TEACHING TIP

TEACHING FOR WRITING EXPOSITORY RESPONSES TO NARRATIVE TEXTS

Sunday Cummins ■ *Ruth E. Quiroa*

> I am going to give an example of my mom. My mom works at Burger King and some times she cooks and she burns [her arms] really bad and I feel really sad about it so we put cream to get it good but it doesn't do nothing and she says it stings. That's what I think about César Chavez doing ALL THAT WORK!!!! I think César feels really miserable, uncomfortable, and sad.

In a written response to a section of the book *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* (Krull, 2003), Sonia (all names are pseudonyms), a third-grade student in a classroom for English learners (ELs), shared a main idea from the text and elaborated with a relevant connection to her own life experiences. Her response demonstrated not only comprehension of the story, but also of a particular genre of writing about reading—an expository format. The ability to shift from reading a narrative text structure to writing a response in an expository format requires a strong grasp of the difference between these two discourse styles (Kress, 1994). Thus, if a student comprehends the information in a narrative text, but does not understand how to write a

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response in an expository format, he or she may not be able to adequately reveal textual understanding.

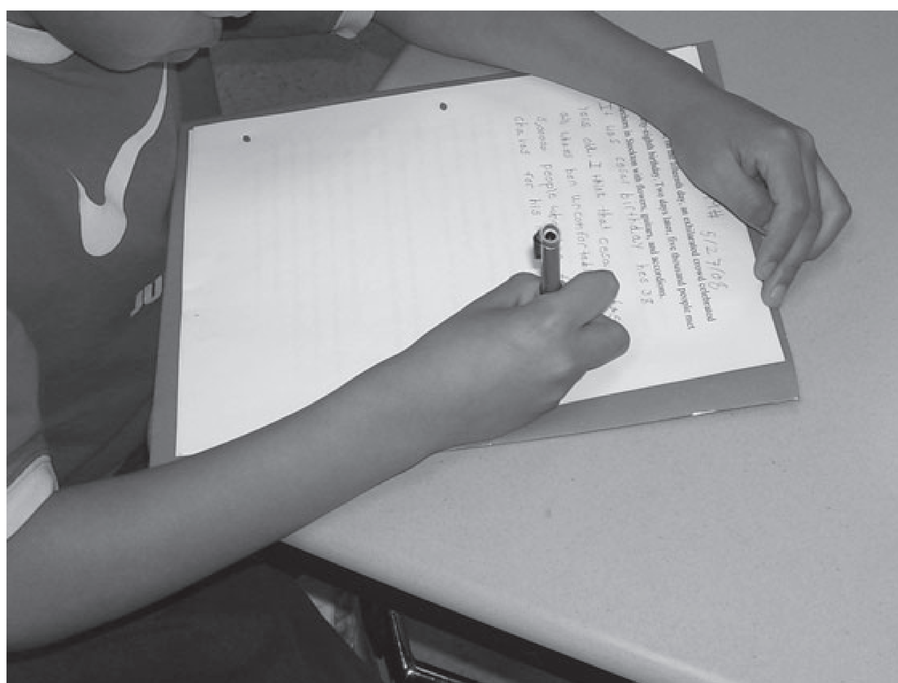
Sonia's written response occurred during a series of lessons following a districtwide reading comprehension assessment administered midyear, designed to prepare students for a state standardized assessment in the spring. It required reading a short story, *Thunderstorm* (Kever, 1999), which adopts a narrative format as a girl describes the way her grandfather provides comfort for her fears during a thunderstorm. Students then responded in writing to the prompt: *How did the girl's feelings about the thunderstorm change throughout the story? Use information from the story and your own ideas to answer the question*. None of the children scored well on this assessment, and a close review of their responses revealed that many constructed narrative summaries, demonstrating comprehension of textual events, which did not address the prompt itself, as evidenced in Veronica's response:

> At frist (first) the girl was scard (scared) of the thunderstorm. Then her grandpa conforms (comforts) her. Then her grandpa sades (says), "I would be raght (right) back." Then he brings a big boll (bowl) of papcorn (popcorn). Fainaley (finally) the girl and her grandpa wach (watch) the rain fall on the garden in ther (their) rocking chare (chair).

This response was fairly typical across the class and revealed an understanding of the story as evidenced in a list of key events, a sense of chronology ("at first," "then," "finally"), and implicit evidence that the character's feelings changed. However, Veronica did not explicitly state *how* the girl's feelings changed, nor did she provide a *list of supporting examples* for such change. The problem was not textual comprehension, but an inadequate understanding of the text structure required to answer the prompt.

This article focuses on how such an issue was addressed through the use of interactive literary discussions and inquiry listening (Martínez-Roldán, 2005) across a range of instructional approaches involving shared, small-group, and independent discussions and writing activities. *Inquiry listening* is defined here as the type of teacher listening that occurs when time and space are allotted to listening to students and "talking less" (p. 30). This can occur during conversations around specific lessons or books and may involve teacher requests for clarification or the use of additional follow-up prompts to student statements to help them make sense of their thinking. It is different from the teacher listening to check solely for comprehension, as it seeks instead to identify the rationale for students' thoughts and how they come to these ideas—all of which may involve cultural, personal, or experiential connections to texts or lessons. In this article, inquiry listening is considered an important way to incorporate formative assessment during literacy instruction and to serve as the basis for future lessons, as well as immediate instructional adjustments to better meet students' needs.

The focal curriculum used with this third-grade class for EL students included visual images, as well as the text *Harvesting Hope*, a Latino/a-themed picture book biography on the civil rights activist César Chávez written in narrative form. This notable text was selected because of its potentially familiar cultural content for the students, as well as its historic and cultural accuracy. *Harvesting Hope* also reveals how Chávez's life and thinking changed in significant ways; dialogue around the themes in this text has the potential to nurture students' conceptual understanding of the term *change*—commonly found in prompts that require an expository response to a narrative text. The goal was to scaffold instruction so that students would begin to first verbalize "big ideas" and then provide rationale(s) for their thinking



based on evidence in images, text, and their own world and intertextual understandings.

Following initial explicit instruction on the structure of an expository response, lessons designed to foster conceptual understanding of the elements of this type of response were implemented based on the students' needs. Specific instructional approaches that served as the vehicles for interactive discussions, while also providing opportunities for formative assessment, included (a) frontloading with visual images, and (b) modeling through think-alouds about teacher–student writing samples.

Frontloading With Photographs

Typically, *frontloading* occurs when a teacher implements a prereading experience that exposes and clarifies important information in a text such as vocabulary (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2009), content area knowledge (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004), or the language structure of a text (Kristo & Bamford, 2004). Frontloading can make the book more accessible to the reader, including ELs (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). In the focal classroom, frontloading was used at the start of the lesson series to prepare students with a conceptual understanding of the expository text structure they were expected to *write* (versus read), which included a position statement with supporting evidence from the text. Photographs culled from periodicals served as instructional tools in an effort to reduce the cognitive load of the information presented for the ELs.

These photographs all revealed a possible story and were accompanied by a sticky note with a position statement and the questions "Do you agree or disagree?" and "What is your evidence?" For example, one photograph depicted an elderly woman dressed in a fancy white dress holding onto the arm of an older man in a suit with a statement that read: "This man and woman are getting married." All of the students stated that they thought the couple was getting married and shared details from the picture as evidence. As the students thought aloud, Ruth typed their comments into a PowerPoint projected on a screen for ease of viewing and rereading. Examples of the students' evidence statements included: "The woman and the man are dressed up"; "They have flowers;" and "There is a piano and there are people sitting behind them."

These comments supported students' inferences that the couple was getting married, because they are all details common for many weddings in the United States and other countries. However, careful listening during the lesson made Ruth wonder about the students' thinking in relationship to the responses provided. In response, she created follow-up questions "on the spot," so as to better understand their thoughts and mine for the rationale behind their thinking. For example, when Renato said, "It's a wedding dress," he was asked, "How do you know?" Another student, Veronica, replied, "Because it is white."

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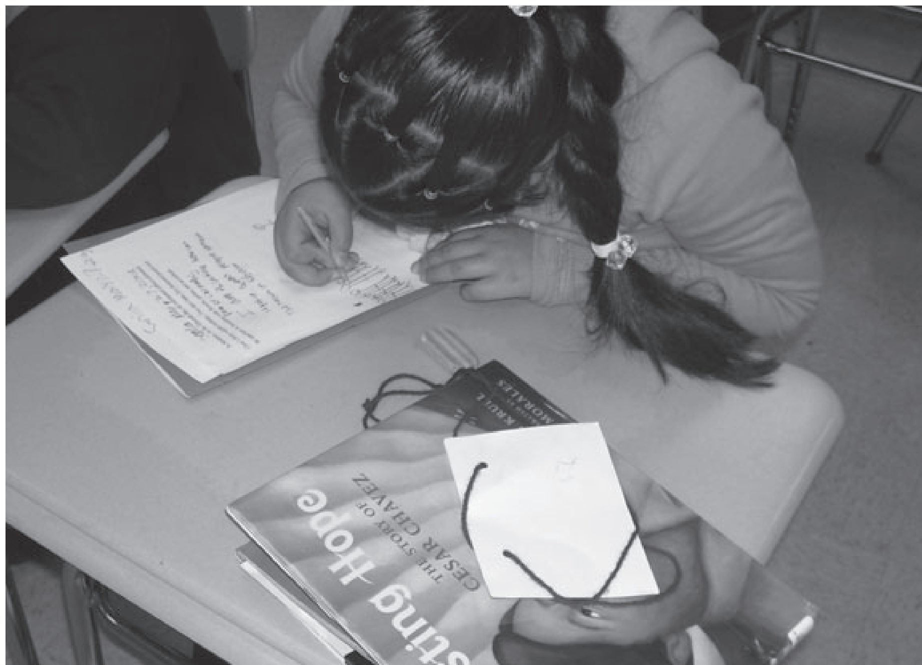

During this same discussion, Ruth also realized the need to nudge for deeper thinking about the implication(s) of picture details. As a result, she engaged students in an unplanned think-aloud, stating: "I think the woman is older than the man, that she might be his mother because she has wrinkles, an older face, and is very bent over. The man is not that old, as he is not bent over and has few wrinkles." She shared that she believed the evidence in the picture was inconclusive about whether the event in the image was actually a wedding, and if so, who was really getting married. When a second picture was provided for analysis, there was a noticeable shift in some of the students' comments as they focused in on smaller details to support their conclusions.

After the minilesson, students met in small groups to discuss additional photos in this manner and collaboratively wrote their positions with related evidence, which they later reported back to the class. The students engaged in lively conversations and even persuasive debates with their peers, demonstrating an awareness of the smaller details in pictures that supported their conclusions. One group's discussion focused on a picture of a snake and a mouse with the accompanying statement, "The snake is attacking the mouse." Sonia adopted a position and supported it by saying "I agree because the snake is opening his mouth to eat the mouse." Similarly, Marcelo stated, "The snake is going to eat the mouse because the snake already ate the mouse's leg and his (the mouse's) eyes are closed and the mouse is falling down."

Thinking Aloud About Writing Samples

Once students were able to create clear position statements with related evidence for photos, lessons shifted to focus on picture books, namely, *Harvesting Hope*. Here the goal was that students would write extended expository responses supported by evidence, and, more important, engage in reflection and self-evaluation of their writing (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007) so that they would elaborate on their responses. Students practiced writing textual responses to portions of *Harvesting Hope* read aloud by a researcher teacher or read with partners or independently.

Current student written work was used with permission to prompt discussions about how each revealed main ideas and supporting evidence. This was projected on a screen to facilitate discussion of strengths in the written piece, as well as the ways the student authors communicated thoughts about the focal text. During the guided portion of such lessons, teacher think-alouds were used to make the expository text structure transparent while also creating a nurturing, safe environment. Children also participated in shared think-alouds about how these writing samples provided textual evidence to support the ideas expressed.

Ongoing analysis of student talk and written products revealed that most children were now able to express positions or interpretations with textual evidence as support. However, they still needed additional assistance in learning how to elaborate their ideas and subsequent lessons focused on the ways writers elaborate thinking. For example, Sunday read aloud from a transparency of Caterina's response on the overhead:

> He feels uncomfortable about his new Home. My first evedince (evidence) is that he had to go to the river to get water. Because their house didn't have water. My second evedince (evidence) is that they had to go to different place to get food. Because the dil't (didn't) hade (have) food.

Here, Caterina argued that César Chavez felt "uncomfortable" when his family began working on other people's farms and provided simple "evidence" without elaboration.

Sunday then thought aloud about Caterina's use of the word "uncomfortable" and how it revealed her interpretation of the text, pointing out the details that support this term: "their house didn't have water" and "they had to go to a different place to get food." Next, students were asked to explain why such details supported the idea of "uncomfortable." The students responded with silence, until the classroom teacher, Ana, asked how many had a grandmother in Mexico without running water. Several hands shot up in the air and Manuel said, "My grandmother has to tote water into her house and she washes clothes with a washboard." Another student indicated that his grandmother washed clothes in a river.

Sunday took advantage of the students' ideas and solicited responses to extend Caterina's writing, which were used to collaboratively compose the following entry:

> This would be miserable because he had to go get water from the river and this would be hard. It is out of the way. I would be sad. I WOULD THINK THIS IS AWFUL! HORRIBLE! There's no way I would drink river water.

After this minilesson, students were asked to write independent responses to the next part of the text, which described the conditions of the migrant workers, while Ana and Sunday circulated the room, providing one-on-one conferences as needed. These written samples revealed that the students made attempts to elaborate their ideas, as evidenced in Marcelo's response:

> Cesar is uncuftirblel (uncomfortable) because he is homesickness. Cesar has to be a fierce worker. Cesar broke his skin. Cesars' ayes (eyes) are stiging (stinging) because (of) grapvines (grapevines) sprayed with bug killing chemecals (chemicals). He had to do farm chores and it wasn't fen (fun). Cesar felt like he was a slave.

Here Marcelo described César's feelings, while also providing details from the text. In the last sentence, he elaborated on his interpretation with a simile "like he was a slave" to describe César's feelings about the difficulties he suffered.

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Scaffolding to Encourage Deeper Level Thinking

There is a great deal of focus in the field of literacy on students' comprehension of texts read, which is often assessed through writing. However, if children do not understand the structural facets of the genre in which they are to write a response, particularly if it is different from the story read, their ability to communicate understanding from the text may break down. This is especially

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- "Models for Using Nonfiction in the Primary Grades" by Rosemary G. Palmer, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2005

true when ELs read narrative text structures and must then write expository responses to demonstrate comprehension. The use of interactive discussions, inquiry listening to hone future instruction, and higher level follow-up prompts during teacher and shared think-alouds of photos and picture books with potentially familiar cultural content can provide important scaffolding to nudge students to think at a deeper level, as well as to better understand how to write expository responses with supporting details and elaboration to narrative texts.

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