

Using Student-Centered Activities to Increase English Language Learners' Involvement and Achievement in Literacy

Sarah Horst

**Glen Forest Elementary School
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools**

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Abstract

English language learners often view literacy learning as an unappealing and frustrating task. Student-centered activities and student-owned areas of the room were used in an attempt to increase student involvement and enthusiasm for their own learning. Achievement tests and self-assessments were given at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the school year to measure the students' developmental levels and outlooks on literacy learning. It was found that feelings of student ownership of the classroom not only increased the level of achievement, but also enthusiasm and confidence.

Introduction

During my first year of teaching third grade at Glen Forest Elementary School in Falls Church, Virginia, I found myself often frustrated and perplexed by my students' lack of enthusiasm for and achievement in literacy-related content. Even the most creative reading or writing activities bored them, and they were completely dependent on me to walk them through every task. It finally occurred to me that force-feeding them literacy was not working. Literacy-related activities were frightening and frustrating to the students, and I needed to find a way to help them develop an intrinsic motivation for learning to read and write.

Before entering into my second year of teaching, I reflected on the methods I had used to teach literacy and what had gone wrong in my classroom. I realized that throughout the year, I had not allowed my students to make any decisions concerning their reading and writing. I had made all of their choices for them. I decided to integrate student-directed literacy centers, literature circles, and writing conferences into my literacy instruction. When conducting my research, my question was: Will student-centered activities increase student involvement and achievement in literacy learning? I used my third grade class to conduct my research.

Student Backgrounds

Out of the 18 original students in my classroom, 15 students were English language learners. Five of these students' first language was Spanish, and Spanish was the language primarily spoken in the home. Nine of the students were of Middle Eastern or African descent and the languages primarily spoken at

home ranged from Arabic to Somali. One of these students was of Korean descent and Korean was the sole language spoken at home.

At the beginning of the year, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) was conducted and nine of the students were one year below grade level. Three students were two years below grade level. Three students were non-oral (These students were pulled out of the classroom during the language arts block, therefore the study does not include them). The remaining students were native English speakers or had been exited from the ESOL program and were reading on or above grade level. From writing samples collected during the first several weeks of school, it was found that the students' writing levels were generally consistent with their reading levels.

In order to better understand the students' attitudes towards literacy, interest inventories were taken in both reading and writing (See Appendices A & B). The students who were reading on or above grade level generally reported positive feelings toward reading and writing. Of those students reading below grade level, most reported some positive feelings, but did not report having many favorite subjects to read about. One student reported enjoying reading most genres, and one student reported that he never enjoyed reading anything. Of those students writing below grade level, most reported enjoying writing some things, but usually reported that they only wrote because the teacher gave them an assignment. Two reported that they never liked writing anything.

To help improve student involvement in literacy, I first had to understand where their lack of enthusiasm stemmed from. After about a month of observing and working with my students, I noticed several issues consistent among those students who were less engaged in literacy-related content. These issues were:

- Boredom and a lack of confidence when confronted with challenging tasks
- Lack of participation in small group and large group discussions
- Lack of engagement or pride in work produced

Strategies

I decided that before tackling the latter two issues, I would have to find a way of reducing the students' boredom and lack of confidence. After all, they would never be motivated to engage in the classroom if they were having these feelings. In one of the pieces of literature I read on the subject, it was stated that a "culturally responsive learning community requires that teachers help the inhabitants of that classroom find a way to work collaboratively toward...using, developing, and constructing knowledge," (Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997). Therefore, from early in the year, we worked on developing a team-oriented classroom.

Each morning, for several weeks, the class met on the carpet and participated in team-building activities. The class first came up with a list of expectations for each other and wrote them down in the form of a contract. Each student then signed the contract and promised the class that he or she would try

to uphold the expectations. Later, the team-building activities consisted of games, songs, and fingerplays. Each morning, three students were allowed to share something and the other students could take turns asking them questions. Later in the year, these meetings were held only once a week. The format was the same, but often they were used to discuss classroom issues. These issues were usually student selected. For example, a group of students requested that we discuss how the class was starting to speak to each other disrespectfully. The students talked about how it made them feel and how they could speak to each other differently. On another occasion, the students wanted to talk about their anxiety about the upcoming Virginia Standards of Learning tests. The students talked about their fears, how they could handle them, and what their goals were before the tests.

After several weeks of team-building exercises, I decided to begin incorporating their teamwork into the literacy aspect of the classroom in order to address their lack of participation. I began by starting literature study circles. In a book on literature circles, it was stated that those students who have been designated "poor readers," often get most of their exposure to literacy from remedial programs. These programs often consist of "boring" books and activities. This causes the students to eventually regard reading as boring, frustrating, and meaningless (Samway & Whang, 1996). Most of my students fit that description. I usually gave each reading group a choice of three or four different books. They chose the book, and were given approximately an hour each day and time at home to read the book. They met two or three times a week to share their experiences with the book. In the beginning, I always acted a facilitator for these discussions. We would have a discussion, and then I would give the students an assignment stemming from that content. After the students became more independent with their discussions, I participated less frequently. I began giving each student in the group "jobs." These jobs consisted of roles that each student played in the discussion (e.g. "Discussion Director," "Connector," or "Investigator,"). This made each student invaluable to the group and promoted engagement in the activity (See Appendix C).

I worked to help the students develop independence and pride in their work through their writing. The students first created a writing center in the corner of the classroom. The students brainstormed a list of things that they might need or want during the writing process. I added a few necessary items, deleted a few items that were impractical, and helped the class create their center. Some of the items included were pens, pencils, paper clips, stencils, markers, construction paper, and laptop computers (from a mobile lab). Above the writing center was a display board for each student to tack up their favorite pieces of writing.

In order to keep track of each child's progression through the writing process, I created a "lily pad" display. Each child was represented by a frog which he or she moved to a new lily pad when moving onto the next step in the process. In the beginning of the year, the students practiced brainstorming and using resources such as the Internet, books, or life experiences to gain ideas for their writing. I rarely gave prompts, although sometimes the students were

required to write in a certain format (e.g. reports, paragraphs, letters). In these instances, I tried to give the class as much choice in their topic as possible. The students were required to have two conferences in the writing process. After their first draft, they met with two or three friends who were at the same stage in the process to have a “CAT” conference (**C**hange, **A**dd, **T**ake-away). The students used this time to listen to others’ writing, and revise their own based on their classmates’ constructive criticism (See Appendix D). Positive language was stressed during these conferences and the students learned to give one compliment for every criticism made. The students then met with me after making their revisions and editing. Before meeting with me, however, the students were responsible for deciding what they wanted to share with me and/or where they needed help. In a book by Fountas and Pinnell, it is stated that students should talk just as much as the teacher during the writing conference (2001). I provided the students with a worksheet to help them with this (See Appendix E). During the conference, I often found other ways in which I wanted or needed to help guide them, but the students were primarily responsible for guiding these conferences.

Results in Reading

At the beginning of the year, I found that I had trouble trusting my students’ direction enough to restrain myself from intervening. The balance between student-directed conversation and off-topic chatting seemed to be finer than I thought. Students’ conversations often seemed to be off-topic, and I did not think that they were making meaningful connections between the literature and other content. However, Cynthia Ballenger states in her book that she had a similar dilemma and she realized that often what seems to be off-topic may just be the students’ way of relating the text to their own lives and that these interactions should not be discounted. Instead, these connections should be reflected on and used to help guide the students into furthering their understanding (1999).

Once I became more comfortable with the students’ direction and more comfortable with giving them choices, I began to notice an enthusiasm for reading that I had not seen before. Students began bringing books into school to recommend them to their friends, or to request that we use them for literature circles. I noticed a great deal of “book talk” outside of the designated reading time. I overheard one girl exclaim to her friend, “Sometimes you are just like Amelia Bedelia!” Students constantly asked me about what books I was going to present them with next week, and what jobs would be available for literature circle. This increase in enthusiasm was supported by their responses on the interest inventory given at the end of the year. Only one student reported never enjoying reading anything, while the rest reported that they enjoyed reading in a variety of genres on their own.

At the end of the year, students were given the DRA or the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), depending on their approximate reading level. Since the school population is transient, three of the students who were tested at the

beginning of the year were no longer present at the end of the year. Two of the students who were reading on grade level at the beginning of the year went up one grade level. Another student who was reading slightly above grade level is now reading at a sixth grade level. Two of the students who were reading two years below grade level are now reading only slightly below grade level. Six of the students who were reading one year below grade level are now on grade level, and two other students who were reading one year below grade level are still one year below grade level.

Results in Writing

Much like with literature circles, I also had trouble trusting the students' direction in writing conferences. I noticed that their interactions were often ineffective. During C.A.T. conferences, they used the same responses repeatedly. I also noticed this in their conferences with me. When asked what they needed to discuss with me, most students said they needed help with spelling or "making sense." The students and I brainstormed a list of things they should look and listen for during writing conferences. I also sat in on some C.A.T. conferences and acted as a facilitator. Despite extra modeling and support, I was still disappointed at the end of the year with their lack of independent thinking and reflection.

However, I did notice an increase in the students' engagement and interest in their writing. I saw a tremendous variety in not only their ideas for their writing, but also in the sources of their ideas. Many of them would approach me at various times of the day to tell me an idea for a piece of writing. They seemed to enjoy telling me about their ideas during writing conferences, and I frequently overheard them discussing their writing with enthusiasm during their peer conferences. The students' also spent a great deal of time publishing their work. The display board above the writing center became a showplace for their writing and their elaborate illustrations. These two-sided results are supported by the analyses of their writing samples and their responses on their writing interest inventories. Judging by the writing samples taken at the end of the year, most of the students did improve their writing level, but only one student made significantly more gains than what would be expected from a child after a year of schooling. On their interest inventories, however, three students report that they still only write because their teacher asks them to, and they do not enjoy it. The rest of the students report that they now enjoy writing in a variety of genres and often write for recreational purposes.

Implications

In future studies, I would concentrate on increasing the effectiveness of the students' interactions with both their peers and me during writing conferences. Perhaps during modeling and brainstorming sessions, I would use examples of their own writing and let them discover the ways to discuss and improve writing without me leading them. Since their interactions often seemed rehearsed, it is likely that they were saying things to please me. If I take my expectations out of those interactions and leave the focus on improving the

writing, perhaps the students will be more likely to effectively interact in and reflect during writing conferences.

Reflection

Although I would like to keep working to help my students think more independently and reflectively about their writing, I found that student-centered activities increased student engagement and achievement in literacy learning. When given freedom to explore and make choices about their own learning, students took responsibility and became excited about literacy. Bluestein states that it is vital to provide students with structure as well as choice in order to help them develop decision-making skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-management skills (1999). Hopefully, the enthusiasm and confidence that my students gained throughout the third grade will carry over into later grades and into the rest of their lives.

References

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Appendix A

Name _____

Reading Interview

1. Why do people read? (List as many reasons as you can.)

2. What are some reasons that you read?

3. Do you ever read when you aren't at school? When and where?

4. What type of genres do you like to read?

5. Do you have a favorite book? What is it? Why is it your favorite?

6. What topics do you like to read about? Why?

7. How often do you read?

8. Is there anything else you want me to know about you as a reader?

Appendix B

Name _____

Writing Interview

1. How do you feel about writing?

2. What are some things that you like to write about?

3. Why do you write?

4. Do you ever write when you are not at school? What and why?

5. Are there any pieces of writing that you are particularly proud of? Which ones?

6. Where do you get ideas for your writing?

7. Is there anything else you want me to know about you as a writer?

Appendix C

Discussion Director

Name _____

Group _____

Book _____

Assignment page _____ to page _____

Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss about this part of the book. Don't worry about the small details: your task is to help people talk over the big ideas in the reading and share their reactions. Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read, which you can list below, during or after your reading. You may also use some of the general questions below to develop topics for your group.

Possible discussion questions for today:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Sample questions:

What was going through your mind while you read this?
 How did you feel while reading this part of the book?
 What was discussed in this section of the book?
 Can someone summarize briefly?
 Did today's reading remind you of any real-life experiences?
 What questions did you have when you finished this section?
 Did anything in this section of the book surprise you?
 What are one or two of the most important ideas?
 Predict some things you think will be talked about next.

Adapted from *Literature Circles: Voices and choice in the student-centered classroom* by Harvey Daniels. Stenhouse Publishers, York, ME

Appendix D

Name _____

Date _____

Topic or Title _____



Remember...compliments first!!!

Change: Do I need to **CHANGE** any information in my writing?

Add: Do I need to **ADD** any information to my writing?

Take Away: Do I need to **TAKE AWAY** anything from my writing?

Appendix E

Name _____

Date _____

Title or Topic
_____

I'm ready to meet with Miss Horst!

___ I've done my prewriting.

___ I've written a first draft.

___ I had a C.A.T. conference.

___ I did my revising and editing.

I would like to talk about...

a)

b)

During my conference with Miss Horst, we talked about...