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Gaining Appreciation and Understanding for Writing in English in a Bilingual Class

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While participating in the Bilingual Teacher Research Forum (a teacher inquiry group), I decided to do research in my classroom to investigate the ways in which emergent bilinguals (EBs) expanded their appreciation and understanding of writing in English as a second language. The purpose of this study was to examine and describe first-grade EBs' development of writing. A variety of assessment tools were used to document students writing growth over time. All the children made progress both in their spelling and in their writing of stories. Engaging in teacher-based research became a professional development tool to document and reflect on my teaching practice and its impact on the writing attitudes and skills of a group of first-grade EBs.

Introduction

For over 10 years, as the only Bilingual Reading Specialist at my school, I worked with teachers from the bilingual as well as regular all-English programs. Shell Elementary (all names are pseudonyms) is a small inner-city elementary school, Grades K–4, in a Spanish-speaking community in North Philadelphia, Pa. There, I provided guidance and leadership in literacy by working with teachers, paraprofessionals, and students. Several times a week, I also worked with a group of first-grade students who, as recommended by their regular classroom teacher, needed intensive small group instruction in the area of literacy. These children were straddling two languages and two cultures. Spanish was spoken at home, and in the school they were learning English. I had only 45 minutes daily to work with the students. The period was squeezed in between morning recess and lunch, so there was no question of keeping the students for a few minutes longer. The afternoon was not an option either, because their regular classroom teacher complained that they would be missing an important content class. I alternated between a reading and writing lesson each day. This group of emergent bilinguals (EBs) is part of the inquiry project I describe in this article.

School and Classroom Context

The building where Shell elementary school is located was built over a century ago. For the past 30 years it has served more students than what it was originally built for. For example, at the time of the study (during the early 2000s) there were almost 550 students in a building meant to house about 125 students. At that time, 90% of the students at Shell elementary were Latino, and most spoke Spanish at home. The student population was also highly transient, with many students moving back and forth to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Over 80% of the families were low income and in welfare. As suggested by standardized test scores, these

students were not achieving academically and many were considered future drop-outs.

Today, the school struggles to keep their enrollment at around 300 students, still being overcrowded. Ninety-three percent are economically disadvantaged and 92% are Latino. Transiency continues to be an issue that influences these students' lives and schooling. Charter schools have siphoned off some of the students, and the razing of deteriorating housing has forced many to move out of the community.

Another concerning characteristic of the school was that during the 1990s and 2000s, the school was also a setting for entrenched teachers. As indicated by Nevárez-La Torre (2010), about half of the teachers neared 30 years of service at the same school and many "maintained traditional classrooms with predetermined instructional objectives and narrow outcomes. The population of the school became increasingly diverse during their time of service, and they still talked about the 'good old days' when students sat in straight rows and copied work neatly from the blackboard" (p. 12). Given the small building, there was no space for a school library; instead, each classroom had a small library collection of books. This practice continues today, although for a different reason; now, there is space for a library, but due to budget cuts, there is no money for a librarian.

The increasing numbers of EBs were served through three types of programs. For those students whose parents requested maintenance of their L1, there was a *Dual Bilingual* program in Spanish and in English. The *Sheltered English* program was also implemented in classrooms where the teachers had been trained in using sheltered ESL techniques to make language comprehensible and scaffold vocabulary instruction. Because of the high percentage of EBs (over 60%) in the school, there were not enough ESL teachers to service all of them adequately. Thus, some mainstream teachers provided some sheltered instruction to support the academic learning of EBs. The third type was the *All-English* program, which provided instruction targeted for native English speakers. They did not offer any language-based modifications for EBs, although they differentiated instruction based on the ability levels of the students (e.g., slow learners, talented).

The Problem

Given the low achievement scores of students in the school, early identification and early intervention were two goals that the principal instituted for all the teachers to work on. I knew that one of the areas of most academic need in my school was writing in any language. Writing was an activity that students in my school suffered through. They viewed it as a penalty for not behaving well in class, since some of the teachers reprimanded them in such a way. Most teachers complained that the students did not want to write and did not know how to write. Their performance in most classroom-based writing tasks and testing confirmed the low performance in writing of many students in the school, in particular, those who were developing English as their second language.

After participating in a teacher inquiry group, the Bilingual Teacher Research Forum for a

few months (the Forum; Nevárez-La Torre, 2010) , I decided to do research in my own classroom to investigate the ways in which EB children expanded their appreciation and understanding of writing in their second language. I was interested in exploring different methods that would serve as effective writing intervention practices in the early grades. Specifically, I wanted to document the writing progress of first-grade EBs in spelling as well as in composing and encoding their thoughts and creative stories.

Purpose and Organization of Inquiry

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe first-grade EB children's writing development. Through the research I wanted to analyze the pedagogical practices I use for writing instruction and explore ways to make them more meaningful and relevant to my students' needs. This inquiry took me on an introspective journey that started with identifying the practices that were used to teach me to write when I was young, the pedagogy for literacy instruction I implemented early in my career, and the path that helped me challenge unproductive teacher-centered instruction. Instructional techniques that emphasized writing as a process (Atwell, 1987; Clay, 2005 a & b) were explored to see if and how they could promote writing growth in EBs. I uncovered how students' home language and their spelling approximations can be honored: these strategies are a rich resource upon which to build instruction while guiding them toward conventions and book language form. Through observations across time and in daily lessons I was able to detect individual patterns of progress and help the children grow in their learning, specifically, in their writing development and enjoyment for this academic activity.

I begin the narrative by describing some of the practices I used to teach writing before I became part of the Forum. To provide the classroom context of the inquiry, I discuss the students' writing dispositions and performance profile as well as how these change once I started to incorporate into writing instruction some different methods based on the research that I read with Forum members. The analysis of their writing development is based on my documentation of their performance in pre- and post-assessments and on the examination of their writing pieces collected daily. Finally, I reflect on what I learned from the inquiry project that allowed me to appreciate the students' process of becoming writers and to experience my transformation as a practitioner.

Teaching Practice Early in My Career

When I first started to teach literacy and later became a reading specialist, my instructional practices were mostly influenced by the methods used to teach me to read and write when I was a child and those used in my teaching preparation program. I grew up in a bilingual home where Ukrainian and English were spoken. I was also biliterate because my elementary and middle schools offered language arts in those two languages. As I valued multilingualism, in high school and college I added a third language, Spanish, to my linguistic repertoire.

Looking back, growing up, I was taught using very traditional instructional practices which included attention to grammar and form in the writing product. The teachers gave us the topics to write and the preferred writing assignment was copying from books or the blackboard (to practice handwriting skills) and completing book reports. At the college level I was exposed to the importance of teaching the mechanics of writing, the benefits of skill drilling and memorization, and that writing development needed to be guided by error correction.

Not surprisingly, I incorporated this same type of instruction when I taught writing. Teacher centered instruction included filling in the blank in grammar workbooks, after reading a passage from a textbook, answering questions in a sentence or two, and writing spelling words multiple times. I did not expect my students to be creative writers or to produce knowledge. I just expected them to follow instructions when answering questions, write the assigned book report, and practice handwriting skills. I gave a lot of attention to error correction, teaching writing skills in isolation from authentic text, and mastering skills through repetition drills. Before participating in the Forum I did not question my pedagogical methods as being counterproductive to writing development, not only because of the instructional models I was exposed to but also because my colleagues at the school were implementing similar practices.

Still, I was always very bothered by the fact that the first-grade students with whom I worked did not see themselves as writers, they expressed a lot of displeasure when a writing task was assigned, and they did not want to write independently for fear of making errors and failing. While, many of them did not write in Spanish because they received their initial reading instruction in English, sporadically they expressed their ideas orally in Spanish. Furthermore, at times I needed to scaffold their comprehension by explaining complex ideas in their first language.

Participation in a Teacher Inquiry Group

It was at this juncture that I was invited to participate in the Forum, a teacher inquiry group that met once a month, each time at a different school in the city. I had been a mentor to new bilingual teachers as part of a summer institute induction program. One of its features was to guide teachers in learning how to conduct investigations in their classrooms to improve their practice. After the summer institute ended, a group of participants wanted to continue meeting informally to support their instruction, intrigued by the concept of teacher inquiry, I decided to join the group (Nevárez-La Torre, 2010).

What started as a short-term commitment one afternoon a month became, for me, a six-year wide-ranging exploration of my practice as a bilingual reading specialist. The group of ESL and bilingual teachers read and discussed scholarly literature, hosted guest speakers on topics related to biliteracy and teacher inquiry, examined videotapes of our own teaching, documented our reflections and insights, and gradually changed aspects of our practices that were unproductive. The exploration of literacy and biliteracy was a common interest of all the members and we pursued it diligently. As we introspected about the ideology that guided literacy teaching in our classrooms, current scholarly discussions were used to challenge these and uncover more relevant and productive ways of promoting reading and writing in multilingual classrooms.

Given my multilingual background and the issues with writing instruction that I confronted at my school and classroom, one of my inquiry interests became: *What happens when I encourage a group of first-grade EBs to write using process-oriented instructional approaches?*

The discussions with the Forum members and the articles we examined together about literacy helped me understand the process that authors experience when they write (Atwell, 1999; Graves, 1994). As I explained earlier, writing and reading for me were linear processes, with a beginning and an end that stressed achieving a product that followed the guidelines and expectations given by me, the teacher. In my teaching I valued writing as an independent activity with very little input from others. As a teacher, I followed the prescribed curriculum to maintain control over the instructional process.

Participating in the inquiry group opened my eyes to new conceptualizations about writing pedagogy that contradicted my beliefs about effective literacy instruction. Gradually I began to construct a new understanding about writing as a process (Atwell, 1999; Samway, 2006) and how best to promote its development with EB first graders.

One of my first tasks was to explore ways that would foster a learning environment where my class would become a community of writers (Freeman, 1995; Samway, 2006; Strahan, Smith, McElrath, & Toole, 2001; Whatley & Canalis, 2002). While closely examining my role as the teacher of writing, I would identify ways of teaching writing that promoted trust, collaboration, and more interaction among students (Igoa, 1995). Specifically, every day I scheduled an author-sharing time at the end of class. This time allowed one volunteer to read their writing for that day to their classmates. I modeled how to respond to an author's writing. The students learned to not only respond with just a short complement but to react to the writing itself by commenting on the choice of topic, a writers' craft, or the way a sentence was constructed. In addition, because we were a small group who worked together daily, closeness developed among the students. They felt free to ask one another for help in spelling certain words and generating writing ideas. Despite the increased noise level, I encourage them to interact with each other as I saw that they were being very productive. Another activity that promoted authorship, ownership, and camaraderie was that once a student finished writing a book, it became part of the classroom library. In this way everyone celebrated with the author the publication of the book and benefitted by reading a new book.

An additional emphasis became the discussion and modeling of writing as a process rather than focusing on just the final product. Initially, I had to model and teach explicitly how to brainstorm ideas for their writing and ways of expanding on those ideas to create a story. This was necessary since these students expressed doubt about their writing ability and insisted that they did not have anything to write about. Rather than emphasizing the written final product, I encouraged them to talk about their ideas. Through these conversations I helped to brainstorm details that made their writing richer. Mini-lessons (Calkins, 1994) contributed to their understanding of letter-sound correspondence, punctuation, capitalization, spacing, and other aspects of the mechanics of writing. A critical feature was that the mini-lessons were based on

the specific needs of the students, rather than following a generic scope and sequence. Finally, we worked on drafting the student's stories. For first graders, this proved to be challenging. They were impatient to get their writing down on paper and move to a different activity. Once they experienced success in writing by publishing some initial pieces, they were more willing to spend the time and energy on writing a draft. Gradually they appreciated that writing takes time and is part of a process involving several steps.

Integration of skills and strategies emerged as a key ingredient that permeated the instruction of writing in my classroom. As explained above, during the writing lesson block my students and I conversed about ideas, listened to one another's drafts, and read what was written. In this way writing, reading, listening, and speaking were worked on at the same time. This cycle of interactive learning allowed them to learn language by using it in an integrated fashion.

As I began to implement these process-oriented instructional practices, I made documentation of writing instruction in my classroom a priority. To gather information for my inquiry, I studied the classroom dynamics during the writing lesson block. By observing how my students went about writing, I would learn from them how best to guide their writing development. Their writing would become the curriculum, and the observations could also help me to examine patterns in their growth as writers.

A Closer Look at My Inquiry Process

All of the students I worked with were repeating first grade and their level of spelling development was far below grade level. As part of my inquiry to support, extend, and guide their writing growth, the students and I worked together for six months (November to April). Of the 10 original EBs that I started to work with in November, only 6 stayed in the school for the remainder of the school year. Four students left at different times before April, and although four new students enrolled, I could not include them in the sample, because they had not received instruction in my classroom since November. Thus, the findings discussed below reflect data collected from 6 students, namely, Keila, Amarilys, Emanuel, Julio, Lisa, and Carmen.

Table 1 specifies the different sources that I used to gather information in my inquiry into my students writing development. In early November, I used two early literacy assessment instruments to gather baseline data on the students writing. In April, I planned to assess students again using the same tests to compare the results and see if any growth was evident. Background information on my students was also collected. To capture my students' everyday writing behaviors and progress, I decided to document observations, keep anecdotal records, and complete checklists.

The Monster Test is a developmental spelling assessment based on the work of J. Richard Gentry (2007), professor of elementary education at Western Carolina University. This test, designed

Table 1

Data Gathering Tools

Instrument	Purpose	Data Collected
Monster Test	Evaluate/demonstrate growth in children's spelling ability	November and April
Adapted Writing Scale	Descriptors/level of EBs' early writing development	November, January, and April
Student Background Data	Attendance, Behavior, Homework	Daily
Teacher observation of student work using anecdotal records and Post-its	Track progress, assess impact of instruction, and highlight needs	Daily
Individual checklists	Items child controls in writing, strategy development	When appears in child's writing

for English-language pupils in kindergarten through second grade, is used to evaluate/demonstrate growth in children's developmental spelling ability. It is valuable to teachers in making informed instructional decisions based on the students' strengths and areas of needed development. It consists of 10 words, the first of which is *monster*. The other words are: *united, dress, bottom, hiked, human, eagle, closed, bumped, and type*. The results of the test can be categorized into five developmental stages: *precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, and conventional* (Gentry, 2007). Although the test was not developed with EBs in mind, it is beneficial to establish a baseline for spelling development in English.

In November, most of the students in my inquiry tested at the *precommunicative* or the *semiphonetic* stage. *Precommunicative spelling* is used to describe writing that cannot be understood by others, and perhaps not by the child who writes it. *Semiphonetic-stage* writers know that letters say sounds, and they can write only some of the letters in a word (Gentry, 2007). If I would have given this test in Spanish, I suspect that the students would hear and transcribe more sounds, because Spanish tends to be more phonetic than English.

Attempts were made by the test developer to translate it into Spanish, but the phonemes in the words are different from those in English, making it difficult to compare results. Generally, it is difficult to translate across languages. However, it is my professional opinion that EBs may have tested better in a language that is more regular, like Spanish, than in English, which has so many irregular phonic elements.

In English, spellers at the *phonetic stage* spell words like they sound. They write all the sounds they hear in words. These spellings do not necessarily look like conventional English spelling, but they are quite readable. Initial and final consonants are in place and these spellers gradually add vowels, even though they may not be the correct ones. Word spacing is evident.

The *transitional stage* has spellers begin to write words in more conventional ways. These spellers undergo a transition from reliance on sound to reliance on visual memory of how the word looks in print. They write with more correct vowels in every syllable. Often all the letters necessary to spell the word are there, but some letters may be reversed. The *conventional stage* is the final one where spellers are able to spell every word correctly (Gentry, 2007).

I also used an instrument adapted from the Blackburn-Cramp Stages of Writing Scale (2011). This writing scale was developed by teachers at Cramp elementary school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for EB writers at the first-grade level and below. However, at Shell elementary school the teachers renamed the stages of early writing development using the following categories: *emerging, scribble/pictorial, precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, conventional, and advanced*. For purposes of my inquiry I refer to this adapted instrument as the Adapted Writing Scale. In November, my students scored at the *precommunicative* or *semiphonetic* stage in the Adapted Writing Scale.

The adaptation was guided by the teachers' professional expertise. They decided that behaviors characteristic of the *precommunicative* stage of writing included stringing together random letters and letterlike forms, writing letters to convey a message and attempting to read it back. Students in the *semiphonetic* stage begin to understand that there is a relationship between letters and sounds and select some letters to match sounds. At the *phonetic stage*, students use initial and other consonants to represent words as well as write some familiar words. During the *transitional stage* children use some invented spelling and some conventional spelling in their writing to compose an understandable sentence independently. The *conventional stage* has students using both phonetic and sight strategies to spell words while writing short, simple sentences of more than four words. The *advanced* and final stage has children use conventional spelling as they write full sentences that are the start of a story. Their stories are structurally more complete and complex.

To gather background information about the students I spoke to their parents, their classroom teachers, and examined school records for attendance. Lack of attendance and completion of homework was a problem that all the teachers complained about. Parents indicated that they were not able to help the children with homework because they were not proficient in English. It was clear that I needed to help my students become independent writers so that they could perform well in the regular classroom and satisfy their mainstream teachers' expectations of writing homework.

Through my documentation of observations and the use of anecdotal records (Himley & Carini, 2000) I was able to track my students progress in skills such as: knows letter sounds; uses correct spacing; makes sense; writes in sentences; includes a beginning, middle, and end; and, additionally, problem and/or solution, uses details, has an interesting lead, stays on topic, and concludes with a strong ending. Individual checklists (Allington & Cunningham, 2002) were helpful to track their progress in the developmental stages of writing when evaluating their written work and to identify areas where further observation and future mini-lessons were needed.

An Overview of Emergent Bilingual's Writing Progress

This section describes the progress in writing stories made by 6 out of 10 emergent bilinguals, Amarilys, Carmen, Emanuel, Julio, Keila, and Lisa, with whom I worked for six months. I began implementing the process-oriented instructional techniques and methods soon after the baseline data were collected in November. As indicated in Table 2, all the children made noteworthy progress in spelling and writing development.

Table 2

Students Measures and Results

Name	November	January	April	Attendance
Amarilys	semiphonetic (MT)		conventional (MT)	poor
	semiphonetic (AWS)	transitional (AWS)	conventional (AWS)	
Carmen	semiphonetic (MT)		conventional (MT)	fair
	semiphonetic (AWS)	transitional (AWS)	conventional (AWS)	
Emanuel	precommunicative (MT)		transitional (MT)	good
	precommunicative (AWS)	semiphonetic (AWS)	phonetic (AWS)	
Julio	precommunicative (MT)		transitional (MT)	good
	precommunicative (AWS)	semiphonetic (AWS)	phonetic (AWS)	
Keila	semiphonetic (MT)		transitional (MT)	poor
	precommunicative (AWS)	phonetic (AWS)	transitional (AWS)	
Lisa	semiphonetic (MT)		conventional (MT)	fair
	semiphonetic (AWS)	phonetic (AWS)	transitional (AWS)	

Note. MT = Monster Test (Gentry, 2007); AWS = Adapted Writing Scale (described in text)

In November, Keila was able to write only a letter or two for each of the 10 words on the Monster Spelling Test. Although she wrote random letters for the words *monster* and *hiked*, she was able to write the beginning consonant for at least 7 of the 10 words. Keila was at the semiphonetic stage of development, and was aware that letters represent sounds. The first pieces of writing that Keila completed included combinations of letterlike symbols and strings of letters as well as numbers and math symbols like the plus sign. At first there was no spacing evident in her writing, suggesting that she was at the precommunicative stage in the Adapted Writing Scale.

In April, Keila tested at the transitional level in spelling; she spelled most words on the Monster Test correctly. On the Adapted Writing Scale she was also at the transitional level, with

most words in her writing spelled conventionally. By analyzing her daily writing I noticed how gradually she began to use a period in the middle of the line to indicate a space between words. The exclamation point became her favorite punctuation mark, and she wrote lines and lines of them.

In his first piece of writing for me, Emanuel wrote entire lines of strings of letters. In the space on the paper where he wrote his name, Emanuel's drawing spread out and into his name as though it were all part of the artwork. Both the Monster Test and the Adapted Writing Scale signaled him at the precommunicative stage of spelling and writing development respectively. In December, he wrote, "My Fopopth ate a banana" on the first line of a story, followed by lines of strings of letters. He had progressed to using some letters to match sounds and was able to write the above sentence with word-by-word coaching. However, when I left him to continue writing on his own, he only produced strings of letters. By April, Emanuel became a transitional speller, according to the Monster Test, and a phonetic writer, as indicated by the Adapted Writing Scale; he would write all the phonemes that he heard in words, occasionally using some vowels correctly. By then he was able to work independently on his writing for most of the class period.

Amarilys made the fastest progress of all the students in the group. For her first writing pieces she would only copy sentences out of her reading book. Then she wrote strings of letters and unconnected words with no spacing between words, as did most of the students in the group, and consonants represented words. The Monster Test identified her as a semiphonetic speller and the Adapted Writing Scale also showed her as a semiphonetic writer. She wrote initial, middle, and final consonants in words, but included no vowels. She wrote all the sounds she heard in the words, and they were quite readable, but did not necessarily look like English spelling. Like most of the students, Amarilys only wrote a sentence or two at the beginning of the inquiry.

By December, spacing was evident, words were spelled correctly, and she made increased attempts at writing sentences, but there was still no punctuation. She used transitional spelling: "scol" for *school* and "lon" for *learn*. By January, there was conventional spelling for most words, there was punctuation, and she would write three full sentences. Children generally use consonants as they sound out words before they begin to use vowels. She was moving from the phonetic to the transitional stage, undergoing a transition from reliance on sound to reliance on visual memory of how a word looks in print. She wrote with many correct vowels in every syllable. Often, all the letters necessary to spell the word were there, but she may have reversed some letters. "Famley" for *family*, "wit" for *with*, "fliy" for *fly*, "brub" for *brother*, "wesngs" for *wings*, and "thay" for *they*.

By April, Amarilys knew when words did not look right and experimented with alternatives. Gradually, she began to write more, and her stories would contain details and a beginning, middle, and end. With guidance and support, she quickly reached conventional stages in both the Monster Test and the Adapted Writing Scales. Her writing exhibited standard spelling, and she used more complex sentence structure. Conventional spelling is a lifelong process, thus,

as she learned more and more words, her spelling continued to improve.

Julio's writing displayed patterns of growth and development similar to the other students. His composing showed that he wanted to write about personal experience. His spelling progressed from the precommunicative stage in November to the transitional stage in April on the Monster Test. There was also progress shown in his writing as suggested by the Adapted Writing Scale, moving from the precommunicative in November to the semiphonetic by January, and reaching the phonetic stage in April. He was starting to build up a bank of high frequency words that he could spell correctly and write quickly. In class, as the students' stories got longer we made them into books for the class to read. Julio's book encouraged other students to think of titles for their work. His mainstream teacher told me that he was showing great writing improvement in her class.

Lisa loved to do fancy and detailed artwork. She often took so much time to draw that there was no time left for her to write. But she did write, she wrote about fanciful things. Analyzing the results of the Monster test, Lisa grew from the semiphonetic spelling stage in November to the conventional stage of spelling by April. The results from the Adapted Writing Scale also showed improvement. Specifically, her writing grew from semiphonetic in November to phonetic in January to transitional in April. This ongoing improvement was also evident in the everyday stories that she wrote in the classroom by increasing the amount of print included. The fact that she was able to spell correctly all the words in sentences she wrote in late April, such as "The princess has a castle and she likes it.", suggested to me that she was approaching the conventional stage of spelling at that time.

Carmen followed the same pattern of growth in spelling and writing development as the other five students in the inquiry moving from semiphonetic to conventional spelling on the Monster Test and on the Adapted Writing Scales from semiphonetic to transitional to conventional writing by April. She expressed some metacognition development through a story she wrote. "I did some tests Today. It was easy for me. Ms. Jones told us to write spelling words. I did very well." For the word *told*, she had written *toD*, but then crossed it out and spelled it conventionally. When she saw how she wrote the word, she realized that it did not look right and changed it to how she thought it should look.

Changes in my Teaching of Writing

As I continued to look at the student's writing, I was very pleased with their growth and progress. The most important change I identified in April was that they had learned to enjoy writing. They expressed disappointment whenever I told them that we would not be writing. What a dramatic change from their reactions at the beginning of the academic year, when they hated to write, and said that they did not know how. Reading and writing were now fun for them. That was wonderful.

In reflecting about what influenced this progress in my students, I identified some areas of

my instructional practice that changed. Although I cannot state that these changes caused my students writing growth, I am certain that it influenced it in some way. As mentioned earlier, the Forum work exposed me to new research about literacy development. Specifically, learning about writing as a process expanded my thinking about how to teach. Gradually, the teaching practices I used in my class moved away from the prescribed curriculum in that they became more interactive and authentic and followed the learners.

Another change was that I made the writing of stories an important activity to engage in on a weekly basis in my classroom. I learned that having a regular and predictable time for writing every other day, as these students did, helped them to make those small increments in growth that added up to big changes. They were thinking about writing, even when they were not writing, and building up their creativity and stamina for the writing task. They experienced writing not as an isolated event but an ongoing opportunity to document their ideas and thoughts by creating connected text and sharing it with others.

I also abandoned the belief that the prescribed curriculum could not be questioned when it was not beneficial in promoting academic growth of your students. Asking questions about what I observed became more of a way of teaching for me. An inquisitive disposition about teaching and learning had replaced in me a complacent attitude about following the mandated curriculum and replicating instructional practices that were not producing first-grade writers. Instead of using the writing workbooks that emphasized rote memorization drills, exercises with decontextualized words, and copying text without understanding its meaning, my students own writing became the text that was read, analyzed, and revised. As their attitude towards writing improved, their engagement in writing their own stories increased, and their mastery of different skills improved, I became convinced that questioning my own practice was a necessary step in being an effective teacher.

I made my teaching more relevant to the students' cultures and more integrative of all language components, namely speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Culturally relevant instruction proposes that curriculum and instruction must relate to students cultural reality as a bridge to help them move from what they know best to the unknown that needs to be learned (Ladson-Billings, 1994; McIntyre, González, & Rosebery, 2001). Forum members opened my mind to the importance of allowing students to use their background knowledge in terms of culture and language in their writing. In this way they could really show me what they knew and valued as well as being willing to experiment and take more risks writing in their second language. Rather than giving them a topic to write about, I invited them to write about experiences they had. Quickly, these first graders started to compose stories about Puerto Rico, their families, and things that they liked to do during the weekends. When there was a word that they only knew in Spanish I suggested that they write it and later it could be translated into English. The fact that the student's complaints about not wanting to write or not having anything to write about decreased hinted to me that I was on the right track.

In each writing conference I had with individual students, we discussed their ideas and

analyzed their meaning, they read orally their drafts, and they listened to my suggestions and revised their drafts accordingly. This time was an opportunity to use all the components of language in an integrated fashion. Mini-lessons were added to explore in depth a particular unit of language, skill, or strategy to expand their oral and written fluency in English. Reading and discussing books written by their peers, housed in the classroom library, was always an opportunity to explore meaning and language in an integrated manner.

To conclude, engaging in teacher-based research became a professional development tool to document and reflect on my teaching practice and its impact on the learning of EBs in first grade. My involvement in the Forum was the beginning of a philosophical change in my thoughts and practices regarding effective instruction of writing in English as a second language at the early childhood level. I moved from a transmission framework to a constructivist framework of instruction. After completing my first inquiry project I realized that this arduous work had wonderful rewards. The improvement that I documented in my students writing gave me a lot of satisfaction. Yet, an unexpected source of encouragement came from one of my colleagues in the regular all-English classrooms. The teacher from whose classroom I pulled students out for my lessons told me that she began to notice changes in their learning as well. She invited me into her classroom to teach the entire class once a week, using the same process-oriented techniques that I used with my EBs, so that she could learn to do it herself. It was exciting to know that my path into inquiry about writing instruction was taking me into new spaces where I could share my findings with other colleagues at my school.

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