

adapted for deaf students, “morning message”

HELPS BUILD WRITING SKILLS

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Right: Students and teacher cooperate in constructing text.

One of the greatest challenges we face as teachers of deaf students is how to teach students to write effectively. We want them to plan, organize, and relay meaning in a coherent way, but we also expect them to develop a sense of control over English writing conventions and mechanics. It is probably no surprise that we are constantly looking for and testing the kinds of instruction that succeed in teaching these writing skills to students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

At Michigan State University, primarily through the work of Drs. Carol Sue Englert and Troy Mariage, we learned of an instructional approach the local schools are using with great success to apprentice students into independent and competent writers. Because of its balanced nature, we became interested in investigating its use in deaf education classrooms. The instructional approach, called “Morning Message” by the teachers who use it, is a guided interactive writing activity. Some of the underlying principles include:

- use of teacher modeling and think-alouds of writing strategies
- active student participation in co-constructing and monitoring text
- provision of organizational structures
- provision of scaffolds to support students in advance of independent performance
- rereading of the text for monitoring purposes
- transfer of control from teacher to students over time
- writing for authentic audiences

Since we learned about Morning Message, we have focused our efforts on adapting this activity to better accommodate the specific needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Data Show that Morning Message Works with Deaf Students

Morning Message was implemented in three deaf and hard of hearing classrooms in Michigan, at the elementary, higher elementary, and middle school levels. The teachers of these classes were seeking their master’s degrees in deaf education at Michigan State University. As part of a course in writing instruction, teachers received training in the

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key principles of Morning Message, how it is implemented in the classroom, and the adaptations that may be necessary when conducting the activity with deaf and hard of hearing children. Once they had implemented Morning Message in these classrooms, the teachers collected data to note any improvements in students' writing and reading achievement. Each teacher used the Morning Message writing activity on 21 different occasions.

From pretests to posttests, all students showed gains (Wolbers, 2007). There were significant improvements in both higher-level writing skills (e.g., ability to organize information in a coherent manner, incorporation of appropriate text-structure elements) and lower-level writing skills (e.g., correct use of prepositions, fewer run-on sentences or sentence fragments). In addition, the students made significant gains in reading achievement and improvements in editing and revising skills. These findings indicate that Morning Message is a very promising practice in

apprenticing deaf children to write effectively and independently.

What Morning Message Looks Like in Practice

Morning Message typically happens daily during a 15- to 30-minute period. One student serves as the day's author, but all students are involved as legitimate participants. To begin the activity, the author suggests a topic for the day from his or her own experience (e.g., a fishing trip with dad). This is formulated into a topic sentence that is written on a displayed writing surface such as an easel. Subsequently, text is co-constructed and revised with the help of the author's peers and the teacher.

To gather more information for the text, students can ask the author questions (i.e., who, what, where, why, how) about his or her experience. These question words are often placed on a visual scaffold to help prompt students in a manner that will generate supporting details. It should be noted that we are describing the use of one

text structure—telling and describing a personal experience. However, Morning Message does allow for the teaching and learning of various genre types, such as exposition. For other genres and text structures, there are more appropriate scaffolds that can be used to support the writing and organizing of ideas.

The students cooperatively build and revise the text by making suggestions and then reaching a consensus. When new sentences or phrases are offered by students to be added to the text, the teacher writes them word for word (including grammar and meaning errors as they are communicated) on the easel. After writing, the teacher opens the floor for further generation of ideas, or allows discussion of a revising or editing component. Writing is taught as a recursive process, with students fluidly moving back and forth among text generation, revising, and editing. The text is reread often throughout the activity by the teacher or in unison with the students to prompt awareness of any part that does not “sound right.” Students discuss potential composing, organizing, or revising approaches through the use of varied communicative tactics such as suggesting, explaining, defending, questioning, or providing a rationale for opposition.

When introducing Morning Message, the teacher may devote more time to direct instruction, prompting, scaffolding, modeling of language and thinking, or guided questions. As students are apprenticed in (1) ways of acting, (2) ways of talking, (3) ways of thinking, and (4) ways of doing writing, they begin to internalize the strategies used by others who are more expert. The teacher facilitates this through a series of “step back” and “step in” moves: stepping back to position the students as the expert decision makers and evaluators of the quality of the text, and stepping in, when necessary, to provide support or instructional guidance (Englert & Dunsmore, 2002). The transfer of control of the writing



Morning Message. These versions adhered to the key instructional principles but were more accessible and responsive to deaf and hard of hearing students.

The first challenge we noted was the writing of the message itself. Typically, the teacher writes a student's expression when it is offered. Many deaf students, however, communicate using ASL, which has no formal written form. It is because of this difficulty that we proposed the use of a "two easel" approach. When students offer an idea in ASL, an

translation could be considered a challenge and a benefit at the same time. Although the process undoubtedly lengthens Morning Message, it does help to build necessary metalinguistic awareness of both ASL and English.

The second challenge was the rereading of the message. Typically, the teacher rereads the text while pointing word by word as he or she speaks. To do this while signing is difficult, to say the least. However, it is critical that the text be repeated again and again to instill a rhythm and a pattern in the written language. Just as hearing students read along with their teacher, deaf children should also be signing (or fingerspelling when there is difficulty matching sign to the English constructions). This is a vital step in teaching students to reread and monitor their texts. Students start noting patterns and are able to recognize "what looks right" in written text, much as hearing children develop a sense of "what sounds right." Therefore, we proposed that teachers point with one hand and sign with the other when rereading the text.

Third, when working with young deaf children it can be difficult to elicit experiences through language. Students with language delays may encounter difficulties when taking on the role of the author and expressing their experiences. One suggested adaptation to counter this problem is to establish a common ground where the students and teacher can hold a discussion. It may be that the teacher has to create an authentic event (e.g., a visit to the grocery store) involving all the students in the classroom and then encourage the students to use that event as the topic for their Morning Message. Again, this would ensure that all the children had background knowledge of the topic and had been exposed to some of the vocabulary.

If, however, a student is given the opportunity to contribute his or her individual experience, it may be appropriate for the teacher, in conjunction with parents, to devise a

process leads students to greater self-regulation, higher confidence, and more independence with writing.

The final written product is published for an authentic audience. This may be a newsletter that is sent home and shared with parents or a school bulletin that is distributed to peers and staff.

Adaptations Make Morning Message More User-Friendly for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

Although Morning Message has proven to be an effective instructional practice with hearing children (Englert & Dunsmore, 2002; Mariage, 2001), we foresaw specific challenges in using the writing activity with deaf and hard of hearing children. After pinpointing areas of potential difficulty, we brainstormed alternative practices that teachers could adopt. The deaf education teachers in the study all implemented adapted versions of

additional step becomes necessary. First, students collaboratively discuss whether an offered expression is ASL or English-based sign (i.e., capable of being written). If the expression is ASL, the teacher notes the concepts on the "ASL easel." This is merely a holding place for the idea so that it is not forgotten. The teacher may capture the idea the best he or she can using gloss words, symbols, pictures, or any other mechanism, making sure to note movements, use of space, and expressions in addition to sign vocabulary. The class then discusses ways to translate the ASL concept into a written form. If necessary, the teacher may need to model or think aloud the principles of each language and possible translation techniques until students begin to internalize the approaches. The translated idea is then recorded word for word on the "English" easel. The addition of the ASL-to-English

planning tool by which Morning Message topics can be better understood and communicated. This may take the form of a journal or semantic map that is sent home to parents to guide a brief description of an event the student recently experienced. Parents record ideas in the journal or on the map in collaboration with their child, perhaps even reviewing vocabulary that will aid the student's expression of the message in class.

How Morning Message Benefits Deaf Students

With Morning Message, students are apprenticed in ways that promote the appropriation of higher-level and lower-level writing strategies. When teachers model or use think-alouds, ways of thinking about writing are extended into a shared space that is accessible to all participants. For example, after repeated exposure to the thoughts of others concerning the handling of grammatical

errors, students will increasingly develop an ability to self-monitor for the same errors.

A second benefit of Morning Message is that it offers a framework to help deaf and hard of hearing children make the necessary connections between their growing linguistic competency in ASL and the written English print that is part of the world around them. Much like the widely used Language Experience Approach (Schirmer, 1994), it allows students to offer their own personal experiences in sign language and see how they are then expressed in English.

Finally, teachers using Morning Message bridge students' background knowledge and experiences with the expected content knowledge of the grade and subject area. By being cognizant of the writing curriculum and objectives, teachers can use Morning Message as a way to integrate necessary subject-matter instruction into an authentic writing activity.

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