



Transactional Writing: Explanation

LEVEL 1i 1ii 1iii **2** 3 4 5

The Best Nest

THE LEARNING CONTEXT

This class was introduced to written explanations through picture books that described some phenomenon or process in narrative form, for example *Mr Archimedes' Bath* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. The students listened to the stories and discussed the scientific processes described. They were asked to say how or why something had happened.

The teacher used models of written explanation, in published texts, to illustrate the specific language features found in explanatory writing. The students were able to identify some features and discuss how they made the explanation clear. Discussion covered use of paragraphs, cause-and-effect phrases, and specific detail. She particularly used explanations in the Junior Journals, for example "How Flies Walk Upside Down" (1. 84).

She then read *The Best Nest*, and the class discussed how and why birds build nests. She focused particularly on cause and effect, giving some examples of effects, and asking the students to respond with a possible cause. For example, if an effect was that "the nest falls to the ground", a possible cause could be that "the nest is built on a rickety branch". Students recorded these in their draft books.

The students were then given the task of writing an explanation for "What makes the best nest?" They revised the criteria they had identified from the published models, such as using a topic definition to begin, and including specific detail and cause and effect.

Jonathan wrote his draft as a list, numbering his ideas. In conference, the teacher was able to guide him toward using paragraphs for his sequenced ideas. He published his work independently.

Teacher-student conversations

The teacher talked with Jonathan to extend his understanding of explanation writing.

Teacher: You have remembered to include the definition of a nest.

Jonathan: Yes – that has to come first.

Teacher: And you've numbered these ideas?

Jonathan: It made it easier to sort the different things out.

Teacher: How about when you publish, you use separate paragraphs for those ideas, instead of numbers?

Jonathan: Okay.

Teacher: I see you've used the words "cause" and "effect" too.

Jonathan: Yes.

Teacher: If we wanted to keep the meaning the same, without using those words, how could we write that in a sentence?

Jonathan: Um ...

Teacher: "The nest is warm" ...?

Jonathan: Oh – you could say the nest is warm so the egg is happy.

Teacher: Yes, you could. Any other words that might fit there?

Jonathan: The nest is warm ... *therefore* the egg is happy.

Teacher: Well done – "therefore" is a useful word for explanations. You will have a lot to think about when you publish your explanation.

INTEGRATING READING AND WRITING

Opportunities should be sought in classroom reading programmes for students to respond to written and visual texts, identifying how processes or phenomena can be explained. Picture books with narrative text will be useful. Exposure to transactional texts will be essential. The "reading to" programme will provide opportunities for discussing specific vocabulary, language features, and diagrams, which may be transferred to student writing and drawing.

WHERE TO NEXT?

To move Jonathan towards the next learning step, the teacher might help him to focus on:

Ideas

- extending factual ideas with some objectivity.

Structure

- prioritising, grouping and organising ideas.

Vocabulary

- encouraging extended use of precise topic-related vocabulary.

This could be done by:

- ongoing class and individual discussions, prompting further detail through questioning
- modelling texts with examples of language features of explanation writing
- conferencing or giving feedback in reading and writing programmes.



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CURRICULUM LINKS

English in the New Zealand Curriculum

Level 2: Writing Functions

Transactional Writing: Students should write instructions and explanations, state facts and opinions, and recount events in a range of authentic contexts.

Levels 1 and 2: Reading and Writing Processes

Exploring Language: Students should explore choices made by writers, and identify and use the common conventions of writing and organisation of text which affect understanding.

Thinking Critically: Students should identify and express meanings in written texts, drawing on personal background, knowledge and experience.

Processing Information: Students should identify, retrieve, record, and present coherent information, using more than one source and type of technology, and describing the process used.

English in the New Zealand Curriculum, pages 35-36

REFERENCES

Allen, Pamela (1980). *Mr Archimedes' Bath*. Sydney: Collins.

Carle, Eric (1970). *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. London: Hamilton, Picture Puffins.

Eastman, P. D. (1969). *The Best Nest*. Glasgow: Collins.

Ministry of Education. (1994). *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media



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WHAT THE WORK SHOWS: Jonathan has clearly explained a natural phenomenon in some detail. He confidently uses the explanation-writing features that he has been taught.

Student's final draft

Deeper features

Ideas

Includes ideas that are objective and subjective.

Supports some ideas with details.

Structure

Begins to sequence explanation with some confidence: initial definition, concluding summary statement.

Sentences

Uses mainly simple and compound sentences.

Vocabulary

Uses key topic-appropriate words, and cause-and-effect words.

Starting to take risks with vocabulary.

Language features

Maintains present tense.

Uses a poetic feature to make explanation clearer.

The Best Nest

A nest is a birds house which birds live in. They have to make it nice and cosy for the soon-coming egg.

The contents of the nest include straw, hay, wheat, hair, stuffing (wool), wool and drinking straws.

The nest is warm therefore the egg is happy. The nest is in a high place, so predators cant get it.

it works by acting like a heater to warm the egg to make it faster to hatch.

The nest is a unique thing it is essential for birds

Surface features

Spelling

Demonstrates good understanding of all basic sounds and patterns in written English.

Grammar

Uses most grammatical conventions with support.

Punctuation

Punctuates with increasing independence.



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