tentatively, it leaves the children feeling they can write.

It is important to emphasize a whole language approach, since literacy includes reading and writing. Ideally, writing is tied into literature, that is, children are exposed to books that provide them with background knowledge to help them in their writing. This literature would include science and social studies books; this is the body of literature--an all-inclusive body of literature--from which teachers may choose. This is an important factor since research on non-native speakers (Rigg, “Whole Language in TESOL,” p. 71) “...confirmed that these readers’ backgrounds strongly affect the meaning constructed from the page.” And although it is more meaningful for students to write about something they understand and choose to write about, the reality is that bilingual students entering the third grade must be led slowly through the verbal response process and ultimately through the writing process. As they begin to improve in their reading, the writing ability will follow.

Stephen Krashen’s well-known theory of input for language learners supposes that “we acquire (not learn) language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of (acquired) competence.” (*The Natural Approach* , p. 32) Krashen feels that both reading and listening are essential ingredients in a language program and that “...the ability to speak (or write) fluently in a second language will come on its own with time.” (p. 32) It is therefore important for the teacher to use visual aids and anything that adds that element of “extra-linguistic content,” according to Krashen. In addition, teachers can use a sheltered or simplified approach in talking with the children, in an effort to aid them in understanding much the way that caretakers simplify their speech. In fact, Krashen has named the special talk that goes on between child and adult caretaker *caretaker speech* to distinguish it from talk between adults and to emphasize what he calls the “here and now” aspect of it.

Given Krashen’s theory outlined above, it is easy to understand how teachers can become frustrated with the demands made on us to follow a curriculum that is designed for regular education or native English speakers, and to be required to review material for the Connecticut Mastery Test, a test given to fourth graders early in the year. Nevertheless this is the reality of the job and it is why I have decided to design a six-week program for the beginning of the year.

The idea of reviewing fourth grade material with children who write at a kindergarten and first grade level is almost mind-boggling. As a coping mechanism, I have seen young learners sail through the material ticking off answers in an almost random fashion.

There is a term for what I call an internal coping mechanism: Krashen calls it the affective filter--an attitudinal factor that can determine how quickly a learner acquires the second language. (*The Natural Approach* , p. 37) Students with a high filter tend to learn more slowly; they have fears that affect their ability to pick up and use

English. It follows that students who are forced to plod through long texts containing vocabulary and structure that is very difficult for them will respond poorly, effectively closing down. I have found that my students have an extremely short attention span for the required CMT reviews. I eased the way by going very slowly, discussing each aspect of a subject and determining their knowledge of it through questioning. A text on sharks, for example, held more interest for them than a text on dust storms. This is not surprising.

Strategies

A Note on When to Begin

The writing strategies that are described in detail on the following pages are based on my experience during the school year 2001-2002 including changes I tried out on the children, sometimes in the middle of a lesson, to make the lessons really work well. I have, in fact, included only those strategies that worked best. One improvement I have made is to design a time line of when to begin each segment. Although I tried everything out in the classroom, I was unable to begin at the start of the school year. Teachers will want to adapt the time line to the needs of their students, of course. The time line can also be extended to two or even three weeks rather than one week. I found that spending anywhere from as little as twenty minutes a lesson to as much as forty-five minutes on a lesson two to four days a week to be optimum.

Print Concepts: what to do before writing

Week 1

I found many surprises awaiting me when I began teaching children to write. Because they had only a vague understanding of “print concepts”-- the idea that sentences begin with a capital and end with a period, for example, or that words are made up of letters and sounds--they could not write even a short sentence. Few of the children in the class fully understood what function punctuation performs in reading; they could not point to the first or the third paragraph in a book; in fact, they really didn’t know the difference between a sentence and a paragraph. Two or three of the children did not know the alphabet and could not name the letters. Even though I began the year reviewing the basics, including capitalization and punctuation, children continued, fully six months into the school year, to begin sentences with a small letter and end them without punctuation. Many regularly wrote using the conjunction ‘and’ to join bits and phrases for a never-ending paragraph. With such a weak print background, it is small wonder that these children could not write to a prompt although several had been instructed in the previous grade and had gone through structured preparation for writing.

I mention this to underline the importance of the most basic instruction for these children, instruction that begins not with writing, but with familiarizing them with the basic print concepts--usually learned in kindergarten or first grade. In the first few weeks, depending on the need, children needed to thumb through books--even books the children couldn’t read--pointing to a sentence, pinpointing a paragraph picked at random, and counting words in a sentence. One example would be, “Point to the third paragraph. Put your finger on it. Count the words in the second sentence of that paragraph.” Such mini-exercises guide children in noticing how books make sense, and how reading will follow. Pointing is risk-free: naming the different types of punctuation as well as words that begin with a particular letter is also fun for them and useful.

Rules of the Classroom

Week 1

According to Harry Wong, in his most useful book entitled *How to Be an Effective Teacher The First Days of School*, formulating rules and procedures the first day of school and practicing and enforcing them daily is as important as teaching children. In fact, for many inner-city children, rules and procedures provide a foundation for a positive behavior program that doesn't exist at home.

Wong advises teachers to post rules before the children arrive. It is, however, a relatively simple task as well as a shining opportunity for the teacher to use the class rules as a subject for discussion, eliciting suggestions and writing them on the board. Most children are intimately familiar with class rules; they know they must raise their hand before speaking; they know they must follow directions. Therefore, discussing and writing down the rules really serves as another example of meaningful communication and an introductory exercise to using commands, understanding how to form a command, and writing commands.

Beverly Eisele, in her wonderful book *Managing the Whole Language Classroom* reminds teachers that, "Command of oral language is the foundation for success in reading and writing." (p. 19) Since the classroom environment should reflect different kinds of written messages, the classroom rules should be clearly posted, read on a daily basis and reviewed whenever necessary. As other oral activities turn into written exercises, they too can be posted on the boards for the children's enjoyment--encouraging them to read and use notices, calendars, posters, various word walls, instructions, maps, and anything else that helps them become more independent.

A beginning writing exercise for the children was to have them write the rules for classroom behavior on the inside cover of their new journals, even before they began actually writing on a daily basis in their journals. This served several purposes: one of the most important was to monitor the children's ability to follow directions, to find the inside cover, for example, and to number the rules. They also had to set up their journals with a label and to be able to put their hands on the journal quickly, open it, and write the date.

Personal Information

Week 2

There are several ways to introduce children to simple writing. One of the easiest is to have them fill in cards with their name, address including zip code, and phone number. An authentic task, always best, would be for them to complete library card applications, for example, or to fill out the information needed on the many flyers advertising children's books that are distributed regularly in school. I have picked up what I call "the real thing"-- that is, easy-to-complete cards-- at banks, stores, and restaurants, places that will sponsor contests where prizes for a free hamburger or ice cream are awarded. This adds to the thrill and the children are writing for a purpose. Some children do not know their own telephone number or address and they can be held responsible for this information by doing it as a homework assignment and being quizzed orally. I have even devised a game based on the old "Hi, my name is Alice and I come from Alaska and I sell apples." I have revised the game so that the children substitute their name and address and any other information I feel is appropriate to that day's lesson. This exercise acted as an ice-breaker during the first days of school.

Following the recitation of basic fact, the children completed an acrostic using their first names. This is a poster project and I used it as the basis for a bulletin board. I created a template for a face and the first step was for the students to cut it out and draw in their features. Then, they wrote their first name vertically. For

each letter in the name, the children wrote a word indicating something about themselves: an adjective or a noun. A child could describe herself as being open-minded, for example, and could use the word basketball because she enjoys playing the game. An example would be the following, using the name Pedro:

P peppy
E enthusiastic
D dribbler
R runner
O open-minded

Of course, before they can do any writing, the class must discuss the vocabulary. The vocabulary itself is limited. Frankly, I provided the adjectives for the exercise, after eliciting from the children what they liked doing. I asked questions to discover if they were social, athletic, liked parties or preferred playing computer games. This information translated to descriptions such as out-going, computer nerd and party girl. My feeling is that it is perfectly acceptable, in the beginning, to lead the children to the vocabulary well and allow them to copy. This builds confidence. For some children, even the simple act of copying five or six words from the board or from a chart is a difficult task. These vocabulary words, incorporated into the poster-autobiographical lesson described above, were useful.

As an extension and review of the words, I had the children practice as a short end-of-the-day exercise. The vocabulary review was risk-free and gave the children the sense that they were mastering a few rather difficult words.

Journals

Week 2

One of the most helpful ways to get children writing from the very first week of school is to introduce Journal writing. In general, journals are used to encourage students to write freely, choosing their own topics. Journals are not corrected by the teacher. Students can share what they wrote but it is a choice.

There are several possibilities: double-entry journals, literature response journals, learning logs, dialogue journals, and reflective or daily thoughts journals. I began with a daily thoughts journal; later it could become a dialogue journal if the student chose to participate.

I had to model journal writing for my students, using the overhead projector. I began with simple events of the day, for example, writing one or two sentences. These were personal. One day, for example, I wrote the following, reading it aloud as I wrote:

“I don’t understand why some of my students won’t even try to write in their journals. What can I do to help them? I have told them not to worry about spelling.”

Each few days, I would add a sentence, so that the more advanced students would be encouraged to do the same. In fact, I would circulate, giving each student a goal for the day or the week.

I learned this by trial and error, but a more positive spin is the term *explorer teacher*, used by the Freeman authors in their textbook on language acquisition and explained a few paragraphs down. During the first week of school, I naturally discovered the limitations of some of the children's writing--not unusual considering their language level. Instead of even trying to write, these children, who read at a kindergarten and first grade level, sat at their seats, looking around the room or down at the paper. "What should I write?" they asked. No matter how many suggestions I offered, they continued to sit, their writing hands frozen.

How to Encourage Low-Level Readers to Write

So, I decided to experiment. I asked them to draw. I told them to draw whatever they felt like drawing and we could talk about it afterward. What I discovered was that they could communicate simply by drawing a picture and writing a word. This was important for me as a teacher: I learned there are ways to open communication that were risk-free for the children and that paved the way for progress in the future. Writing a sentence would be the next goal. But it was the picture and the word that allowed me to open a dialogue with the student, asking questions about the why they had chosen that particular picture and that particular word. This was important to establishing rapport, allowing us to get to know one another better. Furthermore, the children produced something and felt proud of their work. One boy drew his favorite Nintendo game, explaining that he played Nintendo 900 hours a day. Another boy drew his little nephew, his sister's new baby. In this way, I began to learn about the home lives of my students.

The Freeman authors emphasize a whole language approach to teaching English in *Between Worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition*. "One argument for developing all four modes (listening, speaking, reading, writing) simultaneously is that each supports the others." (p. 158) But knowing what to teach, how to teach it, and when to teach it--these are the challenging aspects of the job. In fact, the Freeman authors, as previously mentioned, ever aware of the various ways children learn, have a description for teachers who experiment with different ways to get the material across to students in an effort to make it meaningful: they are called explorer teachers. It is essential to be an explorer in a classroom with children at mixed levels of language and learning ability. An explorer teacher learns through her mistakes. How else can you encourage your students to take risks in the classroom if you dare not take risks yourself?

I mention this because I think it is important, when experimenting or exploring, to give yourself credit for trying new things, especially if they don't quite work. And, there are many things that might not quite work, especially with students in the class who read at a very low level. These children may very well have the short attention span of kindergarten and first graders, even though they have been placed in the third grade.

Dialogue Journaling

Weeks 3-4 and throughout year

Dialogue Journaling is similar to a conversation between a teacher and a student. It can be exciting for students who can manage a few sentences, thus "talking" to their teacher. For beginners, dialogue journal writing can take the risk out of writing, since communication is the most important aspect of the activity.

Joy Kreeft Peyton describes the use of dialogue journals for her nonnative English speakers:

The journal is the one area in which the students in my mainstream classroom who come from other countries and are learning English can participate as equals with those who have been in this country all of their lives...Incorrect spelling and grammar do not make a difference in the journals; the message is the important thing...They know I have given my attention to them and to them alone through my written response. (*Dialogue Journal Writing* : p. 2)

Although I would let my students choose their topics, I used dialogue journaling to encourage my students to respond to class readings. I did this in a sly manner: I would ask them questions about what they had read and since every student participated in the Guided Reading on a daily basis, everyone had something to say. Later in the year, Day Books were purchased for the children, who were expected to read and respond to the texts and stories--all chosen from classic children's literature. Dialogue journaling made the Day Book writing a bit easier going for some of the children.

Pen Pal Journaling

Weeks 4-5 and throughout year

Dialogue journaling can be especially useful when students across classes write one another and respond to one another because nonnative speakers have the chance to read and respond to children from a different background. I introduced this particular sort of dialogue journaling as Pen Pal writing. Most of the children were excited about having a pen pal and I promised that boys would be paired with boys and girls with girls. As usual, I began by modeling how they could introduce themselves and talk about their favorite singer or group, and their families. I found that this type of dialogue journaling works well if done on a regular basis, that is, two or three times a week.

Teaching the Past Tense and Reported Speech

Week 5

Consistent use of the past tense and transferring direct speech into reported speech are difficult tasks for language learners for several reasons. First, the correct use of pronouns is difficult for Spanish-speaking children at the beginning stages of learning to read in English, especially children from Puerto Rico. There is a tendency to lop off word endings. Although careful reading out loud, while pointing to each word, gradually teaches the children to correct this habit, it can be confusing to the listener. Second, third graders learning English are not aware of how the tenses are used. As a result, the tenses are inconsistent in their speech and their writing.

Although these difficulties in language are all a normal part of learning the language, I felt that it was important to make the children aware of such points of grammar. The reason for this was the testing that has become one of the realities teaching.

Retelling a Story

Use of the past tense and reported speech become increasingly important as the year progresses because for the DRA reading tests, students are required to perform what is called a "retell" of a story they have read. This requires not only an understanding of the story, but organization of events in the order in which they occur, and a clear report of the main idea, important details, characters, setting, and problem. Many children read and truly understand the story but are unable to successfully perform the retell because they don't yet have the vocabulary and are not used to reported speech. It is a skill that can be practiced and taught through

the use of key words to aid the child. What is significant here is that the children usually enjoy performing a retell and can also be taught to retell stories to one another if they begin practicing early enough in the school year.

What Did He/She Do? The Past Tense Game

I began teaching children the past tense by having them perform in class. This began as an exercise where I whispered in a child's ear, he walked across the room, and I asked another child to describe what he did. Answers such as "He walk across the room," were unacceptable. Of course, it became necessary to teach the three ways of pronouncing "ed" and emphasizing the spelling of the simple past tense once the students began writing it. I also learned that the old bugaboo, prepositions and phrasal verbs, those common idioms in English such as "Look it up in the dictionary," or "Look down on someone," were problems for the children. So, we practiced. Later, children could read simple commands on an index card rather than have the teacher tell them what to do. This was progress.

Relaying Messages

Another exercise would be to write commands and messages on note cards. These could start out being very simple, such as:

Sharpen your pencil.

The child then must relay the message as reported speech:

You have to sharpen your pencil.

The teacher said to sharpen your pencil.

Some children were able to say:

He has to sharpen his pencil.

Of course, this was an exploratory process. To hold the children's interest, I would occasionally get one of them to give an exciting message to the whole class, such as:

The teacher said we're good. She said we can go outside today.

The message was not always grammatically correct; still I was happy if it contained elements of the past tense and was understood.

Daily routine

Week 6

This is a simple exercise where children describe their morning routine, using the present tense. I had the children begin talking about habit and daily routines several weeks into the semester because the present tense is much more difficult for them than the past tense. It can also be practiced as a game in which the students tell, in much the same way as they related "Hi, my name is Ann..." what another child does for his/her daily routine, since the third-person singular is difficult for many language learners. The simple act of repeating over and over the third person singular, as in "She **gets** up..." proved useful in solidifying the

concept that the verb changes. The game served as a pre-writing activity that was later expanded with more particulars; vocabulary was taught as needed. For example, I expanded the lesson to include likes and dislikes, favorite ways to spend a Saturday afternoon, and anything else that inspired the children in their writing.

Hi, my name is Ann. I get up at 7:00.

This becomes:

Her name is Ann. She gets up at 7:00.

The child then says:

My name is Steve. I get up at 7:30.

The game continued until the sentences became too long to remember or the children got bored.

A Word on Reading Activities

The Program Guide provided by New Haven's Department of Bilingual Education emphasizes "A Curriculum of High Expectations for English Language Learners." (p. 14) Some of the suggestions that fall under the category of "good practices" include the reminder that language learners "...acquire language naturally, therefore, their environment at school for learning and acquiring English as a second language should be 'acquisition-rich.'" The Guide also describes the four stages of language acquisition, reminding teachers of the importance of presentations such as role play, pictures illustrating a concept, and hands-on demonstrations.

For children in the first or second stages of learning English, these elements become crucial to understanding. For more advanced children, hearing stories that are read to them, reading themselves and with a partner, and regular comprehension checks, discussions about the material, and response writing are also a part of the learning process. Thus, connecting literature to the writing process gives children ideas about the language as well as teaching them about the different types of books--fiction and nonfiction are one example-- and how to expand their own imagination when reading and writing.

Freeman cites a particularly interesting anecdote concerning the importance of a comprehension check. In one study, the researcher, an experienced teacher, noted that although children could respond to phonics flash cards and were able to read passages in their readers, they were unable to predict what would happen next in a story, and did not understand what they were reading. This is attributed to the concentration on parts, rather than the whole, that is, the children "...did not even realize that reading is supposed to make sense." (*Between Worlds* , p. 125) Freeman feels that for second language learners acquiring both reading and writing skills by looking at the big picture, for example is more important than dwelling on spelling. I have found this approach useful in both reading and writing. Children were coached to find the problem in the story they read and to create a problem for their own story. They eventually came to understand that a story wasn't much of a story without a problem. That is why literature is essential: I read stories with clear-cut problems of all kinds to the children; I asked the children to identify them and tell me if they had similar problems in their own lives. This eased the way into narrative writing.

Narrative Prompt Writing: The Beginning

Week 7

Listening to stories, identifying the beginning, middle, and ending, retelling the story, and identifying a problem in the story are all part of the preparation needed to introduce prompt writing. Writing to a prompt is an important component of the CMT. It is important to teach children to write, of course, and large amounts of money have been spent on workshops to instruct teachers on how to more successfully get students to achieve a higher skill level in their writing.

How exactly to teach the writing? I had to find a way to teach children who could read only at a kindergarten level to write and several of my students were still learning to speak conversational (BICS) English. The valuable training I received through the Empowering Writers workshops led by Barbara Mariconda and Dea Paoletta Auray did not come until later in the year. Therefore, using the Empowering Writers program as a basis, I have devised a gentle--for teachers and students alike-- plan to follow during the first six weeks of school. However early a teacher chooses to begin narrative writing will depend, of course, on the individual class. I could not begin without first going through the program of review described in detail previously.

First, I introduced prompt writing in an extremely controlled way: I wrote an introduction each day and modeled it over and over. This “slow-going” approach was non-threatening to very low-level readers, and challenging to those children who could elaborate with longer, more detailed paragraphs on their own. It included a brief, daily discussion of the “writing diamond” simplifying its structure to the following:

Writing Diamond: simplified version (adapted from *Narrative Writing: Book 1*)

(figure available in print form)

Short beginning: two or three sentences

Middle: seven to ten sentences

Short ending: two or three sentences

The point of modeling the introduction so often was to teach the children that the first step in writing to a prompt is to restate the prompt. Teachers can make up prompts or use the many suggestions provided by the authors of the Empowering Writers program. Also, it is useful to follow the general format of the CMT third grade narrative writing prompts.

I used the example of a monster appearing unexpectedly in the classroom. This lesson was eventually expanded to include writing a complete story with suspense, a beginning, middle with elaborative detail, and an ending. But, that occurred much later.

First, I read the class several books on dragons and other monsters, asking them to note in particular how the author began the story each time. All the books had detailed illustrations to aid in comprehension, much like the Big Books the children had experience with previously. One book, entitled *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, is chock full of award-winning illustrations of monsters of all kinds. It was fun to elicit vocabulary from the children, pointing to claws, hooves, and talons and supplying vocabulary when needed, so the students could use it later when composing their own stories.

After the reading portion of the lesson, I began simply, teaching the children to read each prompt carefully, discussing elements they could include in their story. It was interesting to see how the readings influenced their thinking. Some children were happy to copy elements of the stories they had heard and others wanted to write something completely original. After modeling several beginnings, the students proceeded to write a few

sentences. The goal was to begin the story and hold the reader's interest. I used a simplified version of the CMT prompt but used the general style of prompts that appear on the test. Bilingual children must learn to change *you* to *I* in their restatement of the prompt. This is the prompt that was used:

You go back to your classroom to get your pencil case. As you are looking in your desk, you hear a sound. It gets louder. You look up.

What is it?

What do you do?

How do you feel?

Of course, the children wrote only a beginning but I wanted them to see the prompt format repeatedly. If you're good at thinking and writing off the cuff, modeling will be easy. When I first began modeling story beginnings, I wrote them out for myself on an index card and read them out loud as I copied them on the overhead, effectively faking a "think aloud."

Sample Story Beginning

I went back to my classroom to get my pencil case. I was looking inside my desk when I heard it. It sounded like a huge thump. Then I heard another thump. It was getting louder. It was getting closer. It was getting closer to my classroom. My hands froze inside my desk. I looked up.

This particular beginning contains more than the two or three sentences I suggested the children use for a beginning; however, I told them that I was a teacher and an adult writer and should be able to write more than they had to write. What is more, I used repetition as a way to create suspense and keep the writing simple. Too complicated, complex sentences would be discouraging. This example seemed to please them with its accessibility.

Next, I made it very clear that I didn't want the reader to know what was at the door. "Who wants the reader to close the book, not read your story?" I asked them. "I want my story to have a beginning that makes my reader want to know more." In this way, I have introduced my students to suspense, thus paving the way for the next lesson in the unit: how to write using suspense. Again, this is an element of teaching narrative writing taken from the Empowering Writers program.

Prompt Writing: Using Suspense in the Beginning

Week 8

I used the idea of sound (*Narrative Writing: Book 1* , p. 2) to build suspense because the character in the story is by himself in the classroom, looking for a pencil. It is essential for the teacher to force the young writers to contain the story to one character in the very setting where the action will take place. This was one of the important points to come out at the workshops and is mentioned throughout the series of books by Mariconda and Auray. Otherwise, children will not be able to focus as they should on the points they are learning about writing beginnings. One character in one setting means full control.

In order to build the beginning of the story around sound, I had to elicit and build a vocabulary list of sounds, supplying some and writing everything on chart paper for future use. The authors suggest several other ways to build suspense; they can be used once the children have practiced and mastered sound.

Another important point to make is that some children wanted to write longer, more complete beginnings to their stories; I allowed them to go ahead. However, it is important for the children to stick to beginnings; otherwise, the tendency, I found, was for the students to write the main event in one sentence. Here is an example: *I looked up. It was a monster. He chased me around the classroom and then he ran out.* It is better to slow them down by getting them to put a sentence describing action relating to fear into the story. My example was the following sentence:

My hands froze inside my desk. I looked up.

The sentence is, by design, very simple. When reviewing my notes from the workshop and the advice given by the authors on elaborative detail, one thing that struck me time and time again was this type of question: What does fear look like? What does anger look like? I wanted the children to write more than, for example, I was afraid; I wanted them to tell me what fear looked like. Were their hands cold? Were they unable to move them? Did their heart pound so they couldn't breathe? These are some of the ways in which we feel fear.

Art Component of Prompt Writing

Week 8 and throughout the year

After the children practiced writing beginnings using sound and action to intrigue the reader, I introduced the art component of the prompt, that is, the children would illustrate and color their monster before continuing with their stories. (The CMT does not require this.) The drawings are cut out and mounted on plain colored paper. Drawing a monster and writing from the details of the drawing helped me explain to the children the idea of elaborative detail, the next step in the writing. It prepared the children and I felt they wrote less in a vacuum and more as if they were intimately involved in the creation of their character.

Auray and Mariconda explain the importance of art on page four of their book: *Easy Art Activities That Spark Super Writing*. Briefly, art is used as a "...concrete visual resource...as a means of inspiring and translating the power of specific visual detail into vivid writing...fun...(and) as a way to motivate and inspire." I felt that when the children drew talons, claws, or a beak, I could more easily encourage them to learn and use the vocabulary in their drawings when they wrote simply by pointing. "Where is that in your story?" I would ask.

A Last Word

This pre-writing/writing unit for bilingual children will make the beginning of the school year just a tad easier--I look forward to using it. The information that follows includes three lesson plans based on some of the material outlined above as well as suggestions for reading that I intend to use to provide a literature link to the narrative writing. I must add that I am always on the prowl for multicultural stories and books to use as an accompaniment to the writing program during the school year.

Lesson Plans

Lesson 1: Beginning narrative prompt writing

Objective: Students will be able to restate the prompt and begin writing their story

Rationale : Students, according to curriculum standards, must be able to write an organized, cohesive piece that contains a beginning, middle and an ending. Students must be able to write under timed, examination conditions for the CMT. Learning to write is a process; students must take one step at a time.

Prewriting: The teacher will read *Where the Wild Things Are* and any other highly illustrated books that will help the children use their imagination in creating a story. Then, the teacher will lead the children in a discussion of the book(s) paying special attention to how good story beginnings are written.

Procedure: I used the example of a monster appearing unexpectedly in the classroom.

This is the prompt that was used:

You go back to your classroom to get your pencil case. As you are looking in your desk, you hear a sound. It gets louder. You look up.

What is it?

What do you do?

How do you feel?

Write prompt on chart paper or on the board--somewhere where the children can refer to it repeatedly.

The teacher leads the class in a discussion about the prompt, using role play, if possible.

Emphasize that “you” changes to “I” when writing.

Model the writing, talking out loud, telling the children you don’t want to use the word monster.

Underline or highlight the “restatement of the prompt” sentence.

Elicit and help children with vocabulary for sound words and action words, asking them how they’d feel if they heard huge thumps getting closer and closer. Would they hide in a closet?

Would they start shaking?

Sample Beginning

I went back to my classroom to get my pencil case. I was looking inside my desk when I heard it. It sounded like a huge thump. Then I heard another thump. It was getting louder. It was getting closer. It was getting closer to my classroom. I looked up.

To extend the lesson, similar writing prompts follow:

You are out walking in the woods with your friend when you turn around and he/she isn't there. You look around. You see nothing. It is quiet but you hear a sound behind you. You turn around. What happens next?

You are walking home from school when you stop to tie your shoelace. As you are bent over, you hear a whisper. There is no one behind you, no one near you. You hear it again. What does it say? What does it look like? What do you do?

Your teacher sends you to the principal's office to give her a note. You are walking down the hall and you glance into a classroom. It is empty. Then you see a shadow near the door. The shadow is speaking in a soft voice. What does it say? What do you do? What happens?

Lesson 2: Creating suspense beginning

Objective: Students will be able to use sound and/or action to create suspense in the beginning of the story

Rationale : Learning to write is a process; students must take one step at a time.

Prewriting: The teacher will lead a discussion about suspense and what it is, giving examples of good and poor story beginnings.

Example of poor beginning:

I went back to my classroom to get my pencil case. I saw a monster. It was scary. I was afraid.

Procedure: Use the same example, that of the monster appearing in the classroom door.

The teacher leads the class in a discussion about the prompt, using role play.

Role play creating suspense by having first one claw appear and then another claw followed by, perhaps, the muzzle of the dragon. The teacher can model this first, at the doorway to the classroom. Use a monster hand if you've got one--it will be a real surprise for the students.

Again, emphasize that "you" changes to "I" when writing.

Elicit from the children what happens to them physically when they are afraid.

Write these examples of "what fear looks like" on chart paper for the children to use later. They can include examples similar to these given by my students:

My hands stopped moving.

My hands froze.

I thought I was going to throw up.

My heart starting moving in my chest.

My hair stood up.

Elicit "sound" vocabulary from the children and create a word wall for use by the students as they

continue to work on the stories.

Lesson 3: Art Component of Narrative Writing

Objective: Students will be able to use their illustration of a monster when writing, especially in describing the monster.

Rationale : Students will better understand the connection between a visual image and describing that image in writing if they can create and write about their own monster--thus taking the role of author-illustrator.

Prewriting: The teacher will have read the children stories rife with interesting and thrilling illustrations of monsters of all kinds.

Procedure: The teacher can have a monster template ready for those children who find it more difficult to draw from scratch, otherwise, with drawing paper and crayons, markers or paints, students can design and use color to illustrate a monster.

The authors of *Easy Art Activities That Spark Super Writing* , advise having children cut out their drawings and mounting them on construction paper so they stand out clearly.

Be sure to urge children to complete the art component in a timely manner (setting a timer is advisable), and to put in specific details for use later in their writing.

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