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Research Question(s):

What is the impact on my students in learning English language and English literacy skills when I use a retelling strategy? Does this support their comprehension, vocabulary and academic language, writing skills, and oral fluency?

Context:

I work with students from 7 classrooms ranging from Kinder to 3rd grade; all of these students have been selected by their teachers due to their slow progress and poor assessment data. I was concerned about the students selected to receive support services as I noticed that the great majority were English language learners with the dual challenge of learning to read while learning a second language. The District adopted language arts program for 1st grade has a heavy emphasis on decoding skills and controlled vocabulary, and is often incomprehensible for 2nd language learners. For students already struggling with the discreet skills taught in the program, reading texts with little meaning seemed a counterproductive activity. These students who are still acquiring English vocabulary, developing the sound system and leaning the grammar and syntax need accommodations and strategies that will help them access the curriculum using the English language skills they have mastered. I chose to research the strategy of retelling a text to integrate the four language arts: reading, writing, listening and speaking and build upon the students' emerging English language skills.

Data/Methods:

To answer my research question, I collected the students' CELDT (California English Language Development Test) scores, informal assessments of their English language development, lesson plans with student work samples, transcriptions of oral retellings and student-teacher dialogues.

I observed and documented children using the strategy of retelling texts orally and in writing. Students read texts at their instructional level, practiced the text at home, and then re-read the same text the next day. They chose a text that they had read recently to retell, one

which they believed they knew well and had enjoyed reading. The object of retelling was to capture the essence of the text, not to memorize it, and to tell it in their own words. Retellings could be done orally or in writing, depending on the teacher or student objectives (whether to practice fluency, use story vocabulary, assess writing mechanics, etc.) My primary objective was to have children be responsible for the entire text and generate large chunks of language, rather than answering specific questions or doing fill-in-the-blank workbook activities.

I also created a rubric to measure student progress in five areas: comprehension, vocabulary, oral fluency, engagement, and writing mechanics. I found that this rubric did not adequately capture student progress; while many students' retellings showed increasing complexity and control of language, the scores generated did not reflect this. In addition, the degree of scaffolding and student-teacher dialogue varied over retellings, and this greatly affected the quality and complexity of student work. Finally, many of the students I began working with during this research "topped out" of the support program.

Findings:

- Students need frequent, structured practice using academic language; although their social English was beginning to approximate native speakers, their academic language needed repeated, scaffolded practice. Over time, I observed that students began to incorporate the literary language of the text rather than simply recounting events. For example, after reading Mrs. Wishy-Washy, a student retold, "Oh my, you are so dirty! she said with an angry face."
- Students found the activity highly engaging, and enjoyed doing the oral retellings. They were very motivated if there was a social context for the retelling: taping and sending the tape home with them for their parents to listen to, listening to others' retellings of the same story, or retelling in a group setting. They would return to the text to re-read, check understanding and negotiate meaning if things were unclear; previously, their goal was to finish reading.
- In addition, I observed that the scaffolds, graphic organizers and the student-teacher dialogues prior to retelling aided the students in giving a more detailed, sequential

and comprehensive retelling. These students also benefited from explicit instruction in vocabulary, academic language, English syntax, paraphrasing and summarizing.

Policy implications:

There continues to be a need for additional services for children that must simultaneously learn English language and English language arts, and site budgets should include funding for literacy and language specialists. Given the “pushing down” of curriculum, primary grade children who must learn English and master grade level language arts standards are handed a huge cognitive task. My recommendations are that at the State and District level, more funding be allocated to resources for English language learners, including professional development for teachers in second language acquisition and specific accommodations to curriculum. Corollary to that, teachers need flexibility in implementation of their curriculum to meet the needs of ELLS as well as support in assuring that all ELLS have targeted language learning to achieve full proficiency in academic English. Informal and formal assessments are needed to give current data to teachers (the CELDT, given in September with results received in January, is insufficient to guide instruction). For the upcoming Language Arts adoption in 2008, there needs to be a focus group that specifically reviews materials that are appropriate for English language learners.

Next steps:

- Continue action research at my school site on structures and strategies that will support English Language Learners in becoming literate.
- Contact the State Department of Education to participate in the review of Language Arts materials for the 2008 adoption.
- Contact the San Francisco Multilingual Department to advocate for continued professional development for teachers in second language acquisition, support for second language learners, and adoption of assessments to both drive instruction and monitor progress.
- Review the May 2006 Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth whose findings specifically address issues of English Language Learners. Consider further action research based on these findings.