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The Benefits of Structured Conversation in A Literacy Circle with English Language Learners

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Abstract

With the growing populations of English language learners (ELLs), many teachers are ill equipped to teach these students successfully. Specifically, educators are unsure of how to conduct conversations that are productive towards the curriculum, and benefit ELLs. Using a qualitative research method, this researcher conducted a literacy circle with three elementary students who are all ELLs, over the course of two weeks. This study was conducted to learn how conversation benefits ELLs in a literacy circle. Participants read, discussed and responded to written prompts in a literacy circle that was facilitated by the researcher who instilled prompts to structure the discussions that occurred. Observations, anecdotal notes, audio recordings and student writing samples were used to record data throughout this study. The findings suggest that structured conversations benefit ELL’s verbal speech as well as their written language. Furthermore, literacy circles develop learners’ critical thinking and practice valuable social skills as well.
Chapter One: The Overview

Introduction:

Literacy is defined by all the ways a person can express his or herself. Most people think of literacy as reading and writing, but there are so many more avenues of literacy. It is spoken through oral language; it is physical through art such as dance and motion; it is abstract through different art forms such as sculptures, paintings and music. Some of these modes of literacy come naturally to people, while others have to be constructed. While a child can move around and “dance” as a two-year old, literacy modes such as reading and writing are learned through constructive guidance. Because of this constructive guidance, society as a whole has a unified way of communicating and that way is through oral language, writing and reading. As a result, it is of extreme importance that all students learn how to use language—orally and in written form. The most natural way for students to learn these aspects of literacy is to immerse them into it through conversation that is structured by the teacher.

The Problem:

The percentage of multi-cultural and international students is quickly growing at exceptional rates in the United States. Being an English Language Learner (ELL) in the classroom is becoming more and more common and with that, teachers need to be more and more aware with what the needs of ELLs are. Therefore, being prepared to teach them is something that teachers must learn to do. ELLs “may need special attention to ensure they understand instructions, have adequate vocabulary and concepts, and can connect their background experiences with the materials to be learned” (McGee & Richgels, 2012, p. 237).
Giving them “busy-work” because they do not understand what is being taught is not acceptable and teachers need to learn how to reach and challenge the ELLs in their class. Many teachers ask the question, “How am I supposed to teach them if I don’t speak their language or know their background/culture?” They don’t know where to start so they avoid the issue altogether. Therefore, teachers need to learn how to teach ELLs successfully, so they may reach their fullest potential.

**Significance of Problem:**

Today’s world is continuously expanding from being a community-based world to becoming a global world. People are constantly interacting with others all over the world, for professional and personal reasons, creating gateways from one side of the world to the next. Therefore, we need to teach our students, the ELLs and our English proficient students how to live and actively contribute to this global society. This study will explore how structured conversation about complex text assists ELLs in expanding their understanding of the global world. The significance of teaching our students how to talk to one another and how to critically understand the texts they come into context with is, we can ensure our students’ success.

Students should be aware of and be able to find the perspective of each text they encounter. Not only that, but they should also, be able to decide if they agree or disagree with the author’s perspective in the text. In the book *Getting Beyond “I Like the Book”: Creating Space for Critical Literacy in K-6 Classrooms*, Vivian Vasquez discusses critical literacy and how it connects all text with real world issues, such as: racism, social issues, and economic issues,
along with revealing to students the concept of bias and perspective. She defines critical literacy as not being “an add-on but a frame through which to participate in the world” (Vasquez, 2010, p. 2). This can only be done through an open but structured learning environment.

This study is also significant because teachers need to realize that all students have different ways of learning and all students have the right to have an opportunity to succeed. Life is not perfect and many students come to school from environments that are not safe, supportive and happy. School should be the place all students know they will be safe there, will be supported to discover and pursue their passions there, and can be happy that, there, they can be themselves. “…the importance of motivating students to learn cannot be emphasized enough; also important is catering for students who have different learning abilities and who cover the work at different rates...” (Phillips & Soltis, 2009, p. 3). It is the teacher’s responsibility to create this environment where the students can be comfortable with who they are and what they can do.

Lastly, if we do not teach our students, especially our ELLs, to speak academically, then it is unrealistic and unfair of us to expect them to be able to fluidly write using academic language. This study is important because it explored how structured conversation fueled by prompts got them in the habit of answering in complete sentences and using proper vocabulary, and it also increased students’ understanding of the text. In short, the more they practice speaking academically, the more natural it will be for them to write academically. The more they explore each other’s thinking, through conversing, the more they will understand about the text and world around them.
Purpose for the Study:

Something that has a huge impact on student’s reactions and understandings of things, such as differences in language and culture, is the teacher they look up to. The teacher should not only be a model of how to treat others but he or she should also set up a proper atmosphere in the classroom. A student’s approach to learning strongly depends on the atmosphere. It is up to the teacher to make learning an exciting adventure that every student wants to jump aboard on, and even more importantly, the teacher should also make learning an easily accessible adventure for all students.

Oral language, along with reading and writing, are the formal modes of literacy that all people use as a way to express themselves and communicate with others, therefore essential to not only practice but master. A teacher has to know how to teach literacy, as well as know the parts of literacy and importance of it. The teacher has to be able to model the different modes, along with the different parts of reading and writing to show students how to develop their own skills. Modeling good reading strategies and good writing techniques is an essential part of teaching literacy. There are many ways to teach literacy, and allowing the students to work with each other through social constructivism is one of the most effective ways.

The purpose of this study is to look into one way teachers can effectively teach their ELLs and prepare them for the real world. The goal is to prove by teaching productive conversation in a literacy circle, ELLs will expand their oral and written vocabulary; it will also develop their understanding of the world around them by causing them to think more critically about the text and connecting it to their own lives in a global fashion. This study is designed to focus on structured conversation and literacy because these are two key factors of learning.
With this research, teachers who are struggling with teaching ELLs effectively, will be able to create an effective strategy to reach each of their students and also be aware of the significance structured conversation has on learning.

*Research Questions:*

This research study focuses on the following questions:

- How does structured conversation affect English-language learners’ oral skills?
- How does structured conversation affect English-language learners’ writing skills?
- How does structured conversation affect English-language learners’ development of critical thinking skills?

*Study Rationale:*

The reasoning behind this study is simple. I have always learned best from conversing with others and talking my thoughts and ideas out; so I always try to incorporate conversation or discussions into my lessons for students. I am a firm believer that through conversation, our beliefs and understandings can be pushed past the points we would have reached on our own. Using conversation prompts - the conversation is guided and focused, but at the same time, it is authentic because students have the ability to choose which direction they want the conversation to go.

Successfully helping ELLs develop their oral skills, in turn, helps their reading and writing skills, but this is not a simple task. There are four lenses of learning that need to be addressed
in each lesson in order for learning to be maximized. These four lenses are: learning is meaning-centered, learning is language-based, learning is “human,” and learning is social. Teaching through these four lenses at all times is difficult but it is crucial for students to be successful in building their critical thinking skills. By doing so through social interaction, helps make them active citizens of society.

**Study Approach:**

Social interaction has been a prominent factor of learning and language acquisition since Lev Vygotsky (1978) created the theory of social development and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist that concluded that social interaction is the primary developer of language and learning in general. “To Vygotsky, all learning involves a movement from doing activities in a social interaction with the support of a more knowledgeable other to internalizing the language and actions of the more knowledgeable other and being able to use this knowledge alone” (McGee & Richgels, 2012, p. 4). His theory places strong emphasis on the social and cultural context in which children are surrounded by. He believes that knowledge or cognitive development is built through social interaction, collaboration, and the culture that surrounds each individual child. In other words, learning takes place through social interaction making it a mediated and facilitated activity.

Giving English-leaners the opportunity to converse with peers, including students who speak English fluently and who are ELLs as well, will allow them to gain language and comprehension. Delving deeper into Vygotsky’s theory, to drive children’s minds to
continuously learn, they need to be challenged with a task in which they can complete some parts of but need guidance or assistance to perform the task completely. He created the term: zone of proximal development, for this. It describes, “The range of tasks that are too difficult for the child to master alone but can be learned with guidance and assistance of adults or more-skilled children” (Santrock, 2011, p. 50). This is where the concept of scaffolding comes into play.

According to Pauline Gibbons (2002), scaffolding is “the temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something, so that the learner will later be able to complete a similar task alone. It is future-oriented.” (p.10). According to Vygotsky, the child will eventually internalize the aide that was given and use it to direct their own thoughts and attention so his or her competency increases (McGree & Richgels, 2012, p. 4). Then, the child will be able to solve the task on his or her own and are ready to be challenged with the next task that has higher complexity. Therefore, scaffolding is essential for all learners and English-language learners especially. This allows teachers to push students through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) without getting overly frustrated. It is also something that all teachers can do, regardless of whether they know the first-language of their ELLs or not.

Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Carol Rothenberg (2008) really combine the two notions of social interaction and scaffolding by incorporating the gradual release of responsibility in classroom talk. First, the teacher should model, then the class should practice with the guide of the teacher. Next the students continue practicing through collaborative tasks, relying more on each other than the teacher for guidance. Lastly, these authors take “talk” as far as saying it should be used during independent tasks as well. When talk is truly
learned, it is internalized and students can then use self-talk to increase metacognition (p.18).

Therefore, because both social interaction and scaffolding are needed to ensure student success, this study combines both of these instructional practices and implements them through the gradual release of responsibility in a literacy circle.
Chapter Two: The Literature Review

Introduction:

There has been a great deal of research conducted on English-language learners and yet, teaching them is still a mystery to many schools and teachers. This research study is based on the need for effective strategies to reach and teach the ELLs in classrooms today. It’s important to look at the research that has already been done in this field to gain background knowledge and to know where this research study falls into place with the rest of the research out there. The research in this literature review will be analyzed by explaining the purpose and findings of the different studies, and how it pertains to this study in particular. This literature review will be organized in the following fashion. First, the theories behind the acquisition of second languages will be discussed. Following this, the reasoning behind why critical pedagogy through social interaction will be explained. Before discussing the research on guided reading or literacy circles, the significance of scaffolding will be addressed. Lastly, the effectiveness of guided reading groups or literacy circles will be shared.

Second Language Acquisition:

To understand how to teach ELLs effectively it is vital to understand the key concepts of second language acquisition for educators. First, there are several stages a language learner goes through as they learn the target language. Stage I is the silent stage; this stage is also known as the preproduction period where learners listen and gain understanding of the target language but are not comfortable with using the target language yet. The next stage is the early production stage where they develop around to 1,000 words that they actively use and
understand. The third stage is called the speech emergence stage because this is when students can hold straightforward conversations but often make errors. The intermediate language proficiency stage is next and this is when learners can make complex statements and can speak at a greater length. Lastly, the final stage is the advanced language proficiency stage when students can participate fully at grade level in the target language. Their language is comparable to that of native speakers (Reed & Railsback, 2003). In order for language learners to develop the target language, it is vital for them to be immersed in the target language and in constant interaction with other speakers of this language. This is why social interaction is so important to ELLs.

Critical Pedagogy and Social Interaction:

In a research article written by Joyce Purdy (2008), the author shares excerpts of conversations amongst ELLs, native English students and their teacher. The excerpts display how conversations around texts can shape and expand the construction of meaning for all students—especially the ELLs. The study is based on Vygotsky’s theory that learning is socially constructed. The researcher suggests four techniques teachers may use to structure meaningful conversations. Those four ways are: through questioning, teaching vocabulary, engaging in collaborative talk and recognizing that the culture and the identity of the child are important to literacy learning. Through these four strategies used to encourage students to collaboratively talk to one another, the author suggests that ELLs will develop their language skills, and even more importantly create “a productive culture of learners” (p.50). Above all of these suggestions is to understand the home culture of ELLs because with that, the students
will not only create a productive culture of learners, but they will become the leaders of the future. This leads into the topic of critical pedagogy and why it is so essential to ELLs.

Critical pedagogy is “an opportunity and a challenge for students to examine social structure, with its inequities and system of power relations” (Satana-Williamson, 2000, p.4). This is necessary for students because education should be empowering to students so they may fight for themselves and, when needed, fight for justice. In order to develop the future leaders and active participants of society, students need to learn how to do so in the classroom. Students should be equal contributors to the learning process by posing problems, questions, and solutions to daily issues that come up. The teacher should allow students to have a place within this authoritative dialogue to help them develop as individual and independent thinkers and active doers in the community they are a part of in the present time (p.9).

This is especially important for ELLs because many teachers, even the ones who normally do teach using critical pedagogy in their class, resort to “dumping knowledge” on ELLs and this is not supported by experience or by research. ELLs need to active participants in their learning because not only will this motivate them but it will also create a more meaningful experience for them. This can be done simply by using a dialogic approach in the classroom that allows students to talk freely, listen with respect to one another, and develop as proactive individuals in their learning and in their community (p.18-19). This is a simple action to do within the classroom but it will not work if the students are just told to participate. They need to learn how to proactively and productively contribute to the class. This is done through teacher guidance and scaffolding.
The Need for Scaffolding:

In a research article that is a self-study done by Laura Chiaravalloti (2010) the research behind talking and learning is discussed, along with the difficulties in cultivating meaningful discussions amongst groups of students. According to her research, students need to scaffolded into this process gradually and they also need to be held accountable for their learning. After discussing all her research, the author explains how she uses “talk tickets” to scaffold her students into effective academic discourse. She taught them one discussion skill at a time, first how to share your opinion, then inviting others to share theirs, and lastly how to use specific evidence from the text to support their discussion. She begins using talk tickets at the start of the school year and by April she takes them away because in order for students to proficiently participate in meaningful discussion, they need to do so without prompts or visual cues. This is one way to scaffold students into independently discussing topics in a focused and productive manner.

According to Irene Blum and her fellow colleagues (2010), utilizing discussion prompts to develop discussions in the classroom is another great way to help students develop their understanding. Their research reflected Vygotsky’s observation that language is a mental tool for thinking and that learning is a social activity. They also built their ideas on different researchers, Allington, Rosenbult, Almasi, and others, which are well known for their work.

Along with discussion prompts that develop discussion, Levi McNeil (2012) wrote a research article and the research of this article, based on the interactionist and sociocultural theoretical perspectives, focuses on how to make referential questions, or open-ended questions attainable for English-language learners (ELLs). She did this by examining the
scaffolding functions of a fifth grade teacher’s talk. She concludes that teachers need the abilities to draw upon verbal and nonverbal communicative moves in order to scaffold ELLs. By this, she means that in order to get language learners to understand and participate in open-ended discussions, it is important for the teacher to make the students feel comfortable and the verbal and non-verbal language needs to be comprehensible to the students.

Supporting this McNeil’s research, another study was done. By observing a classroom for 19 hours in an English reading program for young English-language learners in Singapore, Viniti Vaish (2013) analyzes how teacher’s questions highly affect (both positively and negatively) students responses and learning. The author observes through a theoretical foci of dialogicity and the importance of oral language in language acquisition. This study has both quantitative and qualitative data and comes to the conclusions that teacher questioning can support and inhibit student talk. It is vital for educators to monitor their questioning throughout their teaching to ensure they are supporting, rather than inhibiting students’ language acquisition and learning. An effective way to teach through critical pedagogy and make sure the social interaction in the classroom is productive and effective in teaching ELLs is through literacy circles or guided reading.

The Effectiveness of Literacy Circles:

A literacy circle is a powerful tool to use as a way to bring students together to collaborate and talk with one another. One study examines how to successfully improve reading comprehension for English-language learners (ELLs) through Transactional Literacy Circles (TLC). The researcher used 75 fourth through sixth grade ELLs and conducted literacy
circles with them. Then compared their results to a control group who did not partake in the study. The students in the study outperformed the control group on standards reading tests and in 7 months, increased one grade level in reading (McElvain, 2010).

Another study that supports literacy circles was done by Ana Christina Dasilva Iddings and her colleagues (2009). This article discusses the question of how teachers who do not speak the first language of their English-Language Learners (ELLs) can support these students to make meaningful connections to texts. The authors of this article conducted the study using the classroom microethnographic method of research (the use of language/other systems of communication at the center of what happens in the classroom) and interpret the study through two fundamental beliefs founded by Lev Vygotsky. The context of their research is a microanalysis of a literacy event that occurs between a teacher and his three ELLs in a literacy circle. The teacher guides his three Spanish speaking students through a picture walk and a read aloud of *Curious George* and throughout the literacy circle, he asks questions to push students understanding, affirms and reiterates their responses, relies on the students to explain and sometimes translate to each other, and allows the students to take on different roles in the group to encourage their own understanding of the text and also help others in the group expand their understanding. By doing these four teaching practices, teachers can support ELLs even when they do not know the student’s first language or backgrounds. Not only are they supportive of their ELLs language needs, but they are also developing critical thinking skills within them by allowing them to take on different roles in the group and talk freely amongst each other.
While literacy circles are a powerful tool to use to strengthen literacy skills, it is important to remember that ELLs may need special attention or modified activities. The authors of the article “Modified guided reading Gateway to English as a second language and literacy training” describe why modifications in guided reading (MGR) are necessary for English-language learners and provide a theoretical framework for this approach using sound research. The theory this practice (MGR) is developed on is the interactive reading model and this article is intended to help teachers of English language learners to successfully instruct their students (Avaloz et al., 2008). So, to teach ELLs well through a literacy circle, it is important to not only scaffold them through questioning and the use of discussion prompts, but also to modify the circle as needed to enable the ELLs to fully participate.

Limitations in Research and Opposing Viewpoints:

While there is an extensive amount of research on ELLs and how to teach there are some shortcomings within this research. Firstly, some of the studies discussed were completed in countries other than the United States and this lowers the relevance they have to students who are ELLs living in America. This is because the educational standards are different in the U.S. compared to Singapore or other nations. Also, the American culture weighs heavily on the way students learn here as well.

A popular myth circulating educational discussions opposes the practices open conversations amongst ELLs is that they should not be allowed to use their native language because it will slow down their English language development. In reality, allowing students to use their native language facilitates cognitive and academic growth. The use of L1 (first
language) should be used to mediate L2 (second language) tasks, so that students may better comprehend and complete the task at hand. Not only will it help them complete their assignments but it also does not harm the acquiring of the L2 (Davies-Samway & McKeon, 2007, p.13). Therefore, by allowing students to communicate in their L1, it boosts student comprehension and engagement in a literacy circle.

Another reason teachers refrain from allowing ELLs in the classroom to speak their L1 is because they believe it will distract them as well as other students in the classroom. While this may be true sometimes, it is not more likely to happen with the ELLs in the classroom than with the mainstream students in the classroom who speak English. Many times, it is the constant translation from fellow native language speakers that helps students who are not as proficient in the target language (Davies-Samway & McKeon, 2007, p.46). Also, the importance of learning ELL’s cultural backgrounds and incorporating their cultures into the classroom is essential for their success in the classroom. Therefore celebrating their diversity—their language and culture in the classroom should be a regular occurrence in the classroom to help ELLs feel empowered and excited to learn and grow within the classroom.

Conclusion:

Teaching ELLs is not going to disappear from the U.S and in fact, in today’s world, it’s becoming more and more common. Allowing students to learn through conversation that is scaffolded and guided by teacher prompting is an authentic and natural way to help develop their English language and their critical thinking skills as well. Because of this, more research
needs to be done to add to the general understanding of how to effectively teach ELLs, specifically to develop their literacy and language skills.
Chapter Three: The Context of this Research Study

Participants:

The students in this study are identified as English-language learners (ELLs) by the state and the school. These three students are in the same grade level and same classroom. There were two girls and one boy that participated in the literacy circle. These students reside in a two-parent household and are from a middle class social-economic status. The students were selected through a purposeful sample, who, along with their parents, gave consent to participate in this research project.

Setting:

The study took place at a private school in a suburban neighborhood in upstate New York. It took place in the third-grade classroom of the three participants during the literacy block in the morning. This classroom consists of twenty four students, ten boys and fourteen girls, who are all mostly in the middle class.

Positionality as the researcher:

I am a graduate student at SUNY Brockport in the literacy education program with a bachelors in English literature. I am certified in elementary education, special education and am working toward my literacy certification. I completed my student teaching in New York City, where I worked with a general education, third grade classroom and an inclusive, fifth grade class. In this urban setting I worked with students to strengthen their literacy skills through many different facets. Since receiving my initial certification and bachelors, I have substitute
taught in three public school districts and one private school. This allowed me to gain experience in a variety of settings and work with a wide array of students in several subject areas. As a child, I was an English-language learner and owe my success to my teachers. Through all of my experiences, my belief in literacy as the foundation of learning has grown and strengthened. Reading, writing and speaking are the ways we, as humans connect and communicate with one another. As an educator, I am determined to guide learners to critically think about our world and become lifelong active participants in it with their words, actions, and attitudes. This is done in an authentic and positive environment that is supportive of all students and aides each in finding their own passions, building the confidence to pursue them, and acquiring the skills needed to achieve them.

**Methods of Data Collection:**

This study incorporated a variety of methods to collect data to deepen the understanding of the research questions. I gathered information through observations and anecdotal notes, audio recordings, and writing responses. Observations and notes were taken to record anything that was visible but could not understood from an audio recording. This way, I recorded behaviors and anything else I saw. Audio recordings were used to gather the data of what conversation prompts were used in the literacy circle and what affect they had on the circle. The student verbal discussions were also recorded so that the growth of the students understanding of the text can be proven. Lastly, students’ writing responses were collected, so that the effect of oral discussion on writing can be shown as well.
Procedures:

During this qualitative study, I facilitated a literacy circle with three English-Language learners (ELLs) who are in third grade. This literacy circle will took place over the course of two weeks, every school day. Each literacy circle session was between 20-30 minutes long. The literacy circle had the following events in each session: first, we read a book together; then we discussed the section read as a group; lastly, the students wrote responses to share their understanding of the book. Students were taught to use discussion prompts to guide their book conversation. This will scaffold them to have a deeper comprehension of the book and also expand their oral and writing skills.

Criteria for Trustworthiness:

The study of how to effectively teach ELLs in an academic setting has been increasing as this is becoming a more and more prevalent issue in schools in the United States. Due to this growing need, there has been a large quantity of research to determine what will lead of ELLs to be successful in schools. This research study adds to the research and its' validity is verified through a number of procedures. First, this study had persistent observation because the observations took place at the same time of the day, every school day, for two weeks. Each observation was the same amount of time as well, therefore it was persistent. This research is also valid because of triangulation. The data of this research was based off of observations and anecdotal notes, audio recordings, and student’s written responses, so it was not based off of one set of data, but three different sets of data. This created triangulation within the research. Lastly, there also was transferability within the research because the detailed descriptions of
the participants and research context were included in the research while, simultaneously, protecting the privacy of the setting and the participants.
Chapter Four: Data Collection, Analysis and Findings

Introduction:

In this chapter I will describe, in detail, the setting and the interactions that occurred during the data collection. Then, I will discuss the data that was collected. I sectioned the data findings into two themes. First, I noticed that with structured conversation, the participants in the group gained a better understanding of the text and were able to verbally express their understanding in articulate ways. The second theme was because of the structured conversations in the literacy circle, writing responses improve. These two themes interact with each other throughout the data collection because literacy as a whole is speaking, listening, reading, and writing combined. Therefore, it would only make sense that the different aspects of literacy affect one another.

Description of Data Collection:

The Setting:

The study took place with three, third grade students in a small private school in the late morning of the school day. Lily, Emma, and Mark are the pseudonyms that will be used for the three participants in this study. All three students spoke Ukrainian or Russian and were ELLs. For two weeks, I worked with the three participants in the hall outside of the classroom. On Wednesdays, the rest of the class went to Chapel, so we were able to conduct our literacy circle inside the classroom.
Establishing the Environment of the Literacy Circle:

The study began on a Monday and before delving into the complex text the group would read, we began with reading leveled readers from the online resource: readinga-z.com. The first book we read was *Food Around the World*, a level R, nonfiction text. On this day, the lesson began with pre-reading activities such as a picture walk, a text-feature study and pre-teaching vocabulary. The students shared their favorite foods and this conversation freely led to a discussion about Ukrainian and Russian food. All three students got so excited to be able to talk about the traditional foods their parents and grandparents make. They listened to each other as they shared and were able to make the connections between what a food or dish is called in Ukrainian and what it is called in English. I was surprised with how open to discussion all three participants were on the first day of the literature circle. Then, upon repeated listening to the audio recordings, I realized that everyone loves talking about food! So, because of this common ground, the participants were comfortable with sharing. After the pre-reading activities, we read through the text as a group. I asked questions to push their thinking and deepen their understanding throughout the reading, and the participants interjected with connections and comments along the way. I also asked them to share stories from their own lives and most children loves having a chance to share a little bit about themselves.

On the first day, the purpose of the first day was for me (the researcher) to gain understanding where each participant stood in their understanding of English and reading strengths and their weaknesses as well. At the end of the reading and discussion, I asked them to write a response to a generic fact and opinion question about foods. This was a quick
response designed to accustom them to writing a response at the end of each literacy circle session, without overwhelming them on the first day.

From the first day of reading, I took notes on each participant's reading and speaking habits. Lily read first and she was a strong reader. She used all three cueing systems, meaning she used her visual (graphophonic) cues, her meaning cues, and her grammar (syntax) cues. She understood what she read and asked questions without being prompted. Next, Emma read; although she was on the same reading level as Lily, her fluency was not equal to hers. Emma read slowly and halted abruptly in the middle of a word or a sentence. Often times, she had trouble decoding large, multi-syllabic words and if she read a word incorrectly she would wait for someone to help her read it by telling her the word. Lastly, Mark read. Mark read quickly and after a few miscues that he made, I realized that he tends not to listen for meaning as he reads; he focuses on speed instead. When he misread a word, he did not reread it or attempt to correct his mistake. Instead, he continued plowing through the text even though the meaning of that section was lost to him.

The second and third day of our literacy circle, we began a new text from the ReadingA-Z program. This text was titled Inventions, written by Ned Jensen and it was a level R nonfiction, text. During these two sessions, I focused on discussing the text with the students and connecting the text to the world. On day two, we stopped halfway through the book and discussed how inventions are important in our lives and how they make our lives easier. This was a more difficult subject to discuss, compared to food from the day before, because it was more abstract and more thought provoking than food. On the third day, we began the circle with discussing what we read the day before and then finished the text.
The writing responses for these two days were vital to set up with students for the remainder of the literacy circle. On day two, the writing response prompt asked them to write about one invention that makes their life easier and why. This prompt was a simple one because it asked them to recall information they learned from the text. This response asked them to use their understanding of vocabulary and support their reasoning with details from the text. On day three of data collection, the response was a little more involved. It asked them to explain the difference between a discovery and an invention. While the text discussed this briefly, it was a more difficult concept to have complete understanding of. To prepare the participants for this response, I used verbal discussion to scaffold them into the written response. We discussed this as a group-each sharing our understanding of the two words and giving examples of each. The purpose of this response was to prepare them for more in depth or critical response prompts.

These three days were used as scaffolds to prepare the participants for the routine that the research required. After the first three days, the literacy circle routine had been taught, practiced and learned. The texts that were read on these days were the appropriate reading level for all the participating students and was not considered complex texts. These were purposefully chosen to first model and practice the routine before implementing it with the purposefully chosen complex text. By prompting the students to participate in a structured conversation, the literacy circle established an open environment where conversation could freely take place. I asked a variety of questions to allow them to become comfortable with sharing their thinking and asking questions within the group.
The Heart of the Literacy Circle:

On the fourth day of data collection I introduced the complex text we would be working with for the remainder of the study. The text was a non-fiction picture book titled: *Brothers in Hope: The Story of The Lost Boys of Sudan*, written by Mary Williams and illustrated by R. Gregory Christie. This book is written at a third grade reading level—Lexile level 670 and guided reading level: S. This book was awarded the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award Honor by the American Library Association (ALA), the Notable Children's Book by the ALA, the Best Children's Books of the Year: Outstanding Merit by Bank Street College of Education, the Notable Books for a Global Society by the International Reading Association (IRA), Books Reflecting Diversity: - A Look Into a Wilder World, and finally, the Children's Book Award Notable by the IRA.

Besides the fact that it is a celebrated work of literature by many organizations, this text was selected for a number of reasons. First, it was at the third grade reading level, making it accessible for all participants to read and comprehend. Secondly, it was a non-fiction book but it was written in a creative narrative style, making it captivating for the readers in the circle. Thirdly, and possibly most importantly, this text opened doors to discussions about the world outside of the participants’ immediate reach and helped them expand their critical thinking to the global world.

Before we began reading the central text, I first activated and built background knowledge on topics that surrounded this text. The circle began by talking about Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, conversing about why the lost boys had that title in the classic children’s tale. Then we shared our ideas about why the name “the lost boys” was given to the Lost Boys of
Sudan. Afterwards, we looked at a map of Sudan—pre and post-civil war—to gain understanding of why the war took place and what the effect of it was. Lastly, we read the article “The Lost Boys of Sudan” written by the International Rescue Committee. Discussing the article as we read, the students had a great deal of questions and comments about the Lost Boys and the war in Sudan. We finished this session by writing a response to a prompt that asked the participants to summarize what they learned about the war that took place in Sudan.

Diving Into the Text:

On day five, the circle was finally introduced to the text. We read about the author and illustrator and came to know how the author learned about the Lost Boys and why she decided to help them share their story. The author, Mary Williams, created the Lost Boys Foundation, dedicated to raise awareness about The Lost Boys. She wrote *Brothers of Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*, as her first book to help them. I read the first page out loud to model good reading strategies and also to capture the group by utilizing the story telling style of the text. We finished this day by discussing predictions about what will happen next and throughout the story. The writing prompt asked the students to write their predictions down. The purpose of this writing prompt was to activate their background knowledge on the topic and to solidify their predictions that they discussed. It is vital for ELLs and all learners to be able to transpose their oral responses to written responses—hence why constructed conversation is so vital to writing.

Following the introduction of the book, the literacy circle fell into a comfortable routine for the remainder of the data collection period. We started by reviewing and summarizing
what we read the day before, read the next section of the text, held a conversation while we read, and concluded with a writing prompt response. The prompts were always based on the conversations we had about the text that day—asking the students to recall from the text but also connect to it and analyze it. The purpose of the discussions and the writing responses was to aid the participants in comprehending the text in more than just a literal way.

To fully reach and impact students, especially ELLs, learning needs to be a combination of all four lenses: meaning-centered, language-based, “human” and social. A literacy circle that is structured, allows learning to have all of these attributes. It is meaning-centered because in a literacy circle, the discussions and conversations are important and matter to those participating in it. A literacy circle is language-based because it involves speaking, listening, reading, and writing—all components of language. It is “human” because it allows each voice to be heard in the circle. It gives the opportunity for everyone to be a part of something and feel connected to others. Lastly, it is social because without conversation, the learning would not happen. This research study led to two key findings and those were how structured conversation aided in ELLs verbal responses, and written responses.

The Findings:

Implementing structured conversation in a literacy circle led to gains in text understandings and to the ability to express understandings articulately.

In the beginning of the literacy circle, the participants were happy to share their ideas and getting them to speak was never a problem. The problem laid in how they answered. They responded to questions with one word or short, incomplete sentences. This led me to find that
explicit teaching of verbal academic language and proper sentence structure led to gains in student achievement. Asking students to answer in a complete sentence may feel unnatural or awkward at first, but after some time, it becomes automatic. Subsequently, when asked to write a response, writing a complete sentence comes naturally to them. For example, on day one, when I asked them to share what their favorite food was, they all gave one word answers such as: “pizza” and “pasta.” Now this question didn’t require an elaborate response, but students need to get into the habit of responding in complete sentences verbally.

When I explicitly asked the students to share their ideas in complete sentences, I found that the participants quickly grew accustomed to speaking in a more academic way. For example, when asked “what is a discovery.” Mark’s response was “something like where you found something.” To encourage him to speak more on the subject and use proper grammar, I prompted him by asking, “Can you tell me more about that in a complete sentence?” He paused and thought about how he would explain his thinking, and then continued by saying, “A discovery is something you find, like dinosaur bones.” I discovered that, when asked a question and pressured to answer immediately, ELLs often mix their words up and use similar ones, such as “where” instead of “when.” If gently prompted to structure their spoken language and given some time to think about their response, students make a conscientious effort to do so.

Another example of gains in ability to express understandings articulately is how Emma’s verbal responses changed from the beginning of the data collection period, to the end of it. Naturally, Emma is a quiet child who often times does not share out unless directly spoken to or asked to share. In the beginning of the data collection period, Emma was just like this. She would listen to what Mark and Lily would share but would not share her thoughts
with the group. At first, I did not want to push her out of her comfort zone right from the start, so I let her grow accustomed to the group’s routine and also develop a more trusting relationship with myself and the other two participants. Then, after I noticed her acting more freely in group, I began inviting her to join our discussion by asking her “what do you think Emma?” or “do you want to add more to that idea Emma?” At first, she responded with nodding her head or by giving me short responses. As the data collection progressed, with consistent routine and conversation, she began sharing more of her thoughts verbally.

A specific display of Emma expanding her oral language was on day six of the literacy circle. After reading a section of *Brother’s in Hope*, we began discussing what the ambiguous line of “First there was just me, one. Soon, one became many. Too many to count.” Without asking her to share, Emma volunteered sharing her thoughts by stating “He’s [the narrator and main character] talking about first there was just him, who was lost, but then, one became many and they couldn’t count how many because there was so many of them.” Now, the grammar in her sentence is not completely correct, but this was still a feat. The fact that she volunteered to respond and responded in a sentence that answered the question and explained it, displayed progression.

Specifically asking students to respond using complete sentences may sound foreign and strange at first, but after the first few requests, the participants grew accustomed to restating their answers in complete sentences. By the end of the data collection period, the participants would share their thinking in complete sentences on their own. Speaking in complete sentences and explaining the thoughts behind the answer verbally led to better writing responses as well.
Participants’ writing responses improved when conversation was structured during literature circle time.

After studying and analyzing the data, it was evident that conversation and explicit instruction improved writing responses. This finding proved itself over the entire course of the data collection. In the beginning of the data collection, the responses were brief and no more than two sentences (if that). Students “explained” their thinking with a “because” statement and rarely referred back to the text, even if that is where their response stemmed from. By the end of the literacy circle, all three participants were writing a complete paragraph as their response. This was not because the prompt asked for a paragraph or I required the writing to be that long. The students themselves knew, to write in complete sentences, to support their answers with details from the text and to explain their thinking as well. Therefore, a second finding from this data collection was structured conversation and scaffolds within the writing prompts aided each participant to develop their writing skills.
The best evidence of this finding is to observe the student writing samples. Figure 1 displays the work of two of the participants on day two of the literacy circle. After reading the text *Inventions* and discussing the importance of inventions in our lives, their writing assignment was to “write one invention that makes your life easier and explain why.” Without any questions for the participants or any guidance from me, they all wrote a one sentence response. Their responses did not restate the question, and were not written in complete sentences, but in sentence fragments.

I decided to try to aide their writing with explicit teaching. Before handing out the writing response in the next literacy circle session, I explained how important it was to restate the question and use evidence from the text to support answers. That way, the reader would know where the information written down came from. For the next two days, I made sure to scaffold the response prompt by stating “use details from the text” instead of just writing
“explain why.” Along with this, the structured conversations that took place were filled with prompts like: “what in the text told you that?” or even more vaguely “what made you think that?” After studying my approaches, this finding was very evident. By using such prompts, the participants used metacognition that first, connected the text to their thinking, then connected to their verbal responses, and finally led to their written responses.

Figure 2 displays Emma’s writing on day five. In this writing response, it is clear that the writer was still struggling with making the connection between the text and her understanding of it. This struggle could be caused by a lack of comprehension of the text but the detailed conversations about the text eliminated the factor of miscomprehension of the text. In this scenario, the best explanation was the lack of English vocabulary knowledge. This participant had trouble with finding the appropriate words to explain her thinking. This is not an
uncommon struggle for ELLs and with constant conversation and direct instruction, will eventually be overcome. While this response is not a perfect display of progression, this figure also shows Emma was attempting to use the text to explain and support her answer. According to the audio recordings, the discussion that preceded the writing on this day, specifically connected each feeling that was shared, back to the text. This exemplifies how structured conversation helped Emma develop her writing.
Lastly, Figure 3 displays the writing response that all three participants completed on the final day of the literacy circle. In this writing response prompt, I removed the scaffold of stating “use details from the text to support your answer.” It was rewarding to see the discussions and writing prompts that led up to the final day of data collection, fulfilled their purpose. All three students referred to the text to support their answer. They all wrote a detailed response that was longer than three complete sentences. They explained their thinking in their writing and each student’s responses correlated with what they discussed in the conversation before the writing. By the end of the literacy circle, students were able to use what was discussed in the group to develop their writing. In conclusion, the findings of this study were evident throughout the data itself. The research done by scholars before that support social learning, language acquisition and scaffolding were all proven true in this study.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

Summary of Major Results:

This research study has been filled with valuable information for teachers of English language learners and even native English speakers as well. It is vital to look at the findings and draw conclusions from them. It is also important to see where it falls in the grand scheme of teacher research—specifically research that pertains to ELLs. This research study focused on three aspects of conversation. First, how structured conversations affect English-language learners’ oral skills. Then how structured conversation affect English-language learners’ writing skills and lastly, how structured conversation affect English-language learners’ development of critical thinking skills. By analyzing audio recordings, reviewing anecdotal notes and observing the growth in student work, these three research questions were turned into the major conclusions as well.

Overall, literacy circles that focus on conversation and discussion, are beneficial for ELLs because they develop the learners’ verbal skills, and written skills. This was seen throughout the audio recordings and the writing samples of the students that participated in this study. Not only did they develop their English speech and writing, but they also developed their critical thinking skills by listening to each other’s ideas, responding to each other and learning about life-altering occurrences in another place of the world. Developing these skills: listening to others, building off of each other’s ideas and being compassionate of others around the world, are invaluable skills to have as students grow to become active members of society.
Discussion of the Results Relating to Literature:

*English Language Learners Oral Skills Improve Through Structured Conversation in a Literacy Circle*

Vygotsky, Lightbrown and Spada, and a slew of other literacy learning researchers all stated social constructivism and interaction is the key to learning and this research’s findings go to support that. The more students talk-productively-the more they learn. In this case, the more English the students spoke, the more fluent their oral skills became. This sounds logical and it is, but many times the simplest solutions are the ones that are overlooked the most. Many attempt to find programs and workbooks that develop ELLs’ language skills but just having students speak amongst each other is a huge learning opportunity for them. As the old saying goes, “practice makes perfect.” Therefore allowing students to practice their English is conversations that are focused on high-interest, academic texts, is a natural way to do so.

*English Language Learners Writing Skills Improve Through Structured Conversation in a Literacy Circle*

The second conclusion that can be drawn from this research study is how ELLs writing skills improve because of the conversations they have. If a student is asked to write a proper and well-written sentence before he or she has spoken those words, it is much more difficult for that child to succeed. On the other hand, when learners have the chance to independently think about a prompt, then discuss the topic with others to expand their thinking on it, they are much more capable and much more prepared to write in a grammatically correct and complete sentence. Therefore, holding discussions and conversations that prompt the students to think
about the text in ways that they may not have done on their own is beneficial for their oral and writing skills.

_English Language Learners Develop Their Critical Thinking and Expand Their View of the Global Society_

The last conclusion is what pushes the learning outside of the classroom and into the global world. There is a scientific theory called the ripple effect that states that once one action occurs, others follow. This can be connected to this research study because once on aspect of literacy is altered, all of literacy skills will be affected. Literacy does not only pertain to reading, writing, and speaking. It pertains all the ways humans communicate in a large scale. Prompting students to push their thinking from focusing on their community based worlds to focusing on the world as whole leaves a huge impact on students. Learning and talking about other places of the world and people who can be across the ocean and connecting with them is powerful. This research proves that conversation develops ELLs into fluent speakers, writers and thinkers.

_Implications:_

As educators, there are many implications to take away from this study. The responsibility of a teacher goes beyond learning who your students are and where their abilities lie. The teacher must use that information and find avenues that will aide their students to success.

Promotion of learning is not unidimensional—the importance of motivating students to learn cannot be emphasized enough; also important is catering for students who have
different abilities and who cover the work at different rates, deciding what content to teach and what activities to organize in order to facilitate this learning, maintaining discipline, and socializing students to become functioning members of society—all of these are grist to the teacher’s mill (Phillips & Soltis, 2009, p. 2).

Meeting the needs of students and making sure each student is getting the best opportunity to succeed academically is one of the most essential parts of teaching.

The first implication of this research for teachers—including myself—is, they must understand how critical the role of a second language learning process is in any student. Becoming proficient in the academic English language is essential for all ELL students to successfully attain knowledge in the American School system. Teachers need to do before trying to teach ELLs is “evaluate their own perceptions and dispel any misconceptions that may affect their teaching practices” (McGraner & Saenz, 2009, p. 6). This includes realizing that second language learning takes longer and requires more effort, but it does not mean that an ELL student is less capable than a native English speaking student. Once the teachers begins working with ELL students, they should begin with using the ELL students’ background knowledge, experiences, and cultures as a launch pad for learning. By integrating student’s experiences in the classroom, teachers will be making explicit connections for the students.

*Implementing structured conversation in a literacy circle led to gains in text understandings and to the ability to express understandings articulately.*
An implication for teachers, that may be the most important to note from this study, is to never underestimate the power of conversation. Due to the findings of this research, it is vital to guide students’ conversation to allow them to grow from said conversations to their fullest capacity. To aide and guide our students to open their minds, especially those who are not articulate in the English language, allow conversation to freely take place in guided reading groups, literacy circles and in the classroom in general. It is the most natural way for all people to learn. Our job as the teachers, is to make sure the conversations that take place are structured and are benefiting the learning needs of our ELLs.

*Participants’ writing responses improved when conversation was structured during literature circle time.*

Along with guiding conversations in the classroom, another implication to draw from this study is to explicitly teach how to speak academically and how to write academically. Explicit teaching practice is a simple task, it is stating the goal bluntly, model it, and allow students to practice it, before expecting them to implement it into their learning habits naturally. Explicit teaching is overlooked and often times avoided because teachers want students to pick up the hints and messages that they are discreetly relaying. This wastes time and energy. If teachers simply state the goal and explain the importance of the skill or concept being taught in the beginning of a lesson, it will make for a much more productive and enlightening experience for all. Therefore, to state it simply, teachers should tell their students the goal of each lesson and the significance of it to ensure the highest level of comprehension and success.
Limitations of this Research Study:

This research study was conducted in a short period of time and there are valuable deductions to be drawn from it, there were also some shortcomings throughout the research process. First, the research was completed in the hall outside of the students’ classroom. While they have completed work here before and were not easily distracted, it was not an ideal place to have in depth conversations that required participants to thinking deeply and critically about the text and the world. Also, this study would have been more effective if it was done over the course of six to nine months. The shortness of this study may have not shown all or the severity of the outcomes. Students need time to grow accustom to the facilitator (the researcher) and also the routine of the circle. Not only that, but if they worked for a longer period of time, I do believe that the structured conversation would have developed even more in the students themselves. Lastly, it would have been the best if the research worked with students whom she taught on a daily basis, but as a substitute teacher, that was not possible.

Recommendations for Future Research:

Future research will need to focus on the professional development and preparation needs of elementary classroom teachers of ELLs to prepare them on how to facilitate structured conversation amongst learners. Further research should also look into what prompts, specifically, aid ELLs to further their thinking to progress the effectiveness of conversations and language development. Another productive aspect to look into is to see if or what the correlation is between second language acquisition and the development of reading skills. This
would aid the education world by helping them kill two birds with one stone, by effecting both processes simultaneously. Finally, further research should also exam how to eventually remove the teacher from the equation to allow students to facilitate their own structured conversation.

Significance of Study:

Teachers are responsible for guiding their students to build successful lives for themselves academically and socially. The findings of this research displayed the effectiveness of conversations amongst and with students who are English language learners, whether it is among ELLs themselves or with English proficient peers. Teachers may use a variety of strategies to improve their students’ literacy development but before they do any of that, they need to understand each student as an individual person and know where they come from. Teachers must build a trusting relationship with each student and caring community within the classroom to be able to successfully reach each student and give them the support they need to thrive.
References


Vasquez, V. (2010). *Getting Beyond "I Like the Book": Creating Space For Critical Literacy in K-6 Classrooms* (2nd ed.). Newark, DE: The Reading Association Inc..

Appendices

Appendix A: Student Response Sheet

Name: ___________________________  Date: ______________

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Appendix B: Conversation Prompts

During the literacy circle, some prompts that may be used to focus and push the students’ discussion are:

1. Tell me in your own words what happened in the book.
2. Talk about your favorite parts.
3. This book reminds me of...
4. Add something new to the book.
5. How do you think the character felt when...why?
6. Why do you think this happened?