A Model for Writing in French Immersion Language Arts: Using Best Practices and Professional Learning Communities

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BILINGUALISM IN A PLURILINGUAL CANADA: RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS

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Background & Research Context

• NB focus on literacy and new **provincial standards** for writing
• New pedagogical materials related to literacy (writing)
• Lack of consistent approach to the teaching of writing
• Need for professional conversations about this issue
• District emphasis on the creation of PLCs at school level
Research Project

- L²RIC’s interest in the area of best practices- project funded by a grant from Canadian Heritage
- Recognition of the interest in the teaching and learning of writing (both at the school and university levels)
- Participation in the PLCs at a local elementary school (phase 1) and a local middle school (phase 2) through an action research project
- Two master teachers - one at each school who became research partners (Renée Bourgoin and Josée Le Bouthillier)
The purpose of this study was to explore and improve the teaching and learning of writing in a second language context through a Professional Learning Community (PLC) partnership between the school and the university.

Objectives:

- To examine the collaborative knowledge building process in the context of a PLC
- To examine the role of the PLC in the professional development of in-service teachers
- To identify, analyze, apply, and evaluate the best practices in literacy according to the literature and the lived experiences of teachers
- To experiment with a instructional model for writing in order to gain further insight into best practices in the teaching of writing
- To share knowledge and exemplary practices related to literacy and to PLCs with the wider educational community (e.g., teachers, students, student-teachers, researchers, parents)
Theoretical Framework

- Best Practices - general concept
- Best Practices in Writing
- Professional Learning Communities (PLC)
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Best Practice

• A Definition:

Serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching

(Zemelman et al., 2005, p.vi):
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
Best Practices in Writing

• Process approach most efficient (Cumming, 2001)
• Daily writing practice for extended periods of time (Hall, 1993)
• Predictability and consistency in instruction (Calkins, 1983)
• Explicit instruction, scaffoldings, and modeling (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005)
• Reading-writing connections (Cumming, 2001 and Grabe, 2001)
• Writing processes similar in both first language (L1) and second language (L2), but certain modifications and different expectations needed (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005)…
Second Language Writers (as compared to L1 writers)

- Create shorter texts
- Use more simplistic sentence structures
- Use a reduced vocabulary
- Make more mistakes
- Take longer to compose
- Have access to limited strategies and linguistic competence (Cornaire and Raymond, 1994)
- Need three times more time to plan (Hall, 1993)
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
Professional Learning Communities

• Teacher collaboration in order to ensure and improve student’s learning (Schmoker, 2005)
• Teachers meet to analyze learning and teaching processes in order to improve professional practices (Harris and Muijs, 2005)
• Common vision and shared knowledge (Fullan, 2005)
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
The ÉCRI Model

ÉCRI Model
Reasoned and Coherent Writing in Immersion

- Phase 1: Presentation of the Writing Project
- Phase 2: Modeled Writing
- Phase 3: Shared Writing
- Phase 4: Interactive Writing
- Phase 5: Independent Writing

Supporting Activities:
- Reading Activities
- Oral Activities
- Guided Writing
- Mini-Lessons on Writing Traits and Writing Strategies
Phase 1- Presentation of Final Project

- Discussion of final project
- Presentation of the genre and/or theme
- Explanation of 3 components of project: written, visual and oral
- Personalization, activation of prior knowledge and anticipation
- Explanation of the phases
Phase 2- Modeled Writing

• Presentation of model texts
• Visual representation of the structure of the text (graphic organizer)
• Identification of particular linguistic and textual elements
• Creation of the rubric
Phase 3- Shared Writing

• Sharing of teacher’s writing process
• Suggestions from the students
• Evaluation of the teacher’s text according to the rubric
Phase 4- Interactive Writing

- Emergence of learner/writer autonomy
- Creation of collaborative text on the part of students
- Negotiation of content of the text
- Interactive planning, writing and revision
Phase 5- Independent Writing

- Writing of final individual project
- Follows process writing approach (planning, writing of a draft, step-by-step revisions, and writing of final text)
- Conferencing is a key component of this phase
- Publication and presentation of final project

Examples of final projects by grade level:
- Grade 1- descriptive texts related to a farm theme with shadow boxes
- Grade 3- procedural texts with Photostory of steps
- Grade 4- opinion texts with role play
- Grade 5- opinion texts with placards
- Grade 7- parodies with reader’s theatre
- Grade 8- publicity texts with videotaped “Ad”
Methodological Orientation

• Action research:
  - Cooperative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2006)
  - Democratic dialogue (Gustavsen, 2006)

This methodology encourages two-way communication, the participation of each member of the team, a balance between reflection and action and work experience as a starting point for dialogue.
Method: Research Questions

Phase 1:
1. What are the best practices for the teaching of writing in a second language context as identified by the literature and by practicing teachers?
2. How can a PLC help teachers construct knowledge about the teaching of writing?

Phase 2:
1. Can the ÉCRI model designed for use at the elementary school be implemented effectively at the middle school level? If so, what modifications, if any, are needed?
2. What is the role of a PLC in implementing the ÉCRI writing model successfully at the middle school level?
Data Collection

Phase 1- Action Research Project at Elementary Level:

- Regular sessions with 12 teachers over an eight-month period (10 classroom French immersion teachers, 1 resource teacher, 1 English language arts teacher) consisting of..
  - Monthly PLC meetings to explore teachers’ current practices related to the teaching of writing
  - Conversations guided by questions and activities based on current literature (concerns, challenges, and perceptions of best practices)
- Co-construction of a coherent model for the teaching of writing—ÉCRI
- Experimentation with the model in the classroom context with observation and videotaping over a period of 6 weeks (5 teachers representing 4 grade levels participated in this aspect of the research)
- Stimulated recall reflection on selected “best practices” clips
Phase 2- Action Research Project at a Middle School Level:

- Regular sessions with PLC over a 8-month period (4 French immersion language arts teachers, 2 English to immersion language arts teachers, and 1 literacy specialist) consisting of…
  - Presentation of ECRI model and research project
  - Discussions about adaptability of model for various contexts,
  - Specific sessions based on topics of interest of the PLC related to writing.
- Experimentation with the model in the classroom context with observation and videotaping over a period of 6 weeks (5 teachers representing 4 grade levels participated in this aspect of the research)
- Future data collection steps: Stimulated recall reflection on selected “best practices” clips
Data Analysis

Phase 1 (elementary):
- Analysis of teacher insights collected during PLC sessions to determine emergent themes related to the model and the PLC process
- Analysis of videotaped data using the writing model and literature related to “best practices”
- Analysis of stimulated recall in order to add further insight into experimentation with writing model

Phase 2: (middle school- in progress)
- Same process in multiple contexts- FILA, English to immersion, struggling writers
- Analysis of written texts produced by learners participating in project
Professional Learning Communities- Emergent Themes

Professional Dialogue:

In both schools, an increased in professional discussions and teachers’ collaboration shared terminology, discussions about writing now occurring on daily basis.

- “Teachers are talking this way now [using the model phases and the related terminology]. Everyone is using the same terminology. Staff room conversations are changing and they are more oriented towards students’ learning. I spend time brainstorming about modeling and sharing and graphic organizers with other LA teachers.” (Grade 8 FI LA Teacher)

- “We adopted a common language... In the morning before the bell rang, it would not be surprising to hear teachers having informal discussions about writing and the model- ‘where are you in the interactive writing phase’; ‘I’ve got another approach for shared writing, what do you think?’; ‘Come see my new graphic organizer’” (Grade 5 FI Teacher and PLC lead-teacher).
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Professional Learning Communities- Emergent Themes
Beyond the PLC:

- At the elementary level, individual grade level teachers met in small groups to discuss issues related to the particular needs of their students.
- Members of the French Immersion PLC at elementary school shared their experiences with literacy teachers at the middle level.
- French Immersion PLC at the middle level reported to the school general PLC and served as a guiding coalition who helped build consensus and who lead change (DuFour et al., 2006); Relational Leadership (Donaldson, 2007).
- Grade 6 teachers who were not initially involved expressed an interest in the idea and asked for in-service sessions on the writing model.

“I liked the Wednesday afternoon sessions when we were able to share what we had done in class... I especially liked our collaboration [grade 1 teachers with lead teacher]- We were able to generate many good ideas together. You helped me understand the steps in the model” (Grade 1 FI Teacher).
Best Practices in Writing - Emergent Themes

The Need for a Writing Model:

✓ In both schools, teachers felt the need for a common instructional writing model (e.g. Zemelman et al., 2005; Pressley et al., 2007).

✓ Teachers felt need for more scaffolding in their instruction and more explicit instruction (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005).

✓ ÉCRI model provided necessary scaffolding and allowed for explicit instruction: “We don’t just ask the kids to write- we teach them how to write. We understand that each writing phase (step) is important for student success.” (Grade 3 FI Teacher).
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Best Practices in Writing- Emergent themes

The Writing Model and Learner Confidence:

Many teachers reported an increase in confidence with respect to the task of writing:

✓ “The level of confidence of my students is increasing with this model. There is a lot of support in the model for all students.” (Grade 8 FI teacher)

✓ “[During the shared writing phase], the students were able to see the teacher’s difficulties and were able to understand the process much more clearly. It gave both teacher and students more confidence with respect to writing- like symbiosis, bonding.” (Grade 8- literacy specialist teacher)

✓ “At the primary and elementary levels, it was not rare to see a student not writing at all, not a word. The model provides the necessary scaffolding for all students to feel capable of writing. ...Oh, some might say that the struggling writers mostly copy the models provided by the teacher. In my opinion, they are still making gains and progress by doing that....But, more importantly, they are writing and it makes them more confident and feeling good about themselves. It is devastating not feeling capable to put a word down on paper.” (Grade 5 FI Teacher)
Best Practices in Writing- Emergent Themes
The Writing Model: Concerns and Adaptations

✓ Some teachers expressed concern about the need for flexibility with respect to the apparent linear nature of the model (especially for Phases 3 and 4): “I see the benefits of this scaffolded and structured process, but my students are asking me: Madame, when are we going to write?” (Grade 8 FI teacher)

✓ Middle school teachers discovered that, at their students’ level, Phase 3, Shared Writing and Phase 4, Interactive Writing, worked better if combined: “The length of the texts at Middle school is too long and the students need to move on faster. I have combined phases 3 and 4. I start the text and model my process, then the students continue it. It works well.” (Grade 7 FI teacher)
Best Practices in Writing- Emergent Themes
The Writing Model: Concerns and Adaptations

During the Phase 3, Shared Writing, the middle school LA teachers felt that it was important to give students a greater participation in the process:

✓ “During the discussion about phase 3, I was a bit worried about sharing my process without involving the students during the process. When you (one researcher modeled that phase in the teacher’s class) did it, my students were discussing word choice, voice, sentence fluency and linguistic conventions with you. I am happy that you involved them in the sharing phase. My students were interested and eager to share.” (Grade 7 teacher)
Best Practices in Writing- Emergent Themes

The Writing Model and Learner Autonomy:

First four phases of the model as well as the complementary activities allow students to gradually decrease their reliance on scaffolding and, consequently to gradually increase autonomy until they are ready to write independently in the fifth phase.

✓ “At the end of this process, all my students, even my weakest, were able to produce a well-structured persuasive text. The understanding of the text genre structure, of the characteristics and of the purpose of every paragraph helped with the clarity of the text. My students’ ideas were better organized and the transitions between paragraphs were more fluid.” (Grade 7 FI teacher)
Best Practices in Writing- Emergent Themes

Differentiation and the Writing Model:
Various aspects of the model (e.g., use of graphic organizer, emphasis on conferencing) allow teachers to respond to various needs of the learners.

✓ “I was impressed with my students’ conferencing. They could identify some of their particular problems and solve them with some guidance. They were good.” (Grade 7- FI teacher)
✓ “While struggling students feel comfortable working within the guidelines of the graphic organizer, stronger students easily recognize set expectations and can work toward exceeding these expectations.” (Grade 5 - FI Teacher)
Best Practices in Writing: A Synthesis

- Students more successful and autonomous.
- Contributes particularly to improvements in students’ text structure.
- Supports struggling writers - no student falls through the cracks.
- First four phases of the model provides the necessary planning time for L2 writers and for struggling writers.
- Encourages skilled writers to push themselves further - noticeable differences in texts.
- Modeled writing phase in which students compare texts, not only provides models of genre structure, but also vocabulary and sentence structures needed.
- Shared and interactive writing phases reinforce these aspects of the writing (e.g., text and sentence structure, word choice)
CONCLUSION

• Effective PLCs contribute in a meaningful way to the co-construction of knowledge and the on-going professional dialogue necessary for the enhancement of best practice.

• Teachers at both the elementary and middle schools reported that the ÉCRI model was useful and effective way to plan units focused on the teaching of genre writing and provided a clearly defined, but flexible framework for scaffolded instruction of writing.
LIMITATIONS

• Structured nature of the model
• Lack of analysis of pre-model writing
• Lack of comparison with Francophone students at a similar level
• Limited to one elementary and one middle school in urban context
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Analysis of written texts of middle school students participating in the project.
- Further analysis of classroom footage to gain further insight into particular strategies needed in specific contexts - e.g., struggling writers.
- Follow-up interviews with middle school teachers regarding specific aspects of their teaching observed in the classroom footage.
- Publication of the DVDs and companion materials in the “Best Practices” series focusing on the ÉCRI model.
- Third and final stage of the research project in a secondary school context focusing on writing across the curriculum and an adaptation of the European Language Portfolio.
Writing Achievement Standards- End of Grade 6

Appropriate Achievement
- **An appropriate achievement will illustrate writing that**
  - **Content**
    - introduces a specific topic with a main idea that establishes the purpose and audience
    - includes straightforward and predictable ideas
    - attempts to support the ideas with relevant details (may have distractions)
  - **Organization**
    - gives an introduction to establish the purpose
    - shows evidence of sequencing, with connecting/transition words
    - shows control with paragraph divisions
    - provides an obvious conclusion
  - **Narrative/Imaginative Writing**
    - has a clear beginning, with the main characters introduced and the conflict presented
    - portrays characters who are based on familiar stereotypes and tend to be 'good' or 'bad'
    - sometimes includes dialogue to support/enhance ideas
    - gives definitive endings (could be predictable and/or abrupt)
  - **Information Text**
    - follows most conventions of the selected form (persuasive writing, reports, letters, invitations, directions, procedures, etc.)
    - uses text features (titles, headings, charts, diagrams, etc.) that are generally clear and related to content
    - presents introductions that show a clear purpose
    - includes details that follow a logical sequence (chronological, cause and effect, etc.)
    - has a conclusion (could possibly be over generalized) that is appropriate to the form

Strong Achievement
- **A strong achievement will illustrate writing that**
  - **Content**
    - introduces a specific topic with a main idea that establishes a clear purpose and definite audience
    - includes some original and thoughtful ideas
    - shows development of information with relevant details to support the ideas
  - **Organization**
    - has an effective introduction to establish a clear purpose
    - demonstrates sequencing with transition words
    - includes smooth paragraphing
    - provides a logical and definite conclusion
  - **Narrative/Imaginative Writing**
    - introduces the characters and conflict in an engaging and creative manner
    - shows a development of complex characters, settings, and plot
    - presents dialogue that enhances character and plot development
    - gives definitive endings (could be surprising or unusual)
  - **Information Text**
    - chooses conventions of the selected form correctly (persuasive writing, reports, letters, invitations, directions, procedures, etc.)
    - contains text features (charts, diagrams, etc.) that clearly enhance content
    - presents introductions that effectively establish purpose and engage the audience
    - includes details that follow a logical sequence (chronological, cause and effect, etc.) with effective transitions
    - has a logical and appropriate conclusion for the form
Appropriate Achievement
- **Word Choice**
  - includes word choices that convey meaning
- **Voice**
  - shows an awareness of audience and an engagement with subject
  - includes glimpses of personal feeling and individuality
- **Sentence Structure**
  - includes different kinds of sentences, with varied sentence structures (occasional errors)
  - includes a variety of sentence lengths and beginnings to create interest and establish rhythm
- **Conventions**
  - includes correct capital letters and end punctuation
  - includes internal punctuation (commas, quotation marks, and apostrophes) and paragraphing with some competence
  - has familiar and commonly used words spelled correctly
  - follows subject/verb agreement with generally correct tense
  - incorporates generally correct pronouns (e.g., *Give it to Tom and me.*)

Strong Achievement
- **Word Choice**
  - strengthens meaning with descriptive vocabulary
- **Voice**
  - demonstrates a confident awareness of audience and a sincere engagement with subject
  - includes strong personal feeling and individuality
- **Sentence Structure**
  - shows confident use of different kinds of sentences and structures (minimal errors)
  - includes a variety of effective sentence lengths and varied beginnings
- **Conventions**
  - demonstrates skill with the correct use of capital letters and end punctuation
  - includes internal punctuation (commas, quotation marks, and apostrophes) and paragraphing with competence
  - includes more complex vocabulary (minimal spelling errors)
  - follows subject/verb and tense agreement
  - incorporates correct use of pronouns
Selected References