

Stepping Out of the Conversation: Giving Students a Space to Co-Construct Writing

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Abstract

This paper describes fourth-grade English language learners in a Spanish-dominant language community. The author, a teacher researcher, uses discourse analysis to study the language her students used in a writing group in a language arts classroom. The discussion concerned a story one student had written in English. Because the group was student directed rather than teacher directed, a context was provided for co-construction of the text by students in the group.

Introduction

In early October 2000, a group of English language learners (ELLs) met in a writing response group to discuss the stories and poems they were working on in class. The fourth-grade students had written rough drafts and were in need of constructive criticism that would move their work forward through rethinking and revision. One student, “Victor” (all student names are pseudonyms), had just finished reading his story to the other students, so I prompted his audience, “Does anyone have any questions about Victor’s story? Was there something that you didn’t understand or that you would like to know more about?” An awkward pause ensued as the children stretched and squirmed.

A response group is an interactive event that is often used in classrooms where students are engaged in the process of writing. Peer response groups have developed in writing classrooms as a result of the work of writing teachers who have studied the practical, daily work that writers do in developing and crafting a piece for publication (Graves, 1991). As the writing process made its way into the classroom, teachers built upon a growing understanding of language development and social learning theory. Since social interactions

have been found to support learning (Di Pardo & Freedman, 1988) and many professional writers benefit from peer feedback, it is logical to expose students to feedback from their peers in the elementary classroom. The bulk of writing research has been with native English speakers, but Prater and Bermudez (1993) found that ELL children also benefit from peer response groups. Receiving feedback from peers helps them develop fluency of thought and ideas in their writing.

In her work with ELLs, Edelsky (1986) argues for a shift from teacher-dominated literacy environments to interactive, peer-oriented ones. Di Pardo and Freedman (1988) suggest that teachers need to understand that student talk will not be just like teacher feedback and that students need to have audiences for their writing other than the teacher.

I decided to use these ideas to remake my classroom into a place where I was not the only authority; but instead, I wanted to share the power and responsibility with my students. I wanted to create a learning environment that would promote talking, reading, and writing among all members of the class with a variety of audiences. It is within this context that I worked to improve the writing response groups in my fourth-grade classroom of ELL students.

Not Much Talking Going On

I had used writing workshop in my classroom for many years, yet I never felt satisfied with one aspect of the workshop: revision. I always spent time at the beginning of the school year giving instruction and modeling for the students on how to respond to an author. I encouraged the students to respond to each other's writing by giving their initial reactions and questioning the author for clarification and development of the writing. At the beginning of the 2000 school year, when students began offering responses to each other's writing, I immediately noticed that something was blocking their conversation. I had hoped for genuine discussion between writers that would serve to move their writing forward. Unfortunately, I did not see any discussion at all. What I saw were low-level questions such as, "What was your dog's name?" or statements such as, "That was a good story." The students directed their statements to me and seemed to request my approval rather than addressing the author whom they were supposed to be helping. I wanted them to look at each other and talk to each other, but something was inhibiting their discussion, and I suspected there was more to it than their level of English fluency. The students seemed to need something to get them started with their discussion other than the instruction and modeling I had provided. In addition, my presence in the group seemed to be stifling their normally chatty behavior. They balked when prompted to give ideas about even the most innocuous subjects such as what type of pets they had at home.

It was at this point that I decided to study the revision groups, observing what was happening and what students were saying. As a teacher researcher, I wanted to improve my practice. To do this, I decided to reflect on what my students had been doing, come up with an idea of how to improve the situation, and then look closely at what was happening. In addition to studying the response group, I did two things that I hoped would expand the possibilities for conversation. First, I suggested that students retell the story to the author as well as giving ideas and asking questions. This, I hoped, would give the author a sense of how the story was received by the audience. Second, I decided to remove myself from the group so that students would not feel obliged to seek my approval with their statements. I hoped the students would thus be set free to engage in lively conversation at their own pace.

I began this study with a sociocultural perspective because “reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening, and interacting, on the one hand, or using language to think about and act on the world, on the other” (Gee, 2001, p. 1). My students were using discussion to talk about their writing, thereby linking their writing with speaking and acting. A sociocultural view of language assumes that students will interact with one another and the text within a particular context. In this case, the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom was part of a larger social context. The limitation of this paper from a sociocultural viewpoint is that it does not directly address what was happening in the students’ personal lives, families, and community. The strength of the paper is that I was an insider within the context of the school. As their teacher, I had insights involving the tone of the response group because it happened in my classroom and with students whom I knew well.

This paper will focus on one discussion that was held by a group of 12 students regarding a story written by one of the students. A narrative vignette will serve to bring the readers of this paper into the classroom and the response group. A vignette is a fictionalized creation using composites of data. I use the vignette as part of my analysis because I want to include the social and psychological context of the experience. In *Narrative Inquiry* (2000), Clandinin and Connelly write, “Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (p. 18).

This paper includes the setting, method of inquiry, a narrative vignette, and an analysis of the talk that occurred within the vignette. I will conclude with ideas that I feel are applicable when working with ELLs as they develop English literacy.

Setting

This study was conducted in a K–5 school in a poor, urban neighborhood in the southwestern United States with many Mexican immigrant families. The ESL language arts class that was the focus of this study was held for a 2-hour

block in the morning of most school days. During the rest of the day, the students were in their homerooms with students of varying degrees of English proficiency, including native English speakers. The students in the ESL language arts class all spoke Spanish as their first language. They varied in their language ability, as measured by the IDEA-Oral Language Proficiency Test (IPT), and ranged from non-English speaking to fluent English speaking. The IPT scores, in my view, do not give an adequate picture of student language development. Yet, the scores do indicate that some of the students were learning to speak English concurrently with learning to write in English, while others had a better command of English usage. Jessica, the focal student in this study, had scored as limited English speaking.

This study involved a group of 12 students. Each child had a chance to read a story or poem aloud and discuss it with others in the group. Some children actively participated by asking questions or commenting on the piece; others only listened. Sometimes students who were good friends participated more when reading each other's stories. In some groups, students responded to an author of the same gender. Certain students liked to participate in every discussion. Finally, there was an assigned student director whose role was to choose a student to read and to start the discussion.

Method

I collected data from my classroom in the form of notes, photographs, interviews, and tape recordings as the students participated in response groups. The class was divided into two groups with a student director in each group. I set up the tape recorder near one of the groups and let it record as I positioned myself in a neutral place near the middle of the classroom where I could observe from a distance.

In this paper, I am concerned only with a portion of the transcribed tape recording. The notes, photographs, and interviews were also used for the narrative vignette. The tape recordings were taken about 2 months into the school year. At the beginning of the school year, the students were very hesitant to speak, as is common with second language learners. Based on transcripts, field notes, and interviews, I wrote a vignette focusing on one student, Jessica, who read a very brief story. Her peers questioned her about the missing details of her story. Another girl, Lupita, eventually took her aside to revise the story.

Jessica

Jessica fidgeted in the chair, the paper rustling between her tightly clenched fingers. Her eyes darted nervously across her audience of peers. The boys worried her with their sarcastic and flippant remarks, but the girls

looked back at her sympathetically. She bowed her head over her paper and began reading in a low voice, her black hair hanging in strands, hiding her eyes. She read:

I was acting that I was a teacher and it was fun to act that I was a teacher because I get to write on the board and use the books anytime I want and to read lots of books. I could use anything I want to do.

As she finished reading, the discussion quickly began.¹

Luis: Uh, what's the story about?

Miguel: About Jessica was a teacher.

Jaime: That [That she could . . .]

Miguel: [That she was a teacher.]

Jaime: And that she likes . . .

Miguel: um school . . .

Victor: being a teacher . . .

Lupita: And that she likes . . .

Alicia: [Ye~~e~~e~~e~~s.]

Lupita: [to write on the board . . .]

Alicia: She could read anything she wanted. Books and . . .

The retelling of Jessica's story wound down quickly, since there wasn't much to retell. Jessica was somewhat of an outsider; she was in this classroom only during the 2-hour language arts block. She squirmed uncomfortably. Taking a deep breath, she looked hesitantly at Luis, the group discussion leader, as he asked the first question.

Luis: What kind of books did she read?

Victor: How many books did she read?

Alicia: [What kind of books did she read?]

Jessica: [Thousands.]

Roberto: Books?

Jessica: Yeah.

Miguel: Hard books?

Luis: [What did she use?]

Jessica: [Any, any.]

Roberto: Books.

Victor: [Chalkboard, books, um . . .]

Jessica: She would use anything. Anything, anything.

Alicia: [Everything and anything.]

Jessica paused to look at her audience. Her eyes sparkled and she was slightly out of breath. She slid off of the chair to make way for the next student whom Luis would call to read. She headed for Lupita, who greeted her with admonitions, delivered in hushed tones. The girls hurried to Jessica's desk. Hunching over the story, the girls worked quickly, erasing, whispering, then scribbling rapidly. After several minutes, they raised their heads and lifted the paper in triumph. They brought the paper back to the circle of chairs and joined the response group once again. Jessica, her mouth turned up slightly in a satisfied smile, handed her paper to Lupita and listened to Claudia, who read about playing softball.

Jessica watched quietly as Claudia breezed through the retelling and questioning. The students liked Claudia, and she was the best writer in the class. Then, suddenly, it was Lupita's turn, but instead of reading one of her own pieces, she read the revision of Jessica's. Jessica sat on her hands and bit her lip until the end. Luis asked if there were any questions.

Victor: She already changed it.

Luis: You want, you want, you wanna?

Victor: She already changed it.

Jessica breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed. It was over. They liked it.

Analysis

Jessica's story about pretending to be a teacher did not have enough detail to give her audience a real sense of character or plot. After the initial question posed by the student director, the students added to the retelling of Jessica's story with self-initiated conversational turns. As is common in conversations, some speech overlapped, and sometimes students finished sentences for one another.

Many turns began with clausal conjunctions such as "that" or "and that." These features of the conversation show the students actively making meaning from Jessica's story. The story is being co-constructed by the group as they make use of "that" as if to say, "We know the story means that . . ."

Miguel: [That she was a teacher.]

Jaime: And that she likes . . .

No one told these students what the story means. They constructed the meaning as they discussed the story. This is very different from the view that a story has only one meaning, which only the author can approve. Instead, these students co-constructed meaning. Not only is the writer in control of monitoring her own expression of meaning (Goodman, 1992), but in this case, the other students are monitoring the construction of the story. In this situation, the strategy of retelling another student's story helped both Jessica and the

other students make meaning from the text. The students worked with Jessica to tell this story in a way that is understandable to her audience. The social context of a group discussion, along with the strategy of retelling the story, gave them the opportunity to learn from one another.

Jessica was one of the least proficient English writers and readers in the class, as reflected by her vocabulary and comprehension placement tests as well as her writing evaluations. Some students' responses reflected that they were aware she was a beginner, and they were the more able writers and speakers of English.

Luis: What kind of books did she read?

Luis asked this question to elicit detail, something that able writers include in their stories. The question is followed by three more detail questions from other students.

Victor: How many books did she read?

Alicia: [What kind of books did she read?]

Jessica: [Thousands.]

Roberto: Books?

Jessica: Yeah.

Miguel: Hard books?

Luis then asked another question also intended to elicit detail.

Luis: [What did she use?]

Jessica began to answer the question but was interrupted by Roberto and Victor.

Jessica: [Any, any.]

Roberto: Books.

Victor: [Chalkboard, books, um . . .]

Jessica's answer to what she (the teacher in her story) used was the word "any." "Any" is a quantifier that refers to the question yet leaves it unresolved. Roberto and Victor's responses simply restated what Jessica's story already mentioned so that Luis's question would be resolved. By supplying vocabulary, the students gave Jessica suggestions for using the details in her story and extended her vocabulary from "board" to "chalkboard."

Jessica went back to her original thought and was interrupted by Alicia, who supplied the idiom "Everything and anything."

Jessica: She would use anything. Anything, anything.

Alicia: [Everything and anything.]

Alicia stressed "Everything" in this idiom, and the forcefulness of her suggestion serves to position her as a more competent user of English.

The questioning by other students pushed Jessica to think about the missing details in her story. It served to give Jessica words to describe it. Leading questions such as “Books?” and “Hard books?” were met with affirmative answers from Jessica, who gave the other students some control over some details in her story.

As a teacher, I often feel that I should take control of a student’s story in order to make it “better.” I see the deficits in my students’ stories from an adult’s perspective, and many times that perspective has tempted me to offer suggestions for revision that are beyond my students’ level of understanding. The usual response from students is to obediently make the suggested changes without judging for themselves if the revisions make sense to them. Since I took myself out of the discussion, this left a space for the students to fill with their own ideas and contributions. The students took on the role of more competent peers and moved Jessica to a new level of thinking about her story. Allowing Jessica’s peers to take on this role allowed two things: She could understand how the suggestions related to her peers’ reception of her text, and she could safely reject the students’ suggestions.

Finally, Victor brought the conversation to a close, even though Luis, the director, seemed to ask if the students wanted to discuss it further.

Luis: You want, you want, you wanna?

Victor ended the discussion with the statement, “She already changed it.” This signaled an affirmation of Jessica’s story and concluded the students’ discussion involving it.

This analysis shows how students worked together to make sense of a story, to shape the story, and to affirm the final draft of the story. At the beginning of the school year, my attempts to prod the students into discussion resulted in perfunctory responses and appeals for approval. This was a result of the power differential between students and teacher and the social distance between us (Lindfors, 1999). This difference in power made it very risky for the students to put forth their opinions about the stories. As their teacher, I was the authority on how their stories should be written. I had more knowledge and used it to guide students toward better writing in the writing workshop. In the response groups, however, the students’ perception of me as the authority was getting in the way of the discussion. By removing myself from the response group, I allowed the students to have access to one another. They began to help each other as peers who were all struggling with learning to write personal narrative and learning to speak and write English. In a social context where the students discussed the story and co-constructed meaning, there was less risk than in a teacher-led group. Although Jessica felt tension with some of her peers, there were others who gave her support and help, making the overall experience a productive one in terms of revising her story. Jessica’s revised story incorporated many more details. Her “anything” became “paper, pencils, crayons, erasers, rulers and glues” in the revised story:

When I was 9 years old I wanted to pretend that I was a teacher. Also I pretend that my room was a classroom. Then bears were kids and the bed was the table. After that I had books, paper, pencils, crayons, erasers, rulers and glues. Then I was a teacher by now. Then I had all the kids.

Applications

A close look into one episode within a response group has given me a more intimate acquaintance with what really happened during the discussion. It allowed me to see more than the superficial aspects. On the surface, it was obvious that Jessica was uncomfortable and had written a vague story; that the boys were harsh in their treatment of her; and that Lupita helped her with revisions. A closer look allowed me to see that they were working along with Jessica, helping her move forward in her construction of a text. Their questions helped her think about her story in a new way, yet in a way that was accessible to her at her current level of language learning. The students seemed to be innately aware of Jessica's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986).

The role of the teacher should be to notice the strengths and weaknesses of students and to use strategies that are applicable to their needs (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). Retelling the story before going on to questions and advice was a strategy tailored to the needs of the students at this particular time. Strategies should be simple enough to become routine and safe enough for the students to risk trying them.

By taking on a less prominent role during discussions, teachers can make spaces for students' voices. Within this space, discussion becomes a real possibility. Students can learn that they have something of value to say when they have an audience for their ideas and a time and place to be heard. Learners are social beings, and discussions are enhanced when the social risk is low enough to enable students to express themselves. Discussing writing with peers does involve some risk, but a lower risk environment can be facilitated by giving students responsibility for their discussions and by giving status to student talk in the curriculum.

The social context for learning must be such that students feel they can take risks and that there will be others who will help them along the way. Giving them time for discussion in a small-group setting provides opportunities for them to share ideas and create meaning collaboratively. In addition, students should be offered opportunities to write about topics that are meaningful to them. When they are invested in the topic, they are more likely to have something to say about it in a discussion. This combination of meaningful topics and discussion allows students to work together, co-constructing text as a way to become more proficient English speakers and writers. The value in

co-constructing texts for second language learners is in the opportunities that it offers for building upon one another's learning and doing so within a context that is of immediate concern to the student as a social being.

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Endnote

¹ In the transcription, brackets indicate overlapping dialogue, and underlined words indicate stress.