

Using Weblogs to Increase Language Arts Proficiency in ESL Students

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Abstract: This project involves a twelve-year-old, Hispanic male student at a Title I elementary school in the Kansas City, Kansas School District. He is officially classified as an ELL student, with the home language identified as Spanish. The student's general education (Tier 1) reading instruction takes place for 90 minutes each day, five days a week. Although there is no "formal" reading "program" in place, students participate in a Guided Reading format, in which the class is split into smaller reading groups, which meet with the teacher daily for approximately 20-30 minutes. In addition, students meet with an ESL teacher/para for 20-30 minutes daily. Students follow a prescribed curriculum (Guaranteed Viable Curriculum, or GVC), which assesses mastery through a series of computer-based "Checkpoints" given every 4.5 weeks. Results are available immediately, which gives teachers the opportunity to discover which individual students master standards assessed during each instructional window, and which standards may need to be revisited, reviewed, or retaught. Other assessments given on a regular basis include the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress), given in the Fall, Winter, and Spring, which this year (2011-12) replaces the Kansas State Assessment (KSA) as the "high stakes" assessment in the KCKPS, Fountas & Pinnell (F&P) which measures reading levels, and the KELPA (Kansas English Language Proficiency), which assesses K-12 English Language Learners (ELLs)/Limited English Proficient (LEP) students for their proficiency levels in the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing English. It is based on the indicators in the Kansas English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Standards. Teacher created formative assessments round out this "Checking for Understanding" (CFU) program. The school administered the KSA General Reading Assessment in March of 2011. On this, the student achieved a raw score of 91, placing him in the "Exemplary" category, which is the highest category on that test. The MAP reading test administered in April 2011 yielded a RIT score of 220, placing him in the "At/Above Proficient" designation, and the Fall 2011 reading MAP again placed him in the "At/Above Proficient" category, with a RIT score of 214. In all "Checkpoint" assessments, he scored in the "Proficient" category, with raw scores ranging from 79-92%, with the exception of the first checkpoint in February 2011, soon after he arrived at the school, on which he scored a 58%, placing him in the "Not Proficient" category. Regarding the KELPA, he scored 3 out of 4 possible points, placing him in the "Advanced" category regarding language acquisition in all areas of listening, speaking, and writing. In addressing behavior, the school uses a district-wide discipline form to gather school-wide behavior data. No behavior concerns were noted for this student. The apparent disconnect here occurs because although the student consistently scores in the highest categories academically and cognitively, he appears to be "stuck" at a KELPA level 3, corresponding to a Level 3 (Early/Fluent – Transitional) according to the "Leveling Correlation Chart" (Cappellini, 2005, p. 163). The long - term goal, therefore, of this case study is to move the student from a Level 3 to a Level 4 (Fluent) category upon completion of the KELPA administered in Spring, 2012. As the project developed, I first examined the year-end proficiency scores of ELL students in reading and math. I chose this particular fifth grade class because the teacher was new to the district, although not new to teaching. With this in mind, I spoke to the teacher regarding the project, and she was eager for any classroom support that would be available. Another reason I chose fifth grade in particular was because I taught communication arts in a middle school for eight years. This presented valuable insights into the vertical curriculum that students would be expected to master. As students advance in grade level, the correlation between successful school performance and success in later life, whether it be college or a trade, becomes more positive. Therefore, I deemed it essential that any student evidencing a learning gap should be given the opportunity to close it before reaching the secondary level. Although teachers at all levels are concerned with student achievement, it is often more propitious to defuse any potential difficulties while still in elementary school, where an often decided advantage is that the classroom teacher usually interacts with the student all day, not to mention increasing pressures on students, such as peer interactions, that often surface, and can interfere with learning, at the middle school level. For this particular project, I chose a high achieving (proficient) student, who evidenced a learning gap between his NCLB test performance and language proficiency. We chose blogging as a way to remedy this situation, since the district was presently involved in a "year of study" regarding writing in the curriculum as aligned with the common core. A weblog (or 'blog') can be thought of as an online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts as

in an “online diary.” Another feature of blogging is that similar to an open journal, the accumulation of writings and other content creates both a record of learning and a resource for others. In addition, a weblog is interactive, in the sense that readers can respond to any given entry with a comment and even threaded discussions can take place depending on the characteristics of the blog. We chose “Kidblog” (www.kidblog.org) as our platform, due to its simplicity and ease of use for digital “natives” and “immigrants” alike. We chose a hybrid of the “Tutor,” “Learner,” and “Class” blogs, as described by Campbell (2000).

The Project

Oscar T. is a twelve-year-old, Hispanic male student at Emerson Elementary School in the Kansas City, Kansas School District. He is officially classified as an ELL student, with the home language identified as Spanish. Oscar has attended Emerson for two years, beginning in the fourth grade. He has no identified disabilities, his attendance is good, and he presents no behavioral issues that would interfere with his learning. Oscar is in a fifth grade general education class comprised of fourteen students, and has never been retained

The school administered the KSA General Reading Assessment in March of 2011. On this, Oscar achieved a raw score of 91, placing him in the “Exemplary” category, which is the highest category on that test. The MAP reading test administered in April 2011 yielded a RIT score of 220, placing Oscar in the “At/Above Proficient” designation, and the Fall 2011 reading MAP again placed him in the “At/Above Proficient” category, with a RIT score of 214. Regarding the KELPA, Oscar scored 3 out of 4 possible points, placing him in the “Advanced” category regarding language acquisition in all areas of listening, speaking, and writing. In addressing behavior, the school uses a district-wide discipline form to gather school-wide behavior data. No behavior concerns were noted for Oscar. The apparent disconnect here occurs because although Oscar consistently scores in the highest categories academically and cognitively, he appears to be “stuck” at a KELPA level 3, corresponding to a Level 3 (Early/Fluent – Transitional) according to the “Leveling Correlation Chart” (Cappelini, 2005, p. 163). The long - term goal, therefore, of this case study is to move Oscar from a Level 3 to a Level 4 (Fluent) category upon completion of the KELPA administered in Spring, 2012.

The following tables represent Oscar’s NCLB test scores this year:

NWEA MAP	Winter 2012 - Jan 17, 2012	(Grade 05)
Reading	221 	At/Above Proficient
NWEA MAP	Fall 2011 - Sep 22, 2011	(Grade 05)
Reading	214 	At/Above Proficient

KELPA	Apr 01, 2011	(Grade 04)	
Total	3 	Advanced	Performance Level
Total	81		Percent Correct
Listening	3 	Advanced	Performance Level
Listening	88		Percent Correct
Reading	3 	Advanced	Performance Level
Reading	72		Percent Correct
Speaking	3 	Advanced	Performance Level
Speaking	83		Percent Correct
Writing	3 	Advanced	Performance Level
Writing	85		Percent Correct

KSA General 2010-2011 - Mar 01, 2011 (Grade 04)			
Math	89	Exemplary	Raw
Reading	91	Exemplary	Raw
Science	75	Exceeds Standard	Raw

Upon examining Oscar's test results and grades, an obvious discrepancy appeared. Since Oscar scored consistently high on the language arts portions of the KSA (Kansas Student Assessment), in fact "Exemplary" with a 91 raw score, as well as the MAP why did he score at a Level 3 on the KELPA?

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- **It gives daily reading practice to the learners.** Sometimes students find assigned reading material too boring, difficult, or hard to relate with. This is because it is often written with another purpose in mind. Entries are kept short, geared towards the learner interest, and linked to related online sources for further reading if desired. Vocabulary used in class can be recycled this way. New vocabulary words can be linked to definitions on other sites found with a search engine. Furthermore, to develop learner familiarity with native language patterns the tutor can use a casual, natural writing style.
- **It promotes exploration of English websites.** Any entry made by the tutor can and ought to encourage further exploration of the Internet in English by linking to related articles, and content based websites. For those learners reluctant to step outside the comfort of exploring the Web in their native language, being led to interesting English language sites will increase their confidence and help to overcome their aversion
- **It encourages online verbal exchange by use of comment buttons.** At the bottom of each entry, any blog reader can make a comment that can be read and further commented on by all who access the site. Ask your students questions, give them riddles, challenge their views; whatever it takes to encourage them to comment.

"Learner" blogs are blogs that are either run by individual learners themselves or by small collaborative groups of learners. In ESL, learner blogs may be best suited for reading and writing classes. We followed the district GVC in writing in which a common reading assignment would be followed by blog postings on the thoughts of each learner or group of learners. In addition, the act of constructing the blog may

encourage the use of search engines and net surfing in English to find the appropriate sites to which links can be made. This will empower the learner to direct the reader to sites of choice for further reading. Individually, blogs can be used as journals for writing practice, or as free-form templates for personal expression. The idea here is that students can get writing practice, develop a sense of ownership, and get experience with the practical, legal, and ethical issues of creating a document. They also had to learn that whatever they write can instantly be read by anyone else and, due to the comment features of the software, further exchange of ideas is promoted.

Finally, the “Class” blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. For this, we added four other students to the group, and participated in the “Blogging Challenge,” (www.edublogs.org). The students worked on their blogs weekly, consistent with the *Edublog* challenges. Since the “assignments” came out on Mondays, the students had until Wednesday to compose their blog entries. Also, in keeping with the district’s “Year of Study” in writing, students were encouraged to follow the format of “first draft, peer edit, second draft, and publish” for their work. For the rest of the week and through the weekend, students were encouraged to comments on each other’s’ blogs, as well as those in the *Edublog* network. Receiving comments, especially from “far away” peers, proved to be the “bright spot” of the assignment! Each writing session lasted 30 minutes. Students met twice a week with me, and the rest of the time they were encouraged to check the blogs on their own, or as part of homework assignments.

As of this writing, the final scores are not yet in for the Spring MAP and KELPA, however, all indications point to Oscar scoring “Fluent” as he heads off to middle school. We plan on continuing our blog next year, with the goal of increasing student participation, and we hope that Oscar and his classmates continue to visit us through the blogging world as well.



Figure 1: The TCETC Logo.

References

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