Bridging To Writing With Oral Storytelling:
A Common Core Based Plan For English Language Learners

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Introduction and Discussion

The following is a curriculum unit devised for the Delaware Teacher's Institute in conjunction with Yale University. It was created during the 2015-16 school year with the intended focus of having students create fiction based stories. The original intention for this unit was to have the students create fan fiction based on popular stories and video games in hopes that students would learn to engage in more creative language play within a structured academic environment. This would have been based off of an article written by Rebecca Black, published in 2009. In the article, Black discusses the positive interactions that students had with publishing fan fiction articles in an online forum.[1] The level of interaction and collaboration that the medium provided the students was encouraging and I had initially assumed would be a positive starting point in gaining confidence in writing for my current class of English Language Learners.

With the increasingly stringent academic standards and a push for non-fiction writing and reading in students, it is difficult to foster a love for pure storytelling. This is primarily due to the fact that students are often not allowed to explore fiction purely for enjoyment. Teachers are generally required to push fast paced curriculum that does not allow students the time or leisure to explore interests or even develop basic story telling techniques. The purpose of this unit is to create a functionally feasible platform for students to develop and create stories in their own voices.

As I stated previously, I had originally intended (and plan on discussing the academic reasoning within the research section), to have my students create stories based on established characters from popular media. While working with my students, the focus of this project shifted due to a number of reasons. The main reason being, the students in my focus group struggled greatly with even using their natural voices in a storytelling

medium and it was difficult to get these students to create something outside of themselves when they struggled so greatly with telling their own stories. It is my intention with this unit to help bridge a gap from becoming a haphazard explainer to becoming a conscientious storyteller. Throughout the practice sessions I had with my students, they became more consciously aware of their audience and willing to add details and to perform using language than before.

The backbone of this unit is to have the students work on performing in a medium where they can eventually observe and critique themselves. While my students often (and still) complain about recording and seeing themselves, the improvement I have seen from them during a relatively short period of time indicates that this form of self-reflection is on the path to creating learners who are in the possession of a tool box of skills that will be helpful in fostering awareness and a growth mindset within students who are generally not encouraged to become either self-sufficient or who develop an early mindset of learned helplessness.

In my classroom, I believe that it is vital for students to learn what they "can do". This is a vital core component to the WIDA consortium, which is used as the driving philosophy for teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the state of Delaware.[2] ELLs traditionally struggle with writing and often reach a point of stagnation in their language acquisition process which may be difficult for them to overcome. [3] My initial aim was to make writing a fun and non-threatening activity that does not serve to make a language learner feel inadequate.

Scenario

The students involved in this project attend Pulaski Elementary School (Pulaski) in Wilmington, Delaware. Pulaski is part of a dual language initiative set up by the Delaware Department of Education and features several bilingual programs in the emergent grades. From grades K-2, students are able to attend classes that are taught in both English and Spanish, fostering academic growth in both their home language and an additional language. The program allows both English and Spanish dominant students but as an early exit bilingual program, the students do not receive Spanish language instruction in the upper elementary grades.

Spanish dominant students receive pull out and push in support in the form of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes from Third through Fifth grade. If the students have

been attending Pulaski routinely from Kindergarten, they generally have achieved verbal fluency in English but struggle with the academic strains of reading and writing in a language that may not be routinely spoken in the home. Similarly, these students struggle with writing, both in rudimentary composition and also in the organization of ideas.

Pulaski is a Title I school under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). These schools are typically afforded additional federal funding for support programs, such as tutoring and academic intervention services. One hundred percent of the students at Pulaski are provided with free breakfast and lunches as per financial need. Many students are also given free dental and eye care, as well as weekend food provided to them via the school's backpack program. While these programs are of a huge and welcome assistance to the school's population, and fulfill both survival based and academic needs, there are always gaps to be filled. This will be discussed in more detail in the "Research and Rationale" section.

The population is highly transient and many students, both Spanish and English dominant, have unstable housing or can be classified as homeless. The academic implications in regards to serving a population with high poverty with be further discussed within the demographics and research sections of this paper.

Demographics

The students used for this project are commonly referred to as "dual identified students". These are students who are dominant in another language, in this case, Spanish; but also have a cognitive, behavioral, or emotional disability that requires them to have services through the Special Education (SpecEd) department in the school.

The student focus group for the set of trial lessons outlined are in the Third grade and are between ages eight and nine. Out of the six students involved, five are Spanish dominant, and one has been placed into the ESL program based on entry test scores and a family submitted Home Language Questionnaire (HLQ), however, the student speaks only English in his home. This is a more common occurrence than one may think, and if this student was more academically successful, he probably would not require additional support. He does get additional SpecEd support and has trouble functioning academically at grade level. There are three boys and three girls in this particular class, and the students are primarily native to the United States. There is one newcomer who

recently arrived from Puerto Rico but is acquiring English rather quickly despite other academic and behavioral challenges that he generally faces.

All of the aforementioned children read significantly below grade level and although there are no physical impairments to prevent writing, students have trouble producing written work. While the majority of the school has been required to address reading difficulties, the ESL department has been tasked by the district to address writing struggles that are all too common among second language learners. Below is a table with student information including students' Fountas-Pinnell reading level and their 2015 WIDA ACCESS literacy score.

Student	Gender	Reading Level: FP	WIDA Lit. Score
E	M	K	1.0
N	M	D	2.7
A	F	K	3.6
F	F	G	3.1
Y	F	K	3.4
J	M	K	3.2

ACCESS scores are based on a 1.0-6.0 scale and are comprised of 50% writing and 50% reading. A score of 1.0 is a new beginner, while the highest score listed, a 3.6, would be a typical student who had been acquiring English for approximately 2-3 years.[4] As previously stated, all of these students have been speaking English extensively since at least Kindergarten, and many have households that are English dominant or fully bilingual. In regards to the Fountas-Pinnell reading levels, grade level for a Third Grade student using the Fountas-Pinnell model would be letters N-P.[5] All of these students are currently reading at a late Second Grade reading level or lower.

Research and Rationale: Poverty Struggles in the Classroom

Students at Pulaski Elementary typically develop and maintain skills at a pace slower than that of their more affluent peers. While some may lay blame on language acquisition, ELLs in similarly affluent areas do not have the same struggles that the students in my sample group in particular may have. Poverty stricken students often experience additional academic challenges due to home based hardships such as food

scarcity, housing instability, and trauma that occurs because of these things and due to environmental factors.[6] Several students at Pulaski experience homelessness or are officially considered homeless, or more specifically, do not have a permanent residence and reside with relatives or in long term hotels.

Additionally, the prior mentioned programs are helpful but due to home instability, students often still are not as provided for as the programs may belie to the common observer. The free glasses may end up lost (many students are now required to leave their glasses in school), necessary medications sometimes go for weeks between fillings, and students are often without basic school supplies such as pencils and paper in the home. The seeming chaotic lives that the students may lead outside of the school day do not lend to an environment where students are able to digest and internalize the information they may get during the day. An inordinate number of students in high poverty areas live with symptoms of PTSD, due to immediate dangers in their lives or due to the long term stress of having unstable sources for basic necessities.[7] When you take the whole child into consideration, it is not surprising that these children have trouble finding a pencil or their glasses, they simply have bigger things to worry about.

However this does not mean that the students at Pulaski, or in similar schools are helpless. Scholars on poverty often discuss "learned helplessness", a state where students convince themselves that they are unable to complete tasks that may be considered grade level appropriate for students in their age range.[8] For example, it is considered reasonable to have a student in the Third Grade write a paragraph on a single topic using an opening sentence, three key details, and a closing sentence. Students are often provided with graphic organizers to help plan their writing and are typically given guidance in earlier grades so they can learn basic sentence structure such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. During English Language Arts (ELA) students are often taught how to find and describe the main idea of a reading, and locate key details to support this main idea. Students in the sample group show typical behaviors of learned helplessness. They will either loudly proclaim that they have no idea how to complete the given task, or they will give up and sit silently until the answers are given to them. Trying to bridge from a state of complete learned helplessness to a self-actualized child willing to take risks is one of the largest challenges that teachers in high poverty situations can face. The ability to break down the seemingly huge task of a whole paragraph (Five sentences! A daunting task for a struggling child, especially in their second language.) into manageable pieces is what is going to teach children that they can trust themselves to learn.

Moving from learned helplessness is a challenge for any student. ESL teachers in Pulaski's district have been tasked with focusing on writing, and therefore, I feel like I have become a trial and failure expert in overcoming this condition. My students have done so many four squares[9] that I am sure they can draw them in their sleep. The graphic organizer is not helping them understand how to connect ideas from one paper and to put it on another.

Personal Reflections

For me, a breakthrough occurred while discussing oral based storytelling during my seminar at Delaware Teacher's Institute. My students love to talk. They struggle with reading and writing makes them give up and cry, but they can talk like nobody's business and about any topic you give them. We can and have had entire week long discussions on badger burrows, 911 calls, rocks and minerals, and the planet Jupiter. The problem with the students is not in acquiring the information. The problem lies in transferring the information to a literary form. These same students with low literary ACCESS scores have verbal scores in the 4.0-5.0 range, or close to what you would expect from a native speaker of English. ESL teachers are also given tablets with onboard video software which is literally easy enough for a child to use. I set out to have the students plan and tell stories about their lives to get a feel for how words sound and are put together as they speak.

My ultimate goal is to have students become more aware of speaking habits so they can eventually be more comfortable with their writing. The plans that follow focus mainly on the activities I have completed with students in my sample demographic group. I have been working on and practicing extensions with other students who are more academically and linguistically ready to write. These students also use the video footage to monitor speaking performance, including rate, intonation, volume, and good speaking habits.

Activities: #1 Vocabulary

CCSS: W.3.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.[10]

WIDA Standard: Standard 1: Language of Social Interaction; Standard 2: Language of English Language Arts [11]

Curriculum Map Tie-In: Writing a sequence of events.

Required Items: student notebooks, sequencing words printed on cards, interactive white board, *The Three Little Pigs* story, storyboards or pictures from the story to match with words.

Vocabulary words: first, second, third, before, after, then, next, last, finally

Procedure: Pre-teach

The teacher will introduce the vocabulary words, displaying them so the students are able to see them while they are read a story. I used *The Three Little Pigs*, but any story that is moderately familiar to students will be a good choice. The importance of discussing a familiar story is that it limits exposure to new words or ideas to the targeted vocabulary words. Students will have plenty of time to discuss the words in personal scenarios!

After reading the story once, give the students time to either picture walk the book (look at and discuss the pictures), or time to look at the storyboards from the story. Using the sequencing word cards, have the students match the sequencing word with where it belongs in the story.

Procedure: Practice

Display the pictures along with the vocabulary cards and have the students practice retelling the story. For example: "First the three brothers went out to build houses. Next the one pig made his house out of straw…" It is imperative that every child gets the opportunity to speak. After the story has been retold, the teacher will re-write the story on chart paper or on an interactive white board. Students can read the retelling that they created.

Production:

By the end of the lesson, the class should have written a group story using sequencing words, and can explain the significance of using sequencing words in a story.

Ticket Out:

Students will complete a cloze activity. Using a copy of the story summary, they will fill in the appropriate sequencing words.[12]

Activities: #2 Beginning the Process

CCSS: W.3.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.[13]

Curriculum Map Tie-In: Writing a sequence of events.

Required Items: Construction paper, markers, sticky notes

Procedure: Activation

Remind students of the story from the previous day, displaying the sequencing words. Discuss *The Three Little Pigs* in the context of having a bad day. Have the students had a bad day before? Would they be able to draw pictures about their bad day?

Activity

Provide a sample drawing of a bad day and discuss using the sequencing words. For example: First, I woke up late. Next, I had to go to work but I found out that my car

didn't start. Then, I couldn't go to work and teach anyone and that made me sad. Since students are taught that paragraphs are between five and six sentences, set up a graphic organizer[14] or use sticky notes in sets of five or six. Students can discuss their stories with each other or with the teacher so they have a better idea what to draw. While writing, students should make sure to use the sequencing words as labels for their drawings. The drawing itself will serve as a rough draft for the next activity.

Production:

    By the end of the lesson, students should have a completed visual panel drawing of a story describing their bad day.

Ticket Out:

    Have students share their bad day scenario with the teacher or with a partner. Monitor to make sure that the student is using the sequencing words.

Activities: #3 Developing a Performance

CCSS: SL.3.4: Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.[15]

Curriculum Map Tie-In: Writing a sequence of events.

Required Items: Previously created sequence, video recording device (small hand held camera or tablet)

Activity:

Using the "bad day" sequence, students will work on recording themselves. This activity does not take long per child but novice performers may need a few tries before their story flows well on camera. Students should be allowed to watch their performance either alone or as a small group. I never have more than six or seven students in a group and the students are comfortable with each other. If I had a more traditional classroom, I would hesitate to show a video of a student talking in front of the entire class. The justification being, ELLs are typically very aware of their flaws in spoken English and sometimes hesitate to speak to peers because they are worried about social faux pas. This is called an *affective filter*[16] and will diminish as the child becomes comfortable. If the child is happy to share their video with the class, by all means, let the class see it.

After watching their videos, have the students discuss in a group about what they liked about watching themselves. You will be setting the students up to use this video as a means to write. Ask questions that are focused on how the students would write about the same situation. Would the sequencing words be necessary? Can you describe anything that happened a little more vividly?

Production:

At the end of the lesson, students should have a completed video and have had the opportunity to reflect on what they have produced.

Ticket Out:

Use a reflection sheet and have the students write one thing that they will use in their story writing tomorrow and one thing that they may change.

Activities: #4 Bridging to Writing

CCSS: SL.3.4: Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.[17]

W.3.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.[18]

Curriculum Map Tie-In: Writing a sequence of events.

Required Items: Previously created sequence, video recording device (small hand held camera or tablet)

Activity:

   Prior to getting the students to practice writing on their own, set up a model. The teacher should have a video of themselves telling a bad day story similar to what the students have already completed. Allow the students to discuss and decide what to put in the story based on the teacher's video. After discussion, the teacher will write the story, one sentence at a time, on the interactive white board or a piece of chart paper. Students can then check the story produced by the class against the video and the drawing that the teacher created to make sure that the stories are the same. Details and sequence are important.

Production and Ticket Out:

   Students will work on watching their own video and writing down their own stories in pairs. Each student will take turns watching and writing sentences while their partner provides an ongoing edit to make sure that the written story matches what was drawn and written in the video. By the end of the lesson, students should have completed paragraphs that match the video and drawings and they should be able to explain the differences and similarities between each version of their story.

Conclusion

The key idea when working with students with a learned helplessness issue is persistence. While completing the above activities with my sample group, the first three lessons took a solid week of 30 minute lessons to complete. I later attempted writing a paragraph and this took an additional week. With students who do not have cognitive difficulties, they may take less time. The reason I did not include a time constraint was to emphasize the fact that some students, particularly ELLs or SWDs will take longer than others to complete a given task. This does not mean that the lesson should be truncated or abandoned, it means the teacher needs to allow for enough time for meaningful activities.

At first, my students were very reluctant to watch themselves on a tablet or to record their stories. This changed quickly after they watched themselves and realized that everyone was making similar mistakes and had the same difficulties as they did. The more they experimented and played with the language available, they more willing they became to branch out and try different things with this language. Please make sure that you are allowing your students the opportunity to experiment and play with the language you are targeting.

In closing, I would also like to discuss the importance of patience on the teacher's part with lessons such as this, or any lesson that will test student knowledge and autonomy. The lessons discussed would work as a unit, and are laid out in a manner that served as "baby steps" for my students. My initial goal had been to let the students create their own fictional stories based on popular television shows, books, games, or movies. This plan would have been fun in theory, but there was no way my students could have handled that much freedom this soon. Throwing a free range project like a fan fiction story at my demographic would have backfired and only served to enforce the feeling of learned helplessness. Providing a strong framework for students, particularly younger language learners, to work within is essential. As they grow more secure and move away from feelings of learned helplessness, you can grow the proverbial sandbox as well.

Notes

[1] Black, Rebecca. "Online Fan Fiction and Critical Media Literacy." This article was important in researching creative things children can do within the classroom, but after doing research for this paper, it would be more appropriate for older children.

[2] https://www.wida.us/standards/eld.aspx

[3] Gunderson, Lee. *ESL (ELL) Literacy Instruction: A Guidebook to Theory and Practice*.

[4] Gunderson, Lee. *ESL (ELL) Literacy Instruction: A Guidebook to Theory and Practice*.

[5]"Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Book Website."

[6] Tough, Paul. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*.

[7] Tough, Paul. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*.

[8] Tough, Paul. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*.

[9] See Appendix A for an example of a four square

[10]"English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 3." Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed December 9, 2015. http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/3/.

[11] https://www.wida.us/standards/eld.aspx

[12] See Appendix D for example activity

[13] "English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 3." Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed December 9, 2015. http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/3/.

[14] See Appendix C for sample graphic organizer

[15] "English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening » Grade 3." Common Core State Standards Initiative.

[16] Gunderson, Lee. *ESL (ELL) Literacy Instruction: A Guidebook to Theory and Practice*.

[17] "English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening » Grade 3." Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed December 9, 2015.

[18] "English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 3." Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed December 9, 2015. http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/3/.

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Appendix A: Four Square Graphic Organizer

Opening Sentence:	
Detail #1	Detail #2
Detail #3	Closing Sentence:

Appendix B: Sample Word Cards

First	Second
Before	Next
Then	After
Last	Finally

Appendix C: Sample Graphic Organizer for Story Sequencing.

Appendix D: Sample Cloze Activity

We read a story about The Three Little Pigs. Let me tell you how the story went.

_____, the three pigs left their mother to build their own homes. _____,

the first pigs made houses out of straw and twigs. _____the big bad wolf

came to eat them. He blew their house down. The _____ thing the two

younger pigs did was to run to their older brother. He made a house out of bricks.

_____ that, the big bad wolf tried to blow the brick house down too. He

couldn't do it! _____, the three little pigs were safe.

First	After	Finally	Second
Next	Then	Before	Last

Curriculum Unit Title	Bridging Oral Storytelling Techniques to Writing	Author	Lisa Ely

KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.

Sequencing of events using real life experiences.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT

Why is it important to tell a story in order?

How do I tell a story on paper?

CONCEPT A	CONCEPT B	CONCEPT C
Recall and retell, sequencing	Recall and Retell using real life events	Explaining events to an audience

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A	ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B	ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C
What are important events in a story?	How can I organize my experiences in order?	How do I tell a story to someone who is listening?

VOCABULARY A	VOCABULARY B	VOCABULARY C
Sequencing Words: first, second, third, next, then, before, after, last	Sequencing Words: first, second, third, next, then, before, after, last	Sequencing Words: first, second, third, next, then, before, after, last

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES

Sticky notes, video recording device, crayons or markers, sequencing word cards