Improving Second Language Learners’ Self-Esteem through Writing

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Abstract

Having a strong sense of self-worth assures better outcomes for English Language Learners (ELLs), already struggling to catch up with their peers in language and content areas. We, as educators, have an obligation to help our students develop their self-esteem, and teaching writing to ELLs through activities that promote socio-emotional development is one way to achieve that goal. This article presents an overview of seven different strategies that can be used to help students (especially in grades 3-6) improve their writing of paragraphs and essays and develop a healthy sense of self-esteem. Each strategy is based on the reinforcement of socio-emotional skills.

Introduction

The present materials were used as part of a writing program designed for helping English Language Learners (ELLs) learning to write in English while developing socio-emotionally (García Garrido, 2010). The activities target the development of writing while considering the four skills of language. We personally consider that writing cannot be developed in isolation. It benefits from the improvement of the other three language skills. The writing lessons include activities that aim at helping students acquire the learning goals and objectives specified by the state of Illinois in the content area of writing. Furthermore, the writing activities teach writing in content as specified by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which allows students the opportunity to learn English at the same time as they develop academic proficiency in other content areas such as socio-emotional development learning, social studies, music, art, math, science, and literature.

In the present article we are going to focus only on the activities that target socio-emotional growth. The main goal we attempt to achieve through emotional development is helping students improve their self-esteem as well as other skills identified by Gardner (1983) and Goleman (1995), as key components of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. Moreover, when working with ELLs we need to pay special attention to foreign language anxiety. This term was coined by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) as an anxiety specific to second language learners. The uniqueness of the language learning process can produce self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors caused by anxiety. There is a strong relationship between a high emotional intelligence and a fast process of second language acquisition.

As was observed by García Garrido (2010), aiding students to develop these abilities will endorse them with the required tools to succeed, some of them being a) ‘mental’ strength to realistically acknowledge their strengths and act on their weaknesses so they can clearly set the path for unending growth, b) motivation to push themselves in spite of the circumstances, c) understanding of the immediate society they belong to so they learn to listen, respect and value
others’ points of view without losing their own personal opinions, and d) self-assurance to believe in the many capabilities they possess so they can ‘authorize’ themselves to accomplish all their goals and dreams, etc.

Below we describe, step-by-step, the goals of each strategy as well as the procedures for how to put them into practice in the classroom.

Strategy 1. Special Candy

Through this activity, students will be able to reinforce their self-esteem by personally stating, and hearing from their partners, some of the many good qualities they have. Students will also be able to develop a sense of belonging to a group by realizing they have things in common with the rest of their partners. In the area of writing, they will learn about positive descriptive adjectives versus negative ones (synonyms vs. antonyms). They will also learn how to spell correctly some specific vocabulary learned during this lesson. Their writing skills will be scaffolded by being in a situation that exponentially lowers the affective filter that hinders the linguistic production of second language learners. While being in a positive state of mind, students will put in writing the compliments they received from their peers; this will facilitate the writing process.

We propose the activity to be carried out in the following way. All students will sit down around the carpet. The teacher will give each person several pieces of candy and will place in the center a basket full of candies. The teacher will say something nice about herself/himself and will get a piece of candy from the basket. The teacher will inform students that each compliment equals one piece of candy. The intention is to help students create a visual connection between the candy and a compliment so they give themselves and their partners as many compliments as possible. Teacher will randomly select a stick with the name of one student. The teacher will give a compliment to that student and will explain that the person who gives the compliment and the person who receives the compliment can each get a candy from the basket. The rest of the students can give another compliment to that student. Repetitions are not allowed. As students are talking, the teacher will list all the positive adjectives on chart paper, writing a heading on top of the paper that reads: “This is who we are.” The teacher will then explain to the students that those positive adjectives listed are the words we always want to say to describe our partners and ourselves. Once the teacher has finished modeling the activity and the explanations are clear for everyone, all the students seated on the carpet will take turns, clockwise, to name one thing in their life that they think is special or some talent or ability that they possess. As each person says what they want to say, the other members of the group will give that person a compliment if they think there are other virtues he/she has not mentioned while describing himself/herself. When everybody has shared, students will go back to their seats. The teacher will distribute each group of students multiple copies of a sheet of paper that has two pictures of candy. On the piece of candy that says, “From...is...” students will write something good about themselves; one of the qualities they believe they possess. On the other piece of candy that reads: “From...to...” students will write a compliment to each member of their group. Students will be encouraged to check the spelling of the words as they are listed on the “This is who we are” chart. In order to differentiate this activity, the teacher will provide students with different choices. Choice 1: write a minimum of one self-compliment and one compliment for a partner. Choice 2: create as many compliments as you want for yourself and for your partners. Choice 3: once you have filled out the candies, extend the compliments and put those descriptive adjectives into descriptive paragraphs (about yourself or a partner, your choice). Tape the candies on the top of your paper.
Choice 4: once you have filled out the candies, draw and label yourself or a partner doing what you think he/she is best at. Tape the candies on top of your paper. Choice 5: create a collage with compliments for different peers – no compliment repetition is allowed. When the activity is done, the teacher will invite all students to come back to the carpet and read one of the compliments they wrote or they received from a partner. The teacher will then review the chart with the positive adjectives and will invite students to tell him/her the antonyms of each one of those adjectives. He/she will encourage students to discuss the reasons for saying good things about our partners and ourselves and will collect all the candies and glue them to a big piece of chart paper to create a classroom poster with all of their compliments.

**Strategy 2. I’m Special Nametag**

The socio-emotional goal of this activity is to help students understand they have to respect and love themselves. The linguistic goal is to help students grasping the concept of main idea and supporting details. Students will be able to recognize the importance of key words in a sentence and how listing specific words can be used as a pre-writing tool. Furthermore, students will be able to expand on one idea and provide descriptive details to support their main ideas by creating different sentences that vary not only in length but also in the diverse range of adjectives, nouns and verbs.

The activity will be carried out the following way: The teacher will invite the students to close their eyes and think about one time someone gave them a compliment. He/she will guide their imagination by playing soft music and saying things like, “remember the smile that compliment brought to your face. Feel the same happiness that you felt when you heard those words. Now, think about one time when you were very proud of yourself for something good that you did. You felt you could even touch the clouds. Touch something soft (your sweater, cotton balls the teacher may have brought for this activity, etc.) and experience the same sensation again. Now, bring your hands to your face. Touch your smile. Feel happy again.” Once this guided imagery is completed, the teacher will give each person an index card. The students will write their own name in big letters and “…is special because…” on top of the index card. Right under the heading, they will write three positive attributes they have. At a given signal provided by the teacher, students will raise their hands, walk around the classroom, discuss their ideas, and then move to another partner. Once everybody has had an opportunity to share with a partner, the teacher will invite students to come and sit by the carpet forming a big circle. The teacher will then select one stick with the name of a student. That student will read out loud what he/she has on the index card and the teacher will copy that information on chart paper. Then, using the overhead / blackboard / smart board, the teacher will invite students to talk to a partner and discuss how to use those three key words (each word being the main idea of a sentence) and expand them. As a whole group, the teacher will model (asking students to give him/her ideas) how to write a sentence (or a couple of sentences) that explains that word. Next, students will go back to their places, develop those three ideas and write three complete descriptive paragraphs. In order to differentiate this activity, the teacher will provide students with different choices. Choice 1: write a minimum of three descriptive adjectives using the right spelling and do a drawing that represents its meaning. Choice 2: fill out a Key Idea, Information and Memory Clue (KIM) graphic organizer containing a definition, a drawing and the three words that you have selected. Choice 3: write 3 different complete sentences – 1 for each key word that you have previously selected. Avoid repetition of adjectives, nouns and verbs. Choice 4: write 3 different
complete paragraphs – 1 for each key word that you have previously selected. When the activity is done students will discuss the reasons for thinking and saying good things about others.

Strategy 3. The Magic Box

This activity aims at helping students learn how to use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to: establish and maintain positive relationships, recognize individual and group similarities and differences, describe the ways that people are similar and different, describe positive qualities in others, and develop a positive self-image. In the area of writing, students will be able to understand and recognize the importance of listing, verbally and in written form, the main elements that have to be present while describing a person’s character/personality. Furthermore, students will be able to expand on one idea and provide descriptive details to support their main ideas.

The procedure will be: The teacher will construct 5 “magic boxes” (one magic box per group or as many groups as there are in the class). Inside the bottom of each box, the teacher will include a mirror. The teacher will begin the activity by asking the group: “Who do you think is the most special person in the whole world? Think to yourself for 30 seconds. Now, turn to your shoulder partner and share your thoughts with him/her for another 30 seconds (15 seconds for each student). I’m sure when you were talking to your partner you explained why you thought that person was the most special person in the world, right? I didn’t hear all of you talking, so could you please put in writing what you were talking about with your partner.” The teacher will give students 1 minute to write about the most special person in the world. They will have to write the name of that person and write one reason (in the form of a sentence or paragraph) to support their decision. The teacher will model the activity and will write something like: “I think the most special person of the world is Mother Theresa of Calcutta. My reason for choosing her is that she always helped those who were in need.” After allowing the students to individually write their own answers, teacher will say, “I have a magic box with me today, and each of you will have a chance to look inside and discover the most important person in the world. Please, give me all your papers. I am going to place all of them in this box. I’m going to select a paper that I know has the response that applies to all of you. Then, I’ll invite all of you to come and see the paper inside the magic box.” The teacher will tell students they are going to have an opportunity to see inside of the box but they cannot tell anybody who they see until everybody had a chance to look inside of the box. After all the students have had their turns, teacher will ask the group who the most special person was. After each student has had an opportunity to say "me," the teacher will explain that the box is valuable because it shows that each of them is special, and he/she may lead students into a discussion by asking questions of the following type: 1) How does it feel to see that you are the special person? 2) How is it possible for everyone to be the special one? 3) Why can we say we are unique? A discussion about each individual's exceptionality may follow.

Strategy 4. Smile Contest

The teacher will tell students they have to create different smile categories. He/she will suggest, and will write on the overhead (as a way of modeling the activity) different categories such as longest smile, friendliest smile, most teeth missing smile, widest smile, cutest smile, most often seen smile. Students will be working together (in order to create the smile categories) using the cooperative strategy Think Pad Brainstorming. This strategy will be used in the following way: The teacher announces the topic. Each student quickly records as many ideas as
possible on small slips of paper (Think time: around 1 minute). All ideas are collected when time is up. As a group, students will read out loud all the ideas and will select 3 of them (Discussion time: around 2 minutes). Each group will have to come out with 3 different smile categories. A member of the group will write each category on a piece of construction paper. Another member of the group will display the categories along the blackboard. A third member of the group will present their categories to the rest of the class by reading them out loud. All the different groups of the class will repeat this procedure. No categories should be repeated. If a team has a category that is already displayed on the blackboard they will not put it on display. Nevertheless, they will have to show it to the teacher and prove they did it. The teacher will invite everybody in the class to walk around the classroom smiling for a minute. Teacher will use music for timing this walk. When time is up, students will go back to their seats and, as a group, and using the cooperative strategy Talking Chips (Each student has one talking chip. Students place their chip in the center of the team table each time they talk. They can speak in any order, but they cannot speak a second time until all chips are in the center). When all chips have been placed (everyone has spoken), the chips are all collected and anyone in any order can speak again. They will make nominations for each category by writing names on several index cards. On each index card they will write the name of the category and the name of the person they think is the best representative for that type of smile. They will have 2 minutes. Once their deliberation process is over, the fourth member of each group will come to the blackboard and will place the index cards in the right categories. Finally, the teacher will distribute the corresponding Smiling Awards to the winner of each category. The teacher may lead students into a discussion about the benefits of smiling and could introduce the topic by asking questions of the following type 1) How does it feel to see that somebody is smiling at you? 2) How do you feel when you smile? 3) Why is important to try to smile every day?

Strategy 5. Letters to Success

Students will be able to improve their self-esteem by 1) acknowledging all the good things they have through a visual mean to relish their successes 2) experiencing feelings of competence 3) identifying and managing their own emotions 4) mastering skills related to achieving personal and academic goals – learning to focus on chasing their dreams by setting clear, specific, and detailed steps of how to attain short and long term goals. In the area of writing, students will learn how to 1) generate and organize ideas, 2) select specific key vocabulary 3) expand and develop an idea – provide reasons that support a main idea.

We recommend this activity to be carried out the following way: The teacher will provide students with letter size envelopes they will decorate. On different slips of paper, students will be writing about a) 3 things they are proud of b) 3 things they are thankful for and c) 3 dreams they have. When students are finished writing they will share with the rest of the students using the cooperative strategy Individual Stand and Share which is performed the following way: Individuals share either a list or one or two items, each sitting down when his/her items have been shared. When seated, the individuals record the other items shared. Often Individual Stand-N-Share is preceded or followed by a team discussion.

Strategy 6. Positive Road or Road to Success

Students will be able to increase their self-esteem by facing their fears and replacing them with positive thoughts. The writing benefits are the same as those of the previous activity. The activity will be carried out the following way: Inviting students to talk about times when they
have said something negative about themselves. Example: “I am not intelligent.” The teacher will ask students to verbally share with their partners the way they felt at that particular moment. Students will be brainstorming positive thoughts to replace that negative way of thinking. Students will be working together using the cooperative strategy Inside Outside Circle. Students stand in two concentric circles, facing a partner. The inside circle faces out; the outside circle faces in. Students will be taking turns sharing with their partners about one time they said something negative about themselves. Students will also be sharing how they felt in that situation. Partners will be giving them a positive thought they should put in their mind next time they think that way. Example: If partner A says “I don’t think I am good in math” partner B can say something like “You know what they say, practice makes perfect. Maybe you need more time in order to become better at math.” Partners switch roles; the outside circle students ask and listen, then praise or coach. After each student has shared one situation, they rotate to the next partner (the teacher may call rotation numbers, “Rotate three ahead.”) Next, the teacher will give students a drawing that will have a road, a car, several stones and several bridges. At the end of the road there will be a finish line that will read SUCCESS!!! The stones are on their way to success. Each stone is something negative they think about themselves. On each stone they will write “negative thoughts” they have had at one point in their lives. For example: “I am not as intelligent as…” or “I will never be able to get an A in that class because I don’t get it.” The bridges, that are right next to the stones, represent the bridge to success. On top of that bridge they will write the positive thought that overcomes that negative feeling. For example: Yes, I am intelligent. I may not understand it now but, if I try hard, I will be able to GET IT!!! When all the students have finished their “Positive Road or Road to Success” they will share with the rest of their partners using the cooperative strategy Three-Stray. Three team members will be visiting others teams’ table to see their work.

Visiting members will have some time to be at their partners’ tables (1-2 minutes approximately). The teacher will announce when time is up and will ask them to return to their original groups. This can be repeated several times until all the teams have been to all the different groups’ tables. Closing: The teacher will tell students that what they have just done is like real life. They have the choice of 1) crashing their car on the road - this is, putting themselves down by their fears – or 2) going through the bridge, this is, trusting their many capabilities. The stones represent negative self-talk and will prevent them from reaching their final lane, SUCCESS. The bridges, self-confidence, will lead them to reach any goal they may have in life and be truly happy.

Strategy 7. Write an About Me Pamphlet

Students will be able to improve their self-esteem by thinking about their qualities and happy moments. Students will improve their writing skills by identifying key words that have to be used when describing a person and a situation. The teacher will give the following directions to students: Think about all the qualities and happy moments that you have (the teacher will give students around 20 seconds). Next, the teacher will pass out an ‘about me’ pamphlet that students will have to fill out. Students will not write their name on the pamphlet. The teacher will then write a number on each of the pamphlets. Students will copy that number some place on their notebook so they remember which paper is theirs. Here are the student directions: Fold the paper hotdog style. Cut each of the categories so you can open each of them as if they were the pages of a book. You will only cut the line that appears on the front of the pamphlet (where you can read each category). Fill out each of the categories. For example: My best feature (this is what
appears on the front of the paper). Open that category. Write what you think is your best feature. For example: “My hair.” (Note: The teacher will set the timer for 5 minutes for the students to fill out the pamphlet. When the time is up, the teacher will collect all the pamphlets and distribute them randomly around the classroom.) When you get the pamphlet of some of your partners you have to: Read each of the categories one at a time. Once you have read a category, remember you have to read only one at a time, you will write the name of the person you think could have written that. You will write the name of the student on the back of the paper where you see all the numbers. For example: Category 1. My best feature. When you open it, if you happen to open the teacher’s, you could read, “my hair”. Since this is the first category, you will write my name under number one. Therefore, if you think that paper belongs to me (the teacher), you would write Ms. García. Read all the different categories and follow the same procedure. Check if you have written the same name in all the categories. Make your final decision of whom this “Pamphlet about Me” belongs to. Once all the students have written their guesses, they will stand up, read their pamphlets and tell the name of the person they believe that pamphlet belongs to. The teacher will allow students to explain how they figured out the ‘hidden identity’ and will also encourage students to give another compliment to their peers.

Conclusion

ELLs encounter a wide variety of difficulties while trying to master the content knowledge that is to be acquired at different grade levels. They do not only have to learn content, as do their monolingual peers, but they must also learn the language in order to understand what the teacher is presenting in class. Fearing not being able to perfectly express what has been learned while worrying about catching up with monolingual peers (as far as content and language) can have detrimental effects on the socio-emotional development of minority students. Being self-aware and understanding strengths and weaknesses is crucial for all students, but especially for second language learners. As we have seen, we can help our students to improve their self-esteem and their writing skills simultaneous when the appropriate strategy is used. Some of them, as described in this paper, can be very effective in building a sense of confidence, which is one of the skills that many ELLs need to foster.

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