

Using Picture-writing with Students who are English Language Learners: A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study employs a writing intervention for a beginner English Language Learner (ELL) with limited reading and writing proficiency in his native language. Picture-writing incorporates small drawings with words at the sentence level to enable switching between words known in English to drawings for unknown words resulting in a multimodal composition. In particular, this study focuses on the participant's response in terms of application and quality of writing. The results suggest that picture-writing may serve as a versatile strategy for teachers and beginner ELLs towards making meaning and inclusion in diverse class settings.

Introduction

In my role as an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher, I work with students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) in a variety of settings from withdrawal programs to small tutorial groups, to in-class support models in mainstream classrooms. Over the years, I have noticed similar challenges faced by some ELLs that left me wondering about alternatives to typically used scaffolds.

First, many students who are ELLs have English writing skills that lag considerably behind their oral and reading skills compared to their grade level. This gap is not surprising given the complexities of written language. In fact, research shows that it can take approximately two years for ELLs to acquire basic oral communicative skills and anywhere from five to seven years (and beyond) to acquire academic language proficiency (Coelho, 2004). Second, in mainstream classrooms, ELLs sometimes appear to be avoiding written tasks or do not produce written work. Unfortunately, in some circumstances writing avoidance is perceived as a lack of initiative or effort on the part of ELLs as opposed to evidence of affective filters in play or the need for alternative scaffolding (Coelho, 2004). In addition, ELLs who have not reached the language proficiency threshold in their first language (L1) as described by Cummins' theory may have an even greater challenge (Dahm & De Angelis, 2018) when it comes to acquiring the new target language (L2). These students cannot easily utilize their L1 writing skills as a resource to help produce texts including bilingual or multilingual compositions to communicate their thoughts and understandings. Lastly, common scaffolding methods such as using technology or visual dictionaries are helpful for some learners (if available), but for others, they are less efficient resulting in the loss of time, ideas, and motivation along the way.

As Ontario classrooms continue to grow in diversity of language, culture and identities, it is increasingly imperative that educators continuously consider ways to create welcoming learning environments and enhance best teaching practices for all students including ELLs. One strategy that benefits students learning English as a subsequent language has been incorporating translanguaging practices (García & Sylvan, 2011). A translanguaging approach recognizes languages as an asset and encourages ELLs to use and develop their full repertoire of languages flexibly to support their learning, communication, and identities. Moving flexibly between language modes allows bilinguals and multilinguals to access and share their funds of knowledge, while they continue to learn the new target language and curricular content in classroom settings (García & Sylvan, 2011; Mary & Young, 2017).

In considering the challenges for ELLs lacking writing proficiency in both L1 and L2, I thought about what constitutes a learner's full repertoire and the critical role of visuals (i.e., drawings, pictures, diagrams) in language. Interestingly, both beginner writing strategies and ELL specific accommodations use visuals in reference materials and drawing as a pre-writing strategy. Visuals support language acquisition, communication, and content learning by reducing the language load for students who are learning English (Coelho, 2004; Olshansky, 2018). In addition, for beginner ELLs with limited L1 writing skills, encouraging drawing as part of pre-writing can help students develop more confidence in writing tasks (Buly, 2011). This led me to wonder about augmenting the idea of ELLs using their full repertoire of language to include visuals in their writing compositions, in a slightly different way. For example, incorporating small drawings directly in sentence writing the same way an ELL might switch between known words in English to incorporating their L1 for unfamiliar words to produce bilingual or multilingual texts. The result would be a multimodal, rebus-style writing product.

In Ontario, the Steps to English Proficiency (STEP) framework and continua helps educators plan for and track the language development of English language learners across the curriculum. At the elementary school level, the STEP continua specific to students with uninterrupted schooling differs by grade division including primary, junior, and intermediate. Each of these STEP continua is represented by a grid with six observable language behaviours (OLB) across the top and language elements down the left column that loosely align with Ontario's language curriculum. The OLB progresses from a STEP 1 or beginning stage of language acquisition to proficient by STEP 6 in three areas: reading, writing and oral language skills (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). In this case study, I examined how one ELL at a STEP 1 overall with limited L1 writing skills responded to an intervention employing picture-writing, a combination of drawings and words that form sentences. More specifically, the following research questions guided my case study:

1. How does a student with limited English skills in L1 and L2 employ picture-writing to convey meaning?
2. What are the characteristics of the student's picture-writing and how does he use the drawings in his writing?

Literature Review

Drawings or Pictures as a Natural Scaffolding Method and Alternate Mode in ELL Writing Development

Studies show that young language learners naturally combine all multimodal and semiotic signs from their full language repertoires to communicate effectively (Olshansky, 2018; Wright, Boun & García, 2015). The practice of moving fluidly between and combining drawings and words in all known languages is an example of how students utilize and benefit from multimodal thinking skills to which also compliments a translanguaging approach to teaching (Olshansky, 2018). When beginner ELLs are afforded the space to include drawings as language, they can represent concretely what they would communicate orally (Adoniou, 2013). These concrete representations also provide educators insight to student thinking and what they want to convey (Olshansky, 2018). An interesting argument for the inclusion of drawings and multimodalities for ELLs relates to social justice because in our increasingly diverse classrooms,

students can make meaning without being relegated to the language of English words (Olshansky, 2018).

Another consideration relates to the stages of adjustment and acculturation ELLs new to the country are experiencing. For example, a silent phase is characteristic of the beginning stages and often influenced by feelings of anxiousness or frustration due to communicative barriers (Coelho, 2004). Given the complexities and challenges of learning to write in a new language, the use of drawings may help reduce related anxiousness and affective filters by providing an alternate entry point to access and convey meaning (Olshansky, 2018).

At the Kindergarten level, students are encouraged to draw as a natural progression to writing with words. However, as they gradually replace drawings with words and sentences, drawings become embellishments and less academic, often relegated to the arts (Adoniou, 2013). For this reason, resorting to drawing as a strategy in the development of writing for older students in the junior and intermediate grades is overlooked in favour of immediate production of writing in the target language, despite the everyday uses and careers that rely on drawings, diagrams, and multimodal compositions (Adoniou, 2013; Hope, 2008). Unfortunately, this leaves little space for many learners who might benefit from using drawings while they are acquiring language skills. Moreover, tendencies towards a traditional, monolingual approach further limits ELLs from using their full repertoire to communicate their feelings, ideas and understanding in their writing compositions (Zapata & Laman, 2016).

Methods

Context and Participant

This case study was part of a course project at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) and was limited to one participant due to COVID-19 restrictions. It was conducted in an Ontario K-8 elementary public school with a large percentage of ELLs, a majority being native speakers of Chinese or Farsi. At the time of data collection, classes shifted from in-person learning to remote online learning and back again due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person ESL support models were limited to in-class support due to health and safety restrictions. However, the Principal agreed to the use of a vacant classroom for limited withdrawal of selected students including the participant for this study. During remote online learning, the intervention was implemented via Google Meet breakout sessions within the Google Classroom of the homeroom teacher. Although this format was more limiting, Google Meet had the option to present screens and the Google Apps for Education Suite used by the school allowed file sharing for both synchronous and asynchronous activities.

Evan (pseudonym) finished Grade 3 in China before being placed in Grade 4 at our school last year and is currently in Grade 5. He was selected for this study as an English language learner at a STEP 1 overall with limited proficiency in L1 (Mandarin) reading and writing. Despite the accommodations and modifications provided by his homeroom teacher, Evan completed little written work independently in the mainstream classroom.

When asked how he felt about writing, Evan expressed that writing was “okay” and then clarified that writing is “easy” when he knows the words and how to spell them. At the time of the case study, Evan was able to write all the letters of the alphabet, was beginning to spell out words based on their sounds and had a growing repertoire of sight words that he wrote with good accuracy. At home, Evan’s parents arranged for additional periodic support with a tutor who was also fluent in Mandarin.

Data Collection and Analysis

The school Principal supported the study conditional on the family's consent which was obtained via email using a standard letter provided by OISE. A total of four support sessions ranging from 30-45 minutes were used for this study over the course of nearly two months from February to the first week of March 2021 (two online, two in-person). Data was collected through observations, anecdotal notes, work samples as well as emails and discussions with Evan's homeroom teacher. A total of four work samples were produced during the sessions. Two additional samples were produced outside of the sessions and forwarded by the homeroom teacher or uploaded by Evan to the shared file.

Prior to each session, a printout was prepared of the Google Slides presentation with a "notes" section to jot down observations and Evan's responses. Photos and screenshots of work samples were collected in addition to those uploaded to shared Google Slides.

During the first session, I introduced the picture-writing intervention using an interactive, visually supported lesson that employed the gradual release method moving from modelled instruction to independent work (see Figure 1). Picture-writing was intentionally integrated into the prompts and instructions on the four Google Slides which were highlighted during the lesson. The rebus poem used as a shared read aloud as well as other prompts were selected based on knowledge of Evan's hobbies and interests related to winter sports in addition to his English reading skills. For guided practice, a prompt was provided and the Google timer was set for five minutes where we both worked on our short 1-2 sentence responses. Afterwards, we took turns holding up our picture-writing for the other to read aloud and discuss. I had several responses prepared ahead of time, again considering Evan's current vocabulary and some of our previous discussions. The final task was for Evan to independently employ picture-writing in response to a different prompt. Each of the slides and related activities was allotted roughly ten minutes to fill the forty-minute session.

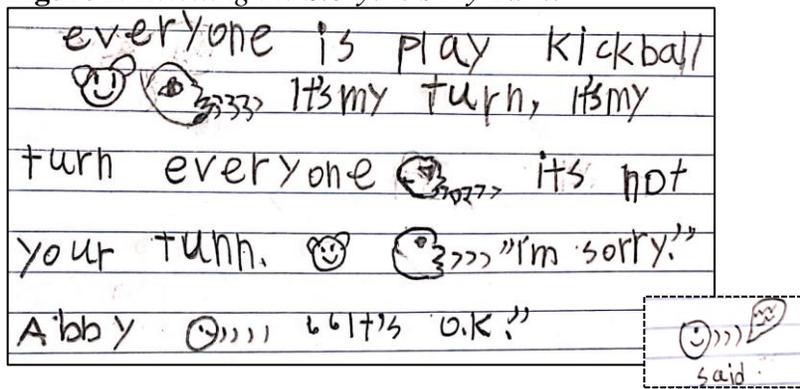
Figure 1. Lesson Presentation Using Google Slides with Bitmoji (left to right, then down)



Evan's private tutor was present during the remote-learning literacy block for translating or task support which overlapped with our first two virtual sessions. During the first session, I asked her to confirm using Mandarin that Evan understood the intervention and he could choose to apply it to any written task throughout his day. Toward this end, I also provided both his homeroom teacher and tutor an overview of the intervention including access to the Google Slides so that they could partner in supporting him.

I began the second session and all subsequent sessions by referencing the Google Slides with a brief review statement, "Remember, we can write the words we know and draw pictures for the words we don't know." In addition, we always had a computer available that he could access independently if he preferred to use Google Translate. Evan also continued to work with his personal editing checklist that was used prior to the intervention. During this session, we reviewed, discussed, and labelled a reading response that Evan composed using the picture-writing intervention. Several words were selected and labelled directly onto his notebook as a reference (*see Figure 2*).

Figure 2. *Retelling the Story: It's My Turn!*



For the third session, we used the intervention with procedure writing to compliment and practice what the homeroom teacher was working on in class. Evan understood the format and the homeroom teacher had provided the class with examples and key visuals to support the task. Evan expressed interest in creating a procedure about snowboarding, a topic he had prior knowledge in from texts as well as personal experience.

During our final session, Evan requested the familiar activity of using 'Story Cubes.' Prior to COVID-19 related health restrictions, it was a popular request by many students during our ESL time to collaboratively create sentences and stories guided by the pictures on the cubes. For the fourth session, we used the Story Cubes to generate writing that included the intervention.

A total of six written responses were analyzed using *Figure 3*. The response categories were adapted from several descriptors in the Communication category of the Achievement Chart in Ontario's language curriculum and the OLB descriptors from Ontario's STEP continuum for Grades 4-6.

Figure 3. *Areas of Data Analysis*

Low response (Communicates meaning with limited effectiveness): Uses familiar sentence frame and 1-2 additional words including picture-writing that conveys limited meaning about the topic.
Medium response (Communicates meaning with some effectiveness): Generating sentences with a combination of high frequency or familiar words and picture-writing to convey meaning with some detail about the topic. Includes varying sentence lengths.
High response (Communicates meaning with considerable effectiveness): Generating sentences with a combination of high frequency words, including picture-writing that represents subject specific words to convey meaning. Includes varying sentence lengths and parts of speech to enhance meaning and interest.

Results

The day after our initial session, Evan applied the intervention independently to his summary writing and posted the photo of his work to our shared Google Slides (*see Figure 2*), which we reviewed during the second session. Evan’s summary was based on a book his tutor had selected from the online resources I had setup previously. At first glance, I wondered why he had not copied the word ‘bear’ but after pulling up the text, I saw that it was a first-person narrative that did not mention the animal names. Together, we labelled the words, ‘bear’ and ‘said’ which he quickly adopted into his speaking repeatedly using the words as he read his response and discussed the reading.

After introducing the intervention, I became worried that Evan might resort to drawing even for words that he knew or instead of accessing his reference materials if it was easier or quicker for him. This was not the case at all as evident in his written samples where he used high frequency words with good accuracy and continued to independently sound out words or ask for me to say it aloud so he could listen to the sounds. In *Figure 4*, Evan chose to write about why he loves winter in Canada. During this first session, Evan was already drawing out words beyond what he had acquired in English to share about himself. For example, his first trial of picture-writing includes representations for eating ‘hot pot’ and going snowboarding with identifiable drawings of mountains and a chairlift. His tutor further clarified and translated ‘hot pot’ as traditional Chinese dish, and during our conference, Evan noted he went snowboarding at Blue Mountain.

Figure 4. *I Like Winter Because Winter I Can...*

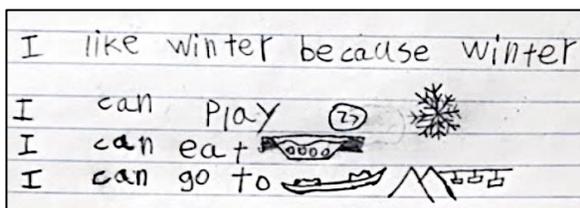
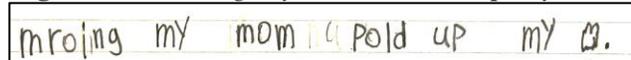


Figure 5. *Morning My Mom Pulled Up My Tooth*



Word Choice and Drawings

Throughout the intervention, I noticed that Evan’s picture placeholders and words were very specific which enhanced his quality of writing and communication for meaning. This was apparent from our first shared picture-writing, where he shows that he specifically likes

McDonald's French fries by adding the capital letter M to the box on his drawing (see Figure 6). Moreover, as the sessions progressed, Evan was visibly writing beyond three-word sentences or simple sentence starters. Evan was writing to convey meaning related to personal experiences, interests and understandings.

In our final session, using a few words and gesturing to his mask-covered mouth, Evan excitedly communicated a missing tooth before writing it out (see Figure 5). When I tried to clarify and paraphrase, "This morning your mom pulled your tooth out?" Evan insisted, adding gestures to clarify, "No, not out. Up!" Evan was making a clear word choice that better described his mom's action which was important to him. In another example (see Figure 8), he applied the intervention, his background knowledge, and experience to compose a procedure instructing me, the novice, how to snowboard. Evan knew the word 'ski' in English but not the word snowboard, which he easily remedied by picture-writing in the title. He effectively used drawings again to describe the important detail of the knee position as bent, not straight. For someone like myself with little snowboarding knowledge, the fifth instruction needed clarification during our conference. It turned out his drawings were placeholders for technical terms such as bindings and locks. Evan explained this with a combination of words, "This is my shoes, this has" and gesturing open and close motions over his shoe. During each conference, we picked out a few key words from his picture-writing and added their corresponding English version that he could reference as he wrote. In this case, we picked, 'goggles', 'snowboard', and 'hill' which he again began to use immediately and continued to use in subsequent sessions. My rationale for choosing a few words related to their everyday usability and to avoid overwhelming him which might discourage his efforts and impact his motivation.

Throughout the sessions, I observed Evan revising his drawings, erasing, altering and also engaging in self-talk, saying 'No' or 'Oh' as he went along. Additional samples provided by his teacher and tutor had visible eraser marks and faint residual drawing marks in his picture-writing. Figure 7 shows Evan had revised his drawing of an iPad with clearly identifiable features (e.g., the home button at the bottom) during a class mindfulness activity.

Figure 6. *McDonald's French Fries*

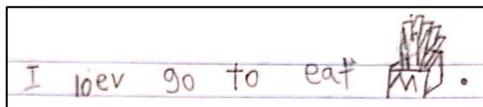
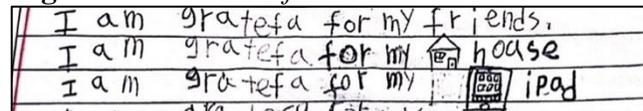
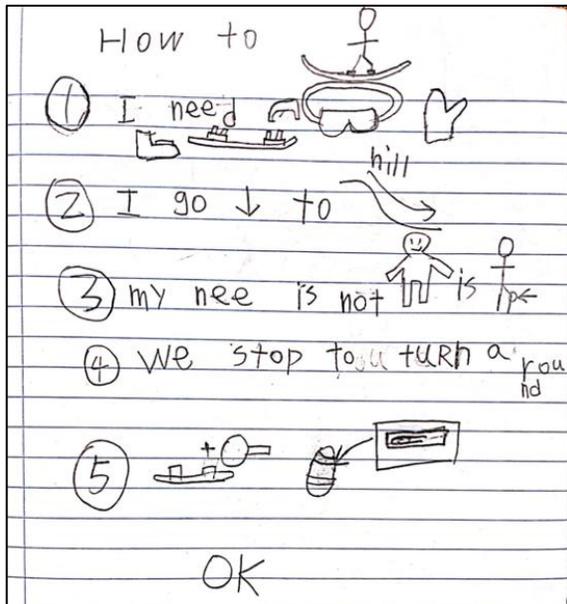


Figure 7. *I Am Grateful For ...*



As Evan began to use the intervention more regularly, I wondered if it might constrain word choice and meaning to those easily drawn. Maybe drawing nouns for example would be easier than verbs. However, looking at Evan's retell writing (Figure 2) shared on Google Slides, the verb 'said' was clearly communicated in an unanticipated, clever way. In fact, Evan used the same drawing to represent the word 'said' consistently throughout his writing. Interestingly, on one occasion, Evan himself noticed that some words cannot be drawn as placeholders. As he wrote the word 'need' (Figure 8), he paused and expressed aloud "'need' not have picture" and reiterated with gestures that he could not draw that word.

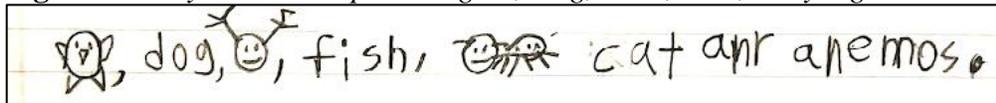
Figure 8. *How to Snowboard*



Conventions

Evan continued to work on adding common conventions and typically used a short editing checklist as a reference. In particular, Evan was working on starting sentences with a capital and ending with punctuation. His use of conventions in picture-writing appears consistent with his regular writing including compositions made using technology. *Figure 9* highlights Evan's application of commas as he lists names of animals followed by a period. *Figure 2* shows his use of quotation marks, also uninterrupted by his drawings. Finally, *Figure 8* shows Evan using a heading and numbered instructions, following the structure for procedure writing that he learned in class combined with picture-writing.

Figure 9. *Story Cubes Sample: Penguin, Dog, Deer, Fish, Ladybug Cat Are Animals.*



Discussion of Findings

Versatility and Openness to Multi-modal Writing

Evan's use of picture-writing demonstrates the versatility and universality of drawing as a natural bridge to writing in several ways. First, Evan was observed intuitively and efficiently switching between words and drawings at the sentence level to compose independently. Second, Evan's concrete representations provided me with insights about his understanding and what he wanted to communicate in his writing (Olshansky, 2018). Last, the drawings served as a scaffold to identifying new words.

Evan quickly adopted the intervention and chose to apply it freely in his writing tasks during the day. The additional samples shared also show versatility in application with different

genres and contexts. For example, a few days after our initial session, Evan's teacher sent me an email with a photo of his procedure-writing related to guided reading with the comment, "Here is a great example of how the pictures helped Evan today." The photo showed Evan's nonfiction composition using a combination of words from the texts and diagrams combined with the picture-writing intervention. Not surprisingly, Evan adapted the picture-writing for himself to include supplementing written words with pictures to add detail or ensure understanding. It appears that adding pictures in writing has become a go-to strategy in his repertoire for meaning making and communication in the classroom. Most importantly, Evan understands that his educators encourage and welcome his multimodal compositions and communication. This openness towards languages and modes has likely provided Evan with additional flexibility and confidence to engage in writing tasks while minimizing related affective filters.

Interestingly, during the sessions, Evan started the writing tasks independently without delay and mostly remained on task. When applying the intervention to his writing, he would frequently say portions of his response aloud to himself or use a questioning intonation to confirm if his pronunciation was accurate as he spelled some words out. The difference in a one-to-one session versus the larger classroom setting may account for this variance in behaviours.

Evan's computer skills appeared to be another factor affecting his writing using classroom technology. As I came to collect Evan for our third session, I noticed he was practicing his English keyboarding skills on the computer. When I inquired about his preference in using a computer versus writing by hand, Evan responded, "I want write, write is faster". This example highlights an instance where technology may have been viewed as less efficient for students who have not yet mastered the keyboard or proficiency in using the available applications.

Quality of Writing

In essence, the picture-writing intervention creates equality between the status of words and drawings towards minimizing language barriers faced by many ELLs in writing. When looking at Evan's writing samples coupled with observations and discussions, his thoughtful attention to drawings as specific words and meaning is apparent. This supports previous research assertions that visuals promote an awareness of and attention to word choice that enhances writing quality (Adoniou, 2013; Olshansky, 2018). Furthermore, Evan's drawings enabled meaning that invited his culture, experiences and interests while he continues to work on developing English language skills and computer skills. Observations of Evan's application of the intervention suggests that writing conventions and generating spelling of words based on understandings of language continues simultaneously without being interrupted or replaced by drawings.

Conclusion and Implications

Picture-writing may serve as a versatile strategy for teachers and beginner ELLs towards making meaning and inclusion in diverse class settings. Specifically, ELLs with limited L1 reading and writing proficiency may benefit from the universality of drawings to communicate.

Before claiming validity or reliability, it is important to identify the limitations of this case study. Namely the one-to-one instruction and sample size makes generalization of results difficult. Additional studies with larger samples sizes would be required. Another limitation

might be that not all students enjoy drawing or find it as quick or easy to employ as the participant in this study.

Employing picture-writing as a strategy may help educators maximize the benefits of drawings as they work with ELLs towards the dual goals of language acquisition and curricular content (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Furthermore, an openness on the part of educators to incorporate multimodal, multi-semiotic communication is imperative to foster inclusion and help reduce affective filters due to communicative barriers. For example, educators may consider introducing and modelling the intervention in their writing workshop so that it is not perceived as meant for some students only. To expand on the current study, it would be of interest to follow up with Evan to see if he still incorporates picture-writing or an adaptation of it to any degree during his writing process. Future research might also consider how picture-writing affects collaboration and group work across various curricular areas and genres.

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Author Biography

Rachel Lazarovic is a teacher in the York Region District School Board. She completed her Bachelor of Education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto where she is currently working towards her Master of Education in Language and Literacies Education. Prior to that, Rachel obtained her honours Bachelor of Commerce from York University.

Figure 1. Lesson Presentation Using Google Slides with Bitmoji (right to left, then down)



Figure 2. Retelling the Story: It's My Turn!

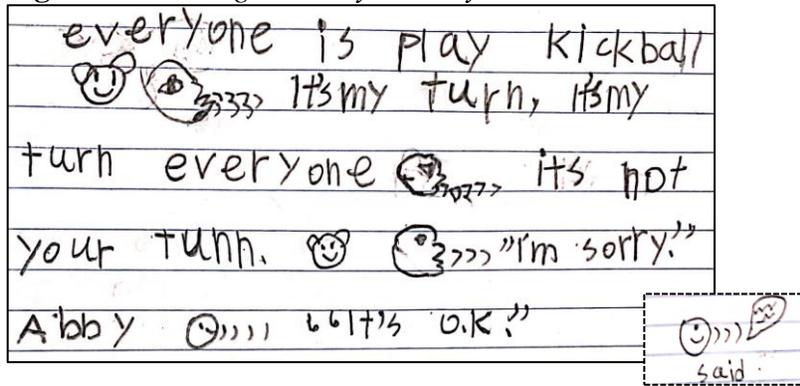


Figure 3. Areas of data analysis

<p>Low response (Communicates meaning with limited effectiveness): Uses familiar sentence frame and 1-2 additional words including picture-writing that conveys limited meaning about the topic.</p>
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Figure 4. *I Like Winter Because Winter I Can...*

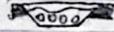
I like winter because winter
I can play 
I can eat 
I can go to 

Figure 5. *Morning My Mom Pulled Up My Tooth*

morning my mom pulled up my tooth.

Figure 6. *McDonald's French Fries*

I love go to eat .

Figure 7. *I Am Grateful For...*

I am grateful for my friends.
I am grateful for my house
I am grateful for my iPad

Figure 8. *How to Snowboard*

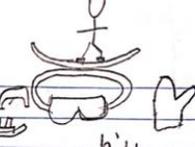
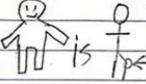
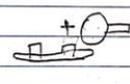
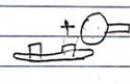
How to
① I need 
② I go down to 
③ my nee is not  is 
④ we stop to turn a  round
⑤  
OK

Figure 9. *Story Cubes Sample: Penguin, Dog, Deer, Fish, Ladybug Cat Are Animals.*

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