

Strategies in Action: Literacy Development

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Second Grade: English-instructed class with numerous Multilingual Learners who have a variety of home language and cultural backgrounds.

Setting:

Mr. Marvin's second-grade class is engaged in a "Problem Solvers" thematic unit based on History and Social Science standards. The teacher is focusing on the importance of individual action and character, and wants his students to understand how individuals and groups have influenced change and worked together to solve problems. The focal language arts standards are related to asking and answering questions from key details in a text, and writing narratives that recount events with details describing actions, thoughts, and feelings.

The class had learned together about John Lewis and Wangari Maathai, and then, over the course of three days, Mr. Marvin engaged them in an [interactive, repeated read-aloud](#) of the book *The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks* by Cynthia Levinson. The book tells the story of the youngest known child to be arrested for protesting in Birmingham, Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement in 1963. The repeated read-aloud was designed both to immerse students in the content of individual and group activism during an important historical time, and also to focus on the narrative structure and the author's use of language to convey feeling. After the first reading, students were engaged in recounting the literal details of the story itself. Mr. Marvin posed several surface-level questions—Who is the main character? Where does it take place? What is the problem?—leading the students to refer to the text. Following the second reading, students focused on analyzing the character of Audrey, citing evidence from the text.

Lesson:

Deconstructing Text and a Focus on Similes

After a third reading of *The Youngest Marcher*, it is time to focus on the rich and wonderful language choices the author used. Mr. Marvin selects a particular section from the story for closer examination of academic text for two purposes: (1) To make meaning and understand the passage more fully and (2) to learn how academic texts are structured, both in terms of overall text structure and also grammatical structures within sentences—in this case, descriptive phrases, expressive verbs, and similes. Assembling the students in a circle, Mr. Marvin prepares to lead them through a [Deconstructing Text](#) lesson. "For a few days now, we've been reading, retelling, and analyzing the wonderful book, *The Youngest Marcher*. Today, let's unpack one of Levinson's juicy sentences from the book!" He posts the following selection of text:

"When Mike visited Fred's church, thousands of people crowded around to hear him preach. In a voice as taut as steel cables, as smooth as glass, he intoned, 'Segregation...is morally wrong and sinful.' That's true! Fired up, Audrey sat taller."

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The children remember this point in the story, and have already grasped what it is about from the previous days of asking and answering questions. What they hadn't paid close attention to was the author's craft. Slowly, Mr. Marvin reads the passage aloud. He has them turn to a partner and talk about what the first sentence is saying, breaking it down into their own language. He records the simple sentences they come up with:

Mike visited Fred's church. Lots of people came to hear him speak. Fred was preaching.

Moving onto the second sentence, Mr. Marvin explains to the class, "In order to paint a picture in our minds, authors sometimes use creative ways to describe thoughts and feelings by comparing two different things using the words 'like' or 'as.' An example might be, 'He's as fast as a cheetah.' So, instead of just saying, 'He's very fast,' the author compares him to a cheetah, the fastest land animal, and that helps us have a better and more interesting picture in our mind about just how fast he is. This kind of description is called a simile." Mr. Marvin then reads the second sentence, on a hunt for similes. The kids are able to identify 'as taut as steel cables' and 'as smooth as glass.' Mr. Marvin is prepared, knowing his Multilingual Learners may need scaffolding: "Do you know what steel cables are?" as he holds up a picture of a steel cable bridge. "See these steel cables here? They are taut. Taut means pulled tight. Can you see these taut cables on the bridge? They're tight, taut, to keep the bridge strong and stable. So a voice that is as 'taut as steel cables' is tight, tense, not relaxed." Referring back to the story, Mr. Marvin asks why Mike's voice might be tight and tense and "taut as steel cables." The children offer ideas to one another with a nearby partner: "Maybe because he is so excited." "Maybe because things are really tense and he cares so much."

Mr. Marvin encourages them to look for another simile as he reads the sentence again, and the children find "smooth as glass." "If someone's voice is as smooth as glass, what do you think that might mean?" Once again, students share their thinking with a partner. When they come back together, Mr. Marvin greets their interpretations with, "Wow, you can see how much information the author shared with us about Mike's voice in that one sentence with these similes. Can't you just imagine hearing him in your mind?"

Mr. Marvin leaves the passage for now. Tomorrow he will focus on the expression, "Fired up." For now, he just wants students to appreciate the author's use of similes to create interesting descriptions. Knowing he will ask the class to do a piece of writing, incorporating the use of similes, he wants to spend some additional time in Designated ELD with his Multilingual Learners on this skill. Seating them around a small table, Mr. Marvin points out the structure: "___ as ___." He writes that on a sentence strip and also introduces the structure: "___ like ___" on a second sentence strip. On his mini-white board, he shares a T-graph. On one side are several adjectives listed: hard, smooth, quiet, soft, flat, busy, noisy. He asks the students to come up with nouns that relate to each adjective, and he records these on the other side of the T-graph. The students then take turns generating similes by selecting a simile frame and using the ideas on the T-graph. "She was as quiet as a mouse." "The cafeteria is as busy as the subway station." "The blanket is soft like a rabbit." They are enjoying the practice, and Mr. Marvin knows his Multilingual Learners will be ready for the whole class writing next week.

Reflection questions

1. Mr. Marvin reads the same text multiple times to the students using an interactive reading strategy. How do numerous reads benefit Multilingual Learners? What are the literacy and language goals for each of the read-aloud lessons? What other literacy and language goals might a teacher plan for an interactive read-aloud?
2. What language-based supports does Mr. Marvin use to develop learners' literacy skills? How do they purposefully bridge student experiences with reading, writing, and oral language? How might these practices support Multilingual Learners?
3. What is one takeaway that you can apply to your own practice in supporting Multilingual Learners' literacy development?