

San Francisco Education Fund

Leadership Institute

Teacher Action Research Paper

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Question:

How can I improve my students' writing performance through interactive writing activities which leads them to independent writing of a solid narrative, descriptive, and expository paragraph in their first language - Spanish?

Rationale for study:

At my school, 1st graders have to produce cohesive (giving details that expand on main idea) paragraphs with a minimum of three sentences each in three different genres. Their first formal piece of writing is a narration of their favorite activity during a sunny day. The second piece is a description of their favorite farm animal and the last piece is a list of things they do before going to bed.

At the beginning of the school year, I saw that my students over all produced very little writing independently. Their understanding of complete sentences as well as writing conventions was minuscule. During my first visit of another 1st grade teacher in October, I observed that most of her students were able to create a longer piece of writing with promising features that addressed solid sentence structure and conventions on benchmark. After this observation, I conferred with our reading specialist teacher, who works with several of my students and who I consider to be my mentor this year. I learned that I have to provide specific scaffolding, namely interactive writing sessions

before independent writing, in order for my students to generate satisfactory work on their own.

Published Research:

In Carla Cicalese's research Children's Perspective on Interactive Writing versus Independent Writing in Primary Grades, 2003, it is stated that students feel more comfortable to take risks in their writing after interactive writing experiences than if they only had experienced independent writing. The students started experiencing their errors as learning-in-progress and made considerable gains from their mistakes. Interactive writing is viewed in this study as an essential step to independent writing. Emergent writers held a more positive attitude towards writing after interactive writing experiences.

Shirley Chin, a Teacher Network Leadership Institute fellow from the New York chapter, implies in her research, Writing Uphill, that interactive writing with especially second language learners is a promising stepping stone for successful independent writing. Her study focused on two struggling new comers in her class that made significant gains in writing correct simple sentences and using correct grammar structures and punctuation after a battery of interactive writing lessons. Even though, Shirley focuses on 4th grade second language learners, I believe that we can view 1st graders writing in their native language as "New Comers" to the written code of their mother tongue. Therefore the strategies used by Shirley Chin for her second language learners are applicable to my 1st grade students developing writing in their first language.

This is confirmed by Kathryn Button, Margaret J. Johnson, and Paige Furgerson's research Interactive Writing in a Primary Classroom. In the research Clay, one of the inventors of interactive writing is quoted stating that "...children are active constructors of their own language....growth does not take place without environmental support...Interactive writing provides opportunities for teachers to engage in instruction precisely at the point of student need".

Background and Context:

I am currently teaching in an urban public elementary school in California. My class is comprised of 17 1st graders with exclusively Latino background. Most of my students are eligible for free lunch. Since this is a bilingual first grade class, we build literacy primarily in Spanish. We spend about 75% of the time in Spanish, the rest in English. Since Language Arts is held almost entirely in Spanish, my students and I work mostly on Spanish writing skills. This is my first year teaching 1st grade. I taught upper elementary grades before.

Data Collection Tools:

During my study, I focused on two students who I identified as highly struggling writers at the beginning of the year. I collected numerous writing samples throughout the year

which are the base for my analysis. The second pillar of my data collection is informal interviews with all students after writing activities. The interviews were conducted in order for me to get reflective feedback directly from my students on interactive writing lessons that I conducted. The students were asked to speak to the impact of interactive writing sessions on their independent writing. Lastly, I started a teacher journal on student behavior observations during my students' independent writing time.

Data Analysis:

First, I looked at the writing samples of the focus group students at the beginning of the year. Student A is a student who gets stuck with writing. The first pieces he was asked to produce had only two words. Students were to describe their favorite animal, student A wrote:

mi animal

transl: my ...animal

The next task was to write at least one sentence about an activity they like to do. He did not produce any words at all during this task. In comparison, the rest of the class showed a significantly better understanding of the assignment and even though they made numerous mistakes in their writing, the product over all was much more promising as the students created writing that reflected somewhat the idea of sentences. Student A is 6 years old. He seems to be frequently overwhelmed with his work. Sometimes after stopping to work all together, he starts crying, as if he doesn't understanding at all what is

expected of him. He works very slowly. But, after approaching him and giving him some one-on-one assistance in his writing, he often seems to be doing better. The first semester, he was selected for reading recovery in Spanish.

Student B is also 6 years old. She is physically tiny and has a hard time focusing on class work. Her mom has little to no formal schooling and it seems there is little structured support for this student's academics at home (since the mother is the one that spends most of the time with her daughter). Her mother complains that her child has behavior problems at home and usually does not follow her mom's directions. Student B's penmanship is, in comparison with the other students, immature. She confuses capital and lower case letters and inverts numerous letters like g, b, and d, as well a. At the beginning of the year her writing was barely legible. She produced only single or double letters instead of entire words, skipping vowels frequently. She also struggles enormously with reading just simple, short words. She participated in reading recovery in Spanish the second semester of the school year.

Both students had extra writing practice during the reading recovery sessions.

At the beginning of the school year, since I am a newcomer to first grade, our reading specialist recommended a visit to another teacher's classroom with strong language arts expertise. During the visit, I observed a very interactive guided writing lesson. Students produced an entire paragraph together with the teacher on a big chart paper in various colors. One technique that stood out in particular during their writing was the use of various colored markers that signaled to students the different parts of a

paragraph – topic sentence, details, and closing sentence, according to Step Up To Writing, a writing program primarily for older students that explicitly teaches paragraph writing in different genres. Only the students did the writing on the paper, as the teacher was soliciting what words to write and how to spell them orally from the entire class. As I looked at the students’ independent writing samples, I was impressed with them having written various sentences expressing their activities that past weekend. The content was cohesive and displayed good detail. The students seemed to be able to express their manifold ideas without getting stuck putting them on paper.

As I returned to my classroom, I decided to undertake the first instructional changes based on what I had observed and discussed with our reading specialist. Up to this point, the structure of my “writing program” was to move from modeled writing directly to independent writing. I would write a paragraph, the students and I would read it together as an example of good writing and then I would send them off to produce something similar. From this point on, I started implementing an interactive writing session before sending them off on their own. I gathered the students around the rug, in order to prepare them for the next assignment. I showed them a piece that I wrote about my past weekend. I had written 4 sentences. Each sentence had a different color. The opening was written in green, which narrated what I did. The next sentence was written in red. This sentence gave details about who I was with. The third sentence explained the location and was written in orange. Lastly, the closing sentence was written in blue and simply stated that I had fun (Me divertí mucho.) In addition, I would write a question for each sentence in the according color, in order to solicit the content of the paragraph

without my students forgetting what to write. In a way, I gave them the outline of what details to attach to their weekend activity. After reading my piece together, we read the first question which I had written down in green. “What did you do over the weekend?” Students would volunteer their thoughts and I would pick one idea to write on our big chart paper. We would orally repeat the sentence together and then I would call on individual students to write each word in green on the paper. After the completion of the sentence, we would read it together to see if it came out o.k. Then, I would direct my students’ attention to the second question written in red. “Who were you with?” We would follow the same process as before in order to put the sentence on paper until we had written four sentences together. The students seemed to be engaged since it seemed to me that it is very special for them to be picked to contribute a sentence to our class piece and to come up to the chart paper to write words with a marker.

Immediately after this activity, I asked the students to now think about their weekend and to write sentences about it. I posted the questions up on the board for them to view and I asked them to trace each sentence with crayons following the color of the question. I repeated this sequence of writing instruction over the next two months. In between, I solicited my students’ feedback about their writing and how they think the interactive lessons supports it. Repeatedly, students would state that the interactive writing helps them understand what and how to write. According to them, the colors helped them to learn about complete sentences, where to put capitals and periods, and how to expand their writing to a little paragraph.

After a couple of time using interactive writing sessions, I looked at my focus students' work again. The prompt this time was to describe something they did the day before.

Student A wrote:

Yo juego carrera

transl: I race

It still did not display a big improvement compared to the previous writing. He wrote just a few words, grammatically and orthographically it was still incorrect, and the punctuation was missing. The tense did not correspond to the prompt either, since we talked about a day that had already past. At least he started with a capital letter which demonstrated improvement. Student B wrote:

Ayer Yo Fuial

transl: Yesterday I went to

Madona conmi HErmana.

MacDonald with my sister.

Y juge en el Madona.

And I played in MacDonald.

Y Mi papi

And my dad

She had traced each line in the colors that we started using during interactive writing. Obviously, she still had not a good sense of what a complete sentence is. She also used capital letters where they didn't belong. Periods are partially in the correct spot. But in comparison to her earlier work, I saw improvement. In addition, as I was observing both of them during the writing process, I noticed that they seem to understand better what to

write even though they were still struggling with numerous confusions about spelling, punctuation, etc.

As I was taking notes in my journal, I started listing the challenges that 1st graders might encounter while they write several sentences. My list started with plain penmanship issues: holding the pen, forming letters, and following the lines, the fingers might start hurting after writing a couple of sentences; spelling is an enormous intellectual challenge for 1st graders, as well as spacing the letters and words; remembering capitals and periods; process sentence structure and keeping an idea in mind as they are writing it down; and finally, at the beginning they have to come up with ideas and organize them into several sentences. For emergent writers, this is likely to be an overload. One remedy seemed to be to offer those challenges at a step by step basis.

As they develop routine in the several areas of writing: penmanship, spelling, developing ideas and keeping them in mind, sentence structure and punctuation, I started to fine tune my writing program in order to offer a better scaffold and to break down the numerous challenges. Since I believed that the students need to develop routine in tackling their writing work, I maintained the structure of modeled writing, interactive writing, and independent writing but provided the students with a graphic organizer. The organizer was composed of a line on top where students would put the theme or title. It also contained three boxes where they could draw details and write just a word or two which they converted into complete sentences later on. This would help them to create their ideas first, write them down and then later to focus on writing sentences without

forgetting their ideas. We used the organizer in our interactive writing session. We filled it out together as a class. Immediately after that, the students went to their desks to fill out their individual graphic organizers. The students would come back to the rug and we would write complete sentences together on the big chart paper as I explained it above. After that, they would convert their ideas on their graphic organizers into a complete paragraph on their own. In order to break up the intellectual challenges further, I encouraged them to just write down their ideas first, without worrying about spelling or punctuation. I would give them time later to reread and edit their work. To address their “fear” of spelling correctly, I only expected them to spell words or word patterns correctly that we had already studied in class before. I coached them to just take a guess if they weren’t sure how to spell an unknown word. Overall, I tried to reduce the challenges to a minimum in order for them to not get bogged down in their improvement of writing.

In order to address the physical needs (hurting fingers and sitting for a long time), I changed the sequence of the interactive and independent writing component. We would write one sentence as a class on big chart paper. After one sentence, we would go back to our seats and the students would write down the first sentence, using their graphic organizer. Then, they would come back to the rug and we would write together our next sentence. This sequence addressed also the development of the understanding of complete sentences. Much more frequently, the students would start with a capital letter and end with a period, since that was a part of the more limited task they had to perform.

I kept this structure in place until the end of the year, since I constantly got positive feedback from my students that the interactive writing helped them to write independently and I saw them being engaged in our class writing and their independent writing.

By the end of the year, student A and B had gone through a considerable development concerning paragraph writing. The last writing task of the year was a repetition of a prompt that we had at the beginning of the year. What do you like to do during a sunny day? This time the students wrote their piece independently without any interactive or modeled lessons beforehand. We discussed the prompt, I handed out the usual graphic organizer, and the students went to work:

Student A:

Ami me gusta el sol	transl: I like the sun
Yo juego con mi pelota en la yarda.	I play with my ball In the yard.
Yotomé un jugo.	I drank some juice.
Yo me voy a casa.	I go home.
Me divierto mucho.	I have a lot of fun.

Student B:

Durante un día de Sol. Yo como nieve.	During a sunny Day. I eat icecream.
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A mi me gusta comer
nieve. Yo nado en
mi piscina. Yo estoi
en el parque.

I like to eat
icecream. I swim in
my pool. I am
In the park.

Even though, there are some mistakes in punctuation and spelling, overall the spelling and punctuation is correct. Student A still fluctuates in the use of present versus past tense but student B displays a solid use of present tense. In terms of content, both students address the prompt and elaborate with detail on it. Student A even shows the use of a nice opening and closing sentence.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

I want to propose two changes to teaching writing on a school and district wide level which include the creation of a comprehensive writing curriculum as well as changes in our professional development. I learned during this past year of teaching writing to my 1st graders that the gap between modeled writing and independent writing needs to be bridged. The bridge is the guided practice together, which prepared my students to understand what to do independently. Since writing is filled with a vast amount of challenges for the students, I found that the writing process needs to be broken down into smaller pieces, which facilitates building routine in the several areas of writing: penmanship, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, creating ideas and putting them on paper in a cohesive manner. Using the sequence of modeled, interactive, and

independent writing throughout the year allowed my students to build routine in the manifold challenge areas.

Our current writing program does not address this development. It includes a variety of genres - good. It usually provides a sample of a 1st graders writing that is, according to our standards, far above and beyond grade level – good. The problem I encountered is that there is no incorporation of an interactive writing component. After reading a sample piece, students are expected to produce a similar writing piece that mirrors the writing in our text book. I am curious how the student in the book became such a proficient author. During my eight years of teaching, I have never encountered a writing program that addressed my students’ needs in a comprehensive way. While discussing writing with colleagues, I have heard various times that writing components were often added last minute to language arts curriculums as an assurance to be considered by the state for adoption. That stresses the fact that we need writing programs that are composed in a thoughtful way.

I suggest as a practitioner to separate the writing program from the regular language arts curriculum. We need to channel focused attention on the development of a comprehensive writing program rather than adding it as an appendix to a curriculum in order to be adopted. We need to form a committee of practitioners and researchers alike who develop a comprehensive writing program for all grade levels in our district in order to meet the writing benchmarks set by our district. This program, of course, needs to be aligned with the state writing standards.

Secondly, this year I made the biggest professional progress due to the observation of a highly skilled teacher in the area of my need – writing. I also improved my teaching through the opportunity to discuss and analyze informally student work with our reading specialist who was working with my focus students in reading recovery. In order for new teachers, like myself in 1st grade, to use comprehensive writing programs effectively, I would like to suggest changes in professional development on a school wide and district level. I encourage our staff and administration to reform our collaboration and cluster time. We do spend time discussing writing assessments, which is valuable. However, we mostly discuss technicalities of delivering them. After each writing assessment we do look at student work, which is valuable. However, the time spent on student sample analysis is minimal. It would be beneficial for me to engage in a deeper analysis of writing samples with my colleagues. As each teacher presents challenges in teaching writing, in collaboration, we could determine their students’ needs and action plans to address them. Participating in ongoing case study groups in the past has always motivated me to make changes in my classroom to improve my teaching since they usually addressed my specific needs as a teacher.

Since I benefited from the observation of another teacher, I propose to consider classroom observations as a professional development component on a school as well as a district level. To see a highly skilled teacher in action was a great eye opener as well as a motivator for me to develop myself professionally in the area of my need. The essential factor that I believe caused me to engage deeply in making changes in my teaching was

the observed lesson being targeted exactly towards my needs as a teacher. How come that we discuss differentiated teaching for students so excessively but ignore it for teachers? I believe that teachers have a great awareness of their strengths and needs. I propose that schools and districts address those needs. A survey could be taken asking about areas of interest before offering professional development days in the district in order to make sure that teachers are interested and engaged learners.

As a new 1st grade teacher but not new to the profession, I need specifics on how to improve my guided writing in small groups with 1st graders. I would be extremely interested to see a 1st grade teacher on video modeling a guided writing lesson explaining challenges and their remedies. However, an introductory talk about interactive writing with several hundred teachers of all grade levels in one hall would not address my needs and would not hold my attention. From experience, I can state that I have changed very little in my classroom based on professional developments that did not address my specific needs.

In the past our district offered a series of workshops over one week each time that were voluntary and took place outside the mandatory professional development days. A workshop list was circulated a couple of weeks before the event and teachers could sign up for certain workshops to be attended in the afternoons, after a regular school day. Even though, the workshops were voluntary, they were well attended and teachers seemed to be focused and eager to learn during the sessions I attended. I believe that the teachers' active participation derived from the content addressing their specific needs as

teachers. I propose that the district continues this system of “differentiated teaching” and offers a variety of “classes” that teachers can pick and choose according to their own judgment of necessity and interest.