

ENHANCING EMERGENT BILINGUAL (EB) LEARNERS PERFORMANCE ON THE STAAR TEST: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS WITH CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSE QUESTIONS (CRQS)

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Abstract

This study explores the performance of two emergent bilingual (EB) learners—a fifth-grade girl from refugee parents and a seventh-grade boy with university professor parents—on Constructed Response Questions (CRQs) in the STAAR test. Using qualitative methods such as interviews and writing sample analysis, the research evaluates their responses based on the STAAR rubric, focusing on idea development and language conventions. The study introduces strategies to support EB learners, including outlining, thesis formulation, logical flow, looping, word association games, and peer editing. Structured approaches like the RACE (Restate, Answer, Cite, Explain), STAR (Scan, Target, Actively read, Respond), and RAPP (Restate, Answer, Prove, Provide) strategies are also recommended to enhance writing skills. Key factors influencing writing proficiency, such as home environments and school support, are highlighted. The study offers four recommendations for CRQ preparation: understanding the test format and rubric, analyzing prompts and examples, planning responses strategically, and managing time effectively. By applying these targeted strategies and practicing consistently, EB learners can overcome challenges, improve writing skills, and approach CRQ assessments with confidence, leading to academic success.

Keywords: *Constructive Response Questions (CRQs), STAAR test, Emergent Bilingual (EB) learners, Instructional strategies, Rubric evaluation, Academic progress*

Emergent Bilingual (EB) is a term used to describe students who are learning English while also developing their home language (Renaissance Edwords, 2024). Enhancing the writing performance of Emergent Bilingual within the context of Constructive Response Questions (CRQ) on the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) test is a multifaceted endeavor crucial to their academic success. EB students face distinctive challenges, grappling with linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural disparities when articulating responses in English. The necessity to optimize their writing skills not only aligns with educational standards but also underscores the imperative to provide tailored support and strategies that empower these learners to navigate the complexities of written expression effectively.

The STAAR test, particularly its Constructive Response Essay section, demands a unique set of skills—requiring students to synthesize information, articulate coherent responses, and provide textual evidence to support their viewpoints (Wilson, 2018). For EB, mastering these elements while accounting for language proficiency disparities poses a significant hurdle. Therefore, an exploration of targeted methodologies and instructional approaches becomes

pivotal in honing the writing abilities of EBs, ensuring their capacity to perform proficiently within the parameters of the STAAR test's writing components.

The study concentrated on assessing the writing proficiency of two students who were emergent bilingual learners. Its objective was to pinpoint crucial strategies, especially those fostering writing skills beneficial for excelling in the Constructive Response Questions section of the STAAR exam. This research delved into key factors influencing their learning journey, specifically during the writing stages, with the intent of devising effective strategies to enhance these students' writing competencies.

Theoretical framework

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023), the percentage of public school students in the United States who were English learners (ELs) was higher in fall 2020 (10.3 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2010 (9.2 percent, or 4.5 million students). In fall 2020, the percentage of public school students who were ELs ranged from 0.7 percent in West Virginia to 20.1 percent in Texas. Meanwhile, the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2021) reported that in the 2019-2020 school year, Texas had approximately 1,636,000 English learners (ELs) enrolled in public schools. These students accounted for roughly 19.6% of the total student population in the state. The majority of ELs in Texas were Hispanic (1,619,845 students, or 87.3%), followed by Asian (90,845 students, or 4.9%), African American (43,070 students, or 2.3%) and White (36,863 students, or 2%).

Corujo (2023) revealed that EL students often face challenges in perceiving cognitive and linguistic deficiencies as well as sociocultural differences when learning to write in English. She further argued that addressing these challenges requires providing direct instruction in topics such as grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Additionally, Corujo emphasized the significance of considering students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds to establish meaningful connections between languages. How can teachers effectively equip EL students with the skills to become confident and capable writers? According to Corujo's findings (2023), it involves not only delivering direct instruction in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary but also integrating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into the learning process to bridge the gap between languages and enhance their writing abilities.

In her 2018 study, Wilson outlined a comprehensive approach to STAAR writing, structured around a five-step process aimed at optimizing student performance. The process begins with two rounds of pre-writing, each lasting 10 minutes, during which brainstorming techniques such as idea webs, listing, and outlining are utilized to generate and organize ideas. Wilson emphasizes that the initial draft need not be perfect, urging students to prioritize structure and content over polish. Strategies for enhancing the introduction, reason paragraphs, and conclusion are provided, emphasizing the importance of clarity and coherence. During the revising phase, attention is directed towards incorporating transitions, varying sentence structures, and expanding on supporting points. The editing process focuses on refining mechanics such as capitalization, usage, punctuation, and spelling. Finally, in preparing the final draft, students are guided through formatting considerations and urged to conduct a thorough

review before submission. Wilson's approach offers a systematic framework for tackling STAAR writing tasks, promoting both efficiency and effectiveness in student writing endeavors.

Liborio (2022) underscored the importance of incorporating textual evidence in responses as mandated by the TEKS standards in Texas. They delineated two types of essay questions: the short-constructed response (SCR), typically focusing on a paragraph or section, and the extended constructed response. Liborio proposed utilizing the SCR planner, employing the RAC (Restate, Answer, and Cite) method with distinct colors to effectively tackle SCR questions. Evaluation of SCR questions utilizes a 3-point scoring system, with points awarded based on the correctness of the answer and the relevance of supporting textual evidence. Liborio offered examples of SCR prompts, such as inferring reasons for character nicknames, with accompanying recommendations for scaffolding strategies to support student comprehension and response skills. Practical tips included starting with fiction, progressing through various genres, and employing techniques such as underlining key words and practicing SCRs regularly through read-alouds and independent work, fostering gradual independence and proficiency.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary influences on CRQ performance for emergent bilingual learners?
2. To what extent does the STAAR rubric aid in assessing students' writing skills?
3. What advantages can classroom teachers gain from examining CRQ samples of their students?
4. Which strategies prove most effective for enhancing development of ideas and language conventions?
5. What advice can be provided for children undertaking the STAAR CRQ test overall?

Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to examine the writing proficiency of two emergent bilingual students, identify their most struggling areas, and offer effective strategies for improving their writing skills, particularly in constructed response essays. Suzi, one of twin sisters in the fifth grade, is participating in the English Learners (EL) program at her school. Their parents came to the United States as refugees from Myanmar and she was born in the U.S. Suzi can speak three languages: Karen, Karenni, and English. They communicate with their parents in Karen and Karenni at home and she has limited reading and writing skills in her native languages. During an interview, she used gestures paired with a word or two when asking questions. It was observed that Suzi spoke only when necessary with her friends at recess. She seemed afraid to initiate conversation with peers or adults around her. Suzi shared a common circle of friends with her twin sister at school and maintained strong connections with her parents and other siblings within their family.

The school where Suzi was enrolled is highly diverse, comprising 47% Asian students, primarily refugees, along with 27% Hispanic students and 22% Black students (Hwang, et al., 2023). In contrast, the demographic makeup of the entire state of Texas in 2021-2022 consisted of 52% Hispanic, 28% White, 13% Black, and 4% Asian populations. Among the students at the

school, 40% spoke languages such as Karen (13%), Burmese (15%), Karenni (10%), and Poe Karen (2%), all originating from Myanmar.

The study also collected writing samples from a 7th-grade boy who speaks three languages like Suzi. This student, Kevin, was born in Japan and moved to the U.S. when he entered school in Hawaii. As soon as he began his schooling, he enrolled in the EL program. Both of his parents were Korean American, and they encouraged him to practice Korean at home. He loved to read and write in Japanese, Korean, and English. The school where Kevin was enrolled is primarily Caucasian and he was usually the only Asian student at his school.

Writing Proficiency Analysis

Suzi wasn't particularly daunted by the writing task, but she made numerous mistakes and seemed to struggle to grasp the purpose of the assignment. Among the challenges faced by Suzi, her writing proficiency emerged as the weakest area requiring immediate attention. She exhibited a limited vocabulary in her writing and lacked smooth transitions between sentences. Her responses were often brief and simplistic, failing to delve into the text in detail. Consequently, her writing lacked the depth required for effective communication with readers.

The study utilized the writing rubric from the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2022) to assess students' writing skills. This rubric focused on two key categories: idea development and language conventions. To achieve full credits in idea development, students needed to fully develop a central idea and provide sufficient explanation of supporting evidence. For language conventions, student writing was expected to demonstrate consistent mastery of grade-level standards, including proper sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, and spelling. The study employed genuine STAAR questions for realistic practice and evaluated samples according to the writing rubric recommended by the TEA. The instruction provided was as follows:

Read the poem "One Saturday." Based on the details in the poem, write a response to the following: Explain how the speaker's feelings about the grandparents change as they spend time together. Write a well-organized essay that uses specific evidence from the poem to support your response.

One Saturday

My grandparents are both really great,
But I've never stayed with them alone.
And so I'm nervous as I leave the car,
Keeping my voice a steady, even tone.

My parents told me to be good,
And I vowed to do my best:
Be good, help out, obey the rules,
And try not to get stressed.

Grandma's kiss brushed my cheek
Like the wings of a butterfly
As Mom and Dad drove away,
Waving their goodbye.

"We're going to have some fun, you know,"
My winking Grandpa said
As his giant bear-paw hand
Ruffled the hair upon my head.

A woodland hike exposed a lake
Ringed with massive trees;
The deep blue water shimmered with
The whisper of a breeze.

Back at home, Gram drafted me
To help her make our dinner,
Which, compared to mac and cheese,
Would be the proven winner.

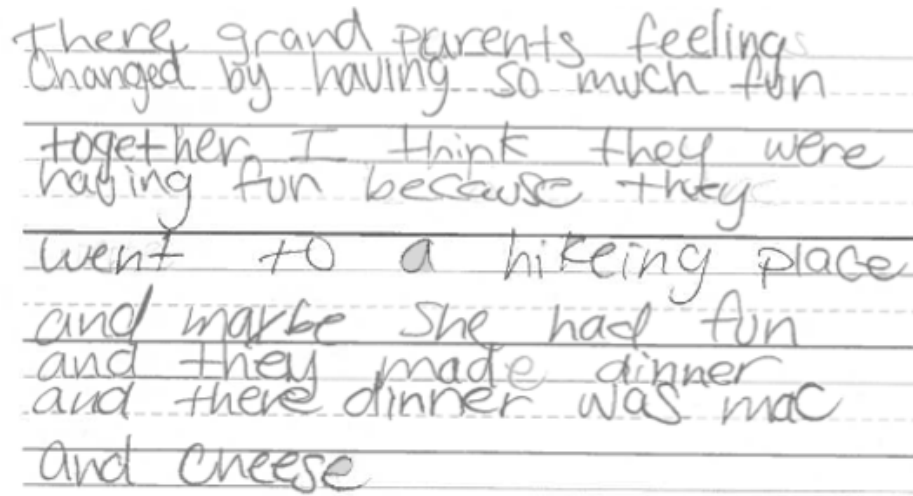
When dark of night draped the sky,
The three of us lay down
Outside on blankets spread upon
The green grass-cushioned ground.

"Black velvet studded with bright jewels,"
Grandma uttered with a sigh.
"That's the picture that I see
When gazing at night's sky."

The gems that sparkle in MY life,
I can touch as well as see;
They're lying on their back right now
On either side of me.

Figure 1 displays Suzi's STAAR CRQ essay response from the poem "One Saturday."

Figure 1: Suzi's Writing Sample

A photograph of a student's handwritten writing on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "there grand parents feelings changed by having so much fun together. I think they were having fun because they went to a hiking place and maybe she had fun and they made dinner and there dinner was mac and cheese".

there grand parents feelings
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and there dinner was mac
and cheese

(Student Writing Source: Mo, 2023)

The assessment of her essay was conducted using the TEA-recommended CRQ writing rubric, which encompasses two categories: Idea Development and Language Conventions. Figure 2 summarizes each score point description for these two categories.

Figure 2: Rubric for Idea Development and Language Conventions

Idea Development		Language Conventions	
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central idea is clear and fully developed • Selection and explanation of evidence is sufficient and relevant • Organization is effective • Expression of ideas is clear • Full awareness of purpose for writing and of audience 	2	<p>Student writing demonstrates consistent command of grade-level appropriate conventions, including correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sentence construction • punctuation • capitalization • grammar usage • spelling
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central idea is present and somewhat developed • Selection and explanation of evidence is limited and possibly irrelevant • Organization is limited • Expression of ideas is basic • Partial awareness of purpose for writing and of audience 	1	<p>Student writing demonstrates inconsistent command of grade-level appropriate conventions, including limited use of correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sentence construction • punctuation • capitalization • grammar usage • spelling
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central idea is not evident or not developed • Selection and explanation of evidence is insufficient and/or irrelevant • Organization is minimal or not present • Expression of ideas is poor • Minimal to no awareness of purpose for writing and audience 	0	<p>Student writing demonstrates little to no command of grade-level appropriate conventions, including infrequent use of or no evidence of correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sentence construction • punctuation • capitalization • grammar usage • spelling
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central idea is not evident or is inappropriate to the task • Selection and explanation of evidence is lacking or irrelevant • Organization is not evident • Expression of ideas is poor and/or incoherent • No awareness of purpose for writing and of audience 	0	

Suzi’s performance in the category of idea development warrants a score of 1, primarily due to the lack of a clear central idea and insufficient explanation of evidence. While she does introduce relevant ideas, she fails to elaborate on them adequately or establish smooth transitions between them. Her writing suffers from disruptions caused by repetition and excessive wordiness, hindering the coherence between ideas. This verbosity and repetition impede the flow of transitions, resulting in overall poor coherence. Suzi’s comprehension of the text appears limited, and the absence of thorough explanation hampers the development of her ideas. Furthermore, her choice of words tends to be vague and constrained, and the adoption of an overly expository tone further obscures the clarity of her message.

Additionally, Suzi’s writing comprises a single extended, run-on sentence devoid of proper punctuation. Furthermore, a spelling error is evident in the term “hikeing,” and the execution of grammar is inadequate. Moreover, many essential components required for forming complete sentences, such as adverbs, adjectives, and transitional words, are absent. Moreover, Suzi’s writing displays shortcomings in grammar and punctuation, alongside a spelling mistake and an incorrect response. Consequently, Suzi merits a score of 1 in the language conventions category.

The CRQ essay sample was also collected from Kevin and evaluated according to the same STAAR rubric. The writing prompt that Kevin was working on was as follows:

READ the following quotation.

<p>If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—Michael Jordan</p>

THINK about the following statement.

No one can achieve success without overcoming obstacles.

WRITE an essay explaining the importance of never giving up.

Kevin’s Writing Sample Analysis

Kevin merits a score point of 2 in the category of organization and idea development. His ideas are closely tied to the central idea of the significance of perseverance. Subsequently, the student elaborated on these concepts by exemplifying the importance of perseverance through the lens of a historical figure like Martin Luther King Jr. Furthermore, the student incorporated a personal anecdote involving chess. Nevertheless, the essay predominantly consists of simplistic sentences and redundant phrases. It is imperative for the student to diversify sentence structures and include a conclusive statement to enhance the overall strength of the essay.

Figure 3: Sample Analysis on Idea Development

Introduction		Idea Development
<p>If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it. This is the mindset required to win at life, according to Michael Jordan. If you fall down in a race, you cannot afford to stay down and cry, because if you do, your competitors will beat you. You have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, suck up the pain, and finish the race.</p> <p>No one has a perfectly smooth life. A famous quote by Martin Luther King Jr. states, "If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. Whatever you do, keep moving forward." Martin Luther King Jr.'s life was filled with adversity. In an era before the Civil Rights Movement, an era of racism and segregation toward African Americans, he paved the way toward equality and integration of his people into the U.S.</p> <p>Life is tough. Sometimes the goal seems very far away, but you have to believe it is there, and strive to achieve it through dedication and indefatigability. You will feel tired, you will feel pain. You have to push through and once you achieve the goal, you will be proud of your achievement.</p> <p>In class, it does not matter how lost of a position you have, the only thing you can try to do is the next best move.</p>	<p>Clear Claim</p> <p>Quoted Evidence</p> <p>Transitions ?</p> <p>Grouping ideas into paragraphs</p> <p>Basic Expression (Word Choice)</p> <p>Organization is limited.</p> <p>No Conclusion ?</p>	<p>3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is clear and fully developed Selection and explanation of evidence is sufficient and relevant Organization is effective Expression of ideas is clear Full awareness of purpose for writing and of audience <p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is present and somewhat developed Selection and explanation of evidence is limited and possibly irrelevant Organization is limited Expression of ideas is basic Partial awareness of purpose for writing and of audience <p>1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is not evident or not developed Selection and explanation of evidence is insufficient and/or irrelevant Organization is minimal or not present Expression of ideas is poor Minimal to no awareness of purpose for writing and audience <p>0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central idea is not evident or is inappropriate to the task Selection and explanation of evidence is lacking or irrelevant Organization is not evident Expression of ideas is poor and/or incoherent No awareness of purpose for writing and of audience

(Student Writing Source: Han, 2024)

Kevin demonstrated proficient language skills in dissecting the prompt. He exhibited a diverse vocabulary while maintaining clarity and conciseness in his expression. His essay predominantly featured a single type of sentence structure and certain sections of the essay revealed Kevin's struggles with punctuation, particularly involving commas and run-on sentences. While employing sophisticated vocabulary to bolster his arguments, he encountered spelling errors, notably with words such as "indefatigueability" instead of "indefatigability". While his word selection was commendable, refining transitional phrases could further enhance the cohesion of his writing. Since he lacked precision in punctuation and grammar usage, Kevin merits a score of 1 in the category of language conventions. The writing demonstrates an inconsistent command of grade-level-appropriate conventions.

The essay, overall, exhibited strong writing, showcasing Kevin's adept organizational skills, particularly evident in his inclusion of respected figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and the quote used. The handwriting remained excellent until halfway through but appeared rushed

and less polished afterward, possibly due to time constraints. While there's room for improvement in execution, Kevin demonstrated a clear understanding in delivering his message.

Figure 4: Sample Analysis on Language Conventions

Language Conventions	
2	<p>Student writing demonstrates consistent command of grade-level appropriate conventions, including correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sentence construction • punctuation • capitalization • grammar usage • spelling
1	<p>Student writing demonstrates inconsistent command of grade-level appropriate conventions, including limited use of correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sentence construction • punctuation • capitalization • grammar usage • spelling
0	<p>Student writing demonstrates little to no command of grade-level appropriate conventions, including infrequent use of or no evidence of correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sentence construction • punctuation • capitalization • grammar usage • spelling

<p>Sentence construction</p> <p>"If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it." This is the mindset required to win at life, according to Michael Jordan. If you fall down in a race, you cannot afford to stay down and cry, because if you do, your competitors will beat you. You have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, suck up the pain, and finish the race.</p> <p>No one has a perfectly smooth life. A famous quote by Martin Luther King Jr. states, "If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. Whatever you do, keep moving forward." Martin Luther King Jr.'s life was filled with adversity. In an era before the Civil Rights Movement, an era of racism and segregation toward African Americans, he paved the way forward equality and integration of his people into the U.S.</p> <p>Life is tough. Sometimes the goal seems very far away, but you have to believe it is there and strive to achieve it through dedication and indefatigability. You will feel tired, you will feel pain. You have to push through and once you achieve the goal, you will feel proud of your achievement.</p> <p>In chess, it does not matter how lost of a position you have, the only thing you can try to do is the next best move.</p>	<p>Capitalization</p>
<p>Punctuation</p>	<p>Spelling errors</p>
<p>Grammar usage</p>	

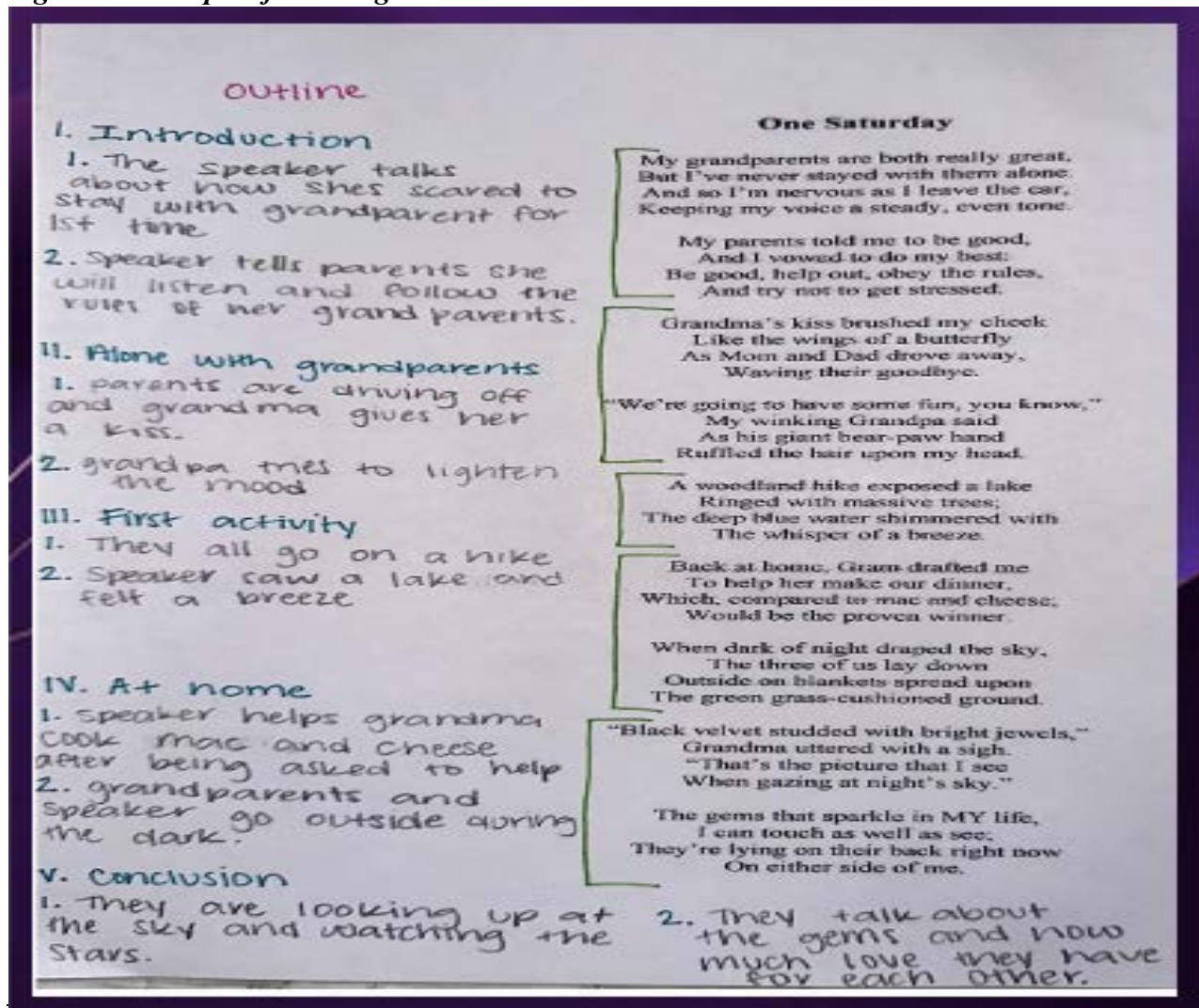
Practical Strategies for Improving Writing CRQ Essays

Suzi's writing proficiency significantly falls short across all three categories: organization/progression, development of ideas, and use of language/convention while Kevin reserves room for improvement in his writing capacity to reach the full score point. To enhance their writing performance, these students must focus on targeted strategies tailored to each category's improvement. The study provided various writing strategies specific to organization/progression, development of ideas, and use of language/conventions that could benefit both students in their writing endeavors.

1. Strategies for the category of organization/idea development

Often, students encounter difficulties initiating their writing process, feeling overwhelmed soon after they begin. Engaging with the prompt triggers an influx of ideas, causing them to overthink and lose sight of their intended focus (Hindman & Hwang, 2024). To navigate this, students grappling with numerous ideas should jot down their thoughts until their stream of consciousness exhausts. Following this, they can proceed to organize these thoughts systematically by grouping them under main points. Lastly, students should refine their ideas, selecting the most pertinent ones to guide their writing process. Creating an outline serves as an effective strategy to hone organization and progression skills (Zote, 2020). It aids in structuring thoughts, saving time, and mitigating writer's block. Outlines enhance clarity, offering a clearer perspective on the writing process, while also providing a structured framework that ensures lucid communication. They contribute significantly to smoother writing, establishing a robust foundation for ideas and the actual writing process. Engaging in outlining is highly recommended as it notably facilitates the final stages of progress. Creating an outline may begin with jotting down all emerging ideas in a list format until all thoughts are exhausted (Zote, 2020). Subsequently, review the list to eliminate irrelevant ideas that won't contribute to addressing the prompt. Retain the most pertinent ones that could substantiate an introduction, two or three paragraphs, and a concluding segment, ensuring sufficient content for each section.

Figure 5: Example of Creating an Outline



(Source: McGaughy, 2024)

For emergent bilingual learners, this strategy can be implemented by starting with a captivating introduction that grabs the reader's attention and focuses on elements relevant to the prompt, such as an engaging narrative, a thought-provoking question, or a pertinent quotation. (Mondays Made Easy, 2023). A well-crafted outline places the thesis prominently and elaborates on each aspect of the paper in a clear manner. Once the introduction is developed, it sets the tone for the rest of the essay. Moreover, the outline serves as a tool for students to structure their thoughts and introductions effectively, enhancing their work and bolstering their confidence in crafting compelling papers (Mondays Made Easy, 2023).

Generating thesis statements is another strategy for organization and progression. These statements serve as navigational tools, offering students a framework to craft their papers

proficiently (Fifteen worksheets.com, 2023). Serving as the cornerstone of any paper, thesis statements concentrate the paper's direction and arrangement. Typically situated in the introductory segment of a paper, a thesis statement serves as a compass, guiding the reader through the author's intended argument.

For emergent bilingual learners, this strategy can be applied by encouraging self-inquiry about the topic and exploring their own perspectives on the issue (The Writing Center of Princeton, 2017). By crafting a thesis statement, students can create a solid foundation for their essay, supporting the development and organization of their ideas. This approach not only enhances critical thinking but also empowers learners to express their thoughts with clarity and confidence.

A robust thesis statement furnishes writers with a clear direction for their essay, providing the necessary framework and concentration to further develop their papers. According to Fifteen worksheets.com (2023), thesis statements function as a roadmap, empowering students to compose their papers with clarity and efficiency. Acting as a linchpin, thesis statements concentrate the paper's focus and arrangement, allowing students to ground their essays and elaborate on their concepts. A robust thesis statement furnishes writers with a precise delineation of their essay's scope, thereby bestowing structure and direction as they further develop their papers.

Figure 6: Example of Thesis Statements

Explain how the speaker's feelings about the grandparents change as they spend time together.

What is your topic? _____

What question do you have about your topic?	How do the speaker's feelings change as they spend time together?
What is the answer to your question?	The speaker's feelings change from feelings of nervousness to feelings of appreciation.
What is your opinion?	The feelings change because the grandparents spend quality time with the speaker. Quality time allows the speaker to feel more connected to their grandparents.

Write your working thesis: _____

Over the course of "One Saturday," the speakers change from feelings of nervousness to appreciation as the speaker spends quality time with their grandparents.

(Source: Liborio, 2022)

To ensure coherence and advancement in writing, students can opt for employing logical flow to effectively link sentences and foster cohesive structure. Logical flow is the seamless progression of ideas within a piece of writing, ensuring that each paragraph builds upon the

previous one and leads smoothly into the next (Wang, 2018). For emergent bilingual learners, this can be achieved by using transition words and phrases, such as *however*, *in addition*, and *as a result*, to signal relationships between ideas. Additionally, outlining their main points before drafting can help students organize their thoughts and maintain a clear focus throughout their writing. Regular practice in identifying and correcting gaps or inconsistencies in their writing can further refine their ability to create a logically connected essay. This coherence allows readers to follow the argument or narrative effortlessly, enhancing understanding and engagement. Achieving logical flow requires careful organization and the use of transitional words and phrases to connect thoughts and maintain coherence.

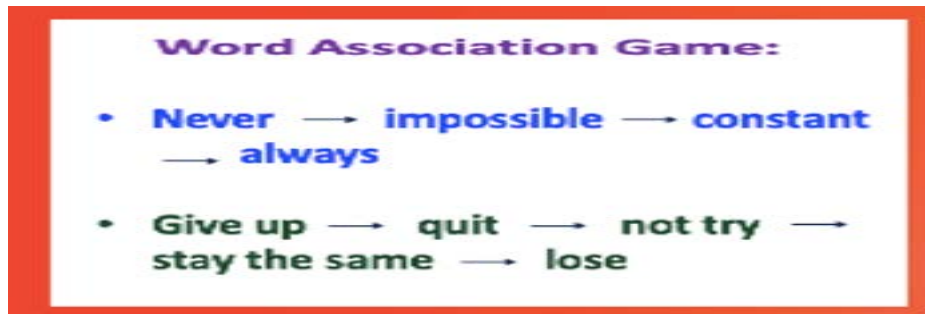
The University Academic Support Centers (2024) recommended using Listing and Looping as prewriting techniques. When listing ideas, students start with broad concepts and then expand on them using bullet points to add more details. After listing, students can pick out a main idea and start freewriting from there. They continue to loop their freewriting, circling new topics, ideas, phrases, or sentences each time. After four or five rounds of looping, students will have specific information that reflects their thoughts on a particular topic.

For emergent bilingual learners, these techniques are particularly useful as they encourage brainstorming in a structured yet flexible way. Listing helps students visually organize their thoughts, making it easier to identify connections between ideas. Looping, on the other hand, fosters deeper exploration and refinement of these ideas, allowing learners to develop a richer understanding of the topic. These methods can also alleviate the pressure of writing a perfect draft on the first attempt, giving learners the freedom to experiment and build confidence in their writing process.

Games4esl (2024) introduced a word association game designed for English learners. In this game, a student is given a word and must respond with an associated word or phrase. These activities prove valuable in helping students strengthen their existing vocabulary and enhance their English language proficiency. For example, if the teacher presents the word "Never," a student might reply with associated words like "impossible," "constant," or "always." Similarly, if the teacher presents the phrase "Give up," the student might respond with "quit," "not try," "stay the same," or "lose." Such exercises encourage active engagement and deepen understanding of word meanings and relationships.

For emergent bilingual learners, word association games can serve as an effective tool to build connections between new vocabulary and prior knowledge. These activities stimulate critical thinking and creativity by prompting learners to explore different contexts in which words can be used. Teachers can further enhance the activity by incorporating themes or topics related to classroom content, making the practice more relevant and meaningful. Additionally, pairing students in small groups or teams can foster collaboration and peer learning, creating an interactive and supportive environment for language development.

Figure 7: Example of Word Association



(Source: McGaughy, 2024)

2. Strategies for language conventions

Both Kevin and Suzi in the study struggled in the category of language conventions. Incorporating regular writing exercises is a highly effective strategy to improve students' language conventions. Writing a paragraph on various topics several times a week could help condition their minds and enhance their writing skills to achieve suitable essay lengths and conventions (Hindman & Hwang, 2024). Proofreading, peer-editing, revising, crafting complete sentences, and varying sentence structure are some of recommendations for Kevin and Suzi to improve the language usage.

Following consistent practice, Kevin and Suzi could engage in peer editing using a checklist. Pairing up, they can mutually revise drafts, refining ideas and rectifying mechanical errors such as misspelled words and incorrect punctuation before finalizing their drafts. Jessica (2023) asserts that explicit instruction in peer editing is crucial within the writing process. Wedderburn (2023) introduced a peer editing checklist designed for the revising and editing process. This checklist serves as a valuable tool, enabling students to obtain constructive feedback from their peers. Engaging in peer editing often proves more comfortable for students as they can readily accept suggestions for changes from their peers which might be more challenging if received directly from a teacher.

In the study, Kevin's essay predominantly featured a single type of sentence structure. To improve this issue, employing transition words is recommended to help create coherence in flow by connecting ideas, sentences, or paragraphs. They serve as bridges between distinct parts of text, guiding readers smoothly from one point to the next (Doyle, 2024). Transition words can be used to indicate sequence, contrast, comparison, cause and effect, addition, and more.

Snowden (2019) proposed the RACE strategy as a method for practicing STAAR constructed response questions. This strategy involves restating the question, providing an answer, citing evidence from the text, and explaining the response. For instance, when considering the topic "The importance of never giving up," Snowden offers the following steps: 1) Restate the question: Why is it crucial to persevere even when facing challenges? 2) Answer the question: Perseverance is vital because it empowers individuals to overcome obstacles and

achieve their objectives despite setbacks. 3) Cite evidence from the text: According to a study by psychologist Angela Duckworth, perseverance, often termed "grit," emerges as a stronger predictor of success than talent or intelligence alone. 4) Explain your answer: This evidence highlights the pivotal role of resilience and determination in accomplishing success. Through persisting in the face of adversity, individuals demonstrate their unwavering commitment and readiness to endure hardships in pursuit of their goals. When integrated, these steps underscore the critical significance of perseverance in confronting life's challenges and realizing success.

Similarly, in *Custom Classroom* by Angela (2022), four steps of employing the STAR strategy are presented, including Scan, Target text, Actively read, and Respond. She suggests:

1. Scanning the questions by asking, "Is the question whole or part?"
2. Targeting text by reading all the text carefully.
3. Actively reading by taking notes while rereading the text.
4. Responding to questions by answering using text evidence.

For the topic, "The importance of never giving up," the STAR strategy can be employed as follows: Begin by scanning the text to identify key points or arguments related to the importance of perseverance and not giving up. Look for phrases or sentences that emphasize resilience, overcoming challenges, or achieving goals despite obstacles. Then, identify a specific passage or quote that encapsulates the main idea of the importance of never giving up. Afterward, engage with the text by reading it carefully and critically. Pay attention to the author's arguments, supporting evidence, and any rhetorical devices used to convey the message about perseverance. After actively reading the text, formulate a response that synthesizes your understanding of the importance of never giving up. You might write a reflection on personal experiences where perseverance has led to success or discuss how the message of the text resonates with you and inspires you to overcome challenges in your own life.

Findings

The study advocates for prioritizing equity over equality, emphasizing the customization of support to meet the unique needs of everyone rather than offering identical support to all (Hindman & Hwang, 2024). While equality aims to provide the same resources and opportunities to every individual or group, equity recognizes the individual's unique circumstances, requiring tailored resources and opportunities to achieve equal outcomes (Drew, 2023). As an illustration, Suzi encountered significant challenges across all criteria. She earned a score of 1 in the development of ideas and scored 1 in language conventions. In contrast, Kevin received a score of 2 in the development of ideas and a score of 1 in language conventions. It's evident that both students require additional support in the use of language category.

Through interviews and interactions with these students, the study observed several factors that significantly impacted their performance on the CRQ. Firstly, their home environments played a pivotal role. Suzi's parents, refugees from Myanmar, worked in a meat factory, whereas Kevin's parents were both university professors who encouraged

multilingualism at home, fostering a language-rich environment. Additionally, their personalities played a role; Suzi was notably reserved, rarely initiating conversations, while Kevin was outgoing and positive about learning, demonstrating intrinsic motivation. This self-motivation proved crucial to Kevin's performance on the CRQ. Furthermore, the school atmosphere also influenced their performance. Suzi attended a highly diverse school, mainly comprising refugee children, whereas Kevin's school was predominantly Caucasian, with him being the sole Asian student, which could have impacted their sense of belonging and engagement.

The study found that the STAAR rubric was instrumental in assessing students' writing skills in various ways. It provided a structured framework for evaluating different facets of students' writing, such as organization, clarity, coherence, and language usage. Additionally, it offered clear criteria and descriptors that aided teachers and assessors in understanding the expectations for different proficiency levels, thus facilitating more consistent and objective assessment practices. Moreover, the rubric allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of students' writing abilities, encompassing both content and language proficiency, which could offer valuable insights into areas of strength and areas needing improvement. Furthermore, by aligning with state standards and curriculum objectives, the STAAR rubric ensured that assessments remained relevant and reflective of what students were expected to learn and demonstrate in their writing.

Examining CRQ samples benefits classroom teachers in multiple ways. Firstly, it provides insights into student comprehension, helping teachers gauge understanding and application of taught concepts. Additionally, it allows for targeted feedback, enabling personalized guidance for students to enhance writing skills. Analyzing CRQ samples informs instructional decisions, guiding effective teaching strategies. They also serve as a tool for tracking student progress over time. Lastly, it fosters professional development by facilitating collaborative discussions and workshops, enhancing teachers' ability to support student learning in writing.

The study unveiled effective strategies for improving the development of ideas and language conventions. Regarding idea development, it recommended creating outlines, formulating thesis statements, ensuring logical flow, employing peer editing, and diversifying sentence structures. It highlighted the RACE strategy (Restate the question, Answer the question, Cite evidence from the text, & Explain your answer) and the STAR strategy (Scan, Target text, Actively read, and Respond).

For emergent bilingual learners, these strategies provide a structured approach to mastering academic writing while supporting their language acquisition journey. By combining these methods with regular practice and tailored feedback, learners can gain confidence in expressing their thoughts clearly and effectively. Ultimately, these approaches empower students to succeed academically while building critical skills that extend beyond the classroom.

Discussion

While the study may have its constraints in focusing solely on the writing proficiency of two emergent bilingual learners, it nonetheless puts forward five valuable recommendations

aimed at enhancing CRQ (Constructed Response Question) essay preparation for children undergoing the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) test and beyond. These recommendations serve as actionable strategies to improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of essay writing for young test-takers.

1. Get acquainted with the test format and familiarize yourself with the rubric (Soucy, 2024): Practicing writing skills using the STAAR test format can help alleviate anxiety on test day. Teachers can provide prompts in a similar style and difficulty level, along with comparable time limits and expectations. Additionally, review the rubric thoroughly to understand what the graders are looking for.
2. Understand the prompt and examine the samples (Custom Classroom by Angela, 2022): Guarantee that children grasp the essay prompt completely. This entails simplifying complex instructions, offering examples, and clarifying any unclear language to avoid confusion and promote precise responses. Also, analyze the samples provided by TEA to understand the expected standards.
3. Strategize your response with a plan (Soucy, 2024): Encourage students to adopt a structured approach to their essay responses by supporting arguments with evidence from the text or relevant examples for stronger explanations. This study presents some plans, including the RACE strategy (Restate the question, Answer the question, Cite evidence from the text, and Explain your answer), the STAR strategy (Scan, Target text, Actively read, and Respond), and the RAPP strategy (Restate the question, Answer the question by clearly stating my idea, Prove my idea by thoroughly explaining how the evidence proves it, and Proofread and edit my answer). It's essential to emphasize the importance of practicing these strategies regularly to enhance proficiency and confidence in essay writing.
4. Manage time efficiently (Ariav, 2024): Enhance time management skills (Ariav, 2024): Encourage students to engage with the passage actively by reading it twice: once for comprehension and then to extract main ideas and details. Ensure efficient use of time by prompting students to swiftly outline their thoughts with concise words or phrases before commencing their essays. Reserve dedicated time for proofreading at the conclusion, avoiding overthinking, as this could consume unnecessary time.

With consistent practice and application of these strategies, students can approach CRQ assessments with greater confidence and achieve success in their writing endeavors.

Conclusions

Based on the findings and discussion presented, it is evident that prioritizing equity over equality is essential in educational contexts, particularly when it comes to supporting students with diverse needs. The study underscores the importance of tailored support to address individual circumstances rather than applying identical measures across the board. This approach acknowledges the inherent differences among students and aims to provide equitable opportunities for all.

Through examining CRQ samples and understanding the factors influencing students' performance, valuable insights emerge for both educators and students. Although there is a limitation on examining two language learners' case study, this study recommends top strategies for children preparing for the STAAR CRQ test. Additionally, the effectiveness of the STAAR rubric in assessing writing skills and providing structured feedback is underscored, offering a roadmap for educators to comprehensively evaluate and enhance students' writing proficiency.

For emergent bilingual learners, the findings highlight the importance of individualized instruction and culturally responsive teaching practices. By integrating these strategies, educators can create an inclusive learning environment that promotes equity and fosters academic growth. In conclusion, recognizing and addressing individual needs, leveraging effective strategies, and utilizing nuanced assessments are critical steps toward empowering emergent bilingual learners to excel in their writing and overall academic achievement.

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