Spelling as Social Justice:
Empowering Students Learning English as a New Language Through Explicit Spelling Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Teaching spelling is an act of social justice, as spelling is a gatekeeper to proficient academic composition. Writing skills are essential, not only for college and career, but for full participation in our democracy. Many ELLs in the Boston Public Schools are not receiving explicit ESL instruction, including instruction in spelling. Through instruction that follows a systematic scope and sequence of metalinguistic understanding of the English spelling polysystem, embedded in culturally responsive YA literature, ELLs become more expressive in their writing and more empowered with linguistic control. With this instruction, language becomes a tool to utilize for expression rather than a source of frustration and oppression. The implication is that the Boston Public Schools should consider its “embedded” ESL model - simply placing students in a class with an ESL certified teacher in place of explicit ESL instruction.

INTRODUCTION

I began my work with English Language Learners in Boston in 2000 and in the Boston Public Schools in 2005. Expressive language, and specifically writing, is an incredible challenge when learning a second language, and the ELLs I have worked with struggle significantly with sharing their thoughts and ideas in writing. This is not unique to the Boston; in fact, “A mere one percent of 12th grade English language learners (ELLs) scored proficient or above in writing on [the 2011 NAEP].”¹ I believe that examining national needs of ELLs through the lens of my specific students may lend insight to the instructional moves needed for writing instruction for the broader population.

Since 2010, I have worked as a middle school teacher of English Language Learners, specializing in working with ELLs with underlying language disorders and disabilities (i.e. dyslexia, auditory processing disorder, etc.). My hypothesis leading into this school year, in teaching a class of grade 6 and 7 ELLs, was that the priority for my students would be to work on crafting expanded sentences. However, with this particular group of 15 students, I noticed that the need was not for them to compose longer sentences, but analysis of their writing showed their need for improvement in spelling. Students’ errors in spelling were incredibly distracting from the ideas in their writing, even though students were using compound and complex sentences and attempting more sophisticated vocabulary.

While I am aware that spelling instruction may not be a primary focus of early childhood and elementary writing instruction, I know that spelling acts as a gatekeeper to having one’s writing read, analyzed, and understood by an audience. In fact, the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges reported that 80 percent of the time an employment application is doomed when poorly written or poorly spelled.² This is why I believe that teaching spelling is an act of social justice. It ensures that our students have the chance to get their foot in the door for college admission and career readiness.

It was with this belief in mind that I delved into my inquiry of best practices for teaching spelling to English Language Learners. I am proud to say that I have identified a solution that both addresses this need and empowers students to learn and practice spelling with culturally responsive YA literature, explicit instruction in metalinguistic awareness, and sentence crafting.

**CONTEXT: ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Dedicated English as a Second Language instruction is inconsistently planned and implemented for English Language Learners in the Boston Public Schools. I have been employed as a full-time Special Education Teacher and Special Education Coordinator in three Boston Public Pilot Schools. In all three schools, ESL instructional hours were not a part of the school calendar nor was explicit ESL instruction planned and implemented for all or even most ELL students. Additionally, when ESL instruction was implemented in these three schools, the number of minutes per week did not match with the minutes prescribed in the April 2012 settlement between the Boston Public Schools and the US Department of Justice.\(^3\)

To show how my concerns about my own students and the educational opportunities they have to learn the dominant and highly political English language connect to broader concerns about ELLs in the Boston Public Schools, it is important to understand the recent chronology of policy around ELLs in BPS.

In place of ESL instruction, the schools I have worked in have utilized an “embedded model of ESL”, which appears to consist of placing ESL students in English Language Arts classes with a teacher who has a Sheltered English Immersion endorsement and/or an ESL license from the state. However, deliberate and strategic instruction that address the needs of English Language Learners in critical areas of language such as vocabulary, syntax, and metalinguistic awareness (the capacity to discuss the language itself) is neither planned for nor implemented in English Language Arts classes.

My current class consists of fifteen English Language Learners in grades 6 and 7. Twelve of the students speak Spanish as a first language. Two of my students are siblings, and their family is from Albania; however, they do not speak Albanian, yet they are learning Spanish from their classmates. One student is from Brazil. A majority of students in the class have been enrolled in English-Only programs since Kindergarten, yet still maintain status as English Language Learners and are therefore considered “Long-Term” ELLs.

My approach to planning and implementing instruction for my students focuses on addressing both WIDA Standards, particularly those for writing, as well as Common Core Language Arts Standards, including the Language standards of the elementary grades that focus on language patterns and syntax.

The WIDA standards for writing focus on three major areas, which I address each day in my classroom: Linguistic Complexity, Vocabulary Usage, and Language Control.

Linguistic complexity refers to the quantity of language produced. At the sentence level, are sentences simple subject+verb+object constructions, or are they expanded from this basic kernel?

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At the discourse level, are paragraphs organized with topic, body, and conclusion sentences? Is the presented sequence of information or order of events logical? How much does the student write in a given time frame?

Vocabulary usage refers to the variety and sophistication of words the writer uses. Are the words general high-frequency words or more specific “Tier 2” vocabulary? Are students capable of using content-specific technical vocabulary in their writing? Are the same vocabulary words repeated, or are there synonyms that add variety to the writing?

Language control includes not only grammar (morphology and syntax) and mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization), but also precision with word choice. Is the student using precisely the right word in precisely the right place in the language sequence?

When beginning the course with my students, I had anticipated sentence construction as the highest-priority writing need. However, upon careful analysis of their written work, I noticed that their spelling was a consistent distraction from and, at times, a barrier to understanding the content of the writing. Therefore, I chose to focus my inquiry work on the topic of spelling for English Language Learners.

**INQUIRY RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

*What is an effective approach to teaching spelling to middle school ELLs?*

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to address spelling for ELL students, I needed to read what researchers and theorists had to say about language and spelling instruction. Adams, M., & Jones, K. M. (2006) are strong critics of the SEI model as implemented in Massachusetts public schools. The authors argue that SEI is the equivalent of a “sink or swim” model in which teachers happen to be working with ELL students, rather than a model in which there is an ELD curriculum and teachers with a strong background in language acquisition and cultural competence. I see this today in our schools as ESL licensure has become a mandate for all teachers - there are no requirements for teachers to have a specialized background in working with ELLs nor are new positions being created for ELL specialists. Rather, there is a sense that, through osmosis of being in proximity of a teacher with an ESL license, students will simply develop the language skills they need. According to Adams and Jones, the SEI model of instruction has been incredibly unsuccessful.4 This article stood out to me because it supports my assertion of the ineffectiveness of instruction for ELLs when English Language Development is not systematically and strategically addressed by teachers who are highly skilled in instruction for this population.

In her book *Words*, Maria Henry offers an explicit curriculum for teaching word study to secondary students that emphasizes metalinguistic awareness by empowering students to know the vocabulary of the linguistics of English. For example, within the first unit of the program, the vocabulary of consonant, vowel, digraph, blend, pattern, and the six syllable types are introduced. The program continues through a scope and sequence well-aligned with Moats - progressing from

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the six syllable types through syllabication and into Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Greek roots and affixes.\(^5\) This book is one that I generally have with me when planning my instruction because the curriculum is both appealing to and developmentally appropriate for elementary students. I appreciate the sophistication of the curriculum, and I see that my students are highly engaged in its lessons.

Louisa Moats is a highly regarded literacy researcher, and her article “How Spelling Supports Reading” echoes her career-long call for explicit language instruction in American schools. While our society commonly views the English spelling system as confusing, Moats demonstrates that the English spelling system is not as disorganized as it is perceived. Moats highlights the idea of spelling as a gatekeeper to college and career opportunities, and she cites research that provides a clear link between spelling and better reading and writing skills. Moats also provides a scope and sequence for encoding content and strategies that ranges from phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondence in kindergarten to Latin and Greek forms in middle school.\(^6\) I have been highly influenced by Moats’ corpus of research as her work has aided me enormously in having a better understanding of the underlying structures of the English language. It is important to note that her work is very closely aligned with that of Marcia Henry as well as the ideas found in Stirling.

“Why Teach Spelling?” advocates that “a skilled speller is a strong reader and writer”, and it advocates for three key components of spelling instruction: explicit instruction in whole-word, morphemic, and phonemic spelling; careful selection of spelling words with an emphasis on their structures; and practice and repetition. The most useful part of this paper is a set of tables that clearly shows the link between Common Core State Standards and spelling instruction. This article also cites research that indicates that students who received explicit teaching of the six syllable types had notably higher reading achievement than students who received implicit instruction. This article challenges the assumption that explicit instruction is dull and ineffective, and it actually shows that being direct and explicit about language instruction benefits students.\(^7\) This article made me wonder whether the default mode of teaching language systems implicitly is actually because teachers do not have the language expertise themselves (i.e. knowledge of six syllable types; knowledge of morphemic patterns). The ever-popular Wilson Reading Program training certainly does not provide teachers with an etymological, morphological, or lexical lens on decoding and encoding instruction.

Johanna Stirling’s Teaching Spelling to English Language Learners champions explicit spelling instruction as a tenet of writing instruction for students learning English as a Second Language. Stirling views poor spelling as an obstacle to language development, but also sees it as a hindrance to future educational and career opportunities. Stirling sets out to present a new look at an old and infamous problem - the spelling conventions of the English Language. She examines the complex orthography of the language, and she offers educators with instructional strategies that address English spelling. Additionally, Stirling indicates the importance of spelling skills to producing quality writing plainly stating: “...if you are too busy concentrating on spelling letter by

\(^7\) Reed, D. K. (2012). Why Teach Spelling?. Center On Instruction.
letter, your brain is unlikely to be at its creative or intellectual best.” 8 This assertion matches my hypothesis of my students’ difficulties - they were struggling so much with spelling that they couldn’t fully express their ideas in writing. It provides a clear explanation of what may be happening when a student’s written language is inferior to their oral language production. Additionally, this book is an incredible resource as it offers over one hundred activities that allow for instruction that develops awareness and skill of English orthography and are appropriate for both adolescents and adults.

**METHODOLOGY: APPLICATION OF THE RESEARCH**

*Beginnings*

My English as a Second Language class this year was the first ESL class that most of my 6th and 7th grade students have experienced, even though most of my students have been coded by the Boston Public School as English Language Learners since they entered Kindergarten and have not earned the status of being coded as Formerly Limited English Proficient.

At the start of our class in November of 2015, following my return from a maternity leave, my students questioned why they were placed in the course. In response to these inquiries, I deliberately planned instruction and discussion that addressed being an ELL. A part of these lessons was to explain to students why they would be taking the WIDA exam in January and how passing the WIDA would change their ELD code.

Our first major undertaking as a class was to read poetry of identity. I facilitated close reading and close listening sessions of model texts - including India Aria’s song “I Am Light” as well as two poems (Gwendolyn Brook’s “Narcissa” and Carl Sandburg’s “Who Am I?”). Students used phrases and themes from these poems to construct poems about their own identities for publication in a class book as well as for a display of poetry for a school-wide family writing night [see Appendix for student writing samples]. Supporting my students in writing these poems helped me to learn about who they were as people and what they were willing to share about themselves. Most importantly, in guiding all students to the publication of their pieces, I ensured that all students felt the success of completing a piece of writing that afforded them independence and decision-making within the writing process. However, I could sense my students’ discomfort with trusting themselves in the writing process - they asked me over and over “Is this okay?” and “Am I allowed to put this?” I responded with positive encouragement and a checklist for grading their poems, and the students each produced original pieces that told about themselves. However, a major goal that I set for the year after this project was to have students make independent decisions while writing, and I knew I needed to step out of the picture and provide them with as much writing practice as possible.

*Analysis of Writing Samples*

In the week prior to the Thanksgiving break, I wanted to obtain a writing sample from my students in response to a non-fiction piece. We read two articles about American historical figure Sarah Hale, and students synthesized the information from these articles by responding to a

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prompt: Who is Sarah Hale? I encouraged the students to write as much as possible. Over the Thanksgiving break, I analyzed the writing samples through the lens of the WIDA Writing Standards - linguistic complexity, vocabulary usage, and language control.

On a positive note, I was excited by the expanded sentences that many students employed in their writing. However, I was struck by the lack of conventions in spelling, particularly those related to morphology in areas such as pluralization (i.e. countrys - This student did not automatically know to “change the y to an i and add “es” or makeing - This student did not know to “drop the e and add -ing”.) I wondered how much their writing would improve with greater use of conventional spelling.

It must be exhausting for the students to constantly have to guess at the spellings of words. Imagine how much this slows them down and interferes with their abilities to get their thoughts down on paper. For example, Shaniel was working so hard to spell so many words through application of sound-symbol correspondence; however, this is typical of a 1st grade monolingual emergent writer, and Shaniel is a 6th grade student in his 7th year in the Boston Public Schools. Brian gives up on producing original ideas and relies on copying chunks of text. I wondered if the students were even aware how much their spelling interferes with the meaning in their writing.

Beginning a Plan of Attack with Pre-Assessment

I could not turn a blind eye to the spelling needs of my students. I was determined to empower my students by enhancing their ability to manipulate language. I wanted students to gain a sense of control over their written expression by improving both technical skill as well as academic identity as a writer. And so, I decided to devise a plan of attack to help address this need in my classroom.

My first step was to administer and analyze the results of several informal assessments to get a sense of my students’ base level spelling skills as well as their ability to detect errors in spelling, their metalinguistic knowledge, and their attitudes towards writing. I administered four assessments to my students in mid-December: the Words Their Way Primary Spelling Inventory, a self-created Spelling Error Detection Assessment, the Writing Attitudes Survey, and the Marcia Henry Words Pre-Test.

The Words Their Way Primary Spelling Inventory (PSI) is designed for kindergarten to third grade general education classrooms, and it measures spelling skills from writing the letter of an initial consonant in a word through beginning use of syllables and affixes. For this assessment, it is recommended that students score 20 words and above to be considered for taking the next level assessment (Elementary). 11 out of 15 students scored at this level, and 4 out of 15 scored below. These results can be compared to the results of an assessment given to all middle schoolers at the Gardner Pilot Academy earlier this year: the Words Their Way Upper Spelling Inventory (USI).

The USI measures spelling ability from upper-elementary to post-secondary levels, and students who score below 23 are considered to be at the “frustration level”. All of my 15 students scored at

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the “frustration” level in this assessment with the highest score of the group being a 16. Therefore, it can be inferred that 11 of my students are at the elementary level, indicating a need for learning and reviewing the following concepts: short and long vowel sounds; consonant blends, digraphs, and clusters; inflectional endings; consonant doublings at syllable junctures; and spelling of common suffixes.

I created a Spelling Error Detection Assessment [see Appendix] to measure whether students could correctly indicate whether or not there was a spelling error in a sentence. Students were instructed to read a set of 15 sentences and, for each sentence, indicate whether the words were correctly spelled or contained errors. If the sentences has an error, the students were asked to indicate which words contained the error. There were 12 words that contained errors within the sentences. Errors included reversals (b and d), incorrect syllable junctures (“makeing” for making), and omissions (“winnin” for winning) within the primary and upper elementary range of spelling skills. Out of a possible score of 15 with labeling sentences as correct or wrong, 10 out of 15 students were able to complete this task with 10 accurately labeled, including 4 students who were able to accurately label 12 sentences. Out of 12 wrong words, 11 students could identify 6 or more errors, but the highest score was only 9. This assessment shows that my students are inconsistent with identifying spelling errors, and it shows that they are either unsure of or unaware of spelling patterns and common types of spelling errors.

I had become familiar with the Writing Attitude Survey[11] when working on a collaborative district project around evidence-based writing. The survey has 28 questions that begin with “How would you feel…” and ask about particular writing responses. Students have the option to circle a very happy, somewhat happy, somewhat upset, or very upset Garfield. A raw score of 70 is considered neutral, and the maximum score is a 112. 9 out of 15 of my students’ results showed a neutral attitude towards writing (scores ranging from 61 to 77). 5 students showed a negative attitude towards writing (scores ranging from 19 to 56), and 1 student showed a positive attitude toward writing (86). I hope that, through guiding students in developing their writing skills from now through June, I can help them foster more positive attitudes towards writing.

The final assessment I gave was the Marcia Henry Words Pretest from Marcia Henry’s Words [see Literature Review and References], which measures students’ metalinguistic skills. Only one student could successfully identify both consonants and vowels, and one other student could accurately identify vowels. The students were extremely unfamiliar with the terms on the assessment, including consonant, vowel, short vowel, long vowel, blend, digraph, compound word, prefix, suffix, root, and syllable.

The results of these assessments affirmed my initial hypothesis that students were in need of spelling instruction. From my research as well as my background as a reading specialist, I was confident in addressing the barriers to representation and expression in reading, writing, and spelling - but how could I engage and motivate my middle school students in the explicit instruction, practice, and repetition that they so desperately needed?

Before constructing an intervention to address this need, I decided on three major precepts - connect to literature, connect to real life, and empower students with metalinguistic awareness. In

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connecting spelling to a piece of authentic literature, I could show that the spelling patterns exist in real readings written by real writers, rather than constructing superficial, controlled passages to teach spelling. In selecting the piece of literature, I knew that the heavy lifting of the explicit language instruction needed to be grounded in readings that my students could relate to - stories so rich that my students would become immersed in the stories. I selected Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *An Island Like You*, an exceptional collection of young adult short stories set in the Newark barrio, as our core text. Finally, it was important that my students be empowered with the vocabulary to talk about language. I wanted my students to not only recognize spelling patterns and nuances but to be able to use the vocabulary that language specialists use - digraph, diphthong, syllable, etc. I decided to use the scope and sequence of Marcia Henry’s *Words* because it is an explicit curriculum developmentally appropriate for secondary students to learn about language.

*The “Readicide” of An Island Like You*

I began January with an ambitious plan to finish the 256 page novel with my students in a month’s time, anticipating that we could read 15 to 20 pages per day. I was cold-calling on students to read aloud for the first 5 pages of the reading (students were assigned to practice reading aloud for homework) and then I would read the following 10 or 15 pages aloud to the students, as the text was a challenging one for my students, and reading aloud provides them with accessibility.

I also created and implemented daily spelling activities using words from the text, moving briskly through a sequence of lessons on consonants and vowels, consonant blends, digraphs, trigraphs, and short vowel sounds.

Even though my students had performed poorly on a metalinguistic awareness pre-test, I had hoped that once they had a brief “refresher” on these concepts, it would jog their memories and the knowledge would come easily. I also expected that they were proficient in reading and answering comprehension questions using textual evidence.

This pacing and structure did not support my students. They were lost in the reading, and they either responded incorrectly to the comprehension questions or avoided completing them at all. When I asked questions orally, students were unable to respond accurately orally. Additionally, although they did recognize that some of the words from the spelling activities could be found in the text, I had not made the connection between the spelling and reading tasks explicit enough.

For the two weeks that I used this structure, I experienced a lot of emotionality from my students. For example, students began to ask to leave the classroom for various reasons or being angry and defiant. They always said that they understood the reading, even though it was clear that they didn’t. Several students told me: “I can do the work; I just don’t want to.”

Through conversations with my colleagues, who are also these students’ current or former teachers, it became clear that for years, the children in my ESL class had been “hiders”. They were overall well-behaved students who failed reading assessments but were passed on because they were quiet and non-disruptive. I hypothesized that I had found their “Achilles’ Heel”s through my daily assessment and feedback on their work. It was too much for them - too overwhelming and too raw. I rethought my plan.

*Success with Spelling Instruction Connected to An Island Like You*
From January until present, I am using a structured routine with my students that I have refined over the past few months that has been successful to address spelling and decoding, as well as fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

At the beginning of the week, a list of ten spelling words from one chapter of An Island Like You that share a specific pattern are introduced, and the new pattern is explicitly taught. Patterns I have taught include: digraphs ck, th, wh, ch, and sh; trigraphs dge and tch; words ending with vowel+ng and vowel+nk; and words with consonant doubles ff, ll, ss, and zz. Students record the spelling words in their notebooks, and we discuss, locate, and analyze patterns in the words. I explicitly teach the vocabulary of linguistics, so that students have the language to talk about what they are noticing in the words. Throughout the week, students complete a range of activities that address the spelling pattern. For example, students complete cloze or fill-in-the-blank passages using sentences and paragraphs from An Island Like You as well as from The New York Times that use words from the spelling list or words with related language. Students also construct lists of words that follow the pattern and write sentences with the spelling list words and words that follow the patterns. This explicit spelling instruction, practice, and repetition comprises approximately 10-15 minutes of class time per day.

At the end of the week, students take a multi-section quiz. The first few sections focus on spelling and vary slightly week to week, but they generally include a traditional spelling test for all ten spelling words, a word sort or pattern analysis task, and a cloze passage or expressive writing task (i.e. use the spelling words in sentences) [see Appendix].

Participants (200 words)

All students in my grade 6 and 7 class participated in the intervention. However, I want to describe 3 specific students in detail and discuss their successes with this intervention and with the English as a Second Language course in general.

Brian is a 7th grade student who is 13 years old. He has an English Language Development (ELD) level of 5. He has been considered Limited English Proficient since September of 2008. On last year’s WIDA ACCESS assessment, he earned an overall score of 4.8 (Reading - 3.9, Writing - 4.3, Listening - 6.0, and Speaking - 4.9). Brian does not have an IEP or 504 plan.

Miliana is a 6th grade student who is 13 years old. She repeated 5th grade. She has been considered Limited English Proficient since May of 2010. On last year’s WIDA ACCESS assessment, she earned an overall score of 4.1 (Reading - 5, Writing - 4.3, Listening - 3.5, Speaking - 3.8). Miliana has a 504 plan for attention needs.

Shaniel is a 6th grade student who is 12 years old. He has an ELD level of 4. He has been considered Limited English Proficient since September of 2008. On last year’s WIDA ACCESS assessment, he earned an overall score of 3.3 (Reading - 5, Writing - 1.9, Listening - 5.0, Speaking - 3.8). Shaniel has an Original IEP evaluation scheduled for a suspected Specific Learning Disability.

I chose to focus on these particular students because I feel that they represent the diversity of language abilities in my classroom. I have students with and without IEPs and 504 Plans, and the students in the class show variations in their language needs, as shown by the WIDA subtest scores in Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking.

RESULTS
My students have benefitted from the literature-embedded spelling intervention I designed in a variety of ways. Firstly, students are improving their spelling accuracy as well as their writing fluency. The tables below show data that compares writing samples (see Appendix) from November 2015 and March 2016 for each participant. The writing samples were each completed over 1 class period (approx. 55 minutes).

Table 1. Number of Words Written

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>November 2015</th>
<th>March 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miliana</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaniel</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Spelling Accuracy Rate (# of Correctly Spelled Words/# of Total Words)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>November 2015</th>
<th>March 2016</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>93.5%</td>
<td>94.2%</td>
<td>+0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miliana</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>+0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaniel</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>+0.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not only are students writing more, but they are writing with accurate spelling. The increased volume of writing in a set period of time and accuracy in encoding will improve success on the WIDA Writing Assessment in the areas of Linguistic Complexity and Language Control. And, perhaps more importantly, it will increase the chances of the students’ writing being understood - a valuable skill for college and career.

Secondly, I have noticed positive changes in my students’ academic identities as a result of the work occurring in ESL this year. I see that my students are changing the narratives about themselves and seeing school as a place where they too, as a bilingual student, belong. I have made some deliberate choices as a teacher that connect my students and their identities with the academic content. A ritual that we have put in place this year is beginning every class with a snack that I provide and a time to talk with friends while completing spelling practice. Then, a student leads a recitation of the poem In Lak’ech in both English and Spanish (see Appendix) to center us in our values as a classroom and how to exist within our community. Additionally, I deliberately chose *An Island Like You* as our central text because it is a piece of rich and authentic Latino-American literature that contains themes that the teens in my class can relate to - broadly, changes in relationships with family members, friends, and self.
I see successes happening for my students. Shaniel attends individual tutoring sessions with me before school on Wednesdays to support his spelling and reading needs. These times are not only work times, but they connect Shaniel to a trusting adult and provide him with a place to share his thoughts and ideas. Shaniel has a love of animals, and he often talks about his deep knowledge of various animals. Shaniel recently touched my heart when he told me a story about an experience that made him feel upset:

_Last summer, I went to the zoo with my summer program. Kids were banging on the monkeys’ cage, and it really upset the monkeys. I got really mad. I bet if you were there, you would have made those kids sit on the bus until the field trip was over._

To me, this story told me that Shaniel trusts me to maintain a safe setting, and this means a lot to me as I know that he has witnessed violence and trauma, and he struggles to control his emotions at school, often shutting down in class with his head on the desk. He recently asked me for an incentive-based behavior chart because he says he wants to “get on track” with his grades in all of his classes. I am glad that he is feeling motivated to succeed academically, and he feels he has the potential to improve in his academic behavior.

Another success had to do with Miliana and her emotional response to a text. After students complete our weekly quiz, they can choose an independent task to work on - reading _An Island Like You_, reading a book they have brought to class, or starting their homework. I had dismissed the class to lunch, but Miliana stopped to tell me: Mrs. Dines, I’m mad about what happens on page 197! Miliana had been reading ahead in _An Island Like You_, and her comment showed me that she was voluntarily engaging with a text but also was comprehending well enough to have a response and identifying herself as a reader.

A final result is that I have designed a process for text-embedded spelling intervention that I can use with any text and continue to improve students’ spelling skills, and I am able to explain this process to my colleagues and explain the rationale behind each step.

**IMPLICATIONS**

My work in deepening my understanding of spelling instruction this year is firmly rooted in my core belief that all students deserve a voice in the decision-making processes that shape our world and therefore deserve the opportunity to gain a full command of the language of power. If educators acknowledge and accept the research that spelling is a gate-keeper to career opportunities and that spelling is a barrier to full expression of thinking in writing, it is unacceptable for educators to turn a blind eye to spelling instruction and the deepening of written expression afforded by accuracy and precision.

I would urge school leaders and policy makers to consider the consequences of permitting the embedded ESL model - denying English Language Learners the opportunity to polish their language skills and the space to build on their first language foundations and bilingual and bicultural identities in a dedicated English as a Second Language course. Language is a deeply personal phenomena that allows people to show the multiple dimensions of themselves to a
broader audience. Language provides people with an opportunity to fully root and realize their identities.

I believe that my inquiry makes a strong case for explicit spelling instruction as a critical means of ensuring that students are developing both writing precision as well as writing fluency. The practice of providing explicit spelling instruction deeply enhances understanding and awareness of the nuances of the English language. This understanding enhances their linguistic power in developing their overall literacy.

What are we saying to students about themselves if we cannot commit to transforming our students into empowered writers through deliberate and explicit instruction? I believe that the message that we are sending when we do not provide clear language instruction is that our students are not worthy of receiving the rewards that come with writing capabilities. We need to change the present to ensure that, in the future, all students develop the tools to wield the power of language.
References


Appendix: Student Work

Item 1: Traditional Spelling Assessment

Item 2: Word Sort - Words with Digraphs and Trigraphs
**Brian’s Life**

*When I grow up, I want to play for futbol club Barcelona and for the U.S. national team.*
* I have been to Gillette Stadium to see the New England Revolution.*

*I like soccer because I started to play on a team called Hammer F.C. by going to practice and doing the drills.*

*I like myself because I know myself, by doing what I do.*


*I belong on a soccer field, but instead I play with my friends at school.*

*I am Brian, and this is who I am.*
Item 4: Brian - Sarah Hale Essay, November 2015

Spelling Precision Rate: 93.5% (131 correct/140 total words)

Note how Brian repeatedly misspells Thanksgiving, even though it provided in several readings. Brian also repeats several vocabulary words and phrases over and over: Thanksgiving (misspelled as thanks giving), believed (misspelled as believed), “they all said no...they said no”. Some of the phrases are copied text from references.

Sarah Hale was born in Newport, New Hampshire on October 24, 1795. Her husband died when Sarah was 34, with children. To make money she wrote poems, novels and became a magazine editor. Her hard work paid off because of her letters. She saved Thanksgiving. Sarah Hale believed Thanksgiving was a very important holiday. Some of the states back then did not celebrate Thanksgiving. The New England states did not celebrate Thanksgiving. Sarah believed Thanksgiving should be celebrated from every state just like the Fourth of July. Sarah wrote to President Fillmore, President Buchanan, and President Lincoln to ask him for Thanksgiving. After 17 years of thousands of letters, Sarah wrote to President Lincoln to ask him for Thanksgiving. And he said yes! On October 3, 1863, President Lincoln said that the fourth Thursday of November would be Thanksgiving.
What are the cause of youth violence? There are many ways to cause youth violence. For example, sport games on who is going to win. Also alcohol can cause violence. All sorts of arguments can cause violence. How to stop violence? I think that violence occurs when your opinion on something does not go the way you want it to be like. If your going for team like FC Barcelona and your friend likes Real Madrid, you would say Barcelona is going to win, but your friend says no! Real Madrid is going to win, your arguing back in forth and your so mad that you want to punch him. If they get in a fight there friendship would not be the same.

Also if you drink alcohol it can cause violence. If you drink too much you won’t have control in your body, you would do stupid things if you drunk. When you drunk you could start to argue for no reason because you’re not stable you can start a fight, throwing fist at each other, getting bloody noses. You can kill someone too. If you drink and your driving and people are in your car, you could lose control of the car and get injured or even die.
How to stop violence? I think to stop violence we should not argue about some stupid reason like who is going to win. You guys should stay away from people if they are scary and like violence. We should stop drinking and do use in our community, work together.

That how I would prevent youth violence to occur.
Me, Myself, and Her!
by Miliana Arias Baez

I like myself because I’m me.
I only have a mom right now.

I behave like I normally do -
eat the whole refrigerator.

My best friend cares about me
because she always cares about me
and makes me laugh when I’m sad
by telling me jokes.

I reach the refrigerator and I grab
the chicken, potatoes, fruits, beans,
cookie dough ice cream and etcetera.

I like to be fat
because I don’t stop eating
and I just watch tv when I’m supposed to be
doing homework.

My name is Miliana, and I’m the most me in the world.
Sarah Hale was the name of the saver of Thanksgiving. Sarah Hale had 5 children and 1 husband that died when she was at age 34. She was I mean Sarah Hale made books and novels and poetry back then.

Sarah Hale started wearing black cloth since the day her husband died. Basically she started being a widow.

Thanksgiving was almost going to be magically gone. But it didn’t. It turned out to be Abraham Lincoln accepted Thanksgiving to be billing as it is now. To remember what Sarah Hale wished for and how wishes can come true!
violence affected my life because, I used to steal my friend's thing because I used to think it will help me be a better person in which way will help me feel perfect and cool. You must be wondering why people do violence. Certain people decide whether what they really like to do if it's robbing, murdering, and more. You sometimes don't really recognize that you are doing something based on violence. I did not know that violence is something wrong. Tell a true friend told me that violence is wrong. Sometimes when violence occurs very bad stuff happen as a very big consequence. And someday the person who did the wrong will realize what they could have done right.
Me

I'm not ordinary because I know and see differences.
I reach my hand and touch the ideas I have.
When I grow up, I want to make people's dreams come true.
I'm not powerful or invincible, but I'm worth something
because I know I can make a difference
and you can too.

Item 10: Shaniel - Sarah Hale Essay, November 2015
Spelling Precision Rate: 76.9% (60 correct /78 total words)

Are you wondering how made thanksgiving?
Don't look any farther. It was Sarah Hale now
that of the idea for thanksgiving. Sarah
Hale had 5 kids and her husband died when Sarah
was 34. Sarah Hale is famous because she wrote poetry
and books. Sarah is also famous because she mad
thanksgiving. Sarah's dream was writing an it was a me
true did you know she wore black because of her husband
dead. Did you know Lincoln made thanksgiving official?
A night at Franklin in a dark place
with people you really don't want to mas with
stay calm because a killer mite be in the
shado, a good idea is to stay with a friend
or family member to have a better chance
of not being attacked. Have a fence or you
at all times in case of that. Another
good idea is to have a map in your
hood to know your way out in case
of a that. Another good idea is to know
self-defense if that don't have a gun
or knife so you can make a hit and run.
Remember this thing for you go there
because I have to deal with all this.

If that's one thing that plus to me
don't be afraid to stand up and fight
for the people you love because they
will do the already stand up for you.
Item 12: In Lak’ech

In Lak’ech (I Am You or You Are Me)

Tú eres mi otro yo.  
You are my other me.
Si te hago daño a ti.  
If I do harm to you.
Me hago daño a mí mismo.  
I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto,  
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo.  
I love and respect myself.

Mayan-inspired poem, “Pensamiento Serpentino”  
Luis Valdez. (1971).

Item 13: Directions and Sample Items from Spelling Error Detection Assessment

Directions:
- Read the sentences in the table below.
- If you feel the words in the sentence are correctly spelled, write CORRECT in the 2nd column.
- If you feel the sentence has a spelling error, write WRONG in the 2nd column, and tell which word or words are wrong.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Correct or Wrong?</th>
<th>Wrong, which word or words are wrong?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. When war happens, it is a difficult time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Something amazing happened yesterday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I am truly excited for the dance.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. She was making food with her mother.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. There was a fight on the playground.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Her husband did not like to work.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I was depressed when the other team was winning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I went to two parties.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I heard about the big game.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The children would not do homework.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>