

## Summer Institute transforms teacher's classroom

by Marilyn Stubblebine

**T**alk about a light bulb going on! Listening to TC Chris Condon's demonstration last spring at a GVWP pre-institute workshop, I was a grateful recipient of his expertise on developing content. I was rapt in thought as I listened and experienced his inquiry-driven best writing practice. Aha! By using more questioning activities, I could provide needed scaffolding for English Language Learners and support additional time for reflection and interaction for all students to write descriptive details.

One revision activity Chris had us do involved partners taking turns listening carefully to one another as one describes a picture and the other writes questions on post-its about what they want to know more about. Yes! I would do that activity.

That's what I needed: a new way to spark students' writing and get them reflecting and following one thought to another and another to get those rich, meaningful personal experiences down on paper.

Brainstorming, webbing, beginning-middle-end illustrations, and group talk in the pre-writing stage weren't helping most of my students to produce final writing with voice. They were prone to the "I went-came home-went to bed syndrome."

Excited and motivated by Chris' demonstration, I began to see how ELL student writers would benefit from the increased structure, without it being a frame to fill in the blanks. I felt they could all write more thoughtful and interesting details to master the standard of including more simple facts and details. What I had to do was give them the means to do so.

However, having experienced the

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difficulty of having third graders add sentences to their drafts, I thought the questioning activity would work better in the pre-writing stage of the writing process. Luckily, there were a few more weeks of school left, and the required writing assessments were done. I went dashing off to present a new way of teaching the writing process in search of detailed

content. Yes!

Along with the idea of more inquiry-driven activities in which I encouraged students to think of mostly open-ended questions--trying to eliminate the yes/no answers a rush of other ideas developed as we went along.

We started gathering together to discuss vocabulary-- sometimes that was all we had time to do. The theme vocabulary words were on handwritten cards in a pocket chart. In addition, students were encouraged to add words to the pocket chart. They wrote the word, and I checked the spelling. Then the new word was available for any student to take to his or her desk to use when writing.

In our gatherings, we discussed: *How would you use that word in your writing?* This time in which students shared ideas and modeled using vocabulary in sentences turned out to be an important addend. Students were able to listen to and learn from their fellow students. EL learners were guided and thus supported by their peers and easy access to new vocabulary in the pocket chart.

This interaction made evident what goes on in a writer's mind as the process reveals a story. I can't say I saw it, but I believe a lot of

*continued on page 4*

# Teacher gains experience

by Amy Johnson

Just eight months ago, my husband and I were standing in a Ukrainian court, trying to explain to a judge exactly how we planned to help our two sons learn English and do well in English-speaking schools, especially considering the fact that the boys would be “older adoptees.”

I think I stammered something about “teaching E.S.L. all the time,” while thinking of California’s diversity. I don’t think I could have known just how much I would really have to learn.

We were granted the adoption. The boys are wonderful 11-year olds who were best friends in the orphanage. They also happen to be very fluent Russian speakers, with no English background. Soon enough, my knowledge of teaching English Learners was taken to a whole new level.

Perhaps every teacher in California can blurt out phrases like “scaffolding,” or “comprehensible input,” or “repetition in context.” We all know about T.P.R., picture and context clues, and “the Language Experience.” It’s something else to be standing in an Amsterdam airport, trying to “act out,” or draw pictures to explain exactly why your children should not go with strangers just because they speak Russian.

However, this was just the beginning of our adventure.

On one, very basic level, learning language begins as a labeling game. We bought a label gun and went nuts. Everything has a name, so we put labels on everything from the refrigerator to the computer to the television to the bookshelf. If it was a person, place, or thing, it got a label.

We soon realized that actions could be labeled as well by finding pictures of the actions. Another invaluable resource has been our digital camera. The boys liked to showoff for the camera. Then, I could upload the photos to make pages for their “picture dictionary.”

Of course another battle involved trying to explain English’s highly convoluted sound-spelling system. The labels didn’t do much good for kids who didn’t know our letter-

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system or even a hint at which sounds went with those letters. We tried not to panic when we realized the 20+ sounds that the letter “a,” alone could represent.

So our first main lessons were to teach phonics and label everything. Were we done yet? Of course not!

My boys brought home their “homework,” during the first weeks of school, and I almost fainted. They are enrolled in a regular, sixth-grade, “sheltered” English program... but, I’m not sure there’s much real shelter there, for them.

At first I balked at the volume and complexity of some of their work; but, eventually, I just rolled up my sleeves and got to work.

Their first spelling lists included: plunge, wreck, bomb, pledge, prompt, brass... not exactly words that new citizens might need, especially when compared with my idea words like bathroom, hungry, emergency, help and pain. However, I soon began to see that any words could simply be vehicles for studying the ways that English combines sounds and symbols to produce words and convey meaning. We worked very hard at trying to spell all of the words correctly... but a “D,” was starting to look like a magnificent grade!

The boys’ teacher suggested narrowing the list down to just 10 words. He wanted to pick 10 words that would help their vocabulary development for the various texts. I wanted to pick words that were phonemically consistent.

However, the problem solved itself at the last minute, as my sons’ eyes glazed over and a certain, sure recalcitrance seemed to set-in. I dumped the lists of repetitions and started over again. Instead, I created a game in an effort to make it fun.

I wrote their spelling words out, one at a time, on sentence-strips. Then, right in front of them, I cut the words into “chunks.” Mostly, the chunks were phonemic chunks (like: ch + ai + r for *chair*). At other times, however, it was useful to break the words by syllables (cup + cake) or to isolate prefixes or suffixes.

The game began with constructing one spelling word, after watching me “chunk” it. When this was mastered, a second word would be added. Soon the stack of sound-chunks was bigger and more complicated.

Next, the boys would rearrange the chunk-cards into two English

# teaching English at home

words. With practice, and every next week's list practice began on the previous Friday night, the boys could build their whole list of 20 words. For their teacher, spelling test time came to look like a regular testing time, except there were two Ukrainians in opposite corners working their puzzles. Early on, spelling has meant "building English words." In time, we will add "meaning making," to the jobs associated with spelling.

And so what about "meaning making?" It seems easy enough to take foreign-born students and help them "transfer" their knowledge from one language into another language... until you actually try it.

Social Studies, honestly speaking, was a nightmare. The children were studying "landforms." "Easy enough!" I thought I'd just pop the words into an on-line translator and "poof" the boys would be able to label landforms. Right? Of course not.

On closer inspection, I found that the words "gulf" and "bay" were given the same exact translation. Maybe the Russian-language doesn't have two different words for these very similar concepts. Worse than that... what if my sons did not know the content of the lesson in any language?

I began to ask myself what is the difference between a "gulf" and a "bay"? Really, are they synonyms?

The boys' teacher gave a list of definitions. According to that list:

**bay** = a body of water that is part of a sea or the ocean and is partly enclosed by land.

**gulf** = a large area of ocean that is partly surrounded by land.

So, that's all better, right? Actually, I did not see the problem

until after I had fed the list definitions through the translator and received the Russian-equivalent of the definition. I had the boys practice writing out the definitions, repeatedly. I thought we were ready. When the test came up, they failed again. What went wrong? This time, I noticed that the two definitions are nearly synonymous, as well. Besides, how would the boys match a word with its definition in English, if they'd only

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practiced seeing the list in Russian? I drug myself pitifully back to the drawing board.

This time, we made flash cards. We connected words and definitions with pictures. The boys had to look at the picture and figure out the words and definitions that would match. At first, we had to practice in Russian. Once the boys got good at it, we carefully picked through the definitions, in search of "sign-post" words that would lend meaning to so much print. Here's another look

at those definitions:

**bay** = A body of water that is part of a sea or the ocean and is partly *enclosed* by land.

**gulf** = a *large* area of ocean that is partly surrounded by land.

With these two words, I have picked these sign-post words. A **BAY** is "enclosed," which means the land "closes-in" the water like we *close* a ziplock baggie. A gulf may not *close* the water in, but just "surround" or go *around* it. A **GULF**, by contrast, is *large*. So, a bay might not be *large*. I would give the boys a word, and they would have to "act-out" the sign-post words. I hope I never forget seeing my sons "make a bay" with their fingers (small, enclosed) or "be the gulf" with their arms (large, not closed). I sent them back to class for another test... and this time? They passed! We'd done it!

What does all of this have to do with our students? Here are a few insights I think I've gleaned:

1) English is a very difficult language.

2) Don't assume students know words or meanings just because they can talk well on the playground. They may know some words in their language but not ours. They may not have a word in their language for what we are talking about.

3) A "scaffold" may mean "something you hang someone from." By this I mean, first language support can help but it can also hurt. Each language needs its own context and customs. These may not be transferable.

4) Don't make assumptions about a person's intelligence based on their production level in English. By this I mean, I have found myself thinking, "my sons talk like toddlers!" I have

*continued on page 6*

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reflection takes place when they gather all together and discuss their writing among themselves.

The post-it questioning activity using the pictures of the beginning, middle, and end of the story generated more details. However, I felt they all required a bit more scaffolding to structure their thoughts and reflect on “what else?” before they threw themselves into their drafts. I *really* wanted to see more descriptive content! So...I made a pre-draft organizer with questions specifically written to develop more details and more thought about their writing *such as what else was special?*. The EL learners benefited from the increased time to organize their thoughts and frame them in sentences with the help of connecting words and new vocabulary. I was seeing more content.

In rallying their support to try new

ideas to become better writers and myself a better teacher of writing, I collected their comments as we went step-by-step through the writing process. The students not only responded with more content but also with answers to questions asking why they liked this writing and what they learned.

*It helps me write better my writing.*

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*I learned that if we go step by step we get to make better stories.*

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*I think this writing was the best writing ever and I think I am getting used to writing paragraphs.*

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*I learned how to give my partner better suggestions I learned by going step by step is so much better.*

How often have I modeled what I thought would be sufficiently laid-out steps only to have the students’ work tell me that I didn’t do enough.

I learned that by extending the pre-writing stage with inquiry-driven activities and proceeding step-by-step, students benefited from the expanded time to think, converse with peers, listen, question, and learn from one another.

This extra scaffolding bolstered their confidence, increased their awareness of the concept of writing “details” and allowed for more language to emerge.

One of my new students this year did a great job on his pre-draft organizer with lots of visual details about a trip to China. Upon finishing his draft, he happily held it out to me with a big smile on his face. His draft listed all the names of skateboarding maneuvers he could proudly do. Just when you think you got an answer...

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*Marilyn Stubblebine teaches at Roosevelt Elementary School in Stockton. She was an SI Fellow in 2005.*

# The “Tipping Point” in Literacy Instruction

by **Stephanie Paterson**

**More than particular types of writing—there are, after all, so many, and the world is changing too quickly to allow us to predict accurately what genres our students will need five or ten years hence—the most important lesson for student writes to learn is that genres are socially real and... they should learn to notice genres, to make sense of genres, even to renovate genres.**

**—Richard M. Coe, “Teaching Genre as Process”**

**W**hat’s hot? Genre theory.

Last spring ’05, TCs Tina Ichord-Johansson, Jose Aldaco, Theresa

Gill, Gloria Puiser, Pretta Condon, Tina Bell, Sally Hale, and Mary Asgill participated in a fifteen-hour Book Study co-led by Chris Condon and Stephanie Paterson, funded by an EL Minigrant from NWP. One exciting follow-up on this group’s reading research in genre theory was to host the October ELL Symposium at Modesto Junior College. The “Best Practices in EL Writing and Literacy” was attended by 24 elementary and secondary teachers. Four sessions were offered by TCs: Tina Bell—*Character Driven Stories*; Brandy De Alba—*Scaffolding the Story Writing Process*; Tina Ichord Johansson—*Scaffolding Narrative Writing*; Marilyn Stubblebine—*Step by Step*

*Through Prewriting: Inquiry-driven Scaffolding Approaches to Develop Content.* Also, inspired by many of the genre-based discussions and applications to the classroom, this spring ‘06, Stephanie Paterson will offer a Special Topics in Composition course at CSU, Stanislaus called “What’s Genre Got to Do With It?” This course coincides with the S ‘06, edition of *California English* on the topic of “Genre Studies.” The aims of the course are to explore many of the same questions raised in this issue: *What understanding of genres do students bring with them? Are there genres of the education community that disenfranchise or marginalize* *continued on page 6*

# Evaluation proves success of YW Camp for EL students

**Young Writers Camp for English Language Learners: Summer 2005**

**Great Valley Writing Project – Migrant Education**

**Riverbank Unified School District and Waterford Unified School District**

by Chris Condon

Working in collaboration with Migrant Education, Riverbank Unified School District, and Waterford Unified School District in Central California, the Great Valley Writing Project (GVWP) conducted two 10-day-long Young Writers Camps for 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Learners (ELLs) in summer of 2005. The camps were led by GVWP Teacher Consultants and one district teacher. Additional oversight and coordination was provided by the GVWP English Language Learner Coordinator. With English fluency levels ranging from Beginning to Intermediate,

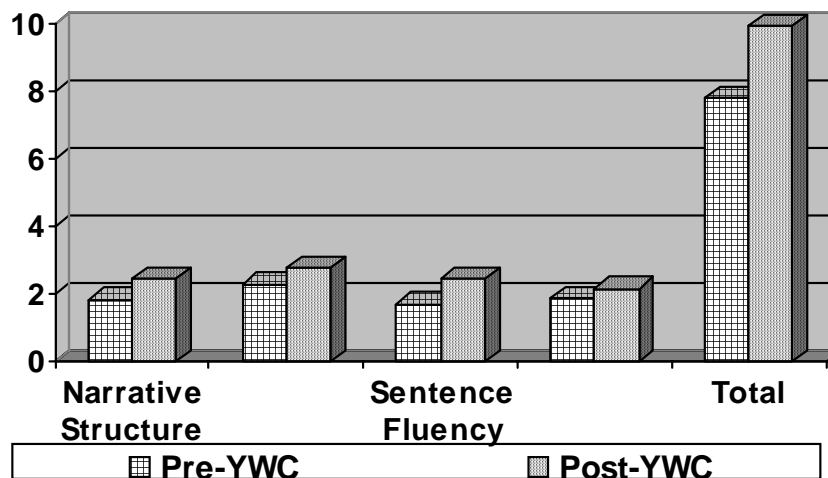
some students were specifically invited to participate in the camp, while others were enrolled directly from a district summer school class for ELLs. The goals for each Young Writers Camp were as follows: (a) provide students with an engaging learning environment focused on writing and literacy, (b) improve student performance in several specific skill areas of narrative writing, and (c) enhance student self-perception of motivation and self-efficacy as writers. A pre- and post-camp writing assessment was used to measure results.

Throughout the camps' varied learning activities, Teacher Consultants sought to integrate best practices in EL writing and literacy instruction. Intensive, content-focused student-to-teacher and student-to-student dialogue was particularly emphasized. Specific strategies often reflected an instructional approach termed genre-based pedagogy, where a specific genre (in this case, sub-type of narrative) is selected, a student-centered context for the genre is

introduced, a model of the genre sub-type is analyzed, a sample is jointly constructed with the students, and finally an independent draft is written by the students.

An overview of results for the 2005 pre- and post-camp writing assessment is briefly summarized below. With a sample of 33 students (N=33), the average individual student score increased from 7.79 to 9.89, for a total improvement of 2.1 points (based on mean of total score: 4 domains, 4-point rubric, 16 possible points). The bar chart below displays average improved scores for each domain (N=33: Narrative Structure (+.60), Word Choice (+.49), Sentence Fluency (+.73), Conventions (+.29), and Total (+2.1).

Overall, this evaluation indicates that the GVWP 2005 Young Writers Camp for English Language Learners resulted in significant improvement in student scores. Writing skills showed growth across all measured domains, especially in narrative structure, sentence fluency, and word choice.



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to remind myself: they should. They've only been here for eight months! They may seem perfectly intelligent in their home language. At school, this goes for parents as well as their children!

5) Your lesson isn't "taught" until everybody "gets it."

Deep inside me, there are notions brewing about how people acquire English or any language proficiency.

It seems that everything we learn has an element of language learning that goes with it.

I worry about my students gaining skills in English but becoming unable to talk to their families on any deep level. I worry about students learning superficial English, without fine-tuning that knowledge.

More than anything, I can clearly see how kids struggle for meaning

against insurmountable odds. It's nothing short of a miracle that anyone can ever talk to anyone else. However, it IS what we strive for... and, oddly enough, communication seems to happen all the time, despite the odds against it.

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*Amy Johnson, Summer Institute 2002, currently teachers at Lakewood Elementary School in Lodi.*

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*certain students? What is the relationship between spoken and written genres, between written and visual genres?* Students and teachers will discover how an understanding of genres, both school-based and others, can raise student achievement. How are you working to increase students'

awareness of and knowledge about the role that text genres can play in improving students' reading comprehension and composition abilities?

If you're interested in receiving a bibliography of genre texts, please contact Stephanie Paterson at spaterson@csustan.edu.

**"The Tipping Point is that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire."**

**Malcolm Gladwell**

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*Stephanie Paterson, Co-Director of Great Valley Writing Project, leads teacher inquiry groups for TCs.*

## 2006 Summer Fellows

- **Catherine Abernathy**  
Neil Hafley Elementary School
- **Robin Alexander**  
Brockman Elementary School
- **Janet Arzamendi**  
Sequoia Elementary School
- **Claire Bristow-Mezzapesa**  
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- **Christina Dimas**  
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- **Sue Duff**  
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Delta Charter School
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- **Alejandra Ledesma**  
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Louis Bohn Elementary School
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West High School
- **Evie Freeman**  
Delta Charter School
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Field of Dreams School
- **Juliet Wahleithner**  
Tokay High School

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- Coaches**
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