

THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS, INFORMATIONAL WRITING,
AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

A Project Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
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In (Partial) fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the Degree
Masters of Art

By
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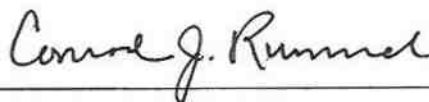
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The Common Core state standards, Informational Writing,
Title of Item and English Language Learners

CCSS, Informational Writing, and EL Learners
3 to 5 : keywords or phrases to describe the item

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Chapter 1- Introduction

The United States of America is currently undergoing a major literacy instructional shift with the adoption of the new educational standards. Currently, forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS 2010). The purpose of the CCSS is to prepare students for college and career readiness. For this reason, the CCSS stresses the importance of informational reading and writing. According to Clark, Jones, and Reutzel (2012), most adult reading and writing involves informal texts (p.265). Graham and Harris (2013) state that the National Commission on Writing reported that current employers use writing as a qualification for hiring white-collar workers and blue-collar workers use writing as part of their jobs (p.39). Furthermore, Graham and Harris note that more people are using writing to communicate with others through the use of e-mails, blogging, texting, and other forms of communication. The Aspen Institute argues that students need to be able to read informational texts in order to make informed decisions and to be successful after graduation. Similarly, Moloch and Bomer (2013) found that informational texts help children improve their sense-making and build their knowledge about the world (p. 206). Graham and Harris argue that students who are poor writers are at a serious disadvantage in succeeding at school, work, or social civic activities (p. 29). In summary, the purpose of this project is to research a process for evaluating the effectiveness of strategies for teaching the Common Core Writing Standards. Consequently, this review of the literature focuses on the importance of informational reading and writing instruction by targeting the following four areas: the connection between informational reading and writing text, the shift between fiction and informational texts, teacher capacity for implementing the new writing and reading standards, and reading and writing strategies.

Chapter 2- Literature Review

Connection Between Informational Reading and Writing Text

Past research indicates a direct connection between informational reading and writing.

According to Moloch and Bomer (2013), “Educational researchers have intensified their call for more informational text in the elementary classroom over the last 15 to 20 years” (p. 206). For this reason, it's no surprise that the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards have emphasized the importance of reading and writing more informational text throughout students' schooling (Clark, Jones, Reutzler, 2012). The English Language Arts CCSS were developed using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) recommendations from the 2009 NAEP Reading Framework. According to Peery (2013), the standards were developed in alignment with the NAEP Reading Framework with the purpose of preparing more students for college and career literacy. Therefore, the new ELA CCSS standards were all evidenced based to support students' learning and for college and career readiness in the 21st century. According to Uecker, Kelly, and Napierala (2014), “Research shows that reading supports writing and writing supports reading” (p.49). For instance, Peery (2013) argues that the new reading standards call attention to the need of more informational text instruction in early grades. According to Peery, “the importance of reading high-quality literature and informational texts even at the very earliest grades cannot be overstated; that goal is one reason those standards are presented in the order they are” (p. 2).

Researchers, educators, and school administrators have worked together for the past decade to develop the CCSS for reading and writing standards. Therefore, Peery believes that these are perhaps the most well-crafted and credible standards a teacher is asked to implement and that the order in which the standards are prioritized is key for student academic success (p. 2). According to Kramer-Vida, Levitt, and Kelly (2012), the CCSS were designed to follow a spiral curriculum model in which students build upon their knowledge and experiences as they attend to the next grade level's standards. In previous years, primary grades have focused on narrative writing rather than expository or

informational writing. In 1989, Newkirk described how elementary students were asked to write “creative” sorts of texts, and secondary students were suddenly asked to write exposition and argument. He identified this split in levels of schooling as “The great approach to literacy”. Likewise, Maloch and Bomer agreed with Newkirk research findings. However, Uecker, Kelly, and Napierala suggest that writing instruction should expand beyond narrative writing. They believe that teachers should include informational writing in order to teach students to use evidence to support their writing. Fortunately, the CCSS eliminates the split in levels of schooling by emphasizing that students read and receive more literacy instruction using informational text throughout a student's K-12 educational experience (Clark, Jones, Reutzel 2012, pp. 265-271).

The Shift Between Fiction and Informational Texts

Currently, our country is undergoing a literacy instructional shift. As teachers implement the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards, they are increasing the number of informational texts used in the classroom in order to meet the demands of literacy instruction for the CCSS. According to The Aspen Institute (2012), “The CCSS explicitly defines the amount of informational text students should be exposed to across the curriculum at each grade level- with the percentages of informational texts increasing steadily from 50% in the elementary grades to 70% by graduation” (p. 1). Peery (2012) argues that teachers use these percentages as a reflective tool to analyze much informational text is being studied in their classroom, but not to reduce literature instruction. The CCSS promotes the increase of informational texts across grade levels because they provide a rich source of knowledge. Also, it prepares students to become college and career ready readers and writers. Evidence suggests that students that are able to read complex information text independently will be able to make better informed decisions and succeed after graduation. According to Maloch and Bomer, “Informational text is a common term, but it can be confusing” (Maloch and Bomer 2013).

There are different kinds of informational texts. Recent researchers have used the term informational and non-fiction to describe any text that presents factual information (Maloch and Bomer

2013). Similarly, Maloch and Bomer state that, “the CCSS employ the term informational texts as a broad term, including biographies, autobiographies; “books about history, social studies, science, and the arts”; “technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps”; and “digital sources on a range of topics” (p. 209). For this reason, the CCSS stresses that informational texts should be taught across all curriculum subjects. Research argues that students need to explore all kinds of text in order to help young children write for different purposes (Maloch and Bomer 2013). According to Ward and Young, “The exposure students have to informational text through classroom libraries, instructional programs, teacher read aloud practices, and teacher guided instruction is limited” (2013). As a result of the lack of exposure to informational text, many students have struggled to comprehend these texts. Past research has indicated that there is a scarcity of informational texts in the primary grades. Although more recent studies have indicated that the inclusion of more informational texts during reading instruction is slowly growing, there is a discrepancy that continues to persist. As a result of this discrepancy, there have been implications for students’ sense making and writing development. Maloch and Bomer state, “Children write what they read” (p. 206). Therefore, students are more successful at composing narratives because they read lots of stories in the primary grades. However, Moloch and Bomer argues that, “If we expect our students to write for any number of purposes, we must provide and teach around texts of varying kinds so that they have models and mentors for their own composing” (p. 206). This indicates that teachers need to provide more reading opportunities in which children are exposed to different types of texts. For example, the CCSS suggests that students read biographies and memoirs, speeches, opinion pieces and argumentative essays, and historical, scientific or technical accounts. According to Peery (2013), “text selection must be predicated upon the learning goals, which are derived from the standards” (p. 6). Teachers need to provide learning opportunities where multiple texts are used to match the tasks. These tasks should demonstrate what students can do and have learned from the lesson. Furthermore, Maloch and Bomer noted trade books are one type of information books that are receiving the attention of

many educators and are being used more in the classrooms. Saul and Dieckman state that, “informational trade books are children's books that are mainly designed to teach their readers about the real world” (qtd in Maloch and Bomer 2013, p. 208). Barbara A. Ward and Terrell A. Young compiled a list of informational trade books in their journal article called *Looking at Informational Trade Books Through a Common Core Lens*. In their article, they highlight several information books that could be used in the classroom across all grade levels.

Teacher Capacity for Implementing Reading and Writing Standards

The CCSS provide clear and concise standards to guide students' learning. For this reason, the Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach. Teachers are not mandated to teach a particular writing process or reading program. As a result, teachers have the freedom to determine how to teach the reading and writing standards (CCSS 2010). In terms of writing instruction, Graham and Harris reported that the CCSS provides an effective road map for writing instruction. The writing standards provide clear benchmarks at each grade level and across grades. Furthermore, Graham and Harris suggest that the CCSS requires a radical shift in how writing is taught. Teachers need to change how they teach writing in their classroom to help students meet or exceed the CCSS. However, Gilbert, Graham, and Kiuahara reported that, “many teachers indicate that they are not well prepared to teach writing” (p. 30). The lack of preparation of teachers influences teacher capacity. However, D. Bickmore, S. Bickmore and Dowell (2013) argue that teacher capacity is key for the successful implementation of writing instruction. They therefore suggest two steps for building teacher capacity. “First everyone should understand the current nature of writing instruction in the school. Second, the principal should determine what faculty members understand about writing instruction and how they define writing” (p. 35). Similarly, other researchers suggest writing instruction should be a school-wide responsibility. Uecker, Kelly, and Napierala argue that, “schools must coordinate and collaborate at all levels by creating opportunities for all students to gain the knowledge and skills needed for their undefined futures” (p. 1). Therefore, professional

development is necessary to support teacher capacity. According to Kramer-Vida, Levitt, and Kelly (2012), “Teachers need to be supported by involved administrators, knowledgeable professional developers, and long-term professional development sessions as they personally make the “hard decisions,” and work through the “hard parts” (p. 107). Likewise, Graham and Harris state that, “ongoing professional development will be needed for virtually all teachers in schools if the students are to meet writing benchmarks” (p. 31).

Strategies and Recommendations Reading and Writing

Although our country is in a transitional phase, recent research suggests few recommendations for the successful implementation of writing and reading standards. Kramer-Vida, Levitt, and Kelly (2012) suggest that writing instruction should begin in kindergarten. “According to Avery (1993), young children are able to write, are motivated to compose, and can write about information, their interests, and their own personal experiences” (Kramer-Vida, Levitt, Kelly 2012). Clark, Jones, and Reutzel (2012) suggest that young children should be taught text structures and features of instructional text in order to help children learn how information text are composed and organized as required by the CCSS. Clark, Jones, and Reutzel noted that past research by Meyer, Wijkumar, Coker (2007); Read et al. (2008); and Donovan and Smolkin (2006) has shown that teaching children text structures and features has helped them improve their reading comprehension and writing composition. According to Clark, Jones and Reutzel, “Informational texts are organized around several conventionally accepted text structures: description, sequence, problem/solution, compare/contrast, and cause/effect” (p. 266). Therefore, teaching text features will help students read different kinds of informational texts. Lastly, D. Bickmore, S. Bickmore, and Dowell (2013) suggest using a set of tools to assess how writing is taught. One of these tools consists of a teacher writing a bingo card. They noted, “A bingo card tool helps organize information and promotes professional conversations that improve teacher capacity” (p. 35).

Summary

The English Language Arts CCSS has emphasized the importance of teaching informational/explanatory text writing in the primary grades in order to prepare students for college and career readiness. Students are now being taught at primary grades how to read a variety of informational texts in order to support their writing development of informational writing. Thus, we are currently in a transition phase where the use of informational texts is steadily increasing in the classroom from 50% in the primary grades to 70% by graduation. The CCSS provides clear expectations for student learning. However, they don't specify how teachers should teach the writing and reading curriculum. Consequently, teacher capacity is important for the successful implementation of the CCSS. Teachers need to know reading and writing strategies that support their writing and reading instruction. However, since we are currently in a transitional period of the implementation of the CCSS, there is limited research at this point that suggests how to support English Learners (EL) writing informational/explanatory texts. Further research is needed to find out what strategies are useful to help support the EL reading and writing informational texts.

Chapter 3-Methods

The English Language Arts CCSS for writing focuses on three text types and purposes of writing: opinion, narrative, and informative/explanatory texts. However, educational research has emphasized the importance of reading and writing more informational texts throughout students' schooling (Clark, Jones, Reutzler, 2012). According to Clark, Jones, and Reutzler, most adult reading and writing involves informal texts. The CCSS highlights the importance of informational texts to prepare students for the reading and writing demands of college, career, and life. Thus, the CCSS promotes the increase of informational texts across grade levels. Therefore, this study will focus on literacy standard 1.2 "Write informative/explanatory texts in which they name a topic, supply some facts about the topic, and provide some sense of closure" (CCSS 2010). Currently, the CCSS are being adopted across the US throughout K-12. However, there is limited research that identifies effective instructional strategies that support EL students with informative/explanatory writing. For this reason, I plan to use strategies from Project GLAD (The Guided Language Acquisition Design) to differentiate instruction and support EL students during writing instruction.

This study takes place in a thriving school District. The District began as a one-room schoolhouse in 1885. Now, the District serves more than 4,800 students through six elementary schools and two middle schools. Student enrollments are between 500-700 students in the elementary schools and 700 students at the middle schools. Classrooms average 30 students per class in kindergarten through third grade, and 35 students in fourth through eighth grade. The District strives to provide world-class education to all students. It offers educational services to meet the diverse needs of students. Some educational services include The Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, The Dual Immersion Academy (DIA) program, The Migrant Program, and The English Learner Program.

The elementary school, in which the study takes place, was established in 2001. The School is centrally located in a suburban community on the outskirts of the city. The school currently serves 554

students Kindergarten to Fifth grade. All students are eligible to receive free breakfast and lunch. Approximately fifty percent of the school population is English Learners (EL). All EL students receive 45 minutes of English Language Development daily instruction and are required to take California English Language Development Test (CELDT) each year.

This research study takes place in my first grade classroom. The class is comprised of 27 students, 11 boys and 16 girls. They are between the ages of 6 and 7 years old. The majority (93%) of the students are Hispanic. Of 27 students, 17 are English Language Learners (ELL). All ELL students, reported Spanish as their first language.

The participants in this study consist of 17 first grade EL students. Participants were selected based on their home language survey that parents filled out when they enrolled their child in school. Scores from the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) were also used to identify each student's English proficiency. The CELDT is administered once a year to all EL students. The CELDT assesses the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. The CELDT results are reported by the following performance levels: Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, and Advanced. Thus, based on the 2012-2013 CELDT scores, 5 students are in the Beginning level, 6 in the Early Intermediate, 4 in the Intermediate, and 2 in the Early Advanced.

This study will focus on three strategies from Project GLAD (The Guided Language Acquisition Design). This research project is scheduled for two weeks and will focus on Penguins. The purpose of this study is to identify the GLAD strategies that differentiate instruction and help support EL students write informational writing. The Project GLAD is an instructional model that promotes English language acquisition, academic achievement, and cross-cultural skills. I was first introduced to the Project GLAD in 2011 by our school's literacy coach. Then, in 2012, I received one week professional development training. The training consisted of two parts. The first part was a staff development workshop where I learned the theory and research that supported the effectiveness of Project GLAD model. The second part of the training was a demonstration session in a second grade

classroom where several GLAD strategies were demonstrated with the students. Throughout this classroom demonstration, I learned practical strategies that promote positive and effective interactions among students. Furthermore, last year, I have received follow-up training through GLAD reunions in which I learned to use GLAD strategies to help students meet the new CCSS. Consequently, there are three GLAD strategies that I believe would best support EL students write informational writing. These strategies are Picture File Cards, Pictorial Input Charts, and a Process Grid. These GLAD strategies can be used throughout all content areas. Also, they provide the practice and scaffolding EL students need to become better writers.

The Picture File Cards is a guided oral practice strategy used to develop higher-level thinking and build language. Before the penguin unit begins, I plan to look for images, photographs, or pictures that are of high interest or emotionally provoking about penguins. The penguin unit will begin by having about five Picture File Cards on each of the six tables in the classroom. Students will be asked to walk around the classroom and observe the Picture File Cards that are on each table. Then, students will have the opportunity to come together as a whole group, at the rug area, to discuss their observations. During the next couple of days, students will use these Picture File Cards to sort and classify penguin characteristics.

The Pictorial Input Chart is a strategy used for direct teaching of information. The Pictorial Input Chart is a strategy based on the research by Marcial Brechtel and Linnea Haley, Susan Kovalik, and John Shefelbine. This strategy takes approximately 30 to 40 minutes of direct instruction. This strategy will be used to front load information about the Emperor Penguin, African Penguin, and Fairy Penguin. Students will be asked to sit in our meeting area as a whole group. Each day I will present a penguin by sketching and labeling information pertaining to each penguin. Then students will be asked to read a variety of informational texts and add information to our Pictorial Input Charts.

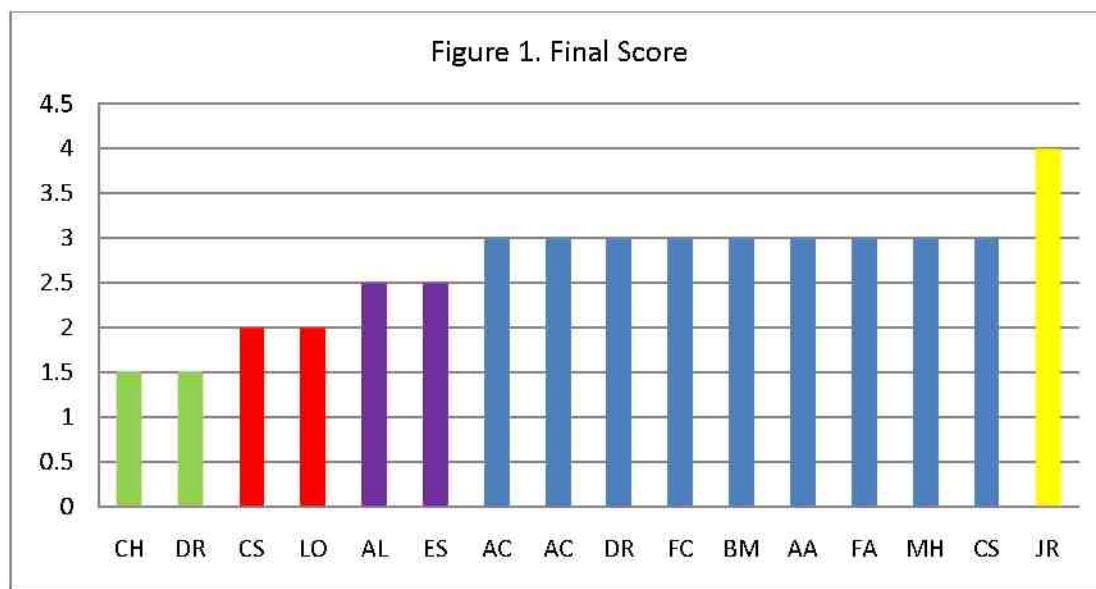
The Process Grid is a reading and writing strategy used to organize information and develop an essay. This strategy is based on research by Sharon Bassano and has been adapted by Project GLAD.

The Process Grid, as the name implies, is a grid with categories across the top and down the side. The Process Grid that will be used in this study will have the following categories across the top: penguin, food, body, habitat, and breeding and will have the following categories down the side: Emperor penguin, African Penguin, and Fairy Penguin (Little Penguin). The information for each penguin will be color coded. Students, as a whole group, will use the information they learn throughout the unit to fill out a Process Grid about penguins.

After all three GLAD strategies have been implemented, students will be asked to write informative texts about a penguin, supply some facts about that penguin, and provide some sense of closure. Students will be encouraged to use the information from the Pictorial Charts and the Process Grid to plan and write their essays. EL students' writing will be graded based on a Teachers College Reading and Writing Project First Grade Informational Reading/ Writing Performance Assessment Rubric. This is a four level rubric: Novice, Developing, Effective, and Highly Effective that grades students based on Focus, Structure, Development, Research/ Reading, and Concepts of print/ Language Conventions. The desired result for this writing assignment is that students score a minimum of a level two. A level two means that students are developing writing stage and are working towards being effective and highly effective writers.

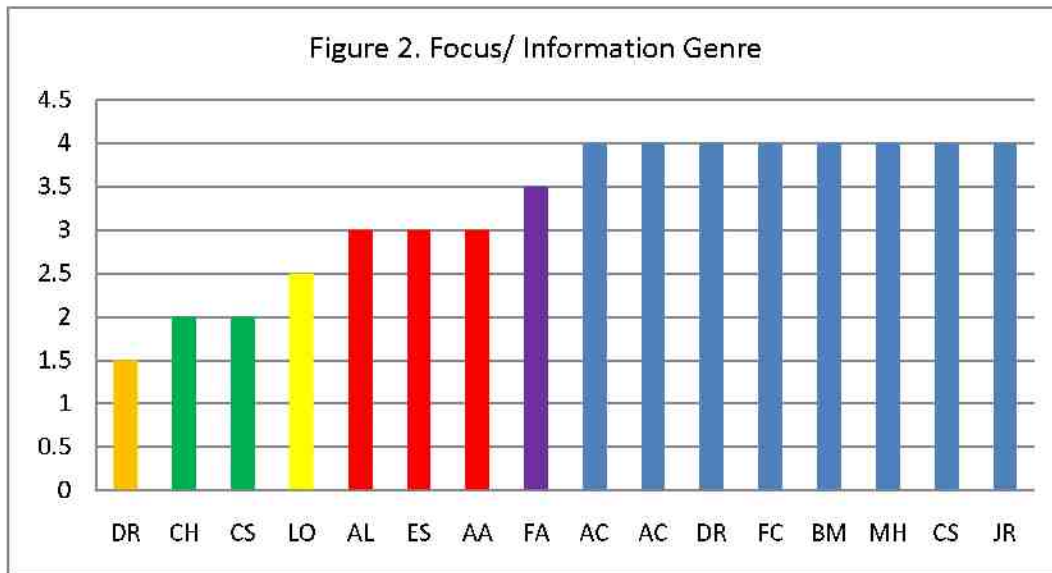
Chapter 4- Interpretation and Results

The completion of this research project took a total of twelve days. Sixteen out of seventeen students successfully completed the informational writing assignment about penguins. One student at the Beginner Level had several absences throughout these twelve days and was unable to complete the assignment. Throughout the writing instruction, students were engaged and highly motivated to learn about penguins. Students' informational writing final scaled scores averaged to 2.6875. (See Figure 1.) Their scores ranged from 1.5 to 4. Fourteen students scored at a level two or higher which meant that 87% met my goal of achieving at least a level two. There were two students that scored a level one. One of these students is a newcomer from El Salvador. This student had both limited English proficiency and limited formal schooling which influenced his writing performance. However, the majority of students' writing clearly demonstrated their ability to write informative texts in which they name a topic and supplied some facts about the topic. Students referenced back to the class discussions of the Picture File Cards, the penguins' Pictorial Input Charts, and the Process Grid to write informative facts about penguins.

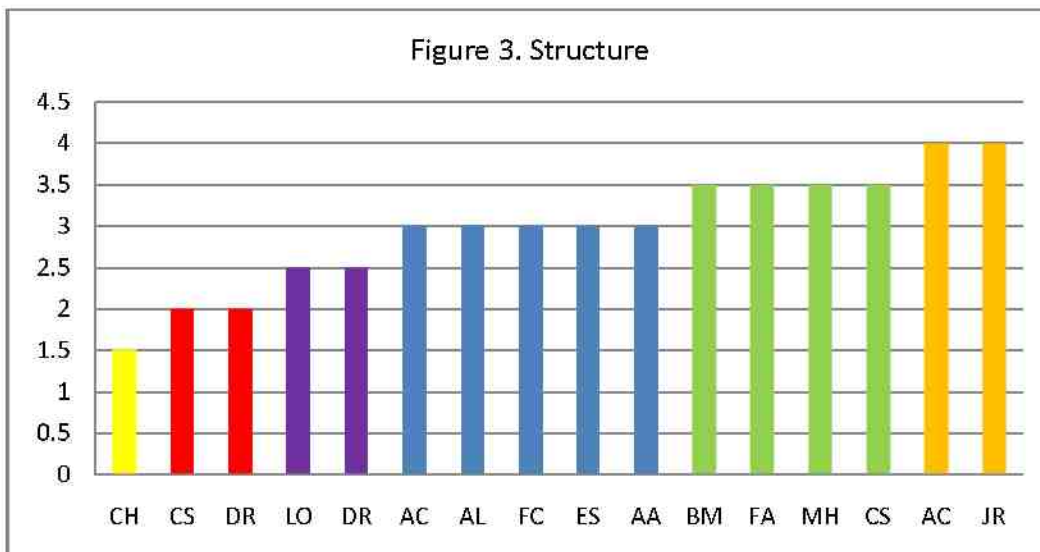


To better understand the students' final scores, I analyzed the students' writing performance for each of the following categories: Focus/Informational Genre, Structure, Development, Research/Reading, Concepts of Print/ Language Conventions.

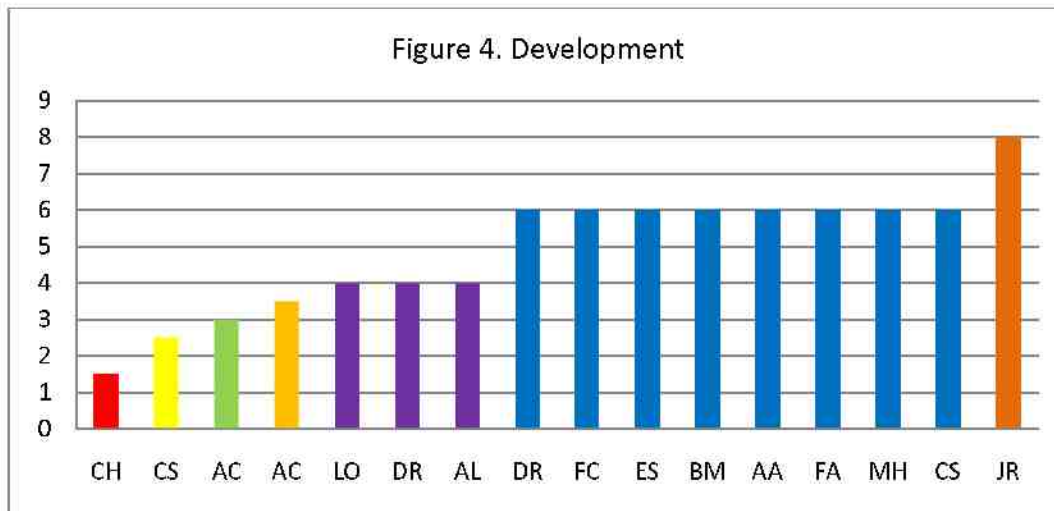
In the category of Focus/ Informational Genre, student scaled scores averaged to 3.28. (See Figure 2.) Their scores ranged from 1.5 to 4. Most students were effective and highly-effective in demonstrating that they can write about a topic and provide details that informed about the topic. Students' writing was clearly informational with minimal opinion sentences.



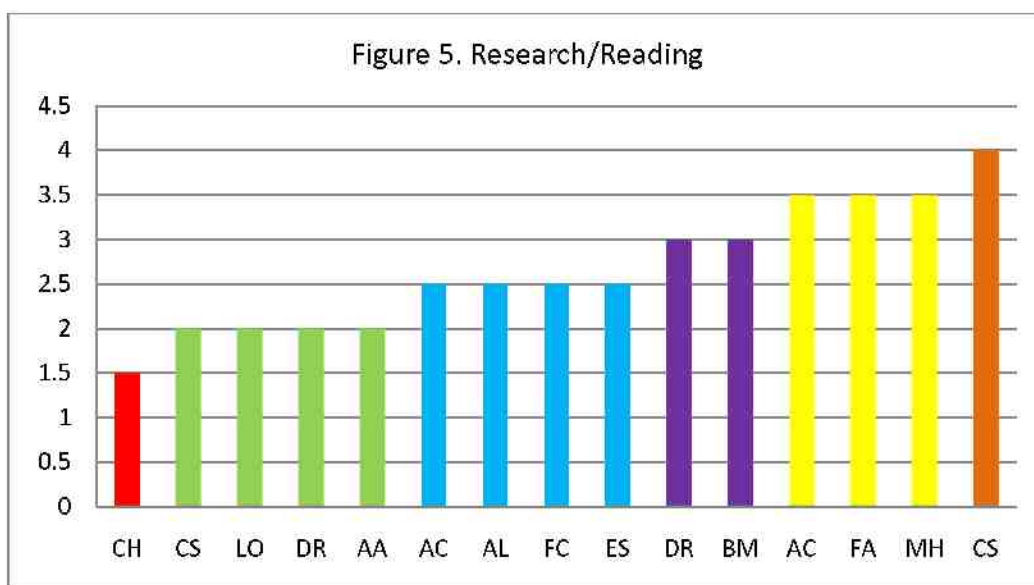
For the category of Structure, student scaled scores averaged to 2.875. (See Figure 3.) The students' scores ranged from 1.5 to 4. All students used the Process Grid to help generate their sentences. The Process Grid was a useful tool for students while writing because the information about penguins was organized into categories. The categories in the Process Grid helped the students stay focus on a type of penguin. Students use these categories as headings for each page of their writing.



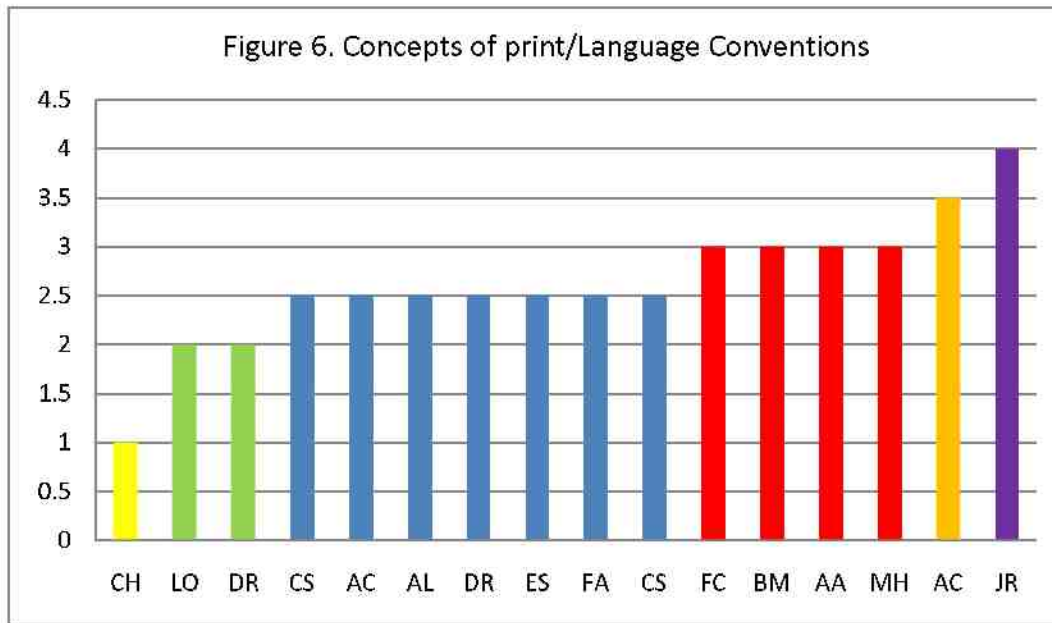
In the category of Development, students' averaged scaled scores were 4.9. (See Figure 4.) However, for the category Development, I doubled the points as instructed by the rubric. This is because development counts more towards the overall success of the piece than other individual categories. For the Development of students' writing, students were able to provide some factual information with pictures and simple sentences.



In the category of Research/Reading, students' scaled score averaged to 2.75. (See figure 5). All students were successful on providing at least one detail on multiple pages. There were few students that included multiple details on multiple pages. Students used the Pictorial Charts about penguins to get important vocabulary and descriptive words.



Lastly, in the category for Concepts of Print/ Language Conventions, students' average scaled score was 2.625. (See Figure 6.) Students' scores ranged from 1 to 4. Most students writing showed directionality and sense of word, with letters generally representing each dominant sound in a word and spaces between many of the words.



The results described above suggest that using the GLAD strategies of Picture File Cards, Pictorial Charts, and Process Grids were effective in helping EL students write informational texts. I was pleasantly surprised by the students' writing performance. Students exceeded my expectations of writing informational texts. I was impressed how students could extract information from the Pictorial Charts and Process Grid to generate informative sentences about a topic. Prior to teaching this penguin unit, students hadn't been taught using these GLAD strategies. Once students had the opportunities to read informational texts, discuss Picture File Cards, and working together on filling in the Process Grid, they demonstrated more confidence in their writing ability and were more motivated to write. These strategies clearly supported students writing by helping them stay organized and on topic.

Chapter 5- Conclusion/ Next Steps

After teaching the unit on penguins, I have identified several areas of improvement and recommendation. The first recommendation would be to do one or two Pictorials Charts per unit. For the penguin unit, I did three Pictorial Charts on different penguins. Three Pictorial Charts for a two week unit were too many, especially since it was the first time I introduced that strategy. Another recommendation would be to provide many opportunities for oral language practice where students practice speaking in complete sentences. I would recommend providing sentence frames for a more structured academic talk. Furthermore, using sentence frames that are appropriate to their EL levels can also help students write more complex sentences. Since I didn't provide sentence frames throughout this Penguin Unit, I noticed that many students' sentences were simple or fragments. Lastly, I would recommend allowing the students at a Beginner Level to dictate a sentence if needed. For example, my student who is a newcomer from El Salvador is unable to write down a sentence because he is in the process of learning letters names and sounds, but he is able to communicate in simple sentences. Next time, I will take this into account when grading his writing.

Although further work is required to gain a more complete understanding of what the best teaching strategies to support EL informational writing are, the GLAD strategies have clearly demonstrated positive result on students' informational writing performance. GLAD strategies can help to support the rigorous demands of the new Common Core Writing Standards. The next step would be to incorporate other GLAD strategies such as the Cooperative Strip Paragraph or the Sentence Patterning Chart during writing instruction and analyze how these strategies support students to write different types of writing.

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