



MODIFIED LITERATURE CIRCLE: INCORPORATING ENGLISH AND SPANISH PICTUREBOOKS TO SUPPORT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS DURING A FIFTH- GRADE SCIENCE LESSON

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ABSTRACT

It is important that preservice and in-service teachers use effective supports for English language learners (ELLs) in science classes to enhance learning. ELLs with limited English proficiency may need more supports to address language barriers that affect student learning. Literature circles can be used to enhance understanding of content when embedded into instructional strategies. This grant-funded study collected data on effective instructional approaches to support ELL students in upper elementary science classes from October, 2017 through May, 2018. During a lesson on phases of the moon, researchers incorporated literature circles into instruction embedded with metacognitive strategies to assess student learning outcomes. Student-participants: (a) took a researcher-designed, pre-assessment, (b) received direct instruction in phases of the moon, (c) were engaged in literature circles, (d) created "Phases of the Moon" booklets, and, (e) took a post-assessment. For the collaborative activity, students were grouped with peers who had similar English proficiency levels; and each group was given a book in English, a book in Spanish, or a book that had text in both Spanish and English. Students were asked to read, identify cognates/clarify unknown words, develop a summary/gist, and create questions to ask peers after a group presentation (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999; Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

Keywords: elementary science, ELLs, literature circles, metacognitive strategies

Supporting students in a learning environment is essential, and this is especially true for English language learners (ELLs). Students can be successful with the right combination of instructional strategies. However, determining which strategies are most effective for a particular student or group of students is dependent upon a teacher's knowledge of students' strengths and understanding of effective pedagogical practices. Elizabeth (first author), a certified teacher who has taught all content areas in 4th and 5th grades across two states, collaborated with Mr. Garza (all participants' names are pseudonyms), a 5th grade science teacher at a public school



on the U.S.-Mexico border. The two were working together to enhance students' academic learning of science content. Elizabeth had previous experiences working with teachers to support ELLs in public schools in the southeastern United States, but this time around, everything did not proceed exactly as she had planned. Nonetheless, identifying effective strategies was key.

The partner school grouped all students by ability, with highest performing students grouped in one class, and lowest performing students grouped in another class based on state standardized testing. Approximately 99% of students in the district identify Spanish as their home language; and all elementary schools in the district use the Transitional Bilingual Early-Exit Model. According to state guidelines, this means that:

Exiting to an all-English program of instruction will occur not earlier than the end of first grade, or if the student enrolls in school during or after first grade, the student will remain in the program for a minimum of two to five years before being eligible to exit the bilingual program (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

Consequently, the language of instruction for the 5th grade science class was English. The state annually measures students' English language development along a continuum, which consists of four proficiency levels from beginning to advanced high. It is important that emergent ELLs have opportunities to engage in conversations with, and be taught alongside, bilingual and English-only peers with a range of academic abilities. In this article, we illustrate how we engaged in this interactive discussion through culturally relevant literature.

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE CLASSROOM

In 2017, ELLs made up about 10.1% of the United States' K-12 school population, with that number increasing to 18% in Texas (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d). Identifying effective instructional supports to enhance learning is important for students. However, ELLs may need more encompassing support in content classes than their English-only peers (Baecher et al., 2012; Echevarria & Graves, 2005; Echevarria & Short, 2010). As students enter upper elementary classrooms, they encounter dense, content vocabulary in science, mathematics, and social studies classes that create challenges for disciplinary learning. This is compounded for ELLs due to language barriers (Linn, 2011; Ortiz et al., 2011), teacher bias, and inappropriate assessments (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002) that can lead to ELLs being misidentified as students with a learning disability in reading. Identifying strategies to support ELLs in upper elementary content classes is necessary.

There are several areas of concern when considering effective instructional strategies for ELLs. First, language barriers must not impede comprehension of content (Linn, 2011; Ortiz et al., 2011). Likewise, supporting students' vocabulary acquisition is critical as it assists ELLs in learning and demonstrating their knowledge of content (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). Therefore, educators must build



students' vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary acquisition in their classrooms. Students from diverse backgrounds may have differing levels of literacy skills in English and in their native language, including spoken language, prior knowledge, and experiences (Lucas et al., 2008). Building students' vocabulary will facilitate comprehension (Kindle, 2009), but educators must understand that ELLs may require additional supports when content vocabulary, such as in science and mathematics, is dense (Matson et al., 2004).

Additionally, educators much consider the unique cultural constructs ELLs bring with them into the classroom (Au, 2000; Yosso, 2005). A culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogical approach acknowledges the cultural experiences of students in a classroom (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rychly & Graves, 2012). Educators who approach instruction through a culturally responsive lens (Gay, 2010) are already valuing and supporting the wealth that their students naturally bring to a learning environment. When educators enrich their classrooms with culturally diverse content and/or culturally diverse curriculum, this can support academic growth for ELLs by acknowledging language and cultural diversity, and assisting ELLs in acquiring necessary academic skills (Willenburg, 2015). When educators acknowledge and value the different ethnic groups and cultural beliefs of their students, they can facilitate learning by providing content that exemplifies their students' backgrounds (Maasum et al., 2014).

LITERATURE CIRCLES

Literature circles are an effective way to engage students in collaborative learning while supporting and enhancing content area knowledge. Daniels (1994) explains that in a traditional literature circle format, students are given choice in text selection, grouped with peers who selected the same chapter book, examine and/or analyze a text with those peers, and then fulfil a role or address particular prompts in order to engage in thoughtful discussions. However, choice in text selection for literature circles is important, with group members deciding how much to read prior to the next book discussion.

There is a wide body of research on the use of literature circles to support student learning and increase reading comprehension (Daniels, 1994; Certo et al., 2010; Straits, 2007). Multiple studies have shown the benefits of literature circles in many iterations. Certo et al. (2010) found that students of all abilities preferred reading literature circle books to their usual classroom text, and because of literature circles, "student-led small-group discussion about literature can lead to enjoyment and engagement among students of all abilities," (p. 257). McCall (2010) noted that literature circles are an integrative activity that provide students with opportunities to apply reading and writing skills to enhance their understanding of content as they read and engage in small and/or whole group discussion. Since literature circle activities often require students to create written and visual representations of their understandings of the text, literature circles support multimodal learning (Barone & Barone, 2016).



Straits (2007) noted that literature circles are an extremely flexible instructional strategy and may be used in multiple content areas and in various formats. McCall (2010) found that in literature circles focused on social studies, students critiqued the credibility of the texts, looked for sources used, and worked to identify the author's goals to determine whether the book was a credible representation of the topic presented. Straits (2007) discussed how similar activities may be undertaken with science based texts by having students make connections to present day culture or compare the science in the text to what was learned in class. DeVick-Fry and LeSage (2010) describe how science notebooks (Klentschy, 2005) and literature circles can be combined into "science literacy circles" to help students see the big ideas in science.

In addition, children's literature has other benefits for students. In terms of support for ELLs, pairing trade books with opportunities for discussion through literature circles can help ELLs create connections with English speaking classmates (Coonrod & Hughes, 1992; Cruz & Thornton, 2008; Salinas et al., 2006). Consequently, to support the 5th grade ELLs in their science classroom, we identified modifying literature circles as a potential way to: (a) support students' understanding of science content, (b) enhance language development, and (c) provide opportunities for culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The modified literature circle included a focus on language and pictures to support content learning.

DESIGNING INSTRUCTION TO SUPPORT LEARNING

To support student learning, Elizabeth was working with Mr. Garza to embed metacognitive strategies such as summarizing, clarifying, and/or creating questions (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) into instruction. These strategies were explicitly taught to students; with support, students used strategies during instruction to support comprehension of content. Elizabeth, along with Lisa (co-author) and Dallas (graduate student/co-author), worked alongside Mr. Garza to support students' academic growth for multiple months, but not all students were experiencing the desired levels of success. Mr. Garza wanted his students to be successful. However, there was one standard that he felt students needed to review based on benchmark testing. Students had been unable to show content mastery in the following standard:

- (a) demonstrate that Earth rotates on its axis once approximately every 24 hours causing the day/night cycle and the apparent movement of the Sun across the sky; and, (b) identify and compare the physical characteristics of the Sun, Earth, and Moon (TEKS, n.p.).

Elizabeth set out to develop a lesson to increase Mr. Garza's students' knowledge of phases of the moon, while also supporting students' cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and providing opportunities to enhance English language development through conversations centered on the moon. After discussions with Mr. Garza, we decided to adjust a science lesson on phases of the moon by incorporating a literature circle. First, we searched for children's books that might increase student learning, while also supporting students' cultural background and language development. Non-



fiction chapter books on the moon did not seem to be a viable option because we wanted to be able to use the books during one lesson. Chapter books would have required more extended time. Likewise, we wanted the rich, visual images and vibrant stories to be shared during the lesson. Overall, we wanted students to read, share, engage, and feel connected to the texts, while also naturally incorporating conversations about the moon.

We collectively developed a content area lesson that utilized literature circles in a new way by bringing in culturally relevant picture books with text in English, Spanish, or both languages centered on the moon. A foldable was also incorporated into lesson development to allow students to draw and write down information. This was in addition to instruction embedded with metacognitive strategies such as summarizing text and creating teacher-like questions. When students create questions that they think a teacher might ask on a test, they understand the question-answer-relationship (Raphael & Au, 2005). Students develop questions that they must also be able to answer. Students search a text and prepare questions that have answers explicitly found in a text or answers that may be inferred from a text. This may help them become better at understanding and preparing for test taking.

CONTENT AND LITERATURE SELECTION

Elizabeth collected a large number of picture books from the library and worked with Diana and Selina to identify literature based on cultural relevancy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and students' English language development. The inclusion of picture books that tied to students' culture was purposeful. Picture books such as *Big Moon Tortilla* (Cowley, 2002), *El Lago de La Luna* (Gantschev, 1996), and *Moon Rope/Un lazo a la luna* (Ehlert, 2003) (Figures 1, 2, and 3) were selected for the illustrations, the story line, the language(s) in the text, the underlying message, and/or the cultural relevancy.

Typically, 5th graders would read chapter books during literature circles, with choice in selection (Daniels, 1994). However to support students' learning of content, language levels, and cultural wealth, a wide variety of picture books were selected. Along with the three aforementioned books, other selections included books that: (a) contained rhyming patterns (Figure 4); (b) relayed ethical standards (Figure 5); or, (c) had lower Lexile levels (Figure 6). Altogether, Elizabeth tried to incorporate a variety of books with different types of illustrations, language components, Lexile levels, characters, and themes.



Figure 1
Cover of *Big Moon Tortilla*

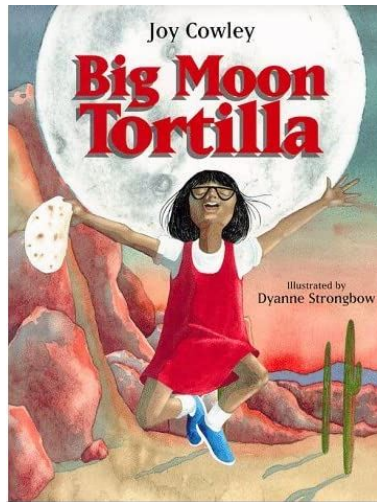


Figure 2
Cover of *El lago de la luna*



Figure 3
Cover of *Moon Rope/Un lazo a la luna*

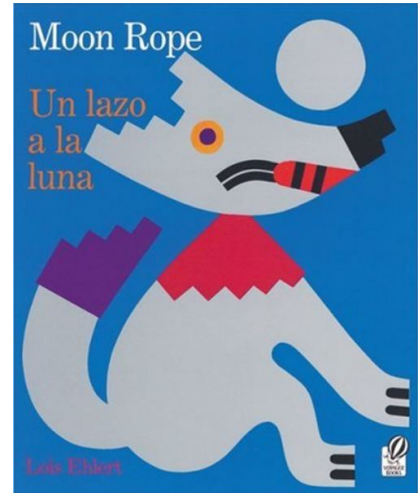


Figure 6
Cover of *I See the Moon and the Moon Sees Me*

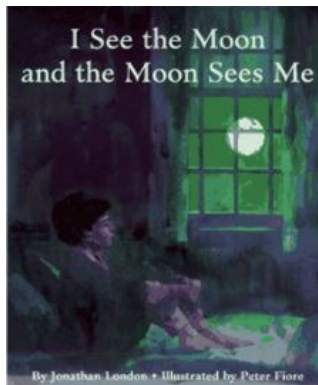


Figure 7
Cover of *Bajo la luna de limón*

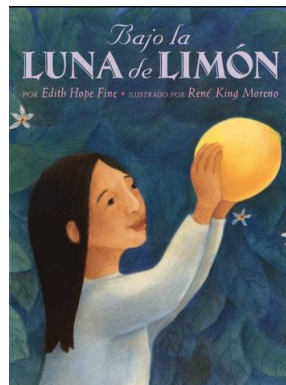
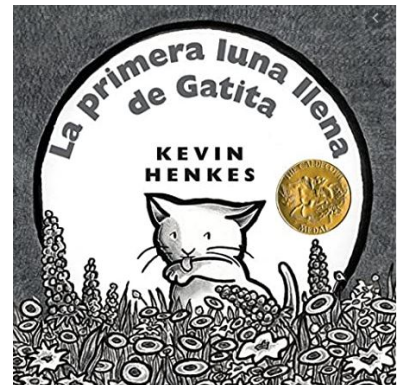


Figure 8
Cover of *La primera luna llena de Gatita*



LESSON AND ACTIVITIES

Prior to the literature circles, which took place after direct instruction, a re-teaching of the standards occurred. Mr. Garza provided all content instruction in English. However, he often had to do a brief recap in Spanish for several students individually. Valencia, an emergent English learner, spoke Spanish all the time and she took advantage of the multiple language supports. Along with supplemental instruction in Spanish from Mr. Garza, Valencia and other emergent English students were also supported by a Dallas, who is bilingual and was typically present during instruction to



assist students and enhance content proficiency. Dallas worked with Elizabeth, and he made multiple comments that Valencia's Spanish language usage and Spanish vocabulary knowledge were absolutely beautiful. Elizabeth, who has limited Spanish usage and understands more than she can speak, asked what he meant. Dallas replied that the vocabulary that she used in her everyday language included words that he considered exceptionally difficult, and even some words he was unfamiliar with and needed support for. He shares this excerpt from their conversation:

En conversaciones con Valencia, una estudiante que solo habla español, ella relató que Bajo la luna de limón, [Under the Lemon Moon] fue una lectura hermosa./ In conversations with, Valencia, a Spanish-only speaking student, she related to Dallas that Under the Lemon Moon [Bajo la luna de limón] was a beautiful read.

Dallas: *¿Cuál crees que fue el tema del libro?/What do you think the theme of the book was?*

Valencia: *La historia demostró que, a veces, al cuidar de los demás, al final nos cuidamos a nosotros mismos./The story demonstrated that sometimes by taking care of others, we ultimately take care of ourselves.*

Dallas: *¿Cómo es eso?/How so?*

Valencia: *En Bajo la luna de limón, Rosalinda se embarca en un viaje de crecimiento y madurez personal que finalmente le enseña a cuidar sus propias plantas y mascotas, así como las plantas y mascotas de sus vecinos y otras personas a su alrededor./In Bajo la luna de limón, Rosalinda embarks on a journey of personal growth and maturity that ultimately teaches her to care for her own plants and pets, as well as the plants and pets of her neighbors and other people around her.*

Dallas: *¿Hay algo en el libro que realmente le haya gustado?/Is there anything in the book that you really liked?*

Valencia: *Las ilustraciones eran impresionantes y el tono tranquilo del libro animaba a los personajes a reflexionar sobre sus sentimientos y los sentimientos de los demás./The illustrations were stunning, and the calming tone in the book encouraged the characters to reflect on their feelings and the feelings of others.*

Dallas: *¿Cómo se relaciona esta historia con la luna?/How does this story relate to the moon?*

Valencia: *Al final de la historia, Rosalinda se sintió tan llena como una luna de limón en el limonero reluciente; y entendió la importancia de difundir la bondad y la generosidad a toda la gente que la rodea./At the end of the story, Rosalinda felt as full as a lemon moon on the*



shimmering lemon tree; and she understood the importance of spreading kindness and generosity to all their surrounding people.

IMAGES

Mr. Garza's instructional presentation was embedded with multiple images of the moon's phases, with labels in Spanish and English, and two short videos. During instruction, Mr. Garza had students draw images of the moon's phases in advance organizers (Ausubel, 1968) that they created. The organizers had flaps, and students wrote down important facts underneath corresponding images. Mr. Garza, with some interjections from Elizabeth, moved slowly through the material to allow students time to draw images in their booklets and write down important information in Spanish or English. After booklets were completed, student-participants engaged in two separate physical activities that demonstrated how: (a) the moon orbits Earth; (b) the Earth rotates on its axis while the moon is orbiting Earth; and, (c) the Earth revolves around the sun, while rotating on its axis as the moon orbits Earth.

Elizabeth took over at this point to allow students to role play different positions of the moon, Earth, and sun during the phases of the moon. The first physical demonstration enhanced students' understanding of the moon's orbit around Earth, with one student acting as the "sun" and remaining stationary and another student orbiting the "sun." A second physical demonstration involved students acting out the rotation of Earth on its axis, as it revolved around the sun, while the moon orbited Earth. This demonstration enhanced students' understanding of specific standards: (a) from Earth, we see only one side of the moon; (b) the time it takes for the moon to orbit Earth is the same amount of time it takes for the moon to rotate on its axis; and, (c) the complexity of the dynamic movements and/or relationship between our Earth, Earth's moon, and our sun.

MODIFIED LITERATURE CIRCLES

After completion of the content instruction, advance organizer, and demonstration activity, students were grouped by Mr. Garza based on English proficiency levels. Once students were grouped, each group received an English language picture book, a Spanish language picture book, or a picture book that had text in both Spanish and English. The groups included seven students identified as beginning/emergent English speakers, two students who spoke only Spanish, some students who were fully bilingual, and the remaining students with varying levels of bilingualism. Students were asked to read their book with peers, using the metacognitive strategies they learned during class. Mr. Garza, Elizabeth, and Dallas circled the room to assist students as they read.

Another modification to traditional literature circles was in the reading of texts. Typically, all students would receive a copy of a chapter book and read independently prior to re-grouping to discuss the text. However, because there were varying English proficiency levels, including students who were emergent English speakers, Elizabeth did not want to add any stress to the learning environment. Students in each group determined how the book would be read. Some groups wanted one student to read the book to the group in English or in Spanish, or a modified version of



both languages; other groups decided to take turns reading. Throughout the modified literature circles, students' language preferences were taken into account by the *students in the group* and they put those preferences into practice. After reading, students collaboratively: (a) wrote a brief group summary to share with the class, (b) created two questions to ask the class after the presentation, and (c) shared important features of the moon that was present in their group's book. Each group had a few minutes to retell their story and/or read their summaries, ask the class their questions, and show pictures from the book.

All students had opportunities to discuss the books, and a final discussion of how the moon appeared in printed pictures produced some thought provoking discussions. This portion of the lesson lasted about 20 minutes. Elizabeth and Dallas observed that students seemed to be fascinated by pictures in some of the texts. Students compared pictures across books and discussed art mediums and the authenticity of images of the moon as portrayed in artwork in the literature. Dallas assisted with translations between Elizabeth and emergent English speakers. Students were also involved in the storyline in some of the texts, but much of the discussion was more related to culture than content. *Big Moon Tortilla* brought out the most conversations. For example, during a group summary of *Big Moon Tortilla* (Cowley, 1998), Elizabeth observed students engaged in a discussion of a story that resonated with them. The plot relates the daily challenges faced by a young girl; and with the wisdom of her grandmother, she gains sage advice on how to face trials as they make warm tortillas. Students were eager to share their experiences in making tortillas with their own families. This discussion led into other cultural differences among students in the group (i.e., whether their families made or bought tortillas, how often tortillas were at meals, etc.). Although this diverged from moon content, these were important conversations for student-participants as it fostered learning and language and valued their cultural heritage. Likewise, the translanguaging (García, 2009) was prominent in all group discussions as students naturally used both English and Spanish to make meaning. Students in the groups conversed seamlessly, supporting each other's language and understanding. Altogether, the lesson lasted ninety minutes and included: (a) instruction with PPT, advance organizer, and videos; (b) physical demonstration; and, (c) literature circles and discussion.

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS

It is important to consider students' needs when developing lessons. Educators have a wide variety of students in their classrooms and must take that into consideration when they develop lessons. In schools on the U.S.-Mexico border, a majority of teachers are bilingual, but this is not the case for most classrooms across the United States. English-only teachers can opt to use bilingual texts to support student learning. Accommodations and/or modifications to support ELLs, students with exceptionalities, gifted students, and/or culturally and linguistically diverse students simultaneously can be difficult, especially when preparing multiple lessons daily. This lesson on phases of the moon is one example of how a teacher might support diverse students' needs through incorporating modified literature circles into instruction. For this lesson, a variety of stories that incorporated culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010) and tied to content were purposefully



selected to extend/enhance student learning of content in a science classroom. To address the needs of multiple students at the same time, the inclusion of multicultural literacy, varying Lexile levels, Spanish and English texts, and a variety of themes was purposeful.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Overall, results from this one lesson are positive. Pre/post assessment data that was collected demonstrated student learning had increased. However, pre/post assessments cannot ascertain which strategy (metacognitive strategies, literature circles, graphic organizers) might have increased student learning because the lesson incorporated multiple supports. Nonetheless, student engagement in this lesson demonstrates how the use of two, three, or even more hands-on, research-based strategies may support ELLs' comprehension of content. The use of metacognitive strategies can enhance students' awareness of "fix-it-up" strategies, and the addition of modified literature circles may enhance content learning. Likewise, providing students with opportunities to use advance organizers/graphic organizers that include drawing pictures and writing down vocabulary definitions in their own words can support learning.

Finally, picture books can provide opportunities to mesh ELAR and science in positive ways that promote learning of science content, engage students in language development, and support students' cultural identities. Incorporating children's literature into instruction to extend learning and/or enhance students' engagement is something that teachers may consider doing more often. Likewise, providing ELLs with opportunities to engage in content area conversations around fictional texts with peers may promote academic growth and support language learning. More research on incorporating modified literature circles into content area lessons may add to the knowledge base, especially literature circles that incorporate multicultural and multilingual texts in students' dominant languages.

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