Fostering Academic Language and Literacy in the Primary Classroom—The Power of Input Charts

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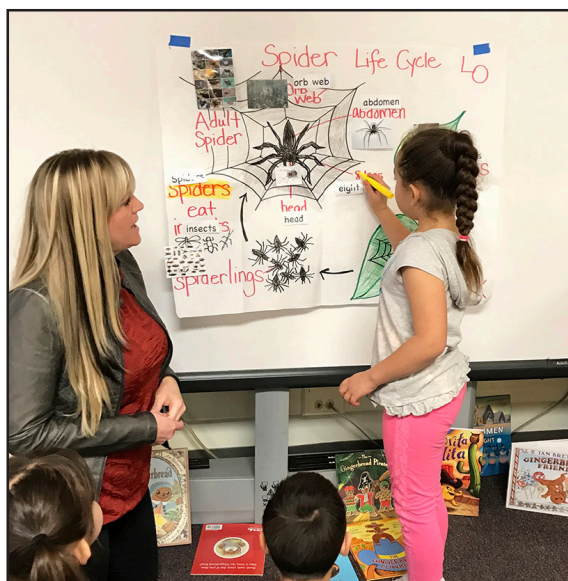
In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela (1995) poignantly writes, "Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate their poetry, or savor their songs" (p. 84).

Think about that ... Language enables us to share our thoughts, our learning, our ideas with other people. Language enables us to achieve academic success, envision scenes created through words, and appreciate music. Language affords us communication and allows us to appreciate the cultures of the world. Language is essential to survival—not just in academia, but in life.

We, Jamie and Lisa, teach at Janet Kahn School of Integrated Arts. One hundred percent of our students qualify for free lunch. The overall socioeconomic status of our school is incredibly low. The majority of our families are young, struggling, and lacking stability. We have the highest transient rate in the Albuquerque Public Schools district. Our students come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including immigrants from Mexico and refugees from Africa and the Middle East. These students bring Spanish, Kirundi, Swahili, Pashto, and Arabic to our campus. We also have families continuing to speak and share home languages like Navajo, Vietnamese, and Cantonese with their children. Our families create the cultural mosaic we have come to love at our school. When students enter our doors, language exists in their immediate world, but it rarely translates to the school environment.

In fact, this is true of our English-speaking students as well. At school, we ask students to learn and express themselves in English. But the truth is we expect them to understand and express themselves with Academic English. Using academic language is far different from simply speaking and writing. Sadly,

A student highlights academic vocabulary on a Pictorial Input Chart.

the tendency is to forego academic language and speak with simple vocabulary as students are learning. When we use intentional strategies, the need to simplify language becomes obsolete as we offer all students entry points for learning and using academic language.

OCDE Project GLAD® (Guided Language Acquisition Design) provides the intentional strategies needed to foster rich, oral academic language, which becomes the platform for writing production. Academic language is not reserved for older, more experienced students; academic language can be taught in the primary grades—even kindergarten! We will walk you through our experience. This marks our fourth year practicing Project GLAD® in our classrooms. It takes time to develop a language-rich environment, but it can begin with one component area focused on comprehensible input.

Input Charts serve as the foundation for direct instruction around content and language learning. There are three major types of Input Charts: pictorial, narrative, and comparative. Each of these charts has its own specific purpose. However, these graphic organizers are all designed to provide comprehensible input for students and provide a platform to which background knowledge can be attached. They combine written labels and concepts with pictures and drawings.

In order to internalize concepts, students must have a way of organizing information in their brains. Such organization begins by tapping into background knowledge, which consists of all the feelings, emotions, memories, and experiences which are already housed in our brains. Incredibly, background knowledge transcends language and can be triggered by drawings, photographs, and realia. Background knowledge provides hooks to hold new knowledge and deepens understanding as we make personal connections.

When beginning a unit, a key first step is to activate the background knowledge of all students. This activation can be done through an Observation Chart by having students examine a variety of photographs or realia and discuss what they notice. What connections do they have to the photographs? These critical oral discussions create little hooks which students can use to connect to new content knowledge.

Pictorial Input Charts provide an organized method of documenting background knowledge and tying it to new knowledge. For instance, one of our kindergarten units is titled "All About Me." This unit includes a family project where students create a Pictorial Input Chart about themselves. At the center of the chart the students draw a self portrait. Then, in four quadrants, students describe themselves physically, list their likes, list their dislikes, and present interesting facts. This personal Input Chart helps students see how the graphic organizer helps them connect to and access knowledge.
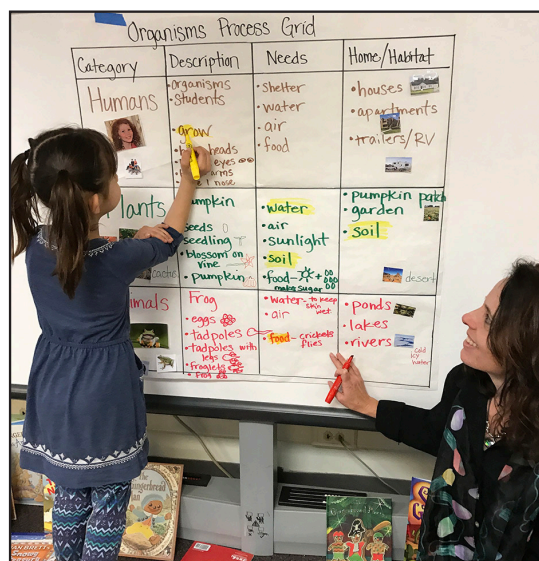
Input Charts can be used to house basic information for an entire unit, like a Comparative Input Chart which isolates and compares specific concepts. For example, first grade used a Comparative Input Chart to introduce concepts of the day and night sky and how they are affected by the tilt and the orbit of Earth. Input Charts can also be used to focus on more specific content. During our kindergarten unit on symbols, we used specific Input Charts to teach one of the symbols to small groups of students who became experts on the symbol and shared their knowledge with

On a Process Grid, students take turns highlighting words they think they'll use in their writing.

peers. There were Input Charts with specific vocabulary for the New Mexico state flag, roadrunner, chile plant, and yucca. Using Pictorial Input Charts in this way allows students to more efficiently learn targeted vocabulary and then provides students a scaffold in order to teach the same vocabulary to their peers.

An additional way Input Charts make content come alive is through stories. Narrative Input charts can be created for both fiction and nonfiction stories. The purpose of the Narrative Input Chart is to revisit and

retell stories with key concepts and vocabulary. The background image often gives a general sense of the story being retold. The story can be retold with actual pictures and phrases from the book, or it can be varied. For example, a story can be retold with photographs and labels which connect to the story and the vocabulary, if actual pages from the book are inadequate. Connecting a book to the content offers students yet one more way to connect with the content through a different lens. With each Input Chart, students review the information and practice the vocabulary in whole group, small groups, and in pairs. The Input Charts become the foundation of the content and will serve as a resource when students begin to write independently and in groups.

Once information becomes classroom or shared knowledge, students need time to further process and explore. They are provided another opportunity to process and deepen their understanding through small interactive groups, such as Expert Groups. This Project GLAD® strategy allows students to become the experts on a given topic. With this transfer of responsibility, students gain increased ownership of the content and their own learning. During Expert Groups, teams negotiate meaning and practice the use of academic language. Students rehearse speaking and listening skills in a structure that allows them to share their knowledge. In this way, processing of new learning is shared, content connections are bolstered, and peer support is continuously provided. This final oral rehearsal is the springboard for beginning writing.

Throughout a unit taught during the second trimester, "New Mexico and United States Symbols," students practice comparing and contrasting the two categories. In Expert Groups, emergent readers grapple with grade-level text as they read to identify community connections, physical descriptions, and important facts for each symbol. Beginning writers learn to highlight and record key details. Then, students return to their teams to teach the information, further internalizing the material.

Using the Input Charts as a reference, student learning can then be recorded in the form of a Process Grid. This Project GLAD® strategy is a collaborative bridge from oral to written language. After working together, student groups report out the content details. The teacher acts as a scribe, using the students' exact phrasing so students can observe how their words become text. An important part of this process is orally reading back the generated text, reinforcing the concept of oral language transferred to written language. Working in collaborative groups lowers the students' affective filters while deepening content understanding and allowing for practice and rehearsal of academic language. The Process Grid allows students to drive the learning, while providing the necessary scaffolds and modeling for teachers to lead beginning writers toward independence. The Process Grid is displayed in the classroom as a resource for future writing.

Cooperative Strip Paragraph

Students are now ready to begin the process of cooperative writing. A premise central to Project GLAD® teaching and learning strategies is to provide plenty of time for students to review material and practice the information orally before moving on to more complex tasks like writing. For this reason, the Cooperative Strip Paragraph begins with an oral review of information. The information is then transferred to writing on sentence strips. In early kindergarten, this may be done by students dictating their ideas to the teacher and the teacher scribing. As the year goes on, this scaffold can be released and students can write sentences cooperatively in groups.

The Cooperative Strip Paragraph is an opportunity to teach students how to organize and edit information. When facilitating the editing process, we model how to revise and rewrite complete sentences. Students, in turn, learn to offer and accept positive critique from their peers. During these sessions, we reinforce how to connect phonemes and letters to produce words while constructing complete thoughts and paying attention to the use of correct grammar, spelling, and writing

conventions. Students then read and reread the revised paragraph together and practice individually. This continual practice allows students to focus on fluency and prosody.
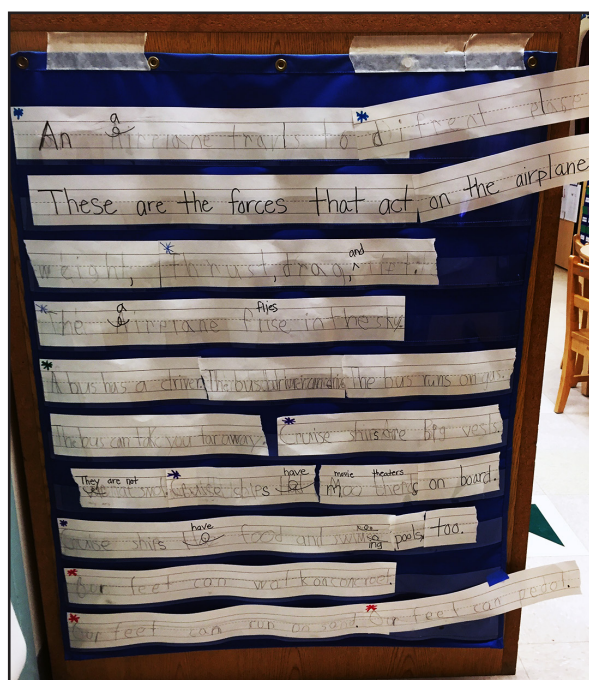
Our culminating unit in kindergarten, "Traveling to Africa," provided students the opportunity to compare and contrast several modes of transportation: walking, cruise ships, airplanes, steam engines, and buses. In writing their Modes of Transportation Cooperative Strip Paragraph, students experienced the full scope of the writing process. Expert Groups collaboratively wrote two sentences each, which became the rough draft. Kindergartners also edited their own work and that of their peers while collaboratively editing the Cooperative Strip Paragraph. Throughout these sessions, students rehearsed how to offer and accept positive, specific, and kind feedback. When the students decided their paragraph was complete, we published their writing in a class newsletter which was sent home to each family. In addition, the students celebrated their learning by reading their paragraphs to three different teachers. Each listener signed the student's paragraph. Students were then rewarded with a reading completion certificate.

Guided Language Acquisition Design provides educators with the instructional strategies necessary to build academic language and literacy for ALL students, especially English language learners. Project GLAD® strategies and protocols have allowed us to foster language acquisition and academic literacy within our classrooms while valuing each student's voice and identity. As we have employed these strategies, we have watched our students blossom into confident readers and writers who are proud of the cultures and heritages they bring to the classroom community. To watch this transition over the course of each year has been one of our greatest joys.

Reference

Mandela, N. (1995). *Long Walk to Freedom.* New York City: Bay Back Books.