

*“What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow”*

*Lev Vygotsky*

## **Written Language Development in ESL Students Through the Use of Kid Writing**

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## **Background Information:**

### **Context**

My inquiry project takes place in a Kindergarten classroom at Easterly Parkway Elementary School in the State College Area School District. My project started out focusing on the language development of two Asian English as Second Language (ESL) students, Kuan-Fu and Jehyun, but then, as luck should have it, we got a new student from France at the end of January. These three ESL students, Kuan-Fu entered Kindergarten with the largest English vocabulary, though it was still quite minimal. Kuan-Fu was born in Taiwan and his native language is Chinese. He relocated to America with his family when he was three years old. He attended preschool last year and this may have helped with his English vocabulary because he had been previously immersed in the English language every day with his preschool teachers and peers. Kuan-Fu has a drive to communicate and to please teachers. He is eager to do his work and has made much progress academically since the beginning of the school year. The second ESL student, Jehyun is unique. He came to school barely speaking English. Jehyun was born in Korea and his native language is Korean. He moved to America this past year with his family. I noticed from his Kid Writing journal during the first couple weeks of school that his entries were mainly pictures with one word to describe each illustration. When he wrote about his pictures, he would trace over the word written by the teacher in yellow highlighter. The third ESL student, Odile, who entered our school in January, came to our classroom speaking no English language. I was able to document her progress from her first day in an American school. Odile was born in France and her native language is French. She moved to America with her family in January. Odile is

very eager to be like the other students in the classroom. She has a drive to communicate with others that causes her to be a risk taker in her oral communication. She is a good listener and is able to follow directions. This leads me to believe that she understands English, but has trouble articulating what she means or wants.

### **Inquiry Plan**

My Inquiry Project focus is on ESL students because I plan to teach in an area that is highly populated with ESL students. I really enjoy Kid Writing and the whole kid writing experience, and naturally the two fell in together. Kid Writing primarily takes place in Kindergarten only. Kid Writing is when students have the opportunity to draw a picture and write about their illustration. The students' writing is based on sound spelling rather than the conventional spelling. In the beginning of Kid Writing, the focus is mainly on letter sound recognition and letter names. After the students can master those skills, they move onto other challenges such as finger spaces in between words, capital and lower case letters, and writing more sentences. The first aspect of the inquiry I wanted to focus on was language development in ESL students.

### **Research based on Experts and Literature**

Children are natural language learners. When second language learners are surrounded by meaningful text and interactions, they acquire language. Most language that is learned is from play with peers (Long, 2004) and meaningful conversation (Dr. Esber, 2005). Meaningful conversation is conversation that is situated in meaningful context. The idea is comprehension. When delivering a message, the message should be understandable but a little over the comprehension level so as to continue to stretch

meaning and to have the children rely on prior language experience and to build on it (Esber, 2005).

“There are four major factors that facilitate the language acquisition process: (1) an atmosphere in which the learner feels secure, safe, and free to experiment with language; (2) an instructional program that provides meaningful language input as a springboard for the creative construction process; (3) comprehensible language input in the form of genuine communication that presents language structures through meaningful social interactions; (4) a content based curriculum that is appropriate to the language levels of the learners and developed to facilitate the acquisition of cognitive academic language skills (State College Area School District Elementary ESL Program, 2004-05).

When children are immersed in this type of meaningful “talk”, language acquisition occurs. However, the key is allowing time for students to develop this second language (Characteristics of Young Learners). According to Noam Chomsky, everyone has something called a LAD (language acquisition device). The LAD allows everyone the innate ability to acquire language naturally (Freeman and Freeman, 1994). The LAD is used when children acquire their native language as well as a second language. When children are immersed in the second language, the LAD allows them to acquire the second language with ease. According to Stephen Krashen, “We acquire when we obtain comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation, when we are presented with interesting messages, and when we understand these messages” (Freeman and Freeman, 1994).

In the Kindergarten classroom, we promote a safe and secure environment for students to take chances in their learning. We try to relate all the activities back to the students or engage them in meaningful discussions. With ESL students especially, as well as the other students, we are constantly celebrating their continual growth and development. The idea of a safe and secure environment also plays into the emotions and

feelings of the ESL student. “Emotions have a great effect on all learning...If an event is related to positive emotions, there is more of a chance for successful patterning to take place” (Characteristics of Young Learners). Dr. Esber talked about the “affective filter” and ESL students. Stephen Krashen discusses that “affective filter” refers to the feelings that a learner has in communicating and being in a new situation (Dr. Esber, 2005).

When learning is unpleasant and painful, students tend to resist learning. When students have anxiety or are placed in a stressful situation, the filter is higher and when the students have low stress or the motivation to learn is high, the filter is low (Characteristics of Young Learners). This is why it is so important to us, in the Kindergarten classroom, to keep learning opportunities and instructional activities playful and stress-free.

### **Wonderings**

Once I learned about how ESL students acquire language, I began to wonder how literacy development plays a part in this language development or how language development plays a part in literacy learning. Because reading and writing are both very large components of literacy, I felt that it was best to focus on aspect of literacy. Kid writing is a huge part of our school week. The students write in their Kid Writing journals three days a week plus they use Kid Writing in other activities. As I mentioned earlier, Kid Writing is when students rely mostly on sound spelling rather than focusing on conventional or “adult” spelling. I was curious to see how vocabulary increases and how that affects writing. I wanted to see if there were any trends in how ESL students begin to write.

## **Inquiry Plan:**

### **Data Collection**

I began my inquiry January 21, 2005. I started by creating observation sheets that allowed me to monitor what each student was doing, saying, and writing at the Kid Writing table, and provided room for any additional reflections. This allowed me to keep track of the progress each student was making. We allow the students to have the opportunity to participate in Kid Writing every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during morning centers. This gives the students ten to twelve minutes of writing in small group settings with the paraprofessional to help guide them. After centers, Mrs. Crow, the paraprofessional, chooses three to five students to share their work at our large group gathering. We have an author's chair to "showcase" the students who share their completed Kid Writing entry. When seated in the author's chair, a student is allowed to present a piece of work (writing) and the students are the audience for the reader. The students as well as the teacher respond with positive feedback when the "author" reads his/her story. According to Martha Combs (2002), "The purpose (of the author's chair) is to celebrate and receive response of completed writing. When children learn to listen and to appreciate another's writing, they are also learning more about how to listen to their own writing." This author's chair time provides a celebration of students' work and therefore gives the students a sense of ownership and pride over their work. It also keeps them motivated to keep moving forward.

I collected data in other ways as well. I conducted a teacher survey of the State College Area School District's Kindergarten staff about their views on Kid Writing and ESL students. However, I received very few surveys back. I gave a short student survey

on their feelings towards Kid Writing to see what they liked or did not like. Some of the students gave very honest answers while most of the students gave me one-word answers or gave answers they thought I wanted to hear. I think this happened because the students had not participated in surveys like this before and were unsure of how I wanted them to respond. I interviewed the ESL teacher, Dr. Esber. She gave me valuable information about what occurs in the ESL classroom as well as a small insight into an ESL student's life. I gathered information on the State College Area School District's ESL Program. In the beginning of the year, Mrs. Spock, my mentor teacher, evaluated two of the ESL students to determine their skill levels on the SCASD Preconventional Stage Writing Standards and/or Emergent Stage Reading Standards. I made copies of their parent-teacher conference sheets. I researched a number of textbooks as well as articles given to me by Dr. Esber. The last thing I collected was samples of the students' Kid Writing Journals. These journal samples begin at the beginning of the year for Kuan-Fu and Jehyun and begin in January for Odile.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of data was an ongoing process for me. As I collected observations in the classroom, every two weeks I would gather my observations and read through them. From these readings and rereadings, I would write down my thoughts and observations in forms of journal writings to help me gather my thoughts and ideas about each student's progress. Once my observations were complete, I gathered the Kid Writing Journals and made copies of them. I separated my data into sections. I had each student's Kid Writing journal paper clipped separately. I then took my observations and separated them by student and ordered them by date. I put all the surveys together and

the last thing I did was put all my journal writings together. I first reread through my personal journal entries to refresh my memory of what I had written. Then I read through my observations and the Kid Writing journals one student at a time. Once I completed that task, I went through the three journals at the same time, paging through them one story at a time looking for similarities in their writing patterns. As I was watching for similarities in their writing patterns I kept a watchful eye out for growth and phonological awareness.

**Claim 1 – There are noticeable similarities in the development of written language in ESL students, such as the important of pictures and phonological awareness.**

### **Evidence**

Each student began their kid writing journals each day with drawings. As Mrs. Crow, our classroom paraprofessional and certified art teacher, put it, “Drawing is universal.” The students loved “drawing” their stories and soon began labeling them. Each of these three students began their journals each day with pictures and labels of their pictures written in yellow highlighter by Mrs. Crow and traced over or copied by the student. As the school year moved on, I noticed that Kuan-Fu and Jehyun, began writing letter sounds for the words in their sentences. For example, in Kuan-Fu’s journal on October 18, 2004 it says “*S O S.*” These letter sounds represent the sentence, “Mrs. Crow’s house.” The same was for Jehyun in his Kid Writing journal. On November 17, 2004 he wrote, “*I m r c n m.*” These letter sounds represent the sentence, “I am (a) rocket on (the) moon.” As their English vocabulary grew, so did their phonological awareness. They began to hear the beginning, middle, and ending sounds of words, some blends, and

began to expand their story ideas. On February 16, 2005 Jehyun wrote, *“I m pleine mi b. E r pleine a ame. Bt mi brr s to go to skol. The nd.”* This translates into, “I am playing (with) my brother. We are playing a game. But my brother has to go to school. The end.” On the same day Kuan-Fu wrote, *“Me and S Sarver o n the tran. Ther r a lt of pepl. We d fn beks ther r a lt of trans bend s.”* This says, “Me and Miss Sarver go on the train. There are a lot of people. We had fun because there are a lot of trains behind us.” I came to the conclusion that Jehyun and Kuan-Fu’s written language development is similar because they both speak a native language, Chinese and Korean, that does not use the English alphabet. Jehyun and Kuan-Fu had to learn the English alphabet along with the letter names and sounds in order to write these sentences. Odile’s written English language development was slightly different and progressed more quickly. I feel that this is because her native language (French) utilizes the English alphabet and so her knowledge of the letter sounds was already there. However, she too progressed in her writing from drawing pictures with labels written in yellow highlighter to writing stories on her own and hearing beginning, middle, and ending sounds. On her first day of Kid Writing on January 28, 2005, Odile wrote “My Family” with the aide of the yellow highlighter. By the end of my observation, Odile had written on February 23, 2005, *“Maos haos. Maos lev n haos. Boud maos. Yalo haos. Boud maos lev n yalo haos.”* This says, “Mouse house. Mouse lives in house. Brown mouse. Yellow house. Brown mouse lives in yellow house.” This tells me that Odile hears the rhyming in mouse and house and thus spells them the same way and only changes the beginning letter sounds.

When working in their Kid Writing journals, the students and the teacher or paraprofessional would say the word together with the child to listen for letter sounds. In

the book Interactive Writing How Language & Literacy come Together, K-2, it says that when working with beginning writers, it is important to say the word slowly to listen for the constituent sounds as well as help connect to phonemic awareness (2000). What I noticed in these journals was that most of the letter sounds the students heard in the beginning were consonant sounds. This is because it is easier to hear and recognize the consonant sounds than the vowel sounds and when they do hear the vowel sounds, it is the long vowel sounds that are easier to hear and identify. This is evident in Kuan-Fu's journal entry on October 27, 2004 when he wrote, "*S o s a s s.*" This says, "Mrs. Crow's house has a lot of windows." As you can see, he hears the long O sound in Crow and the long A sound in the word a. As the year went on, Jehyun and Kuan-Fu began picking up different vowel sounds in their writings. For example, on February 2, 2005 Jehyun wrote, "*Mi me s at the se sore. M brd and me r going bs t sl and ye go bs t the s.*" This translates into, "My mommy is at the grocery store. My brother and me are going back to school and we go back to the house." By saying the words together out loud and slowly, he was able to hear the vowel sounds: long I (even though it was a y), long E, and long O.

In our Kindergarten classroom, we have word posters around the room. Above the Kid Writing station we have high-frequency word posters hanging for the students to see and use. It is important to have these high-frequency words placed where students can utilize them because "knowing high-frequency words move the writing process along because children can write them quickly with little problem solving, leaving more attention for the construction of new words and for composing text" (McCarrier, Pinnell, Fountas, 2000). With high-frequency words, I noticed that these students utilize the

vocabulary around the room to help them spell. In this last entry I wrote about, Jeyhun heard the “g” in the word go and the long “o” sound. He then used the “king of ing” poster in the room to help him complete the word going.

However, with these noticeable similarities between the three ESL students, there was something else that struck me as very interesting. My wondering was that although these three ESL students were acquiring a new language, why do their Kid Writing journals progress in the same manner as native English speaking students’ Kid Writing journals? This led to my second claim.

**Claim 2: The development of the written English language in ESL students develops at a similar pace and way as native English speaking students.**

**Evidence:**

I took a look in the other students’ Kid Writing journals and noticed that some also used the yellow high lighter method. Also, some students started out by simply labeling their pictures without writing any sentences for them. For example, I received a new student in February. He would draw a picture and label it with his name only. His first few Kid Writing journal entries were like that. After practice drawing and labeling his pictures we were able to encourage him to write a sentence to go along with his picture. As the year progressed with all my students, I noticed that some of my native English speaking students’ writing skills reached an early plateau whereas my ESL students’ writing skills were advancing and taking off. Odile started with labeling and as I continue to watch her at Kid Writing her sentences are becoming more elaborate and

beginning to make more sense. I also see that my ESL students are more independent when sounding out words. I will have them tell me the sentence they plan to write and then I will say the word once slowly and they will start writing. Lynne Sanders (PDA) came in to observe on February 9, 2005 and wrote, “You gave excellent prompts for ‘sounding out’ each word but let her write by herself... as you can see she is including many sounds and is showing ‘visual memory’ strength.” I also noticed that Odile, although she has been with our class the shortest amount of time, is the most independent of the three ESL students in her writing. She now draws and begins to write without any prompts or help from an adult in the room. She will say the word out loud to herself and proceed to spell it. This is more advanced than some of the native English speakers who still only hear one or two letters in a word.

I believe that ESL students and native English speaking students, at the Kindergarten level, develop their writing skills at a similar pace because in a sense they are all starting at the same level. Most students in Kindergarten have not yet been exposed to the writing process and ESL students have not yet been exposed to the writing process in English. So we are all starting on the same page. Every student is learning about letters and their shapes, upper and lower case letters, words (letters in clusters), punctuation, finger spaces (spaces between words), and arrangement of text on a page such as left to write and top to bottom (McCarrier, Pinnell, Fountas, 2000). As I mentioned early, Noam Chomsky said that everyone has a LAD (language acquisition device). This gives us “the grammatical competence that includes knowledge of syntax, phonology, and semantics.” No one teaches children these words or their meanings when they are young; these skills come naturally to children with their desire to communicate.

Written by Barbara Law and Mary Eckes, The More-Than-Just-Surviving Handbook: ESL for Every Classroom Teacher says that to learn to write well, EVERY beginning writer needs to be “immersed in writing, a supportive environment, feedback and guidance from interested teachers, and time (2000).”

As a developing teacher myself, I know that we don't just give these opportunities to ESL students but give them to all the students in our classroom because each student is a beginning writer in Kindergarten. Law and Eckes also mentioned that it is important when working with beginning writers, not to wait until they can form sentences to write. Give them the opportunity to write always because everyone has a story to tell. There is logic to ALL errors in writing, not just in ESL students' writing. In Kindergarten we treat all our students the same in Kid Writing. Dr. Esber, the ESL teacher at Easterly Parkway Elementary School, says that “it is important that they are always included. Assume they understand what you are saying. I have a belief that we will share meaning or come to a common understanding.” Because we treat all of our students the same in Kid Writing and provide a comfortable atmosphere, I believe that all of the students in our classroom have a successful experience in writing. According to Stephen Krashen, “we acquire when we obtain comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation, when we are presented with interesting messages, and when we understand these messages.” He also says that written language is a better source for language acquisition than oral language because when children have the opportunity to write about something related to them, it gives them more meaning. With every student, oral or written language needs to be genuine and meaningful to the student in order for the student to further develop their processing of language. The idea of everything is

comprehension. If we can teach all students to understand what they are hearing, saying, and writing then we have achieved our goal. Dr. Esber mentioned to me a theory that was proposed in the 1970s and it said that ESL students should never say what they don't understand, read what they can't say, and write what they can't read, say, or understand. But shouldn't that be true for all speakers of the same language? Dr. Esber also talked about using the Holistic approach when dealing with ESL students. The students are spelling letter by letter and by doing this they are learning letter names, letter sounds, and how to spell and how to write sentences. I feel that this is the best approach for all students because "what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1978).

## **Conclusions:**

### **Future Implications**

As my inquiry project comes to a close there are certain implications for my future practice as a teacher. The students I worked with came from highly educated parents. Most were children of graduate or doctorate students, studying at Penn State University to further their education. These parents have the ability and educational background to work with their children outside of the school setting. I realize that I have been very fortunate in my studies here in the State College Area School District. However, wherever I may get a teaching position, the ESL population may be a lot higher and the parents may not be as educated. So the instruction these students receive at school may be the only instruction they receive. The parents may not be able to help their children because they themselves are still learning the English language. I have been very fortunate to have students who have the desire and motivation to excel and

communicate with their peers. Their writing abilities have soared beyond what I could have hoped for, but without help from home this might not have been possible. Our students take home a family journal where they write once a week to a member of someone in their family and that family member is to write back to that student. If the parent or family member cannot read what the child is writing, how are they able to help them at home? And so it would be my responsibility as the teacher to include parents as much as possible but have realistic expectations for the amount of support they can provide at home for their children. I would have to assume that the only English instruction the children are receiving is during the school day with me. I cannot assume that their English will excel like the students I have had this year, as each child is different and each child learns at a different pace. I need to take that into account and not discourage my future students from wanting to learn.

### **New Wonderings**

Now that I have answered my wonderings, I now wonder how much does the socioeconomic background of the ESL student play a role in the development of the English language. I also wonder if parent educational levels play a part in it as well. I want to know if school is the only place where the student is communicating in English, how much does that slow down the pace of acquiring English? How will this affect my teaching if the students don't understand what I am saying? Is it my sole responsibility to teach these students English as well as the curriculum? Will I have help? How is this going to affect PSSA testing and my job if they don't score well?

## **Conclusion**

I came to these wonderings because of the implications for me as a teacher in the future. These are common concerns that all first year teachers face. After completing this inquiry project, I feel confident that I am well versed from observations and research on the language development of ESL students. This inquiry has taught me about the language development of ESL students as well as the language development in native English speaking students.

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