



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs

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USING CONTENT TEXTS FOR WRITING

English Language Learners (ELLs) need intensive writing practice with the words and language structures characteristic of texts in the various content areas. Students need to know the word choices specific to written and spoken academic language such as the use of transition words to make logical connections between ideas; the role of clauses for embedding information; and how to establish the impersonal attitude of presenting information objectively through language. Writing in a content area requires knowledge of relevant writing forms and involves organizing information that follows conventions accepted by subject area textbooks. This *Bulletin* describes a procedure for helping students become familiar with the language of texts.

ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT

Establishing the context means knowing a particular "genre", or properties of schooling texts. There are three types of genres: personal, factual, and analytical.

1) **Personal** includes *retelling* a sequence of events and drawing on personal experience or *narrative*, which describes and evaluates problematic events and their outcomes.

2) **Factual** includes describing *procedures* with directions and instructions or *reports* which relate a set of facts organized by some classification procedure.

3) **Analytical** includes *accounts*, telling why things happened in a sequence; *explanation*, interpreting a phenomenon; or *exposition*, presenting an argument with reasoning that includes generalization, classification, and categorization. Personal and factual genres are often explored and practiced at the elementary level; factual and analytical genres are usually explored and practiced at the middle and high school levels.

Suggestion: *Examine and understand the properties of the texts you teach.*

MODELING

Modeling involves students reading samples of the kind of writing they have been assigned. Thus, students writing a report need to read report samples; similarly, in writing expository language, students must read samples of how reasoning is developed, and so forth.

Suggestion: *Explore each sample with students by making a magnified transparency; help students underline and list*

separately words or concepts considered important for understanding the text; and help students write a summary statement to embed comprehension.

NOTICING

Noticing involves paying attention to typical features of language which characterize the text to be written. The following are some language properties of the above-cited genres:

Retelling: One actor, personal pronouns, additive transition words (*first, then, etc; and, next, etc.*) and past tense.

Narrative: More than one actor, specific verbs for reporting past events, time, transition words (*immediately, soon, finally, etc.*), adverbs about manner and judging behavior.

Procedure: Simple present tense or imperatives, directions and instructions.

Report: Subordinate clauses for describing characteristics and presenting generalizations, and generic pronouns (*this, one, several, few, etc.*)

Account: Verbs used as nouns (nominalization), causal relationships (*reason for, effects of, leads to, results in, etc.*).

Explanation: Logical relationships (*after, before, when, then, etc.*).

Exposition: Nominal abstract expressions (*issues, belief, reason, problem, argument, point of view, etc.*)

Suggestion: Point these language features out to students as the regular properties of texts.

EXPLICIT ANALYSIS

This step involves having students become familiar with the language features by completing sentence prompts. Here are some examples:

It is common belief that. . .

In addition. . .

It is necessary to. . .

To account for. . .etc.

Suggestion: Examine content texts you are using and select the common sentence starters, transition words, and subordinators for sentence completion. Model first, then have students complete in their own words.

CONTROLLED PRODUCTION

At this stage, students produce a text similar to a model and with sentence starters, transition words and/or subordinators featured throughout. For example:

There are _____
First _____
_____. For example,
_____. Second,
_____.
As a result, _____
_____.
In summary, _____.

Suggestion: Create a controlled text with the variously provided sentence prompts, transition words, subordinators, etc. provided. Have students complete.

INDEPENDENT WRITING

At this level, students engage in writing, which includes planning, drafting, teacher and peer feedback.

Suggestion: Use the process approach with the various editing sequences to elicit student practice.

ELLs need to progress from "The telephone was invented. It helped us talk better with each other" to "The invention of the telephone provided us with more opportunities for greater and more improved communication." Understanding the way content texts are written can help students develop more accurate writing as they acquire academic English.

SOURCES:

Hyland, Ken (2003). *Second Language Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schleppegrell, Mary J. (2004). *The Language of Schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.