

# THE STORY OF SAM

## Advancing Proficiency in Reluctant Learners

By Tammy Dann

### GETTING TO KNOW SAM

From the first time we met, it was clear that Sam hated Spanish. He joined my class in third grade, with no desire to learn the language. He was the master of avoidance and could side-step all of my efforts to teach him Spanish. At the end of the year, he transferred to a different school having learned much less than I wanted him to know.

Sam struggled in all of his classes. He changed schools three times in seven years and was absent often, creating gaps in his education. When he was in school, everything about him screamed out that he did not want to be there. Teachers were more accustomed to seeing the top of Sam's head or the scowl on his face than his smile.

Sam was different from my students who struggle to learn or have difficulty paying attention in class. With those children, close proximity, adaptations to tasks, or more support helped them find success in Spanish class. None of those strategies worked for Sam because he was a reluctant learner; one who not only had difficulty learning the content but also did not want to learn it.

### MAKING THE MOST OF A SECOND CHANCE

Sam was not the first reluctant learner I have taught, but he was one of the most difficult to figure out. I was given a second chance to make a difference with Sam when he returned to my school for fifth grade.

From previous experience with Sam, I knew that I needed a way to get Sam's attention all the time and motivate him to learn, so I worked on improving our relationship. I wanted him to realize that I was an adult in

his life who cared about him. I hoped, with a better relationship, he would work harder in my class and make the growth I knew he was capable of making.

The only problem with my plan was that he hated Spanish.

I was fighting against negative comments he heard at home about Spanish speakers and years of being forced to learn a language he did not want to learn. To overcome those barriers, I did something I never do: I spoke in English.

I am the hard-core, Spanish 99 percent of the time Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) teacher who speaks English in class once or twice a year and only in fourth through sixth grade. Even in the hallways during the day, before and after school, I speak with the kids in Spanish. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and I knew what I gained by using English with Sam outside of class would ultimately benefit his Spanish skills in class.

I watched for Sam in the hallways and chatted with him in English each time we crossed paths. We eventually got to the point where I could joke with him and he would smile. It took a while, but I saw results in Spanish class. Sam paid closer attention and performed most of the requested tasks without the passive-aggressive behavior he had used during third grade, but I wanted more than just compliance; I wanted Sam to have an active role in his education and be more motivated.

### THE AH-HA MOMENT

I use LinguaFolio Jr. with my students in fourth through sixth grade because I want

to create more reflective learners who take ownership for their learning. The language biography packet is where children record their personal language learning history, their preferred learning activities and the evaluation of their progress through the use of can-do statements: unit and program objectives written in child-friendly language. Children monitor their Spanish progress throughout the year by revisiting the can-do statements at the beginning of the year and the end of each trimester.

Looking through Sam's language biography and his reflections on the unit can-do statements in fifth grade showed me that, even though he made measurable growth, he did not see it. He performed fairly well in class and on assessments but marked that he could not do the task when reflecting on the can-do statements. I reminded him of his success, and he changed the response but did it so I would leave him alone and not because he believed he was successful. It was then that I realized the root of the problem was his negative self-perception. He did not view himself as a good student in any area and especially not in Spanish. I needed a new tool to change his self-concept.

While Sam was in sixth grade, I added a list of effective learning strategies to the language biography (see table on opposite page) that I created after analyzing the strategies used by the successful learners in my class. I developed the list because my struggling and reluctant learners needed a better tool for identifying the right strategies and even my successful learners need a reminder sometimes. Like the can-do statements, the

children would evaluate their use of the strategies four times a year. For the first round of reflections, I knew I needed to guide the students through the process and discuss with them why these strategies were vital to their success in my class, and I knew that talk needed to be in English.

I speak in English so rarely that many of my kids forget that I speak English, and any time I switch to English during class the response is the same: jaws drop, eyes are wide open and there is silence. When it was time to talk about effective language learning strategies in English, I capitalized on their undivided attention to present my thoughts.

I began my speech explaining that there are not children who are "good" at Spanish or who are "bad" at Spanish; instead, there are kids who use the right strategies and those who do not. If they believed they are "bad" at Spanish, they needed to change the strategies they used and they would be more successful. After my speech, I asked the children to reflect on their own use of the strategies. I read through each reflection and when a child's reflection did not match the behavior in class, we discussed each of our perceptions of the use of the strategy.

After our focus on strategies, I was sure that was the key to turning things around for Sam. I was wrong. I saw many of my struggling learners start to make changes that led to more success in class, but Sam continued to do the minimum and did not apply himself or seem to enjoy class at all. A few Spanish classes later, I asked Sam to talk with me in the hallway. I told him that during the next Spanish class I wanted him to focus on the strategy "I will watch Sra. Dann" and I did not care if he did anything else for the rest of the class period, just watch me. I promised him that if he used that strategy, Spanish

strategies	beginning of the year	end of trimester 1	end of trimester 2	end of trimester 3
I watch Senora Dann when she is talking.				
I watch my classmates when I do not understand.				
I listen when it is not my turn to speak.				
I listen for words I already know.				
I use my resources to help me understand.				
I ask for help when I do not understand.				

class would be less torturous for him.

As I walked by Sam during the next Spanish class, I whispered, "Remember, all you have to do is watch me." For the entire class period, I saw something other than the top of his head from across the room; I saw his eyes and the spark of understanding. He understood what I said! He was far from loving class, but he experienced enough success that day to try again the next Spanish class. The successes began to build, and I saw him producing more and better Spanish than ever before.

My favorite Sam memory happened near the end of his sixth grade year. In the fall I administered a writing assessment where the students wrote a friendly letter, entirely in Spanish, to a pretend child in Mexico. They could not use any resources, just what they remembered. In the spring, the students took the assessment again, and once it was scored, I passed back both the fall and the spring assessments. Sam wrote one sentence for the fall assessment. He filled three-fourths of the page with text on the spring assessment. Before I collected the papers from everyone, I asked Sam to hold up both of his assessments and show the class why he should win the award for most improved. He showed his peers both papers and smiled shyly as they all clapped for him, some of them with mouths gaping open.

Not every day is a perfect Spanish class for Sam. If he misses several days of school, getting back into the groove requires a prompt from me: "Remember to watch me, and you

will understand better." The bad days are now few and far between, but I know when I see the top of his head instead of his eyes I have a better tool to get him back on track. He occasionally raises his hand and gives answers, which is progress. More importantly, he has learned that when he applies the right strategies he can be successful in my class, and I hope it is a lesson that he applies to other areas in his life.

### APPLYING WHAT I LEARNED

Sam taught me a lot about how to better reach my reluctant learners. I am now much more proactive than reactive. I pull the kids aside much sooner and talk strategies, and then I pile on the positive reinforcement. When they slip, we immediately start talking strategies to get them back on the path to learning. Some kids catch on right away and others need more time, more attention and more love. I am grateful for the second chance to teach Sam because it made me a better teacher for all of my students.

Tammy Dann has been a Spanish (FLES) teacher in the West Des Moines Community School District since 1999. She served NNELL as a state and a regional representative and Early Language Learning Advocate. She is currently NNELL's membership secretary.



# Communicating in Languages Other Than English Part I

by Tammy Dann

## STANDARD 1.1: STUDENTS ENGAGE IN CONVERSATIONS, PROVIDE AND OBTAIN INFORMATION, EXPRESS FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS, AND EXCHANGE OPINIONS.

This standard focuses on interpersonal (between people) communication. If you visit your child's language class you may see methods, strategies and activities that were not used when you learned a foreign language.

*Total Physical Response* combines listening with physical movement. Actions are used to represent vocabulary taught in the target language. This is a very engaging way to introduce new vocabulary in a meaningful way.

With the *Natural Approach*, teachers work to make the language meaningful and memorable. In the beginning, the focus is on listening. The teacher uses a sequence of questions that gradually shift students from the listening to the speaking mode. This method is similar to the way in which your child learned his/her native language.

Some teachers use *passwords* or *language ladders*. These are selected phrases that are memorized as chunks. They are taught, and then posted with a visual to help the children remember the meaning of the words.

*Rhymes, chants, and songs* are fun ways to teach children chunks of language. Often when a child cannot remember a word in the target language, the teacher only needs to hum the song where s/he learned the word and the child will be able to produce the forgotten word. These also provide insight into the target culture.

In the early second language class, you may see *partner and small group activities* that are designed to allow your child to practice the language with different peers. There can be information exchanges where the children are interviewing or surveying each other, finding similarities and differences, or following and giving directions. These

activities are student-centered and build on students' language skills and interests.

### What can I do at home?

- Have your child teach you the actions and vocabulary that s/he is learning at school.
- Request a list of vocabulary from your child's teacher and create your own passwords or language ladders in your home.
- Have your child teach you any songs, chants, or rhymes s/he is learning at school.

## STANDARD 1.2: STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET WRITTEN AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE ON A VARIETY OF TOPICS.

This standard focuses on the interpretation and understanding of written and spoken language. It involves one-way listening and reading in which the learner works with a variety of materials.

Listening is considered by many teachers and researchers to be the cornerstone of language development (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004). As children are beginning to learn a language, their teacher will focus on developing their listening skills in the language. In order to develop students' listening skills, teachers must use the target language for classroom instruction.

*Storytelling* is often used in a language class. At the beginning of a child's language experience, the story will contain a large number of visuals and actions to help convey the meaning. By introducing stories in the target language, the teacher is able to introduce vocabulary in a meaningful way and he/she can also teach certain aspects of the culture from which the story comes.

Reading allows children to draw on their own experiences. They will often work with longer texts and authentic materials. Many of the pre-reading strategies used by the classroom teacher are used by the language teacher.

### What can I do at home?

- Look for authentic literature such as newspapers, websites, and magazines in the target language to share with your child.
- Look through the materials together to find familiar words. Make a list of words you both recognize.
- Use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words.
- Listen to songs or watch TV shows in the target language *with* your child.
- Simply buying videos and asking your child to watch them alone will not help to develop any second language skills on his/her part.
- Listen for and write down for familiar words. Discuss with your child what you hear.

## CONCLUSION

The three modes of communication do not occur in isolation during instruction. Your child's teacher will have a variety of activities that help your child develop his/her interpersonal and interpretive skills in the target language.

Information about the methods, strategies, and activities discussed in this newsletter were taken from: Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C. A. (2004) *Languages and Children: Making the Match*. Boston: Pearson.

*NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today at [http://www.nnell.org/state\\_reps.shtml](http://www.nnell.org/state_reps.shtml). We would love to hear from you!*

*This article was written by Tammy Dann. It is full of tips and resources that can be found at [www.nnell.org](http://www.nnell.org). Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students' backpacks. Send suggestions and comments to Janine Erickson, NNELL's Early Language Advocate: [jerickson@nnell.org](mailto:jerickson@nnell.org).*

# Communicating in Languages Other Than English Part II

by Tammy Dann

## STANDARD 1.3: STUDENTS PRESENT INFORMATION, CONCEPTS, AND IDEAS TO AN AUDIENCE OF LISTENERS OR READERS ON A VARIETY OF TOPICS.

In the past, many foreign language programs focused solely on reading, writing, and verb conjugation. Students left the programs knowing a lot about the language, but not necessarily being able to communicate in it. Today, it is vital that language learners are able to speak, read, and comprehend a language. As with the interpretive and interpersonal modes, language teachers are creating opportunities in their classrooms that allow students to develop real-world skills in the presentational mode. Most often the presentational mode is one-way speaking and writing.

In the beginning of his/her second language experience, your child will likely produce written and spoken language that contains learned patterns and will appear similar to English. As he/she progresses through the second language program, your child will begin to acquire authentic patterns and use appropriate styles, pronunciation and intonation patterns for the language.

Speaking performances can include plays, songs, student-created skits, short speeches, and even Power Point presentations. After learning a story, students can write their own versions and then orally share their stories. These stories can be performed by the students themselves or through the use of puppets. Commercials for products or advertisements for vacation destinations can also be created and performed as students develop more advanced language skills.

Speaking performances can take place both within and outside of the language class. The students can perform for their peers in their own class, other classes, as part of a school assembly, or for their parents. Their presentations can be recorded or taped to be shared later. These performances are

often considered to be a culminating activity for a unit.

Writing in the presentational mode goes beyond doing an assignment for the teacher and allows students to mimic writing experiences that happen in the real world. As with speaking, the audience for the writing is changed from the teacher to other students, native speakers of the language, and even family members. Students' written performances can be in the form of poems, letters, postcards, stories and emails. In the beginning your child will reproduce writing he/she has copied from the teacher or another text. As he/she progresses through the language program, more creativity and personalization will be seen in your child's writing.

### What can I do at home?

- When your child is preparing for a speaking performance in his/her second language class, have him/her perform for you.
- Have your child retell you stories he/she is learning in class.
- If possible, write each other notes in the target language.
- If possible, write poetry together in the target language.
- Have your child teach you the songs he/she is learning in class and sing them together.
- As his/her second language skills continue to develop, try to create skits together in the target language and have the entire family perform in the skit.
- Have your child write letters in the target language to family members in other parts of the world/United States.
- Put on puppet plays of stories your child has learned in his/her language class.

Information about the methods, strategies, and activities were taken from *Languages and Children: Making the Match* by Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg.

You can read more about the Communication Standard in Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, available from ACTFL.

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