

7-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Horne, Jessica L. and Harper, Rebecca (2021) "Using Interactive Notebooks to Help ELL Students Find Confidence in Writing," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 36: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2272>

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Using Interactive Notebooks to Help ELL Students Find Confidence in Writing

JESSICA L. HORNE AND REBECCA HARPER

The number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States is increasing exponentially, with some districts across the United States seeing double and triple digit percentage increases over the past five years (US DOE, 2017). In fact, many school districts are seeing significant increases in their ELL population on a yearly basis. In order to ensure the success of all students, including those whose native language is not English, teachers should consider a variety of instructional strategies and supports to assist in developing literacy skills. Interactive notebooks can help scaffold instruction and improve learning as this instructional tool can provide multiple opportunities for students to practice and master a number of literacy competencies.

Writing can be a challenge for many students, including those whose first language is not English. English Language Learners (ELLs) often enter classrooms with rich literacy experiences and knowledge that are rooted in their native and home languages, but may have limited experiences with English. Becoming a proficient writer involves a number of sophisticated composition skills which can be difficult for many students, including those whose native language is not English, which can negatively

affect self-confidence. In order to increase and improve a student's self confidence in writing, adequate classroom instructional supports should be put into place that help build and foster confidence in literacy tasks. The use of interactive notebooks is a simple, strategic tool to help guide and scaffold learning in the 21st century classroom in all subject areas.

Background Interest

My interest in this topic began during my 4th year as an elementary teacher. I was the English and Social Studies teacher for a student whose first language was Spanish. Just as I did every year prior, I distributed a student interest survey with several questions inquiring about the students' likes/dislikes, their hobbies, family, etc. My new student wrote a note to me explaining that she didn't like any subject except math. Although her writing included several misspelled words, her message was easy for me to decipher. From this writing sample and conversations with her, I realized that she believed that math was the easiest subject for her simply because she didn't speak much English. The numbers in math made it easier for her to do well in that subject whereas other subjects required a command of the English language. I knew right away that I needed to form a relationship with her

so that I could gain her trust and help her see that she could excel in subjects beyond just math. From that point on, I worked with her one-on-one in order to help her grow academically and gain confidence with writing in English. One of the main tools that I used with her was an interactive notebook because of its flexibility and ability for individualized instruction. Over the course of the academic year, I saw significant gains in her reading and writing ability as well as her confidence.

Because of the gains made with this student, I began to consider how the implementation of interactive notebooks with all students, especially ELLs, could offer numerous benefits. Since interactive notebooks can be used to teach a variety of literacy skills, including vocabulary acquisition, sentence composition and construction, and reading comprehension, they are easy to utilize for a number of student populations. Plus, because they can allow for home literacy connections and collaboration, students are able to capitalize on their individual "funds of knowledge" and background experience that they individually possess, which can create bridges between home and academic literacies and increase student self-confidence (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez; 1994).

What is an Interactive Notebook?

An interactive notebook is an organizational tool used inside the classroom that promotes hands-on learning through the use of a notebook. It's an instructional strategy that allows students to take the information given by the teacher and fuse it into their own. This type of instructional tool supports multiple learning styles. Plus, because of its flexibility, it can be used in a variety of content areas, grade levels, and diverse populations. (For the purposes of this article, we will be referring to uses in the elementary setting.) Figure 1 is an example of an interactive notebook excerpt from my class.

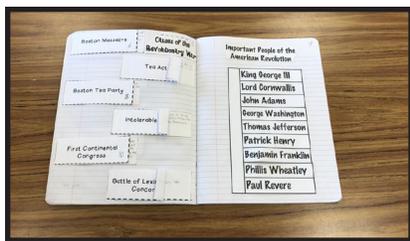


Figure 1. Interactive notebook

Setting up the Interactive Notebook

In order for an interactive notebook to be most useful and effective, the overall organization and purpose are important. Having a Table of Contents for the interactive notebook is helpful for students because it helps them determine which examples go where and assists them in locating information, including specific reference material. The word “Table of Contents” should be written in large letters at the top of the first page. Next, there should be numbers assigned to each type of information found in the interactive notebook. This is accomplished by having the students label the pages at the top right

hand corner with the page number. Since labeling each component of the interactive notebook can take time, it is crucial that this is completed before instruction officially starts. Once the numbers are listed at the top right hand corner of each page, the students can go back and give each page number a title as instruction proceeds. This will help the student remain organized and have a reference to specific information. It is important that the teacher model this process so that students know exactly what should be included on these initial pages. Some possible time savers for this part of the process include using notebooks with pre-numbered pages (These can be found on Amazon.) and providing students with photocopied, premade Tables of Contents that can be glued into their corresponding notebooks.

Teaching Vocabulary with an Interactive Notebook

Vocabulary acquisition can often be a challenge for non-native English speakers since second language writers have a vastly different linguistic base than those whose native language is English (Pour-Mohammadi, Zainol Abidin, & Cheong Lai, 2012). When introducing new English vocabulary words to ELLs, it is crucial that they write the words into their interactive notebooks. This offers them an opportunity for practice and composition. The more a student writes the word, says the word, and uses the word in context the more impact it has on their growth with the English language. This vocabulary practice can be implemented and addressed in mini-lessons that focus on basic skills such as copying and repeating words orally or through additional, more complex activities such as word

sorts, word splashes, or root and stem practice. Implementing the Frayer Model or 4 Square Method for words may help students become comfortable with new vocabulary. When using these vocabulary models, the teacher should draw a square on the board which is then divided into four sections (i.e., definition, synonyms, pictorial representation, sentence).

This model can be adjusted to fit the needs of each student, but this type of teacher modeling is significant to learning and growth. The more familiar a student becomes with words; the more confidence they will gain as they find solace in using the word correctly. This allows word meaning and connection to take shape. For ELLs, I would recommend changing one of the boxes to include a space where the student can write the word in their native language.

Writing with Interactive Notebooks

A simple way to boost confidence is by having students use their interactive notebooks to practice writing narratives about themselves, and by using the new vocabulary words they have learned in class. These are known as identity texts, which are stories written by and about the student. This particular type of writing combines visual, written, and oral components in the form of pictures and words. For students who may not be proficient independent writers, they can dictate the story orally while teachers or family members transcribe it. Students can choose photographs or draw pictures to illustrate each page of their text (Miller, Mackiewicz, Correa, 2017). Because students know the most about their lives and their worlds, writing about themselves, their families, hobbies, and other authentic material can aid in improving the

self-confidence of writers and can be completed all year long which helps demonstrate student growth.

Graphic Organizers in the Interactive Notebook

Thinking maps, or bubble maps, are great instructional tools to use when getting students prepared to write. For ELLs, this can offer an opportunity for thoughts and ideas to be written down in the form of a brainstorming activity. Thinking maps come in different shapes and sizes and can be used for a number of purposes and for writing in a variety of genres.

For ELLs, reinforcing the use of pictures can help them as they are planning their writings. Sometimes it may be difficult to locate the English word for a concept, so I often encourage my students to brainstorm and complete their thinking maps in their native language or draw a picture in lieu of the English word. This allows for the teacher to go back to the student and offer assistance, but also helps the student build self-confidence since they are able to use their home language as they plan their writings. Once the teacher acknowledges the picture and talks to the student, a vocabulary word can be written next to the picture to help reinforce the meaning. This can serve as a reference guide for future writing.

Evaluating Student Growth with Interactive Notebooks

Being able to assess students and their growth is another important aspect of using interactive notebooks. Assessments are not a one-size fits all model for students. With this in mind, teachers should align their assessments to best suit the needs of individual students. The use of interactive



Figure 2 Student with notebook (Credit: [Element5 Digital](#))

notebooks for ELL students can serve the purpose of assessing and having tangible evidence of growth, through the collection of work samples in the notebook.

Assessing a student's growth is an integral part of instruction and should be used to guide and plan future instruction. It is important to note that assessing a student does not necessarily mean grading them formally, but rather serves as a tangible measure of their progress over the course of a period of time, which can assist in developing remediation and acceleration engagements. For example, writing samples can also serve as assessment pieces as they allow the student and teacher to discuss strengths and opportunities for growth.

Using the Interactive Notebook at Home

Encouraging students to take their interactive notebooks home and share them allows families to become involved in school-based literacy practices. Some ways that this might be accomplished is through dialogue journal entries where students

encourage a caregiver to respond to something they have written in their interactive notebook. When developing their identify stories, family members might be encouraged to share theirs with the student and record them in the interactive notebook.

Other ways to include families in the contents of the interactive notebook could include writings about cultural artifacts, traditions, home and family practices and activities that occur outside of the school walls. This validation and celebration of students' home lives can help build confidence and offer non-intimidating opportunities for inclusion in academic and school based tasks.

Other ideas for including families in interactive notebook composition may involve having families create stories together that pertain to the family, having students write English words on a family's shopping list, and even making a family calendar that students can modify and annotate (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 86). These type of small, yet effective strategies can create a safe, family-like environment inside the classroom for ELLs.

Conclusion

Interactive notebooks can offer a number of benefits in the classroom for all students, but especially with ELLs. Because of their flexibility and ability for individualized instruction, interactive notebooks can help facilitate classroom instructional practices that are authentic, student centered, culturally responsive, and inclusive. By empowering our students to embrace their culture and native languages, as well as involve their families, teachers can see significant gains in academic performance and self-confidence.

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