

# The Hook that Took:

Using Multiple Scaffolds and Prompts to Promote the  
Use of Descriptive Words in the Genre of Letter  
Writing

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## **Abstract**

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**Title:** The Hook That Took: Using Multiple Scaffolds and Prompts to Promote the Use of Descriptive Words in the Genre of Letter Writing

**Research Question(s):**

How do scaffolds, such as visuals organizers, and providing an authentic audience for letter writing influence the use of descriptive words in first graders?

**Research Activities:**

Context: Using descriptive words in writing is a fundamental skill targeted during first grade. This inquiry investigated increasing students' use of descriptive words through a series of eight scaffolded prompts targeting the genre of letter writing. The instructional strategies targeted the whole first grade class but the inquiry focused on six cases. The cases were selected based on writing assessments and limited use of descriptive words in a preliminary letter. The group consisted of four boys and two girls (four were English Language Learners). Methods: The students were provided scaffolded activities, such as read-alouds that emulated correspondence letters, visual references, and verbal reminders to increase their use of descriptive words. Various audiences were also addressed by experimenting with different prompts. Data gathered included student writing, student surveys, and observation field notes. Results: The increase of descriptive words after the baseline assessment ranged from 25% to 75% for four of the six students. At baseline, one student performing near the ceiling level showed no change, while another showed a decrease of one descriptive word. The findings suggest that factors such as the nature of the prompt, interest level, scaffolds, audience, and prior knowledge influenced the number of messages and descriptive words that the students produced. Letter writing, especially to an authentic audience the students connect to, proved to be a useful genre to engage first graders in writing.

**Grade Level:** First Grade

**Data Collection Methods:** Student writing, student survey, observation field notes

**Project Descriptors:** Letter writing, descriptive writing, vocabulary, ELL

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## **I. Introduction**

"I don't know what to write! I didn't do anything over the weekend! How do you spell...? I can't think of anything to write! I'm done." These are just some of the familiar phrases I hear on a daily basis when I ask my first grade students to write to a prompt or about anything they want. Writing to a topic and using descriptive words are two fundamental skills that are essential in a first grader's writing. Since the first day of "skul" my students were "hezitant" to "miss spell" a word. In turn, they "wer" willing to sacrifice a "meaningfull mesege" for a correctly spelled word.

After relentlessly trying various methods, such as putting in "magic lines" that act as placeholder for unknown words or circling a word that you think you have misspelled incorrectly, I've come to the conclusion that my students need something more. I pondered how I could possibly move the focus away from spelling when students were asked to focus on the content of their message. How could I develop writers who can paint a picture with words in the minds of their readers? All of these questions made me reflect on the function of an audience: Are my students just tired of writing *for me* and instead they need to write *to me* or better yet to someone else? These questions led me to research how to create approaches to make my first grade students better writers and communicators. This led me to my research question: How do scaffolds, such as visuals organizers, and providing an authentic audience for letter writing influence the use of descriptive words in first graders?

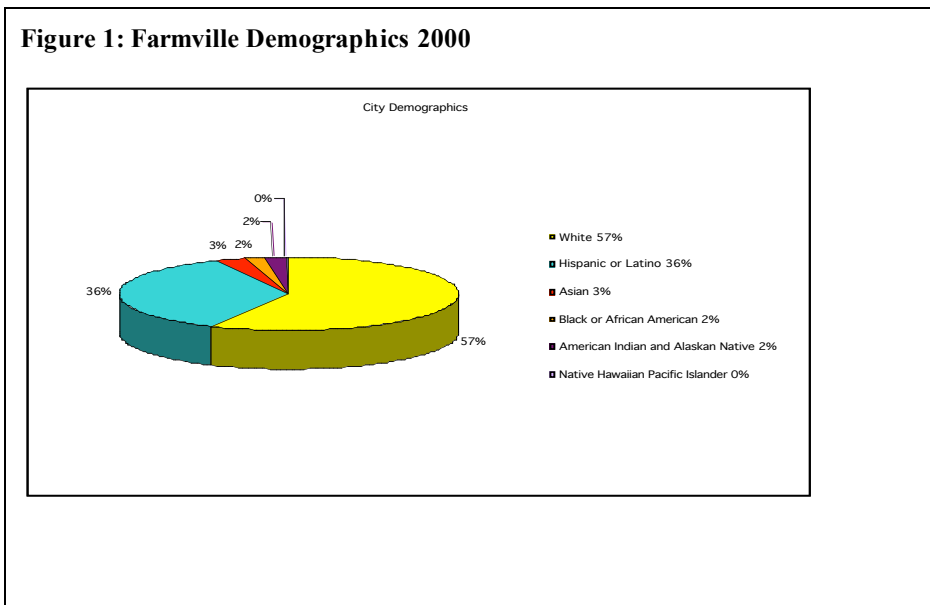
## **II. Context**

### **A. Community**

Farmville Primary is located in a semi-rural northern California community. The community that surrounds Farmville Primary is undergoing a rapid change in demographics, and that change also has created a social divide. According to the city of Farmville's website, there have been at least 676 single-family new homes that have been built since 2003 and an additional 676 new homes are under construction. These homes are listed at approximately \$795,000. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development stated in 2000, that *Hope* is the

first affordable housing project built in the last 20 years in Farmville and that Latinos constitute 28 percent of Farmville’s population, but their voice is often drowned out by the rapidly growing higher-income population.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau Farmville has a population of 18,510 people. The Census cites that 57% of Farmville’ population is white, 36% is Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian, and 2% is African American (Figure 1). Housing around the school ranges from



rundown apartments that are in need of repair to beautifully manicured homes. Farmville Primary serves prosperous families that live in newly constructed homes to low-income families that live in fifth-wheel-trailers. Many of the homes behind Farmville Primary are rental properties, with landlords who own more than one property.

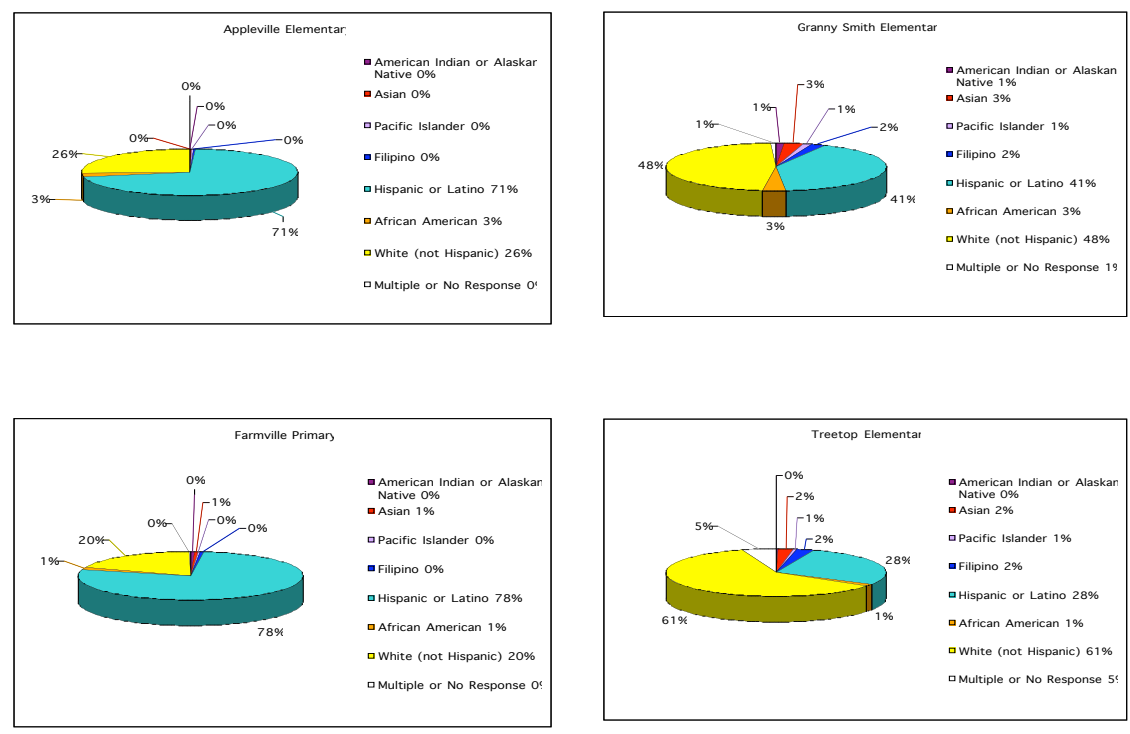
The city’s website states that in 2003, the median cost of a home in Farmville was approximately \$300,000 and in 2000 the Bay Area Census states the median price was \$170,900. Within walking distance from the school exists a large public park. The town is known for the agricultural land that surrounds the city. Due to the many farms surrounding the town, Farmville has a significant migrant population. The Chamber of Commerce considers the town to be a commercial and transportation hub. According to the city of Farmville’s website,

Farmville and the surrounding area have “a solid, diverse base of major employers which include big box retailer Wal\*Mart, biological science company Genentech, window manufacturing company Milgard Tempering Glass and a children’s clothing distribution warehouse for Gymboree.”

**B. District**

Farmville Primary is one of four elementary schools the Farmville School District, which also has one junior high and one high school. The four elementary schools serve extremely different ethnic and socio-economic populations from Farmville Primary with the exception of Appleville Elementary. The student body of Farmville Primary feeds into Appleville Elementary for fourth through sixth grade (Figure 2 and Table 1).

**Figure 2: Demographics of Farmville’s Four Elementary Schools**



**Table 1: Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch in Farmville Elementary Schools**

School	Percent of Students on Free or Reduced Lunch
Appleville Elementary	77%
Granny Smith Elementary	45%
Farmville Primary	74%
Treetop Elementary	22%

About 4,000 students make up the student population of the Farmville District and roughly 420 students are enrolled at Farmville Primary. The district-adopted motto is “On the Move to Improve.”

The school district of Farmville has placed an emphasis on improving literacy for the 2005-2006 calendar year. The district views every teacher as a reading teacher. One of the goals that the district has set for teachers to meet is to make sure that every student demonstrates at least one year or more of growth in reading. The district’s 2005-2006 Literacy Plan states that this goal can be met by using standards-based materials, proper training in the use of standards-based materials, adherence to instructional minutes in Core curriculum, and differentiated instruction.

As indicated on the California Department of Education’s (CDE) website, the Farmville district Academic Performance Index (API) for 2005 is 711, which is a seven point growth from the previous year. Farmville Unified is ranked as a “B,” which according to CDE suggests that the district’s rankings on the API report cannot be compared to other districts due to their markedly different educational missions and populations served. For 2005 the district met Academic Yearly Progress (AYP) both in language arts and mathematics.

### **C. School**

Farmville Primary is a K-3 site composed of 21 classrooms and eleven additional classrooms for other services, such as computers, physical education, reading intervention, Special Day Class, speech and language, Head Start, School Readiness Program, Child Day Care Center, library, resource, and Community Based English Tutorial.

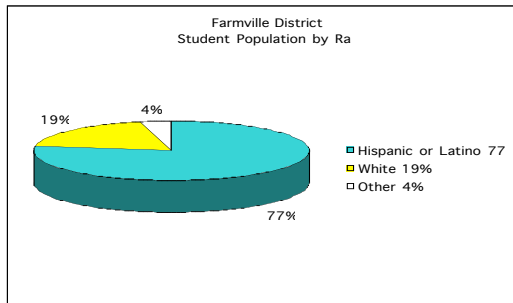
Farmville Primary was established in 1955 and underwent modernization in 2000. The modernization phase equipped all classes with air conditioning, televisions, and VCRs. Additionally, each class became wired for Internet and intranet access. The school also added a computer lab, which students attend once a week. The kitchen in the multipurpose room was upgraded as well as the main office.

During the 2004-2005 school year, the school operated in both English and Spanish at all levels. For many years the school had offered an immersion program to Spanish and non-Spanish speakers. After that program was dissolved, the school offered primary language instruction to its Spanish speakers only. However, after October 1, 2004, the district dissolved its primary language instruction. The school continues to offer Structured English Immersion (SEI) classes and for the most part views each class at Farmville Primary as an SEI class.

The student body at Farmville is mainly composed of Hispanic or Latino students who make up approximately 77.4% of the school population. The second largest ethnicity present is white at roughly 19% (Figure 3). Sixty-two percent of the students are designated as English language learners and 74% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. For most, if not all, Spanish is the primary language of our English Language Learners.



**Figure 3: Farmville District Student Population by Ethnicity**



According to the CDE, Farmville’s 2005 API score was a 660, which is an increase of 12 points from the previous year. The 2005 score ranks Farmville a 2 on a scale from one to 10, with one being the lowest and 10 the highest. The school’s AYP was met in Mathematics but not in Language Arts for 2005.

Schools with similar characteristics (such as pupil mobility, pupil ethnicity, pupil socioeconomic status, percentage of teachers who are fully credentialed, percentage of teachers who hold emergency credentials, percentage of pupils who are English-language learners, average class size per grade level, and whether the schools operate multi-track year-round educational programs) have API scores ranging from a low 614 and a high of 777. One notable difference about many of the schools that compare to Farmville is that the majority of the schools are located in urban areas.

The curriculum used at Farmville Primary is district-adopted and standards-based. This year there has been an added emphasis on uninterrupted instructional minutes and increasing test scores of students who are identified as “far below basic” and “below basic” on the California Standardized Test (CST). First, to meet this goal the school’s new principal (who currently serves as a consultant for America’s Choice) had requested that every teacher select six students who they consider can be reclassified as advanced or proficient by the end of the school year. During the second phase of this inquiry, the principal who had begun the academic year left and a replacement was named. This

change (among many others) created an unsettled feeling among the faculty at the school. Additional changes that occurred during the early part of the year included adjusting instructional time so that a two-and-a-half-hour block is devoted for core language arts curriculum and a one-hour block is reserved for core mathematics. The materials used for core language arts, reading and writing, as well as mathematics are from Houghton Mifflin. The school provides Houghton Mifflin as its primary resource for reading and writing. Although some teachers have attended *Step Up to Writing*, a formulaic writing program that focuses on color coding sentences so that students can self-monitor their writing, this program is not being implemented school wide. Beyond *Step Up to Writing* and Houghton Mifflin neither the school nor the district have established goals for writing outside of the state standards. Rubrics and expectations for writing throughout the grade levels are provided solely by Houghton Mifflin (Appendix A). The teachers also have discretion on what material they want to incorporate to enhance the reading and writing curriculum. The Houghton Mifflin curriculum contains supplemental material specifically for English Language Learners so that the curriculum can be modified to meet their needs. In science and history, the district has adopted Harcourt Brace. Farmville uses an alternate English Language Development (ELD) curriculum from other schools in the district. The program, designed by Harcourt Brace, is known as *Rigby, On Our Way to English*.

Farmville has been identified as a Title 1 Low Performing School that is in its third year of program improvement. In addition to the core curriculum, Farmville has been mandated to allot time to implement two instructional tools handed down by Region IV System of District and School Support. These instructional tools are "Board Math" and "Reading Tools," both published by Carlisle Consulting and adapted from Michael Eaton and Associates. Fifteen minutes are devoted to "Board Math" each day. The teacher is to write problems on the board and call on individual students to answer them. The teacher can call on more than one student to check for understanding. The purpose of "Board Math" is to expose students to various strands within mathematics, such as number sense, algebra and functions, measurement and geometry, statistics,

probability, data analysis and math reasoning. (See Figure 4.) The methodology for implementing “Reading Tools” (see Figure 5), adapted from *Student Success in Reading* by Michael Eaton and

**Figure 4: Sample Board for Board Math**

BOARDMATH--1st Grade				
Number Sense	Algebra and Functions	Measurement and Geometry	Statistics, Probability, Data Analysis	Math Reasoning
Place value, comparing number *Compare the numbers Use < > = 6    12 47   22	Symbols, operations, properties " + " means " - " means	Measurement Measure the arrows → →		Word problems Marie had some pencils in the desk. She put 5 more in her desk. Then she had 14. How many pencils did she have in her desk to start with?
Find the missing number 24, 26, 28, _____, 36	Write the number sentence, Nina has 14 jellybeans. That is 5 more than Pedro has. How many jellybeans does Pedro have?	Which one is longer? 	What is the largest group of objects? The smallest group? x    y    z	
Operations 10    8 + 5   + 8	Functional relationships	Geometry Name the shapes. 	2,    6,    10 x    x    x	
Fact Family 8 + 6 = 14 □ + 8 = 14 14 - □ = 8 14 - □ = 6	I have 10¢ to buy a pencil. The pencil cost 8¢. Will I have any money left? Write the number sentence. 10 - 8 = □	What shape is the clock? _____ What shape is the door? _____		
Fractions, decimals Fraction Cards - 1/4, 3/4, 1 Vocabulary--Numerator, Denominator Circle the pictures that represents 1/2.				

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**Figure 5: Sample Reading Tools Posters Reference**

McPherson 1 <sup>st</sup> Reading Tools	
+1. Prefix, suffix, roots, origins	13. <u>Make supported predictions (confirm or revise predictions)</u>
+2. <u>Context clues &amp; vocab. dev.</u> (synonyms, antonyms, homophones, homographs, etc.)	+14. <u>Interpret, use, graphic sources of information</u>
3. <u>Multi-meaning words</u>	+15. <u>Connect, compare and contrast</u>
4. <u>Supporting details or facts</u>	16. <u>Supported inference (conclusions, generalizations)</u>
5. <u>Events in order (sequential, chronological)</u>	17. <u>Analyze characters feelings, traits, motives, strengths &amp; describe character.</u>
6. <u>Figurative language (simile, metaphor, idiom, personification, etc.)</u>	18. <u>Authors theme, message, moral</u>
7. <u>When, where, and impact of setting</u>	19. <u>Fact or opinion</u>
+8. <u>Main idea</u>	20. <u>Author's perspective</u>
9. <u>Summarize (if words from the beginning/middle, and the end)</u>	+21. <u>Author's structural or organizational pattern (sequencing, comparison /contrast, proposition/support, +cause/effect, problem/solution)</u>
10. <u>Story "plot", problem, resolution</u>	+22. <u>Identify/distinguish/analyze common forms of literature (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama)</u>
+11. <u>Cause &amp; effect</u>	
+12. <u>Authors purpose (inform, influence, etc.) or purpose of reading (information, enjoyment, etc.)</u>	

Associates, is described as the following:

“Select a series of easy listening children’s books. Each day read to students from these books for about 10 -15 minutes. Do not show the pictures, do not use big books, do not let the students read along. This is a listening activity only. As you read, stop after every five or six sentences and ask a question representing one of the reading tools. Each question begins with ‘Who heard a number \_\_\_?’” (www.bayregionssc.org).

The intent of “Reading Tools” is for students to visualize stories and apply comprehension skills to those stories.

#### **D. Classroom**

During the beginning of the inquiry my class was composed of 20 ½ students: 11 girls and nine and one half boys. The half student is a second grader who comes to my class for an hour and a half for reading. In early January, during the second phase of the inquiry the class contained 10 girls and nine and one half boys. Nine of the students are English only speaking students. The other 11 students are English Language Learners with California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores varying from 220 to 526. The scores represent the range of English proficiency from beginning to early advanced. Five of the students who are in my class attended a kindergarten class that initially was instructed in their primary language. Two students are first grade retainees and one student attended kindergarten for less than a fifth of the year. Two students attended an all-day kindergarten class at Farmville Primary, while eight were in half-day English instructed kindergarten classes. One student alternated between full-day and half-day kindergarten and one student came from a neighboring district.

The students’ academic strengths vary in both mathematics and language arts. Six of my students at the beginning of the inquiry were performing at or above grade level. While the majority was at grade level, three were below grade level. The most significant challenges came from language barriers between English and Spanish. Although some of the students who were at grade level could decode text, there was a weakness in comprehension as evidenced by their

passage level and range of scores on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA).

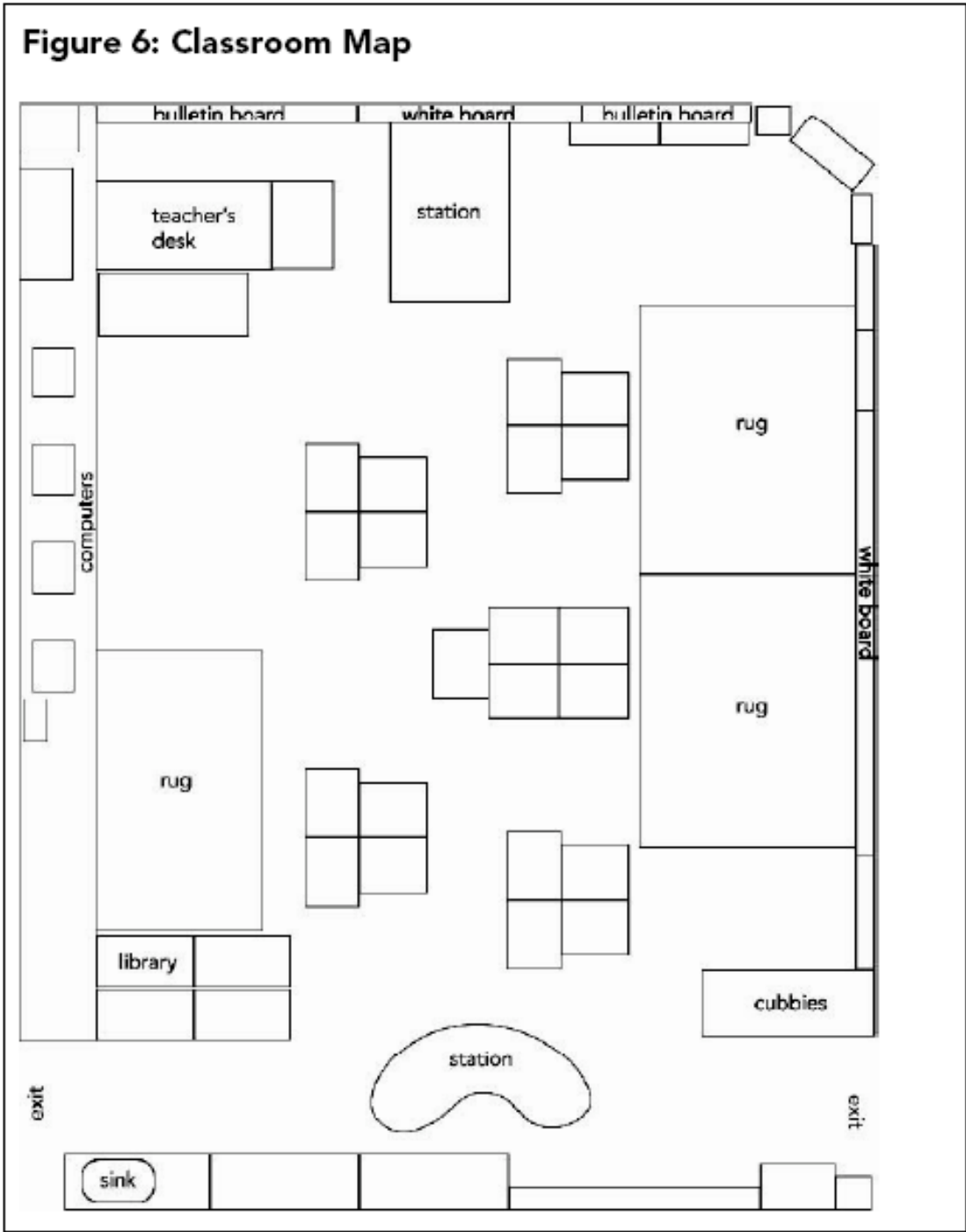
Most of my students were born in the U.S.; however, many of their parents were born in Mexico. One student is a migrant student who travels between the U.S. and Mexico around the winter holidays. The students' parents also have varying levels of education.

My classroom underwent renovations over the summer. I made changes to the layout of the room so that instruction would be focused on one wall. Additional bulletin boards were installed to showcase student work and to increase the amount of reference tools accessible to students. Consideration was given to the classroom lighting to minimize the amount of glare on the dry-erase board and the area where primary instruction would take place. Multiple alphabets with graphic representations of items that have the same initial sound were placed strategically so that students would not have to strain to see an alphabet. Similarly, numbers in numerical and bilingual written form as well as a number line were intentionally placed in locations for easy viewing. A cozy library was also created in the room so that the students could retreat from their desks to read. The library is organized by genre, so students have an easy time finding books that appeal to them by topic. The library also includes books in Spanish to meet the needs of English Language Learners. A fish tank is also in the room with water that trickles into the tank to provide a calming influence.

If you walked into my room last fall, you would have seen a clothesline at the back of the room with vivid green family trees drawn in uniquely beautiful settings. To the left by the sink were colorful turkeys that have 10 feathers with each of them with a ten up to one hundred. Under the trees were four computers that were infrequently used by the students because the computers didn't work or had outdated software. Near the computers is my desk, which faces the west wall and the door. My desk has become an area to house papers more than a workspace, but posted right behind the desk are the students' jobs. At the back of the room is the carpeted library where the students lounge and

read when given the opportunity. This area is also used for guided reading with the students. In the middle of the classroom are the students' desks and two stations. One station is designated as a listening station and the other is for journal writing and guided reading. At the entrance of the room are the students' bright green plastic cubbies in wooden shelves. There is also an area for the students to hang up their jackets and backpacks. Towards the front of the room are two large square rugs with 16 individual squares all in different colors. These rugs are under the white board where most of the teaching takes place. To the left of the white board is the calendar and to the right a word wall. On the east wall are two bright orange bookcases housing the state-mandated curriculum and to the right of that our fish tank with Mittens the goldfish.

The students' desks are arranged in groups of four and five. Each cooperative learning group has at least one English only speaker and one student who is somewhat bilingual. Seating is also alternated between boy and girl with the exception of one group. Priority seating at the desks facing the instruction area was given to students who have learning challenges (See Figure 6 for a full sketch of the classroom).



The students attend school Monday through Friday from 8:20 a.m. to 2:40 p.m., with the exception of Wednesday when there is an early dismissal and students get out of school at 1:45 p.m. The students have a general routine every morning that begins with breakfast, attendance, calendar, and singing a song (Table 2).

<b>Table 2: Daily Schedule</b>								
	8:20 – 8:55 a.m.	8:55 – 9:55 a.m.*		10:15 – 11:45 a.m.		12:30 – 1:45 p.m.		1:55 – 2:40 p.m.
Monday	Opening: breakfast, attendance, calendar, song	Guided Reading, handwriting, journals or stations	Recess 9:55 – 10:15 a.m.	Language Arts: Core Reading, Phonemic Awareness and Phonics 11:00 – 11:45 Writing	Lunch 11:45 a.m. – 12:30	Math	Recess 1:45 – 1:55 p.m.	English Language Development and Dismissal
Tuesday	Opening: breakfast, attendance, calendar, song	Guided Reading, handwriting, journals or stations		Language Arts: Core Reading, Phonemic Awareness and Phonics 11:00 – 11:45 Writing		Math 1:00 – 1:45 (P.E.)		English Language Development and Dismissal
Wednesday	Opening: breakfast, attendance, calendar, song	Guided Reading, handwriting, journals or stations		Language Arts: Core Reading, Phonemic Awareness and Phonics 11:00 – 11:45 Writing		Math		early dismissal, Common Planning Time
Thursday	Opening: breakfast, attendance, calendar, song	Guided Reading, handwriting, journals or stations		10:15 – 10:45 (Computers) Language Arts: Core Reading, Phonemic Awareness and Phonics		Math		English Language Development and Dismissal
Friday	Opening: breakfast, attendance, calendar, song	Spelling practice, Spelling test		Language Arts: Core Reading, Phonemic Awareness and Phonics 11:00 – 11:30 (Library)		Math		English Language Development and Dismissal
* During this hour two students attend reading intervention.								

Due to the school’s status of being in its third year of program improvement there is little opportunity for thematic instruction, and teachers are required to adhere to the district pacing schedule of the Houghton Mifflin curriculum.

**E. Me, the Teacher**

As an educator and learner I learn more by doing than by watching others. I know as a learner I respond better to visual aids, yet I have witnessed that not all individuals are visual learners. It is important to consider the whole learner and address the needs of learners with differing modalities. I believe that it is important that students learn by creating rather than by doing what has been already created for them. For me, this means fewer worksheets and more hands-on activities. My students write and read books that they have written as well as those written by others. I do not like to limit my students’ experiences to those of other people but instead I consider my students’ personal experiences as a learning tool. This consideration takes form through students’ sharing their life



experiences in writing, journaling, math problems and circle time. Considering the lives of the students and how they relate to learning also creates meaning for learning in my students.

### **III. Overview of Inquiry**

At the beginning of the school year I established high expectations for all my students. These expectations allowed me to test the quality of my teaching practices as well as evaluate the students' academic growth as a result. Early in the year the students were making adequate progress in reading. They enjoyed the activity as long as they were not performing for the entire class. This statement could not be made for their writing. Through student achievement data and various observations an inquiry for my first year of teaching would emerge. In the course of observations and data collecting, I frequently questioned possible area that could enhance the students' performance in writing. Throughout the process I compared the students' growth by reviewing preliminary assessment and outcome achievement. The following is the journey that my class embarked upon through the genre of letter writing.

### **IV. Preliminary Data and Analysis**

#### **A. Observations**

On the first day of school my students were excited to be in first grade. After completing a campus tour, lunch, and various activities, I decided to give students a piece of paper so that they could draw themselves on their first day of first grade. After they were done with their drawing, I asked them to write what they liked about first grade so far. My expectations must have been high because I was shocked to see that some of them were writing only a few or no words at all. Many of the students were more fixated on spelling words correctly than writing a meaningful message. When I was asked how to spell a word, I told them to sound it out and write down the sounds that they heard. I quickly reminded myself that they were only five, six and seven-years old and that in time their writing would improve.

During the first couple weeks of school, many of the writing activities were shared writing activities. We spent a week writing narratives about tigers and pigs. Students would contribute to the piece by dictating thoughts, and I would write them on the board for them to copy. The thought of copying being difficult for a first grader never entered my mind. Students were lost. They didn't know where the last word they wrote was on the board, and they were complaining. I responded to their cries swiftly by writing only a few words at a time and asking the class if they were done copying before I continued.

Gradually I attempted to move them from writing the thoughts of others to writing their own thoughts in handmade journals. When given the opportunity to choose a topic to write on, the students often wrote about the same thing. When given a prompt, some students wrote to the topic while others wrote to a topic of their own choice.

On October 14, 2005, I conducted an observation during writing. The topic of the assignment was to write about your favorite season. Prior to having the students write, the class was asked if they needed any words spelled for them. I wrote a word bank on the dry erase board. It included the following words: Spring, favorite, Winter, Fall, Summer, because, season, beach, zoo, leaves and snowman. During that week the students read literature that discussed seasons and the various activities that typically one engages in during those seasons. The students were then told that they could start writing or discuss with their group members what they were going to write.

Many of the students talked to their group members and shared what they would be writing. I noticed those who got started immediately were asking other members how to spell various words. The students in group five took out a resource book that is similar to a dictionary. They began referencing the book to spell words correctly. While others were immersed in their work, I noticed that two students had nothing written in their journals. One group was focused on discussing the alphabet on their name plates, which have an alphabet with visual cues (a number line, colors, shapes and right and left). As the students

were writing, I asked them to use color words and to ask their neighbor for help if they needed any. As I walked around the room students were repetitively asking for help with spelling. I was troubled that my students were more concerned with their spelling than their message. I assured them that their message is more important than their spelling. Even though their spelling prevented them from writing, their peer interaction did not inhibit discussions related to writing. Witnessing this interaction made me realize that it would be beneficial to conduct an inquiry that fosters communication among peers because of the positive interactions and outcome that students had sharing their ideas.

### **B. Survey**

On October 7, 2005, I gave a preliminary survey during class. The students were given cardstock dividers for privacy. The directions were to listen to each question as it was read and choose the response that best matched how they felt. They were also told that the purpose of the survey was to determine how I could help them with their learning and were asked to answer each question truthfully. I read the questions orally, and the students circled their responses. The survey questions were more specific to reading than writing except for question nineteen, which stated, "I like writing stories." The students were given the option to circle "yes" or "no." Analysis of the survey indicated that 76% of the students like writing stories while 24% did not. Question seventeen also peaked my interest, it stated, "I like reading in small groups." The students were also given the option of choosing "yes" or "no". Thirty-five percent of my class did not enjoy reading in small groups. Knowing that such a large percentage of the students did not enjoy working in groups during reading, pursuing an inquiry that required small reading groups would not be wise. Additionally, from observations and survey results, I gathered that during writing the students preferred working together. I was convinced that a lack of enthusiasm for writing was not a stumbling block for my students and writing was worth pursuing.

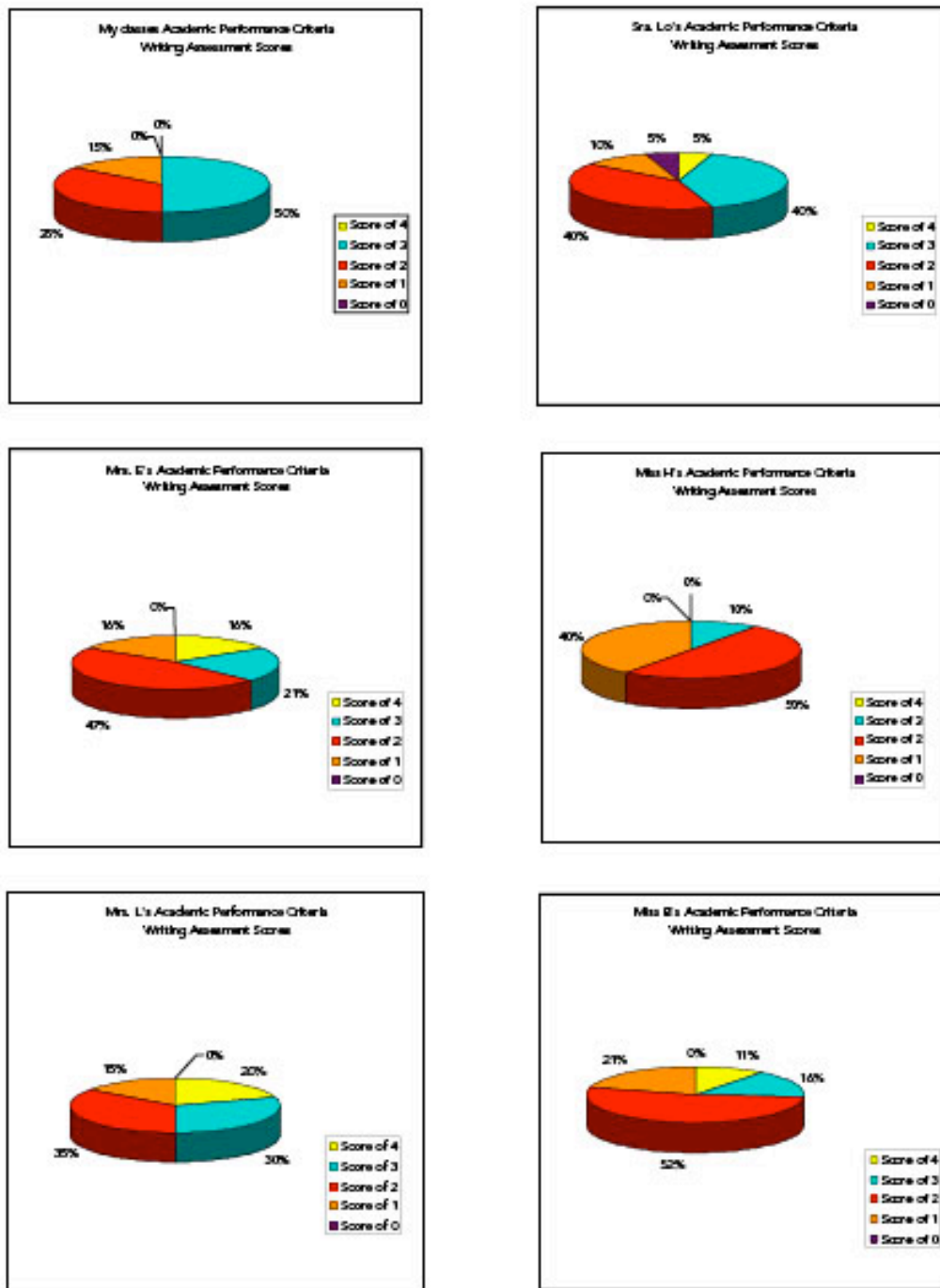
One stumbling block did exist for my students, and it was spelling. The survey revealed that 88% percent of the class felt that they could pull apart words. However, pulling apart words translates into the ability to phonetically spell. My students were so obsessed with spelling that even asking them to simply write down the sounds they heard resulted in resistance until they were given the proper spelling of the word. It concerned me that they were sacrificing meaningful messages in their writing because of spelling. This overwhelming concern for spelling convinced me that it was imperative that the students correspond with an individual who may not be so critical of their writing.

## **C. Achievement Data**

### **1. Writing Sample**

As the end of October neared, the first trimester assessments were taking place. On October 25, 2005, my entire class (except for two students who were absent) was given the district-mandated writing assessment. The assessment took place in the students' home classroom. The students were given partitions for their privacy and to ensure that they did not copy their neighbor's work. The samples were then graded the following day by a panel of first grade teachers. After discussing each piece, the panel developed a consensus rating and assigned a grade/number. Each first grade class had a varying percentage of students at grade level. My class as well as Mrs. L's students had 50% of the students writing at or above grade level, whereas Sra. Lo's, Mrs. E, Miss H, and Miss B had fewer than 50% of their class writing above grade level (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: First grade classes APC Scores for the District Mandated Writing Assessment** n = 20



The purpose of the sample was to assess the students' writing ability. Their score would then be transferred onto the district-wide Academic Performance Criteria

(APC) reporting form. The APC is a high stakes language arts based reporting system that is used to determine a student's proficiency in language arts. This form is also used as tool in making a retention decision. If a student has scores of 50% or more in the red there is a possibility of retention. The APC score in writing ranges from a zero to a four. Each number score determines whether a student is performing "far below" (0 or 1), "below" (2), or "at" (3 – 4) grade level.

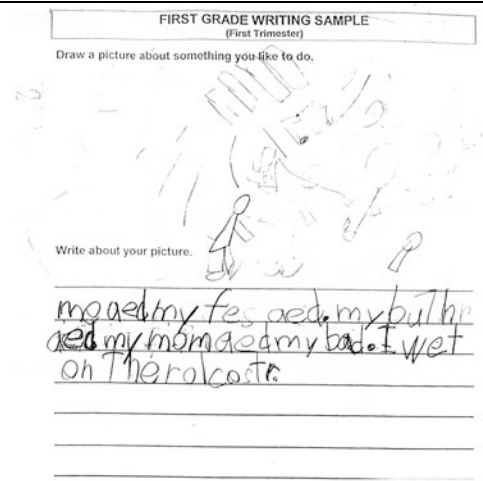

The criteria used to determine the students' scores are based upon California state standards. The writing samples were evaluated on the following criteria: (1) Ability to stay on topic, (2) The use of facts, details and explanations, (3) Punctuation and capitalization. (See Appendix A.) The writing samples were also analyzed and compared to each student's work from the previous year. Anchor papers from the previous school year determined what constituted a zero, one, two, three, or four (Appendix A).

The directions for the writing sample were to draw a picture about something you like to do and then write about your picture. Prior to going to recess the students were given approximately ten minutes to decide and draw the activity they enjoy doing. When the students returned, they were directed to tell me what it was that they liked to do. A word bank with images next to the word was created on the dry-erase board. This gave the students at least one word that described the activity they enjoyed. The word bank was left on the dry-erase board and the students were given fifteen to twenty minutes to write.

As students turned in their, work I asked them to read what they had written. As the students read their story, I wrote down their words on a yellow post-it. The post-its then were affixed to the back of their writing samples. When it came time to assess the work with the panel each teacher read his or her students' stories aloud as had been read by the students.

The data were first analyzed by the panel of first grade teachers based upon set criteria. The criteria followed first grade standards: "The student selects a focus when writing, uses descriptive words when writing, and uses knowledge of the basic rules of punctuation and capitalization when writing."

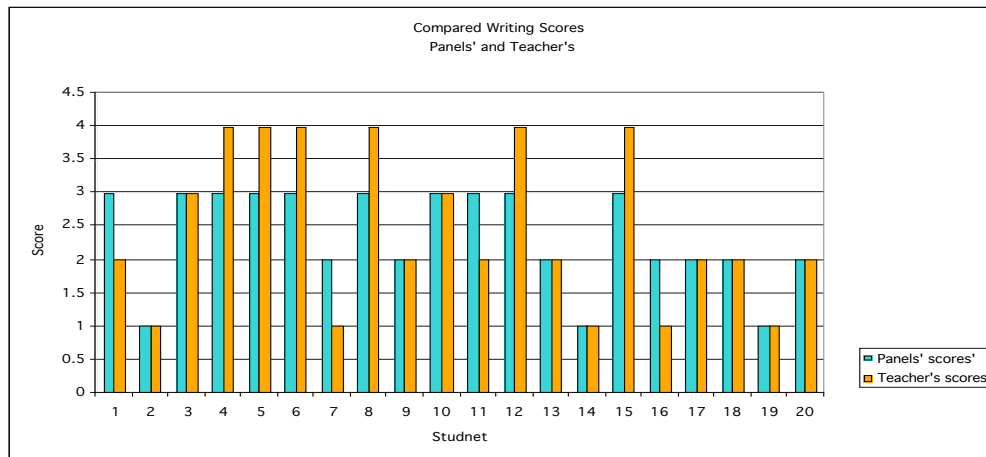
A teacher would read a student's writing sample to the panel and then the teachers would assign a numerical grade. In some instances, a debate would occur over whether a student deserved a higher score. This method of analysis appeared to be highly subjective. Additionally, the anchor papers from the previous year determined the students' scores more so than the rubric. As the panel examined the papers they looked at the anchor papers and looked to see which paper it most likely resembled. A comparison is provided between last year's paper and the score one student received for this year (Figure 8).

<p><b>Figure 8: Sample paper from 2004 determined to be a (2) anchor paper and student work from 2005 determined to be a (2).</b></p>	
<p>Prompt: Draw a picture about something you like to do. Write about your picture.</p>	
<p>Anchor paper from 2004 (previous year)</p>	<p>Paper from 2005</p>
 <p>FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester) Draw a picture about something you like to do.</p> <p>Write about your picture.</p> <p>me and my fes and my bulth and my mom and my dad. I wet on the roller coaster.</p>	 <p>FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester) Draw a picture about something you like to do.</p> <p>Write about your picture.</p> <p>I like to play with my puppy.</p>
<p>Translation: Me and my friends and my brother and my mom and my dad. I went on the roller coaster.</p>	<p>Translation: I like to play with my puppy.</p>

The content of the message, such as how the message might have appealed to the readers' emotions, also played a role in the outcome of various students' scores. For the most part we came to a unanimous agreement on the students' scores.

Independently a reexamination of this student’s writing sample was made that compared my student’s writing assessment with other students’ writing assessments in my class. The reexamination was administered to determine if the students’ scores determined by the panel were appropriate. The reexamination looked at the following five components: (1) Message (did the message create a mental picture for the reader?), (2) Use of descriptive words, (3) Number of words and diversity of words, (4) Capitalization and punctuation, and (5) Letter formation. The results show that four scores were inflated and six could have been scored higher (Figure 9).



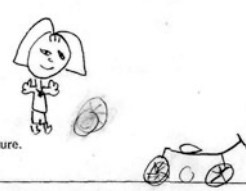

**Figure 9: Compared Writing Assessment Scores of Panel and Teacher n = 20**



All the papers that received a score of one relayed a single message and began “I like ...” These papers also had one or fewer descriptive words, limited diversity in words, and attempts to capitalize and punctuate may have been present but inaccurate (for example, note the period after “with” in anchor level 1 in Figure 10). Some students also had letter formation that was difficult to decipher. Papers that received a two conveyed two messages and limited detail. The papers that received a three conveyed three messages and provided some detail. The papers that received a four captured a whole experience and conveyed multiple messages using cohesive devices (Figure 10).

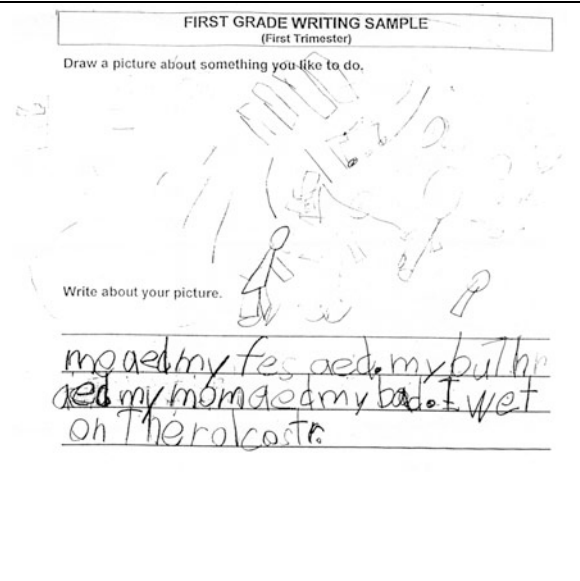
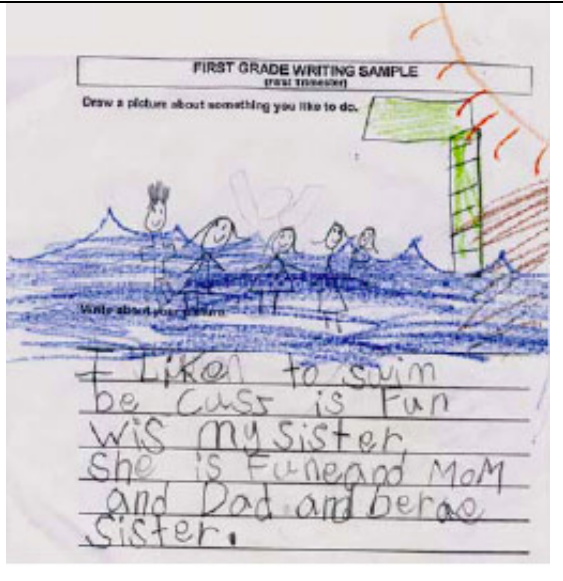


Figure 10: Anchor papers established after reexamination of class papers.

Anchor paper – Level 1	Anchor paper – Level 2
<p style="text-align: center;">FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester)</p> <p>Draw a picture about something you like to do.</p>  <p>Write about your picture.</p> <p>I like to play wif MY PUPP.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester)</p> <p>Draw a picture about something you like to do.</p>  <p>Write about your picture.</p> <p>I like to play baseball And baseball because it is fun I play <del>baseball</del> I play on <del>weekends</del> <del>weekends</del></p>
<p>Retelling provided by student: I like to play with my puppy.</p>	<p>Retelling provided by student: I like to play basketball and baseball. Because it is fun. I play it because I play on weekends.</p>
Anchor paper – Level 3	Anchor paper – Level 4
<p style="text-align: center;">FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester)</p> <p>Draw a picture about something you like to do.</p>  <p>Write about your picture.</p> <p>I like to ride my bike wis my sister and my brother we play hotwheels wis my bike</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester)</p> <p>Draw a picture about something you like to do.</p>  <p>Write about your picture.</p> <p>I like to go to the davis pool it is fun that is a slide that I can go down it all by my self my brother has to go with my mom.</p>
<p>Retelling provided by student: I like to ride my bike with my sister and my brother. We play hot wheels with my bike.</p>	<p>Retelling provided by student: I like to go to the Davis pool it is fun. There is a slide there. I can go down it all by myself. My brother has to go with my mom.</p>

The reexamination suggests that perhaps emotion, neatness of writing and other factors could have influenced the panel's scores. The results after I rescored the students' writing without the input of my colleagues shows that their scores stayed the same, increased by one point, or dropped by one point.

During reanalysis of the students' writing samples, I noticed that most students did not use any descriptive words. The small amount of descriptive words used in their writing limited their ability to communicate a mental image for their reader. Additionally, their writing lacked an individual voice. I felt that the problem was a result of the students being their own audience. I also realized that the prompt was flawed when I compared the paper from 2004 and a rescored paper from 2005. The prompt, write about your picture, steers the students to label the picture more than provide elaborate descriptions or recounts of what they enjoy doing (Figure 11).

<p><b>Figure 11: Sample papers from 2004 determined to be a (2) and a reexamined letter written this year and determined to be a (2).</b></p>	
<p>Prompt: Draw a picture about something you like to do. Write about your picture.</p>	
<p>Anchor paper from 2004 (previous year)</p>	<p>Paper from 2005</p>
	
<p>Translation: Me and my friends and my brother and my mom and my dad. I went on the roller coaster.</p>	<p>Translation: I like to swim because it is fun with my sister. She is funny and mom and dad and baby sister.</p>

In order to increase their use of descriptive words, the students were going to need an outside audience and prompts that were specific. They needed an audience who was not familiar with the topic about which they were writing to motivate them to be more descriptive, and they needed prompts that would engage them in their writing.

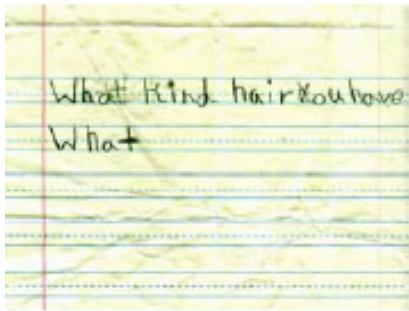
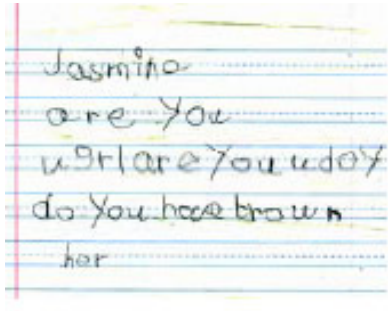
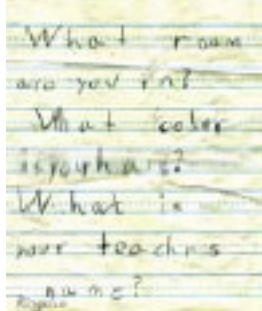
## **2. Letter: Guess Who – What do you look like?**

The first letter that the students wrote was to a second grader who would be attending a fieldtrip with our class. The purpose of the letter was to determine the second grader's appearance by asking specific questions. The students were given verbal examples to prompt them towards the types of questions they could ask. For example, I asked the students, "What are some questions that I could ask you to figure out what you look like? Such as, 'How would I know what color hair you have and what color are your eyes?'" I gave the students this prompt to evaluate the number of descriptive words that they would use in their writing. I also wanted to assess if the students had any familiarity with the sociolinguistic norms of letter writing because of how it identifies an audience and the writer.

The students' work was assessed using a rubric modeled similarly after the rubric created by Madeline Wood for her research in letter writing (Wood, 2005). This rubric would be used throughout the inquiry to assess the students' letters. The rubric assessed five areas specific to letter writing and writing in general: (1) sociolinguistic norms, (2) clarity of message, (3) number of messages, (4) vocabulary, and (5) grammar. The fundamental skill of first graders using descriptive words in their writing was incorporated into the area of vocabulary in the rubric (Table 3).

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Sociolinguistic norms</b>	includes at least one of the following: date, salutation, closing, and signature	Includes two of the following: date, salutation, closing, and signature	includes three of the following: date, salutation, closing, and signature	includes all of the following: date, salutation, closing, and signature
<b>Clarity of message (articulation)</b>	requires the reader to assume the meaning of two or more messages	requires the reader to assume the meaning of at minimum two messages	requires the reader to assume the meaning of less than one message	the message is comprehensible and does not require the reader to make an assumption
<b>Number of messages</b>	student relays one message	student relays 2 messages	students relays 3 messages	student relays more than 3 messages
<b>Vocabulary</b>	student uses no descriptive words but may include very little details, if any	student uses one descriptive word and very little details, if any	student uses one or two descriptive words and includes some details	student uses three descriptive words and includes many details
<b>Grammar</b>	does not use comma after salutation or closing, attempts to capitalize or punctuate properly	uses at least a comma after salutation or closing, or capitalizes and punctuates first sentence.	uses comma after salutation or closing, and capitalizes and punctuates the first sentence.	uses commas after salutation and closing, capitalizes the beginning of sentences, and punctuates most sentences.

An example is provided to demonstrate how letters were assessed using the rubric at the preliminary stage (Figure 11A).

Low	Mid (middle range)	High
		
Translation: What kind hair you have	Translation: Jasmine are you a girl are you a boy do you have brown hair	Translation: What room are you in? What color is your hair? What is your teacher's name? Rogelio
Sociolinguistic norms: 0 points – does not include any sociolinguistic feature Clarity of message: 4 points Number of messages: 1 point Vocabulary: 1 point Grammar: 1 point  Total points: 7 points	Sociolinguistic norms: 0 points – does not include any sociolinguistic feature Clarity of message: 4 points Number of messages: 3 point Vocabulary: 2 point – use of brown Grammar: 1 point – capitalizes name of person being addressed but not first sentence Total points: 10 points	Sociolinguistic norms: 1 point – includes signature Clarity of message: 4 points Number of messages: 3 points Vocabulary: 1 point Grammar: 2 points – capitalizes and punctuates first sentence  Total points: 11 points

The results from this first letter writing activity of “Guess Who — What do you look like?” suggest that most of my students were unaware of the sociolinguistic norms of letter writing (Table 4). I also noted that the students did not use descriptive words even with the verbal promoting provided.

<b>Table 4: Preliminary Data for Whole Class Letter: Dear Mystery Student Prompt: Guess Who – What do you look like?</b>						
	Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score of 20 possible points
Student’s name	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1 Alejandra (mid)	0	4	2	1	2	9
2	0	1	1	1	1	4
3	0	3	4	3	2	12
4	1 (signature)	4	4	1	1	11
5	1 (salutation)	4	3	1	1	10
6	0	4	4	1	1	10
7	0	3	3	1	1	9
8	1 (salutation)	4	3	1	1	10
9 Elmer (mid)	0	4	1	1	2	8
10	1 (salutation)	3	3	1	2	10
11	0	4	2	1	2	9
12	0	3	3	1	1	8
13 Jennie (mid)	0	4	3	2	1	10
14	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
15	0	4	3	1	2	10
16 Mario (low)	0	3	1	1	1	6
17 Nuria (low)	0	2	3	1	1	7
18 Rogelio (high)	1 (signature)	4	3	1	2	11
19	0	1	0	1	1	3
20 Memo (mid)	1 (salutation)	2	4	1	1	9

The findings from this activity made me realize that the students needed additional support in the following areas: (1) sociolinguistic norms of letter writing, (2) use of descriptive words (vocabulary), and (3) grammar. Some students were aware of one sociolinguistic norm or another and included it in their letter. During the activity, student 5 asked if she needed to include a salutation in her letter. I told her that it was up to her. Members in her group overheard the conversation and agreed that it was a good idea to include a salutation; therefore, they all did. The results also suggest that the first grade students required more than audience to improve their writing. With these realizations, I thought that I would need many or one single exceptional “hook” to improve their writing skills. I questioned whether multiple scaffolds (such as the format of the paper, verbal reminders, visual reminders such as posters, and multiple experiences with specific topics) would enhance their writing.

#### **V. Purpose and Rationale**

The most challenging task for all my students is writing and seeing themselves as writers. From preliminary observations of the students writing in their journals, I’ve noticed that many times they struggle to come up with something to write. The students often complain that they have nothing to write about or they focus heavily on spelling rather than the meaning of their message. When given the time to write, many of the students spend their time talking to their peers. Their writing is often repetitive and lacks details. These characteristics even occur when the students are given a prompt on which to write about. Engaging the students in their writing became a central focus of mine because of the implications that writing has in communicating ideas, thoughts, and emotions with others.

Writing is a vehicle to share with others what we cannot say aloud. My students spent a significant amount of time at the beginning of the year writing in their journal with themselves being their own audience. The need arose to introduce the students to an audience beyond themselves so that they could engage in one of the many purposes of writing. I thought that it would be important to develop multiple instances of correspondences with the students. Through different correspondence they would write letters that were informative and

narrative. Calkins (1994) states in *The Art of Teaching Writing*, “it is essential that children are deeply involved in writing, that they share their texts with others, and that they perceive themselves as authors” (p.3). Corresponding with different audiences would provide the students the opportunity to share their writing with others in and outside the class. To establish a correspondence, I selected the genre of letter writing for the inquiry given that letters are personal. As Gunning (2005) suggests, “As teachers we might share how, through writing, we keep in touch with friends, explore topics of interest, record the everyday events in our lives, or entertain or enlighten others and invite our students to do the same (p.482). I felt that by modeling a correspondence with another teacher, my students would be motivated to share more with an audience and increase their use of descriptive words to effectively communicate. The focus on descriptive words came about through California State standard 1.2, “Use descriptive words when writing” (cde.ca.gov). This fundamental skill is important for the students to develop so that the reader can visualize their story.

The students’ result from the first trimester’s writing assessment revealed that 50% of my class scored a two or below. For the writing sample to be considered at grade level, during the first trimester the students needed to score a three or above. A score of two or below was given to the students who lacked focus on their writing or who provided limited details. In addition to low test scores, I am concerned that the students in my class who scored below grade level dislike writing and will continue to dislike writing if not given a clear purpose to write.

Writing letters to their peers would provide the needed clear purpose. The correspondence between the students will accomplish two goals: (1) students will connect the purpose of writing with sharing their thoughts, emotions, and experiences with others, and (2) students will read to respond to what another has written. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) state, “Most writing is usually undertaken to communicate with one or more readers for a variety of informational purposes” (p. 19). By offering my students multiple and repetitive exposures to topic specific curriculum, they can draw upon their experiences to enhance their writing.

After the preliminary letter that the students had written to the second graders, “Guess Who – What Do You Look Like,” I realized that audience alone was not going to increase the students’ use of descriptive words. Therefore I felt compelled to investigate how developing writing assignments and specific prompts could elicit the use of descriptive words. I wanted to examine how the role of prompts could promote the students use of descriptive words during the inquiry. Strange (1988) observes: “When teachers develop assignments and strategies that sharpen students’ sense of audience, the students learn the value of writing as a process of communication” (p. 4). It was through letter writing and addressing a specific audience that I hoped I would increase the students’ use of descriptive words.

#### **A. Rationale for case selection**

The inquiry targets an entire first grade class and a case selection of seven students, four boys and three girls. The boys are Elmer, Mario, Memo, and Rogelio and the girls are Alejandra, Nuria, and Jennie. Of the seven students, five are English Language Learners and two are English speakers. Jennie, Elmer, and Mario are in the medium-low reading group; Alejandra, Memo and Nuria are in a medium reading group; and Rogelio is in the highest reading group. Both English speaking students are in the medium-low reading group.

The students’ ages are between six and seven. Rogelio and Memo attended full day kindergarten the previous year. Mario and Nuria began their kindergarten year in a bilingual class that was required to transition into English six weeks after the start of the school year. Overall this group is diverse in its academic strengths and abilities.

The students were chosen for the inquiry based on their scores from the first trimester writing assessment, in addition to the results of their preliminary letter (Table 5, refer to Figure 9). The images of the first trimester writing assessments (see Figure 10) examined the students’ writing within my class instead of across the grade level. This class-based scoring established new anchor papers for



comparison. The case selection group demonstrated a minimal use of descriptive words or details in their writing in both the grade level scoring and the second class-based scoring. The case selection papers were assessed using a rubric established by Houghton Mifflin curriculum as well as compared to anchor papers from the previous year school year. The students selected for the inquiry demonstrated below grade level expectations for the first trimester.

<b>Table 5: Preliminary Data for Individual Cases</b>						
<b>Letter: Dear Mystery Student</b>						
<b>Prompt: Guess Who – What do you look like?</b>						
	Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Student's name	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1 Alejandra (mid)	0	4	2	1	2	9
9 Elmer (mid)	0	4	1	1	2	8
13 Jennie	0	4	2	2	1	10
16 Mario (low)	0	3	1	1	1	6
17 Nuria (low)	0	2	3	1	1	7
18 Rogelio (high)	1 (signature)	4	3	1	2	12
20 Memo (mid)	1 (salutation)	2	4	1	1	9

## **B. Description of case students**

### **1. Elmer**

Elmer is a small student in stature with a big personality. He is an English only student who moved to the district this year from a neighboring district. His smile can light up anyone's face. He is active not only on the playground but also in the class. Outside the classroom he loves playing football and spending time with his family, whether it is camping or four-wheeling.

There is not a day that goes by where I do not see Elmer standing up to do his work because he cannot sit down. He has an older sister who attends third grade at Farmville Primary. During every recess I see him try to make an effort to visit

and play with his sister. At recess he also participates more actively with students than in class.

Elmer's participation in class can be characterized as boisterous. He has a tendency to shout out what he knows instead of raising his hand to be called on. In times of doubt though Elmer closes up and seeks help from his peers. Elmer behaves this way mostly during reading. There have been instances when he has not read with his partner and has asked the partner to lie about reading. Whether he completes an assignment also depends on Elmer's reading partner. In the area of writing, Elmer's journal entries reveal his love of playing and trips with his family. After each weekend, he can be heard sharing his experiences with his peers. His excitement with this topic is often reflected in his journal entries. His limited interests have limited his choice of words. The following transcriptions come from Elmer's November journal:

11.07.05: I like to play football because it is fun it is because it is fun.

11.08.05: I like to use my skates with my sister.

11.09.05: I like to play with my friend Rogelio and Memo and Lynn and Maria.

11.16.05: I like to play football with Rogelio.

11.16.05: I like to play basketball on the basketball court. I am good.

The subject area in which Elmer shines is mathematics and he is aware of his capabilities. Elmer recites math facts to his peers, including multiplication facts, which I believe he is learning from older sister. His favorite subject in school is math and he is an extraordinary mathematician. When a new math concept is presented to the class Elmer immediately understands the concept and demonstrates his understanding through independent work.

## **2. Mario**

Mario is comedic and can make anyone laugh. He spends a lot of time talking to his peers. He loves joking with his peers, but there are times when he is very serious and gets easily upset. When he is not trying to make others laugh he is quiet and reserved. He has a fraternal twin sister who is also in my class. Mario has sat by her at various times of the year and during these intervals he has

acted as if she was not his sister. He does not talk much to her except outside of the classroom. When he does speak to her, it is usually in Spanish. Mario's English oral language proficiency according to the CELDT is early intermediate, which means he can "begin to be understood when speaking, but may have some inconsistent use of Standard English grammatical forms and sounds and ask and answer a simple question using phrases or simple sentences" (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/documents/eldgrd.pdf>).

If you were to be on the playground on any given day it would be certain that you would find Mario jumping rope and reciting jump rope songs. This is when I see Mario playing with his sister or cousin who also attends Farmville. Mario does not play with many other students other than family. Occasionally, there are days that he plays with another student that is in his class group but not too often.

Mario's work habits are for the most part predictable. Whether in reading, writing, math or art, Mario works slowly. He rarely completes his work in class, so he has to take it home. He takes so much time making beautiful drawings in his journal that he does not have a chance to write. When asked what is taking him so long to complete his work, he often gives a blank stare and takes a while to respond. His journal entries are also predictable. He usually writes about playing with his dog or sister.

### **3. Alejandra**

Alejandra is a very friendly and active student. She often wiggles around in her chair and cannot sit still and does her work standing up. Alejandra is an English Language Learner who had a CELDT score of 493, in kindergarten, which means, she can “be understood when speaking and retell stories and talk about school related activities using expanded vocabulary, descriptive words and paraphrasing” (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/documents/eldgrd.pdf>). She has been labeled a “firecracker” by her kindergarten teacher. She is very active in and out of class. Outside on the playground she moves from one group of students to another. She is comedic and boisterous, and she is a caring student who frequently gives me hugs. She often writes about her family in her journal. During the early stages of the inquiry, I discovered that Alejandra’s mother was diagnosed with leukemia. Alejandra lived in a neighboring town, and she attended Farmville because her mother worked in town. During Phase 2, Alejandra moved to another school outside of the district that was closer to her home.

### **4. Memo**

Memo comes across as a shy child with a considerable amount of love to share. There is warmth in Memo’s eyes when he looks at you, as if he were trying to say thank you or I love you. Memo speaks more through subtle glances and smiles than with words.

Memo is the second youngest of five in his family. He also is an English Language Learner who scored a 481 on his CELDT. His English oral proficiency would have similar attributes as Alejandra’s.

Memo has two older fraternal twin siblings who are seventeen. His brother who is a twin attends the continuation school, which Memo says is for the bad kids. His sister who is a twin attends Farmville High. Only recently did Memo become the second youngest in his family. Memo told me that his youngest brother is not “months” anymore since he is now one. Memo says that he likes to play video games and he is teaching his baby brother how to play video games. At

teacher-parent conferences, Memo's parents commented that Memo is jealous of his younger brother and that he has even chased him with a knife. At school Memo frequently argues with his peers and has been in more than two fights this year. I expressed concerns for Memo's behavior and recommended that he partake in the *Just for Kids* services that the school offers so that he could meet with someone to express his feelings.

Academically, Memo excels in math but has struggled with reading. At the beginning of the school year I picked him as my student to receive additional reading help from a Soroptimist, a lovely woman who spends one-on-one time reading with Memo. His growth in reading since then has been astronomical. At the beginning of the year, he could not pass the first leveled reader. After a three-month time span he was capable of passing the fifth level, which is grade level. Memo commented that his favorite thing to do at school is recess and that he does not like doing anything with pencils, and if he had a choice, he would play *Chutes and Ladders* all day at school. Memo's journal entries typically refer to playing and have the same sentence written three times. At recess Memo can be found playing soccer. He told me that after school he practices playing soccer at home. He also writes in his journal that he likes playing at recess and at home.

##### **5. Rogelio**

Rogelio is an outgoing, athletic, competitive, and phenomenal first grade reader. Everyday he comes to school upbeat and ready to learn. Rogelio and Memo are good friends on and off the playground. Rogelio's main caretaker is his grandmother. He mother had him at a young age, and the responsibility of raising Rogelio fell on his grandmother. His grandmother is an amazing woman. Her expectations for Rogelio are high, and she makes sure that he takes learning seriously. She helps out in anyway possible with Rogelio's learning, and at the same time is juggling raising her newborn baby daughter.

Rogelio loves to be challenged in all academic areas, especially reading. As an English Language Learner his oral proficiency on the CELDT is considered to be intermediate because he scored a 487. When we go to the library, he checks out

chapter books, which he can read. In mathematics, Rogelio is typically one of the first students done with his work. Rogelio is the type of student who comprehends a concept after only one explanation. He is also the type of student who likes to please people. Rogelio's interest in writing appears to be limited. In his journal he has a tendency to quickly write a few sentences that lack descriptive words, and he uses slang, such as "cool."

On the playground Rogelio loves to play basketball and soccer. He wants to try out for the basketball team but is having a hard time telling his grandmother. He is a respectful child towards adults, but occasionally he gets into fights with his peers.

## **6. Nuria**

Nuria is an outgoing and talkative English Language Learner. According to her CELDT score, 423, which is considered to early intermediate English oral proficiency, she would have similar attributes as Mario when speaking. Her social tendencies though have helped her increase her English vocabulary since the first day of school. In class she sometimes loses track of what is happening because she is distracted and more interested in talking with her peers. Nuria can be found code switching back and forth from English to Spanish when she is talking to different peers.

Although chatty, Nuria writes significant entries in her journal, yet they often don't make sense. Her entries include the loss of a friend to death, her love for her family, and her pets. Nuria took an enormous leap in her reading after Christmas break, and it looked as if she had learned to read over night. This growth has translated into a newfound love for reading to the extent that she is regularly found reading books to her neighbors in the same manner a teacher would. She commands her neighbors' attention as she dramatically reads a story. Her math skills vary. The quality of her math work depends on if she rushes through an assignment, making careless errors or takes her time.

Nuria's parents try to devote a substantial part of their time to Nuria's learning. Nuria's mother is extremely interested in her progress, and she checks in with me every day to see how Nuria has behaved. Nuria is aware and proud of her academic growth and wants her parents to be aware of it too. When I have praised her in class, she has asked her father to talk to me to see how she is progressing in school.

Nuria's mother cleans houses for a living and even finds time to volunteer in her child's class. Nuria has an older brother who also attends Farmville Primary and is in the third grade.

### **7. Jennie**

Jennie is a sentimental, quiet, and helpful student. Her peers perceive her support as authoritative because she has the habit of telling other students what they need to be doing. I have overheard her on several occasions acting as a teacher towards other students. She has told students in her group that they need to follow along with their finger when we are reading. She also redirects students when they are not following along by pointing out where they should be in a story.

Jennie is an average student in all subjects. What Jennie may not possess academically, she makes up for in her wonderful imagination and love of fantasy. Occasionally, she may write about unicorns, and other times she writes a one-sentence entry in her journal that is usually about playing with her Barbies.

Jennie is an English-only speaker who likes playing with her cousins. Jennie speaks about her grandmothers frequently and cries about her deceased grandfathers and how she does not want her grandmothers to die. Jennie's grandmother is the primary support for her with her homework. Jennie's aunt who works at a Head Start facility located down the hall from my classroom also helps Jennie with homework.

## **VI. Research Question**

How do scaffolds, such as visuals organizers, and providing an authentic audience for letter writing influence the use of descriptive words in first graders?

## **VII. Baseline Data**

### **A. Survey**

The students in my class were given a survey on December 2, 2005 (Appendix C), similar to the survey taken on October 7. The survey specifically focused on questions pertaining to writing. The students were given partitions so that their answers were not influenced by their peers. The survey consisted of 19 questions used to determine home literacy resources, home literacy index, attitude towards writing, and self-assessment as a writer. Each question and answer choice was read in English, then translated in Spanish out loud slowly to allow time for the students to select their response. Items on the survey included "Do you like to write in class?" and "Can you write a list?" The choices offered to students were either "yes" or "no." In some cases, a happy face or sad face was the choice offered on questions such as "When I write in my journal I feel."

The surveys were sorted based upon results of the class in comparison to the case section group. The surveys were further sorted between those who responded yes and no to various questions. The results from the survey showed that within the case selection group 71% of the students enjoyed writing. Overall 85% of the class enjoyed writing. Within the case selection group 28% of the students did not enjoy writing. The results also show that a large percentage of the students worry about their spelling when writing. Within the case group 57% of the students are concerned about their spelling when writing. Overall 60% of class is concerned about their spelling. The evidence from the survey shows that the students enjoy writing, understand its importance, and could use more confidence in their spelling.

### **B. Observations**

During the observation, I could tell that there was a high-interest in the letter writing assignment to write a letter to Santa Claus. Many of the students were writing and conversing about what they were going to write about. At the same



time some of the students were also concerned about their spelling, but were made aware of the misspellings that Goldilocks had written in her letter. They were also informed that Santa would be able to read first-grade students' writing because he had a lot of practice. Additionally, I observed that students were discussing with their neighbors what they were going to ask Santa for, and this discussion led to another student saying, "That's what I was going to ask for."

During the baseline observation I took notes and limited my interactions with the students so that I could focus all of my attention on their level of engagement (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Observation 1: Letter to Santa (baseline)		
Student	Observation	Notes from observation
Rogelio	Was quick to start the activity.	<p>12-12-05            letters to Santa            created an oversized example of letters needed in letters (sounding)            Ⓢ put on carpet as modeled prior to model read couple pgs of Jolly Postman stressed spelling of Goldilocks &amp; how it was understood</p> <p>Ros: quick start into activity            Memo: wrote but didn't enjoy it            Nuria: took long time            Alejandra: quick not descriptive            Elmer: wrote well sounded out words            Jennie: wrote</p> <p>Ⓢ some Ⓢ talked to 1-1 about sounding out words.</p>
Memo	Wrote the prompt but he appeared not to be interested in the activity.	
Nuria	Took a long time to begin writing her letter.	
Alejandra	Wrote quickly and was not being too descriptive in her writing.	
Elmer	Wrote and sounded out words as he was writing. He asked if he had spelled words properly.	
Jennie	Spent time looking up and down at the board as she wrote. She also asked how to spell certain words and was told to sound them out as best as she could and to write the sounds that she heard.	

## VII. Implementation of Inquiry

### A. Schedule

Table 6: Overview of Inquiry Schedule				
	Day	Date	Letter	Description of Prompt
Phase 1	1 baseline	12.12.05	Dear Santa	Students wrote to Santa describing what they wanted for Christmas.
	2	12.14.05	Dear Rudolph	Students wrote to Rudolph giving him directions and details about their home.

	3	12.15.05	Dear Mom and Dad	Students wrote to their parents about what they would see the night before Christmas.
Phase 2	4	01.17.06	Dear Teacher 1	Students wrote a response to a letter written by the teacher.
	5	01.19.06	Dear Teacher 2	Students wrote to the teacher in response to what was written to them.
	6	01.20.06	Dear Family Member or Santa (final draft)	Students wrote their final draft of letter thanking someone for a Christmas gift.
	7	01.23.06	Dear second grade student 1	Students wrote a letter to a second grader about penguins.
	8 outcome	01.25.06	Dear second grade student 2	Students wrote a second letter about their favorite penguin.

### B. Inquiry Description

The inquiry for my class occurred during the course of two phases; **Phase 1** occurred before Christmas break and introduced the students to the sociolinguistic norms of letter writing and briefly introduced the use of descriptive words. **Phase 2**, three weeks after Phase 1, occurred after Christmas break, and the students were reintroduced to the sociolinguistic norms of letter writing and were able to further explore the genre of letter writing through a specific thematic unit. During each phase, I would examine the effects of letter writing for a specific audience, responding to various prompts, paper format, and various scaffolds used to increase student engagement and the use of descriptive words.

The genre of letter writing was introduced to the students primarily through children’s literature and modeled writing. The following books—*The Jolly Postman* or *Other People’s Letters*, *The Jolly Christmas Postman*, *Dear Santa*, *Mr. Blueberry*, and *Dear Tooth Fairy*—were read aloud to demonstrate how a child might write a letter to a specific audience. Prior to or after the read aloud, I would demonstrate or draw attention to how to write a letter. The students would then be given the opportunity to write a letter addressing an individual similar to that presented in the read aloud book. The students would also be given the opportunity to write to two audiences: their parents and second graders. These letters would be in the case of a parent audience, letters of thanks, and in the case of second graders, letters to inform and share their knowledge of

a specific subject matter. During the second phase, the student in the class happened to be learning about penguins, which was the topic on which they wrote.

Described below are the activities for each day during the intervention. They capture both classroom activities and the students' level of engagement.

### **Day 1 Implementation of baseline**

**Letter: Dear Santa**

**Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas...**

December 12, 2005

The students sat on the carpet as I read a couple pages of *The Jolly Postman* or *Other People's Letters* (Ahlberg, 1986) and parts of *The Jolly Christmas Postman* (Ahlberg, 1991). As I read the letter, written by Goldilocks to the Three Bears, I stressed that although Goldilocks misspelled words, her letter was comprehensible. During both of these read-alouds, student engagement was high. They were exceptionally interested with the realistic portrayal of the letters.

After the read-alouds, I gave the students their prompt. The prompt was to write a letter to Santa telling him what they wanted for Christmas with an emphasis on being as specific as possible. Prior to letting them start the activity, I modeled writing the sociolinguistic components of letter: the date, the salutation, closing, and signature. I created an oversized example of a letter for the students to see on the classroom dry-erase board. The example included the date, a salutation to Santa, a closing, and a signature. I orally told the students that they needed to have all of the following items that I had written on the board in their letter. I discussed the importance of each item both to the writer and the reader of the letter. The students were then instructed to go to their seats and begin writing their letters. If they needed any help with their letters, they could ask their peers for assistance. After they completed writing their letters they would then be able to color their picture. The paper selected for this entry was in the shape of a stocking.

### **Day 2**

**Letter: Dear Rudolph**

**Prompt: Here's how to find my house...**

December 14, 2005

On day 2, I asked the students to sit on the carpet as I narrated a story of snowy Christmas Eve. I told the students that there was such a terrible storm that Santa could not find their homes, and Rudolph was their only hope of getting Santa to the right house. I asked them to go back to their group, and I gave them the prompt to write a letter to Rudolph being extremely explicit about the description of their home, especially the color, size, and location. Once again, I reminded them about the features of a letter prior to passing out their paper. Then I passed out their paper and had them write first and then draw a picture after they had completed their writing.

**Day 3**

**Letter: Dear Mom and Dad**

**Prompt: I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night. It was...**

December 15, 2005

The students were asked to sit on the carpet as I read *The Night Before Christmas* (Moore, 1970) to them. This classic story related to the season and also builds a sense of anticipation in the reader. I read the story slowly with intonation and focused on the mystery of what was coming next in the narrative. I read the first couple of pages and stopped on page 7 without showing them the image. The last sentence that I read was "The moon on the breast of the new fallen snow; gave a luster of midday to the objects below; when what to my wondering eyes should appear..." And then I closed the book and I told the students, "Imagine it's the night before Christmas and you hear footsteps on the rooftop and you spring out of bed to see what is outside. As soon as you came back in, you decided to write a letter telling your mom and dad what you had seen, because if you waited until morning you would have forgotten." Then I gave them the prompt, which was "I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night..." and tell your mom and dad what you saw. At that point, I also pointed out the visual scaffold that contained the sociolinguistic features of the letter and reminded them that they needed to include all these components in their own letter. After they had completed writing their letters I finished the story.

#### **Day 4**

##### **Letter: Dear Teacher 1**

##### **Prompt: Respond to my letter**

January 17, 2006

On Day 4, I introduced the element of a classroom mailbox. I had purchased a mailbox that one would find on the street and brought it to the classroom. I explained to the students that when the red flag is up, that means the mail carrier needs to pick up the mail. I selected a student to fill the role of the mail carrier who would deliver the letters to each student. I told the students that there were letters waiting in the mailbox for them and then proceeded to read them a story.

I used this read-aloud to model how to write to a specific audience, in this case a teacher. *Dear Mr. Blueberry* (James, 1991) is an imaginative story about a student who writes to her teacher about how she sees a whale in a fountain in her backyard. During the reading process I emphasized the descriptive words used in the letter to the teacher, Mr. Blueberry. I hoped that my students would be equally imaginative and descriptive in their own writing.

After reading the story, some of the students guessed that the letters in the mailbox were from me and that they would be writing back. At this point, I had decided to focus on a subgroup of students. Approximately half of the class was receiving letters. The letters encompassed different interests of mine, from gardening to pets that I had as a child. All the letters written ended with a question to which the students were prompted to respond.

#### **Day 5**

##### **Letter: Dear Teacher 2**

##### **Prompt: Respond to my letter**

January 19, 2006

I had looked at the students' responses to my previous letter and wrote back to them. This time these letters were more focused with specific questions to the students which related to their interests. These letters were more conversational than academic. The general prompt was to respond to the letters that I had written to them. For some students, I created individualized prompts that were more specific.

Before the students began to write, I modeled writing a letter myself. I wrote a letter to a colleague who was absent the previous day. During the process, I emphasized the parts of a letter as I wrote them. I also stressed using descriptive words.

### **Day 6**

**Letter: Thank you**

**Prompt: Thank you, family member/Santa**

January 20, 2006

This “thank you” letter went through process writing whereby an initial draft was written and then the students revised their draft with the teacher’s assistance. I used this method because of the students’ lack of confidence in their own spelling. The revision process consisted of my asking the students to circle possible mistakes on their first draft. I went around the room to confirm their self-monitoring. Individually, I asked the students to tell me what words they were attempting to spell. Then I would correctly spell it on a Post-it note and place it underneath the incorrect word. On the next draft of the letter, the students referred to the previous draft with corrections in order to write a cleaner version. The revision process took approximately one week to complete.

### **Day 7**

**Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 1**

**Prompt: What I know about penguins**

January 23, 2006

I informed the students that I would read them a book, and they needed to pay particular attention to information that they could share with their audience. I then read them a non-fiction book about penguins. I chose no more than five areas of focus to read the students. They included geographical location, predators, and other interesting characteristics. After completing the read-aloud, I read a pre-written letter to the principal about penguins (see Appendix D). As I read it, I used intonation to highlight the descriptive words contained within the letter. The sample letter was used as a scaffold to which the students could refer. The students were prompted to write a letter to a second grader telling them what they had learned about penguins.

## **Day 8 (outcome)**

**Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 2**

**Prompt: What else I know about penguins**

January 25, 2006

The day before writing their final letter, the students were provided with multiple scaffolds pertaining to the subject of penguins. These included a read-aloud, a portion of the movie *The March of the Penguins* (Jacquet, 2005), and discussions about penguins. Before we watched the movie, I asked the students to tap into their prior knowledge. Some of the questions included “Where do penguins live?,” “Who knows what a group of penguins is called?,” and “Who are penguins’ predators?”

I began Day 8 by informing the students that today they would be writing their final letter to the second graders. I told them I would read aloud a big book titled *Plenty of Penguins* (Black, 1999) and that during the process I would take notes of any facts that they found interesting. They would have these facts available as a scaffold to refer to when writing their letter (Appendix E). The students noted 16 interesting facts. I informed the students that they could also write about their favorite penguin illustrated at the back of the book, but if they did, they would need to include many descriptive words. I asked for a volunteer to model this.

### **C. Achievement Data and Summary**

#### **1. Case-by-Case Analysis**

After collecting the work of every case student and assigning scores based on the rubric, I examined their growth from baseline to outcome. I also took note of which letters yielded the highest and lowest overall score and summarized what could have contributed to these findings. The scores and findings are represented in the following figures and tables.

Elmer’s growth over the period of the inquiry could be accredited to the increased use of scaffolds from prompt to prompt. The scaffolds and Elmer’s prior knowledge empowered him to be willing to become more descriptive for his audience (Table 7).

<p><b>Table: 7</b> <b>Elmer’s scores in individual categories based on rubric (1 low; 4 high)</b></p>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

		Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	4	3	4	2	3	16
2: Dear Rudolph	Here’s how to find my house	2	2	4	2	2	1
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	4	4	4	2	3	17
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	2 (date, greeting)	1	1	1	2	7
5: Dear Teacher 2	Respond to my letter	3 (no closing)	2	4	4	3	16
6: Thank you	Thank you, family member/Santa	4	4	2	2	2	14
7: Dear Second Grader 1	What I know about penguins	4	4	3	3	3	17
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	4	4	4	4	3	19


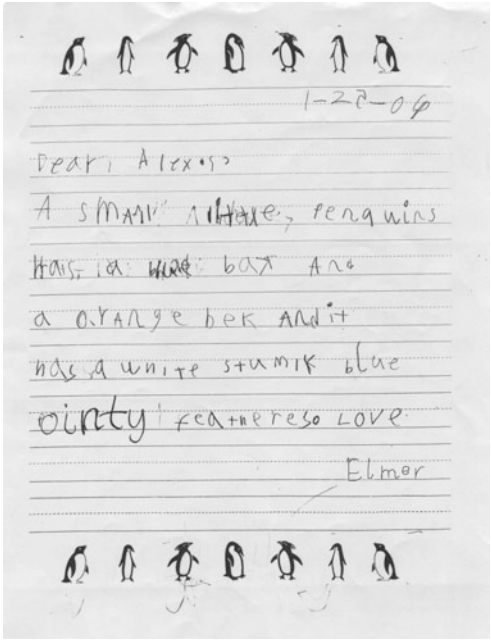
■ = Baseline ■ = Outcome ■ = Highest score ■ = Lowest score

Elmer’s writing since the beginning of the inquiry has improved in the use of descriptive words and the clarity of the message. For his first letter, he received a score two for vocabulary for including the word “big” and the number “12.” Although he included more than one descriptive word in his entry, very few details beyond these descriptive words were included.

Elmer’s growth in use of descriptive words is evident from baseline to outcome. He has shown a 50% growth, which translates to including two additional descriptive words from baseline to outcome (Figure 13).

<b>Figure: 13</b> <b>Results comparing Elmer’s baseline and outcome letters</b>	
Day 1 (baseline) Letter: Dear Santa Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas	Day 8 (outcome) Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 2 Prompt: What else I know about penguins



	
<p>Translation:  Dec. 12, 2005  Dear Santa,  I want a big bike and I want an X-box and a big motorbike. And 12 games.  Love  Elmer</p>	<p>Translation:  1-25-06  Dear Alex. S,  A small little penguin has a blue back and an orange beak and it has a white stomach blue pointy feathers.  Love  Elmer</p>

The findings suggest that Elmer responded better to prompts that lent themselves to conversation. By appealing to Elmer’s talkative personality through the genre of letter writing, he was able to increase his use of descriptive words. The first incident in which Elmer scored equally high in using descriptive words was when he wrote a second letter to me after I had questioned if he had any pets. Although the first letter between Elmer and me, also his lowest overall score, didn’t get the same reaction as the second, it was most likely because the first letter that I wrote to him did not allow for him to demonstrate his vast knowledge with respect to a certain topic.

The other case in which Elmer used a considerable amount of descriptive words is the letter he wrote a second time to a second grader about penguins. He included words such as “blue,” “orange,” “pointy,” and “little” in his writing. These findings suggest that Elmer responds well to topics in which he has some

familiarity. In the case of the letter to the second grader about penguins, Elmer had been exposed to multiple scaffolds to build his knowledge in the subject matter. As seen in class, Elmer had no qualms about shouting out answers when he knew he was right, which may also explain why Elmer had little difficulty showing off his knowledge of penguins in his letter. The scaffolding of information on penguins is what he needed to demonstrate his expertise.

The two scenarios in which Elmer scored the highest in descriptive words were letters that were informative. When Elmer has the information needed to be successful, he shines. The combination of visuals in *Plenty of Penguins* and the note taking may have helped Elmer increase his use of descriptive words. This letter was Elmer's highest overall score, 19, based on the rubric. Elmer lowest score was a 7, which occurred on a prompt that did not have any scaffolds as the outcome letter. Additionally, in this letter he had to respond to a message that I had written to him that he had a hard time reading and needed the assistance of his peers. Perhaps because of the challenges and the inability to read the letter, Elmer shut himself up from demonstrating his full potential and offered these few words, "Dear Mr. Prieto, No I do not."

A notable difference from the final survey conducted is that Elmer's attitude towards writing changed; he indicated that he enjoys it more so than earlier in the school year. There have been three instances in which Elmer has said that he has not had enough time to write. Two were during the inquiry, in which the prompts were "I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was..." and "Here's how to find my house"; the other instance was after the inquiry. This desire for more time suggests that he has a newfound interest in writing and communicating his thoughts to share with others.

Mario's decline in his use of descriptive words over the period of the inquiry could be accredited to lack of interest in the later prompts. Mario's highest use of descriptive words occurred at the beginning of the inquiry in which the prompts were Christmas specific (Table 8).


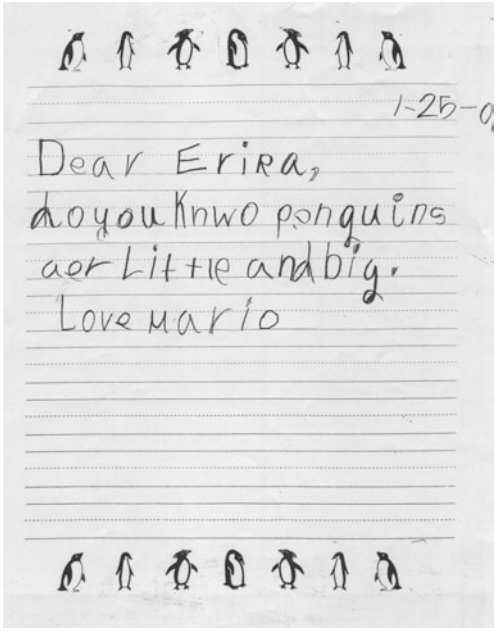
<b>Table: 8</b> <b>Mario's scores in individual categories based on rubric (1 low; 4 high)</b>
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

		Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	4	4	3	3	3	17
2: Dear Rudolph	Here’s how to find my house	4	3	3	3	2	15
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	4	4	3	2	2	15
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	2	3	2	1	1	9
5: Dear Teacher 2	Respond to my letter	3	4	2	2	3	14
6: Thank you	Thank you, family member/Santa	4	4	1	1	3	13
7: Dear Second Grader 1	What I know about penguins	2	4	1	2	2	11
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	4	4	2	2	2	14


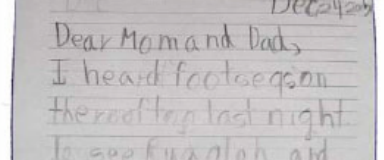
■ = Baseline ■ = Outcome ■ = Highest score ■ = Lowest score

Mario’s use of descriptive words during the inquiry process declined and rebounded slightly but never to the degree that he had demonstrated in the baseline letter. From baseline to outcome Mario has shown a 25% decrease (one less descriptive word) in his writing (Figure 14).

<b>Figure: 14</b> <b>Results comparing Mario’s baseline and outcome letters</b>	
Day 1 (baseline) Letter: Dear Santa Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas	Day 8 (outcome) Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 2 Prompt: What else I know about penguins

	
<p>Translation: Dec. 12, 2005 Dear Santa, I like brand new soccer white shoes. Love, Mario</p>	<p>Translation: 1-25-06 Dear Erika, Do you know penguins are little and big. Love Mario</p>

The findings for Mario suggest that thematic letters about holidays, specifically Christmas, supported his use of descriptive words. The letters in which Christmas was an element are evidence of Mario's highest use of descriptive words. The letters that included an aspect of Christmas include "Letter 1: Dear Santa" and "Letter 3: Dear Mom and Dad." The formatting of the paper could have increased Mario's use of descriptive words because the format of the paper allowed for coloring to take place. "Letter 1: Dear Santa" was in the shape of a Christmas stocking as seen in Figure (14) and "Letter 3: Dear Mom and Dad" resembled Santa on completion of the assignment (Figure 15).

<p><b>Figur Maric</b></p>	
<p>Day 3 Letter: Prompt it was..</p>	

Considering Mario has spent most of his time coloring during journals, it is highly possible that the anticipation of coloring and the excitement and vibrant time of Christmas could have

Translation:  
 Dec. 24, 2005  
 Dear Mom and Dad,  
 I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night. I see Rudolph and reindeers and Santa.  
 Love Mario

promoted his use of descriptive words. Additionally, the motivation behind receiving a present from Santa could have prompted Mario to be more descriptive to get what he wanted, whereas describing a penguin to a second grader without getting anything more than a letter in return did not interest him. Mario’s response to the first letter that I wrote him about my weekend may not have grabbed his attention also, which would explain why it is his lowest overall score.

Mario showed little interest in writing before the inquiry, and after the inquiry there is no evidence to suggest that he likes writing any more. When given the option to write to a prompt or a topic of his choice, Mario sits at his desks and doesn’t do much. When he does write, he continues to convey few messages, and his drawings tell a story more than his words.

Alejandra’s growth in the use of descriptive words during phase one increased by one word. Her growth from letter one to the next demonstrates how a student responds differently to different prompts (Table 9).

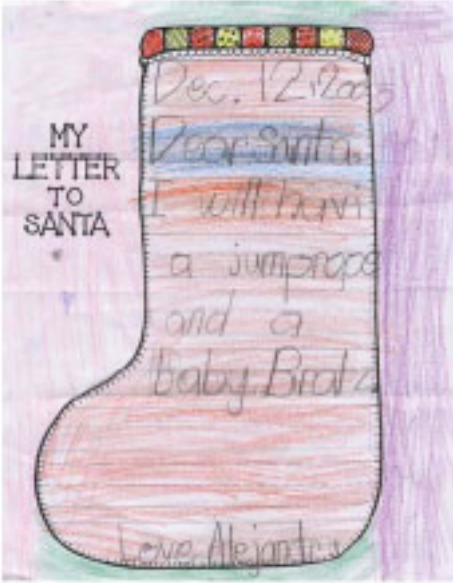

**Table: 9**  
**Alejandra’s scores in individual categories based on rubric (1 low; 4 high)**

		Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	4	3	2	2	3	14
2: Dear Rudolph	Here’s how to find my house	4	4	2	3	3	16
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	4	4	3	2	1	14

■ = Baseline   ■ = Highest score   ■ = Lowest score

Although Alejandra was not able to participate for the entire duration of the inquiry, it is worth noting some of the findings from her work. Alejandra had a 25% increase (one more descriptive word) in her writing during the initial phase of the inquiry. In all of the letters that Alejandra wrote she scored the highest in letter three, “Here’s how to find my house” (Figure 16).

**Figure: 16**  
**Alejandra's baseline and highest overall score according to the rubric**

<p>Day 1 (baseline)          Letter: Dear Santa          Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas</p>	<p>Day 3 (highest score)          Letter: Dear Rudolph          Prompt: Here's how to find my house</p>
	
<p>Translation:          Dec. 12, 2005          Dear Santa,          I will have a jump rope and a baby Bratz.          Love Alejandra</p>	<p>Translation:          Dec. 14, 2005          Dear Rudolph,          I live in California my house color is white.          Your friend, Alondra</p>

Alejandra's increase in the number of descriptive words to the prompt "Here's how to find my house" was most likely positive because of the value that she gives for her home and family. The familiarity with the subject matter could have accounted for the better score. It also could be attributed to her interest in Rudolph.

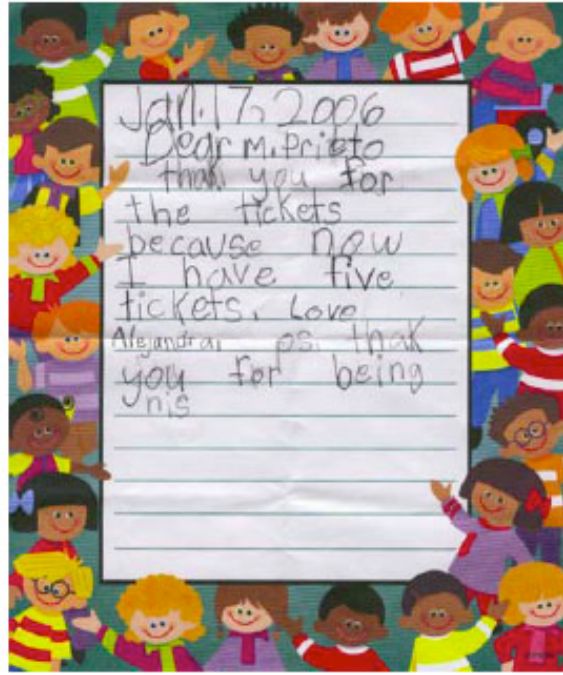


Also worth noting is that Alejandra's last letter, although her overall lowest, included a post-script message which no other student had done during the inquiry (Figure 17). In the read-aloud of Mr. Blueberry, a post-script message is included in one of the letters. This reading suggests that Alejandra picked up on this subtlety and included it in her letter. This finding highly supports that Alejandra responded well to the scaffolds of read-alouds to help guide her in her writing.

**Figure: 17**

**Alejandra's letter with P.S. detail**

Day 4  
Letter: Dear Teacher 1  
Prompt: Respond to my letter



Translation:  
Jan. 17, 2006  
Dear Mr. Prieto,  
Thank you for the tickets because now I have five tickets. Love  
Alejandra. P.S. Thank you for being nice



Memo's fluctuation in the use of descriptive words over the period of the inquiry could be a response to the different prompts and his interest level in responding to each prompt. This finding is perhaps evident in Memo's reply to a letter in which the format resembled a guessing game that I was playing with him in letter 5 (Table 7).


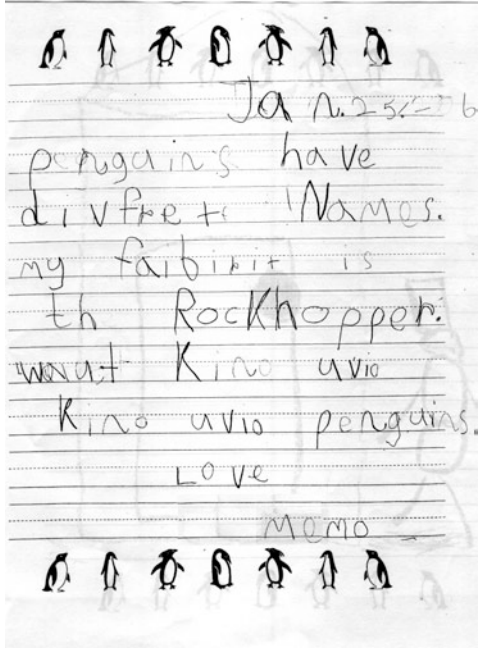
**Table: 10**  
**Memo's scores in individual categories based on rubric (1 low; 4 high)**

		Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	4	4	4	3	3	18
2: Dear Rudolph	Here's how to find my house	4	3	3	2	2	14
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	4	4	4	3	3	18
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	4	2	2	2	2	12
5: Dear Teacher 2	Respond to my letter	4	3	4	4	3	18
6: Thank you	Thank you, family member/Santa	4	4	1	1	2	12
7: Dear Second Grader 1	What I know about penguins	4	4	3	2	2	15
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	4	2	3	2	1	14

■ = Baseline ■ = Outcome ■ = Highest score ■ = Lowest score

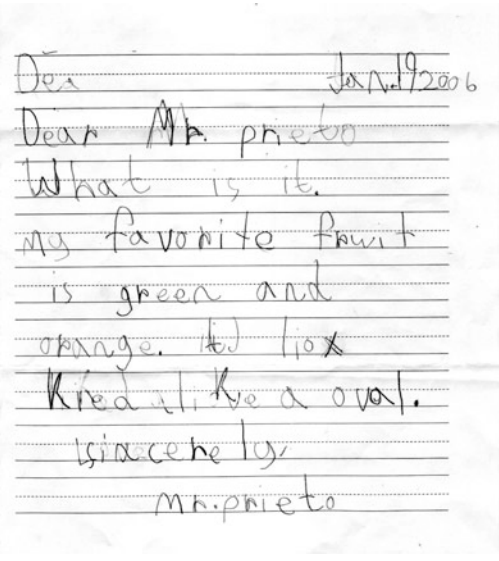

Throughout the inquiry Memo demonstrated a rise and fall in the amount of descriptive words he incorporated in his writing. Compared to the preliminary findings, Memo's writing has somewhat improved in that he does not have repeat sentences in his letters. When comparing his use of descriptive words from baseline and outcome there was a 25% decrease (one less descriptive word) in his writing (Figure 18). His use of proper grammar also declined. This could be attributed to the outcome letter requiring the writer to be more informative than personal, whereas the letter to Santa was both informative and personal.

**Figure: 18**  
**Results comparing Memo's baseline and outcome letters**

<p>Day 1 (baseline)          Letter: Dear Santa          Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas</p>	<p>Day 8 (outcome)          Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 2          Prompt: What else I know about penguins</p>
	
<p>Translation:          Dec. 12, 2005          Dear Santa,          I would like a little motorcycle.          I would like it black. And a X-box 360.          Love Memo</p>	<p>Translation:          Jan. 25, 2006          Penguins have different names. My favorite is the Rockhopper.          What kind of kind of penguins.          Love          Memo</p>

The largest growth in Memo's use of descriptive words occurred in letter 5. Memo was to respond to a playful letter in which I wrote to him describing a fruit that I had eaten the night before. In the letter, Memo was never told the kind of fruit. His task was to figure out the type of fruit I had eaten by using the descriptive words as clues. Memo's high interest in playing games appeared to increase his interest in the letter, and it ignited his use of descriptive words in his response (Figure 19). In contrast, the prompt in which Memo scored the lowest, "Letter 6: Thank you family member/Santa," suggests that a prompt to write a thank you will not contain many descriptive words because what else does one say other than "thanks" in a thank you letter.

**Figure: 19**  
**Results comparing Memo's highest and lowest overall score**

<p>Day 5 (highest score)          Letter: Dear Teacher 2          Prompt: Respond to my letter</p>	<p>Day 6 (lowest score)          Letter: Thank you          Prompt: Thank you, family member/Santa</p>
	
<p>Translation:          Jan. 19, 2006          Dear Mr. Prieto,          What is it? My favorite fruit is green and orange. It looks kind of like a oval.          Sincerely,          Mr. Prieto</p>	<p>Translation:          Jan. 20, 2006          Dear Mom and Dad          Thank you for giving me some clothes.          Love.          Memo</p>

Examining the letter in which Memo scored the highest, I think it possible that he was using the posted scaffolds and the scaffold of the letter he received to support his writing. His letter strongly resembles the letter that I had written and his closing is identical to the example provided to the students. This evidence supports the hypothesis that the scaffold presented through the sociolinguistic norm poster helped his writing.

Rogelio’s unchanged growth in the use of descriptive words throughout the inquiry is likely a cause of his performing near the ceiling at the beginning of the inquiry. There was little room for growth (Table 11).

**Table: 11**  
**Rogelio’s scores in individual categories based on rubric (1 low; 4 high)**


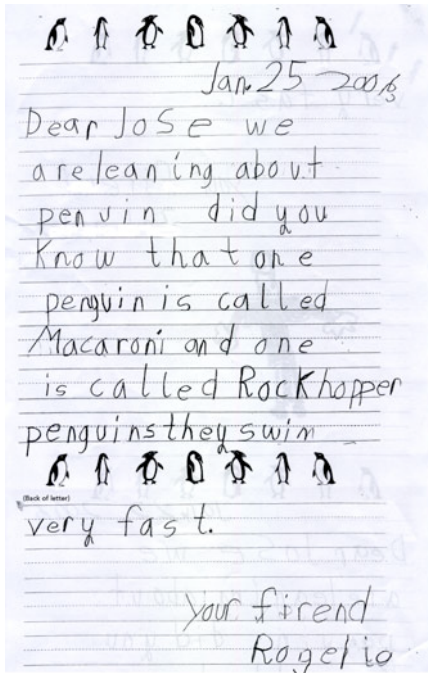
		Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	4	4	4	3	2	17
2: Dear Rudolph	Here’s how to find my house	4	4	4	3	3	18
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	4	4	3	3	2	16
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	4	4	4	3	3	18
5: Dear Teacher 2	Respond to my letter	4	4	4	3	3	18
6: Thank you	Thank you, family member/Santa	4	4	4	3	4	19
7: Dear Second Grader 1	What I know about penguins	4	4	3	3	3	17
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	4	4	4	3	1	16

■ = Baseline ■ = Outcome ■ = Highest score ■ = Lowest score

Prior to the inquiry Rogelio’s vocabulary in writing was not of the same academic level found in the books he was reading. When he would write, he would not take risks in exploring topics other than what he liked to play. He frequently would use words like “cool” and “play.” He also fell short of including descriptive words.

Shortly after the inquiry began Rogelio began to incorporate descriptive words into writing. Rogelio responded positively to the verbal and visual scaffolds. Comparing Rogelio’s baseline and outcome score, with regards to vocabulary, there is no difference. The area in which there is a difference between these two letters is in the use of grammar. Rogelio’s score dropped by 25% (one or more

punctuation mark absent). Rogelio has a tendency to omit punctuation throughout his writing until he writes his last word (Figure 20).

<b>Figure: 20</b> <b>Results comparing Rogelio's baseline and outcome letters</b>	
Day 1 (baseline) Letter: Dear Santa Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas	Day 8 (outcome) Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 2 Prompt: What else I know about penguins
	
Translation: Dec. 12, 2005 Dear Santa, I would like a X-box 360 with twelve games and a little motorcycle that is red. Love, Rogelio	Translation: Jan. 25 2006, Dear Jose we are learning about penguins did you know that one penguin is called Macaroni and one is called Rockhopper penguins they swim fast. Your friend Rogelio

The results from baseline to outcome suggest that from the moment in which scaffolding was introduced, whether visual or verbal, Rogelio was able to incorporate his learning into his writing. The results also suggest that he listens closely to the expectations of the assignment. As mentioned, Rogelio respects adults and aims to please. This may explain how audience could have been a factor in Rogelio's highest scores during the inquiry. The two letters in which Rogelio scored the highest were written to his mom and dad and the other was to me. He scored the lowest though when the *intended*, but not actual audience

was his mom and dad. The imaginative component of the prompt in letter three may have also not appealed to Rogelio. My assumption is that perhaps knowing that his parents were not going to receive the letter, Rogelio did not feel the need to please his audience (Figure 21).

<b>Figure: 21</b> <b>Results comparing Rogelio's highest and lowest overall scores</b>	
Day 6 (highest score) Letter: Thank you Prompt: Thank you family member/Santa	Day 3 (lowest score) Letter: Dear Mom and Dad Prompt: I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...
Translation: Jan. 20, 2006 Dear Mom and Dad, Thank you for the black PS2 and my clothes. I like about the PS2 I like to play the hockey game Love, Rogelio	Translation: Dec. 24, 2005 Dear mom and dad, I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night. I think it was santa and he was wearing a red hat. Love, Rogelio

Another area in which Rogelio's scores were unchanged during the inquiry was in sociolinguistic norms. On day one of the inquiry, when the sociolinguistic norms of letter writing were introduced, they appeared to be cemented in Rogelio memory. I had observed that during the read-alouds Rogelio would point out if a sociolinguistic norm was missing from an entry. This observance further supports the hypothesis that for Rogelio scaffolding and respect for the opinions of adults were the key factors that supported his growth in writing.

Nuria’s growth over the period of the inquiry was the most impressive of all the students. Her increase in the additional use of descriptive words in her writing appears to be supported through each component that was addressed during the inquiry. Nuria not only responded differently to the various prompts, but she also responded differently to her audience and the different approaches used in scaffolding (Table 12).

**Table: 12**  
**Nuria’s scores in individual categories based on rubric (1 low; 4 high)**



		Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	Score 1 – 4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	4	2	3	1	2	12
2: Dear Rudolph	Here’s how to find my house	4	3	4	4	2	17
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	3	4	4	4	2	17
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	2	3	4	3	2	14
5: Dear Teacher 2	Respond to my letter	4	4	3	3	2	16
6: Thank you	Thank you, family member/Santa	2	4	4	3	3	16
7: Dear Second Grader 1	What I know about penguins	4	3	4	3	2	16
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	4	3	4	4	1	16

■ = Baseline ■ = Outcome ■ = Highest score ■ = Lowest score

Nuria showed a significant amount of growth in the use of descriptive words from baseline to outcome. Nuria’s demonstrated a growth of 75% (three additional descriptive words) in the category of vocabulary. Although the baseline and the outcome letter were informational letters, Nuria did not respond similarly to the letters (Figure 22).

**Figure: 22**




Results comparing Nuria's baseline and outcome letters	
Day 1 (baseline) Letter: Dear Santa Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas	Day 8 (outcome) Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 2 Prompt: What else I know about penguins
	
Translation: December 12, 2005 Dear Santa, I would want a bunny chick Bratz. Love Nuria.	Translation: Jan. 25. 2006 Dear Alex did you know penguins is little blue they're small they're sometimes they're big sometimes they're not but Magellan penguins they have stripes they lay egg Love Nuria

The comparison indicates that multiple scaffolding used on the outcome letter supported Nuria's increase in the use of descriptive words. During the initial phase of the inquiry scaffolding was limited; hence her baseline letter received the lowest score. The findings also suggest that although a narrative is not always the best vehicle in which to write a letter, it perhaps could have been the most generous for Nuria. The prompt that most closely resembled a narrative (Letter three: "I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...") showed Nuria's highest use of descriptive words (Figure 23). Mixing the genres of a narrative and letter writing allowed for a greater flex and exploration in the role of prompts. The prompt's evocative appeal and the importance Nuria may attribute to Christmas may have encouraged her to be more expressive in her writing.

**Figure: 23**



The results from this letter (Figure 23) suggest that Nuria's interest in story telling carried over to her writing. The area in which Nuria was consistent in letter writing was number of messages. The numbers of messages in Nuria's letters suggest that being a talkative student translates into being able to write more than one message. The more messages that Nuria wrote, the more likely that she was going to incorporate a descriptive word in her message. This facet played a crucial role in Nuria's increasing the use of descriptive words in her writing.

Day 3 Letter: Dear Mom and Dad Prompt: I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...

Translation: Dec. 24, 2005 Dear mom and dad, I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night santa go in the chimney I see rudolph she was a girl santa leave presents I was five

Jennie showed growth in her use of descriptive words during the inquiry. Her fluctuation in the use of descriptive words could be a result from the different audiences she was addressing (Table 13).

**Table: 13**  
**Jennie's scores in individual categories based on rubric (1 low; 4 high)**


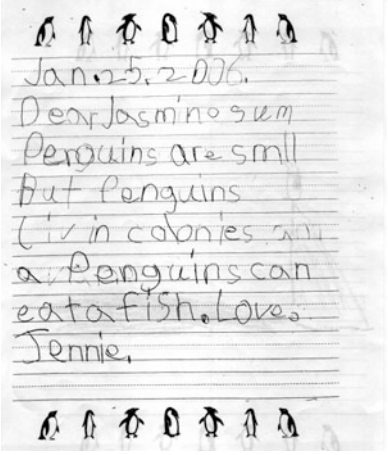
		Sociolinguistic norms	Clarity of message	Number of messages	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total score
Letter	Prompt	Score 1-4	Score 1-4	Score 1-4	Score 1-4	Score 1-4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	4	2	2	2	3	13
2: Dear Rudolph	Here's how to find my house	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	4	3	2	2	2	13
5: Dear Teacher 2	Respond to my letter	4	4	2	2	2	14
6: Thank you	Thank you, family member/Santa	4	4	3	3	3	17
7: Dear Second Grader 1	What I know about penguins	4	4	2	1	2	13
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	4	4	3	3	3	17

■ = Baseline ■ = Outcome ■ = Highest score ■ = Lowest score

Jennie had a growth from baseline to outcome in the use of descriptive vocabulary by 25% (the addition of one more descriptive word). She scored similarly in two cases: (1) a letter that she wrote to her mother and (2) the outcome letter. In the area of sociolinguistic norms Jennie maintained a perfect score. My hypothesis of the audience being the main reason Jennie's scored increased in the use of descriptive words is supported by this finding. I feel that if Jennie had the same interest in all of her audiences, she would have been able to be equally descriptive. Throughout the process of the inquiry, visual scaffolds were provided to Jennie as a reference, and from observations and her scores there is reason to believe that she took advantage of using the scaffolds. By looking at the difference in her score between the first letter she wrote to the

second grader about penguins and the second, it is highly reasonable to assume that the multiple experiences that delved into the subject matter of penguins also helped her write a more informative letter that included many descriptions.

The difference in the use of descriptive words from the baseline and outcome are provided in Figure 24.

<b>Figure: 24</b> <b>Results comparing Jessie's baseline and outcome letters</b>	
Day 1 (baseline) Letter: Dear Santa Prompt: This is what I would like for Christmas	Day 8 (outcome) Letter: Dear Second Grade Student 2 Prompt: What else I know about penguins
	
Translation: Dec. 12, 2005 Dear Santa, I would want hay Furby. I would want it pink. Love Jennie.	Translation: Jan. 25, 2006. Dear Jasmine some penguins are small but penguins live in colonies and a penguin can eat a fish. Love, Jennie

The comparison of baseline and outcome suggest that Jennie benefited from exposures to multiple scaffolds. In the case of the baseline letter, Jennie had to work off only her knowledge to describe what she wanted for Christmas, whereas the outcome letter provided Jennie with multiple scaffolds to help her gain information to use to inform her audience.

The other letter for which Jennie scored well was the letter that she wrote to her mother. What was supposed to be a letter a thanks, letter six, revealed Jennie's sentimental qualities. Straying from the prompt, it appeared that Jennie felt the need to communicate her reactions to her mother's being sick. The result of her actions suggests that she had a clear understanding of the purpose in authentic letter writing, to communicate what she feels rather than what I was asking her to say.

## **2. Cross Case Analysis**

After examining the students' individual growth from baseline to outcome and their personal lowest and highest scores, I compared Elmer's, Mario's, Memo's, Nuria's, and Jennie's highest and lowest scores in the area of vocabulary. In some instances the students may have had more than one letter with the same score for vocabulary. In that case, I only examined the letter with highest or lowest overall and vocabulary score. Rogelio's scores were not included in the comparison because of his unchanged scores. Alejandra was not included either because of her departure during the inquiry.

The following table provides a comparison to illustrate both the similarities and differences in the use of rich vocabulary with certain prompts (Table 14). Included in the table are the letter, prompts, and descriptive vocabulary incorporated in each writing piece.

<b>Table: 14</b>			
<b>Score comparison in highest and lowest use of descriptive words</b>			
<b>Elmer's scores</b>		Vocabulary	Descriptive vocabulary included
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	4	little, blue, orange, white, and pointy
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	1	No descriptive words or vocabulary included
<b>Mario's scores</b>		Vocabulary	Descriptive vocabulary included
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	3	white, soccer, new
4: Dear Teacher 1	Respond to my letter	1	No descriptive words or vocabulary included
<b>Memo's scores</b>		Vocabulary	Descriptive vocabulary included
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	
5: Dear Teacher 2	Respond to my letter	4	green, orange, little and oval
6: Thank you	Thank you, family member/Santa	1	No descriptive words or vocabulary included
<b>Nuria's scores</b>		Vocabulary	Descriptive vocabulary included
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	
3: Dear Mom & Dad	I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was...	4	go in the <i>chimney</i> , <i>heard</i> footsteps, <i>santa</i> leave <i>presents</i> , five
1: Dear Santa	This is what I would like for Christmas	1	No descriptive words or vocabulary included
<b>Jennie's scores</b>		Vocabulary	Descriptive vocabulary included
Letter	Prompt	Score 1 – 4	
8: Dear Second Grader 2	What else I know about penguins	3	small, colonies, eat fish
7: Dear Second Grader 1	What I know about penguins	1	No descriptive words or vocabulary included

This comparison in the table highly suggests that multiple factors could have contributed to the students increased or lack of descriptive vocabulary. A noticeable factor could be the prompts that they were addressing. Some students may have had a higher interest level in a certain prompt than in others. The role of audience could have also influenced their use of descriptive vocabulary, as well as the day in which the prompt was assigned and their ability to write a response.

The two students who had a similar response to the same prompt were Elmer and Jennie. Both scored a four in letter number eight: "Dear second Grader 2: What else I know about penguins." This score could be attributed to the number of scaffolds provided for this writing prompt. The students for this prompt could have referenced the class-generated list of interesting facts about penguins or the big book images. Offering multiple scaffolds and the scaffolds providing a clear focus could have also lowered the anxiety of writing for these two students.

Mario, Memo, and Nuria did not have the same response as Jennie and Elmer did towards penguins or writing to peers. Mario's highest use of descriptive vocabulary occurred when his audience was Christmas related. His highest use of descriptive vocabulary occurred when writing to Santa. The other letter in which Mario scored a three in the area of vocabulary was addressed to Rudolph. This discovery suggests that Mario was motivated to be more descriptive when writing to an audience that was mythical and holiday specific. In contrast, this was the prompt on which Nuria scored the lowest. The comparison made from these findings of these two students illustrates how students respond differently to same prompt.

The prompt that appealed to Memo and yielded his highest use of descriptive vocabulary was "Dear Teacher 2: respond to my letter." As mentioned earlier this letter may have appealed to Memo because of the letter he received that initiated his response. Interested in the game that I was playing with him, Memo was able to produce a letter rich with descriptive vocabulary.

It was not so much a game that Nuria was interested in but instead the opportunity to incorporate a narrative in the format of a letter. Nuria's highest use of descriptive vocabulary occurred in "Dear Mom & Dad: I heard footsteps on the rooftop last night, it was..." I think that this prompt appealed to Nuria because of her interest in telling stories.

Examining the students' lowest scores in descriptive words shows a similar trend to that which is seen in their highest scores. Only two students share a prompt that had the lowest score in descriptive vocabulary, "Dear Teacher 1: Respond to my letter" I think that Elmer's and Memo's scores were at their lowest because of their inability to respond to a letter in which I address my interest more than theirs.

## **IX. Conclusions**

### **What role do prompts play in students' use of descriptive words?**

The findings of the inquiry suggest that prompts may greatly affect a first grader's use of descriptive words in letter writing. Providing different prompts and audiences may have influenced the students' ability to engage in the task of writing. This discovery could account for the varying amount of descriptive words included in each letter. The cross case analysis further demonstrates how the students' use of descriptive words differed depending on the individual and prompt. A diversity of prompts and audiences resulted in varying levels of the use of descriptive words. This finding supports Schleppegrell's conclusion that students do "produce different kinds of text even when responding to the same writing prompt" (2004, p. 16). As demonstrated in this inquiry, students tend to produce different kinds of text in response to the same prompt. This finding supports Ruth and Murphy's assertion that "Investigations of written products suggest that *differences* in writing tasks do produce *differences* in performance" (1988, p. 136). Overall, this inquiry into letter writing showed a greater use of descriptive words than when students were simply writing in their journal or for an assessment. Perhaps providing a target audience to whom to write in the prompt offered students a vehicle by which they could be more expressive.

### **What makes a good scaffold?**

Achieving the results of an increased use of descriptive words was possible not only through different prompts or different audiences, but also through the inclusion of multiple scaffolds. The best scaffold I felt was Focused Listening during the read aloud of *Plenty of Penguins*. This reading, in combination with student input, empowered the students to take command of their learning. Asking the students to involve me in helping identify reference sentences from the story so that they could include these sentences in their second letter about penguins resulted in a long list of descriptive details. The ease of creating this list was perhaps because of the students' interest level in penguins and the accessibility the students had to child friendly print. Reid (2002) states, "Literature written to be clear and accessible to young readers can serve as a useful scaffold, from understanding basic structures and vocabulary to practicing and eventually using a range of expressions, styles, and functions of language" (p. 19). As observed, the read alouds for most students provided a good scaffold that not only reminded them of the necessary sociolinguistic features, but also provided an example after which the students could model their writing.

I feel that my students and I have reached the same conclusion Wood expressed in her inquiry into letter writing: "We write letters to connect with others" (2005, p. 42). In addition to Wood's findings, I think it is the connection that we establish not only with our audience, but also with the prompt and subject matter that allows us to express voice and paint a picture in the mind of our readers using words. Through the different prompts and variety of scaffolds, I was able to find the "hook that took" for not only increasing their use of descriptive words but also increasing their level of engagement in the genre of letter writing.

## **X. Reflections**

### **A. For future teaching**

This inquiry into letter writing allowed my students to begin to establish their individual voice. Through the process of letter writing I was able to witness that students' writing reflects personality. I was also able to learn more about what motivates a student to be engaged in the writing process.



If I were to conduct this inquiry again, I would spend more time getting to know my students personally. I would spend more time on the playground to see which peers they interact with so that I could establish a correspondence between friends. I would also devote more time at the beginning of the school year to interviewing my students so that I could learn more about their personal interests. This way I could incorporate their interest into assigned writing prompts.

When teaching writing, it is important that prompts address the following: audience, wording, and relevance. Audience is important because it can create the expectation of a response and in doing so may increase a student's willingness to become more engaged in the process. Wording also needs to be considered because too little may result in a response of a few words and too much may lead the students astray from what is expected. Lastly, neglecting the students' interest and focusing heavily on prescribed curriculum may not offer the students the opportunity to develop their individual voice. In turn, students may also not be as willing to become engaged in the writing process. Ruth and Murphy (1988) state, "A crucial need for instructional purposes is to develop writing tests to say something—beyond numerical rankings—that is meaningful to students, parents and especially to teachers" (p. 242).

### **B. On policy**

This inquiry was initiated in part because of the results of my students' writing assessment scores during their first trimester. This numerical ranking translated into a performance level that categorized some of my students as performing below grade level. If students have a significant number of areas below grade level at the end of the school year, the consequences of their scores could be retention or summer school intervention. The findings from this inquiry suggest that policy makers may need to reconsider how students are assessed in writing.

Determining a student's ability in writing probably should not lie in the results of one assessment. I suggest that policy makers consider the growth over time and

compare the students' writing abilities across different prompts. As seen from this inquiry, not all students respond the same to the same prompt. Therefore, how can we as educators expect students to write with the same vigor on a specific topic if it may hold no meaning for the individual?

I suggest that to minimize the high stakes of an individual prompt, we may need to examine a variety of writing samples. Perhaps it would be best to examine two samples taken earlier in a trimester, compare them to two later samples, and still give the district assessment. In this way, we could evaluate the growth over time as well as from one prompt to another. This evaluation would better represent a student's range in ability than just a single test.

### **C. On home-school connections**

Prior to starting the inquiry, I had conferences and informed each parent that their child would be writing to them. I stressed how it is important for the parents to get involved, and how much it would be appreciated if they could write back. Letters that the students had written in English to their parents were mailed, and I waited on behalf of the students for a response. I told the students of the mailing and to tell their parents. I also told them that it would be extra special if you could read the letter to them when it got to their house. Then, if they needed to translate for their parents, they could. Parents were also notified through a newsletter (both in Spanish and English) that they would be receiving a letter from their child in the mail. Unfortunately, not one student received a letter back from their parents.

If I were to resend letters to parents, I would provide a translation of what the student had written with the letters so that it would make the process more meaningful. I would also provide instructions on what the next steps are for the parents. To simplify things for the parents, I would supply blank sheets of letter paper and also include an addressed, stamped envelope. This way, perhaps the parents would not have to feel challenged with having to do too much. I think that if parent involvement is possible, it sends a message of how communication between families and school is valued.

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## Appendix A

First Grade district implemented rubric for Writing  
provided by Houghton Mifflin

### Scoring Rubric for California Summative Tests

Use this 4-point scoring rubric to evaluate and score the compositions in the Writing Application tests. A score of 4 represents the best work.

#### 4 points

- The writing focuses on the assigned writing task and indicates clear understanding of purpose.
- Main idea is clear and supported by some examples, facts, details, or explanations.
- Ideas are mostly complete and in logical order.
- Most high-frequency words are spelled correctly.
- Errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling do not interfere with the reader's understanding.

##### Narrative

- Events are told in logical order.
- Exact words are used.

#### 2 points

- The writing attempts to focus on the assigned writing task but may indicate a lack of understanding of purpose.
- Main idea is apparent, but examples, facts, details, or explanations are limited.
- Ideas are generally complete. The writing demonstrates little attempt at logical order.
- Most words are spelled phonetically.
- Errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling may interfere with the reader's understanding.

##### Narrative

- Sequence of events is minimally developed.
- Few exact words are used.

#### 3 points

- The writing focuses on the assigned writing task and indicates general understanding of purpose.
- Main idea is apparent and supported by some examples, facts, details, or explanations.
- Ideas are mostly complete and in logical order.
- Most high-frequency words are spelled correctly.
- Errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling do not interfere with the reader's understanding.

##### Narrative

- Sequence of events is adequate.
- Some exact words are used.

#### 1 point

- There may be no focus on the assigned writing task. The writing indicates a lack of understanding of purpose.
- Main idea is unclear. There are few or no examples, facts, details, or explanations.
- Ideas are incomplete. The writing is confused and demonstrates no attempt at logical order.
- Most words are spelled phonetically. Only beginning or ending sounds of words are spelled.
- Errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling seriously interfere with the reader's understanding.

##### Narrative

- Events are told in no particular order.
- Language is vague.

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**Appendix B**

Anchor papers from first trimester 2004

The first grade teachers in 2004 selected the following papers as anchor papers for the purpose of scoring papers for the first trimester in 2005. The rubric in Appendix A served as a reference to determine a score for each paper.

**Anchor paper – Level 1**

**FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE**  
(First Trimester)

Draw a picture about something you like to do.



Write about your picture.

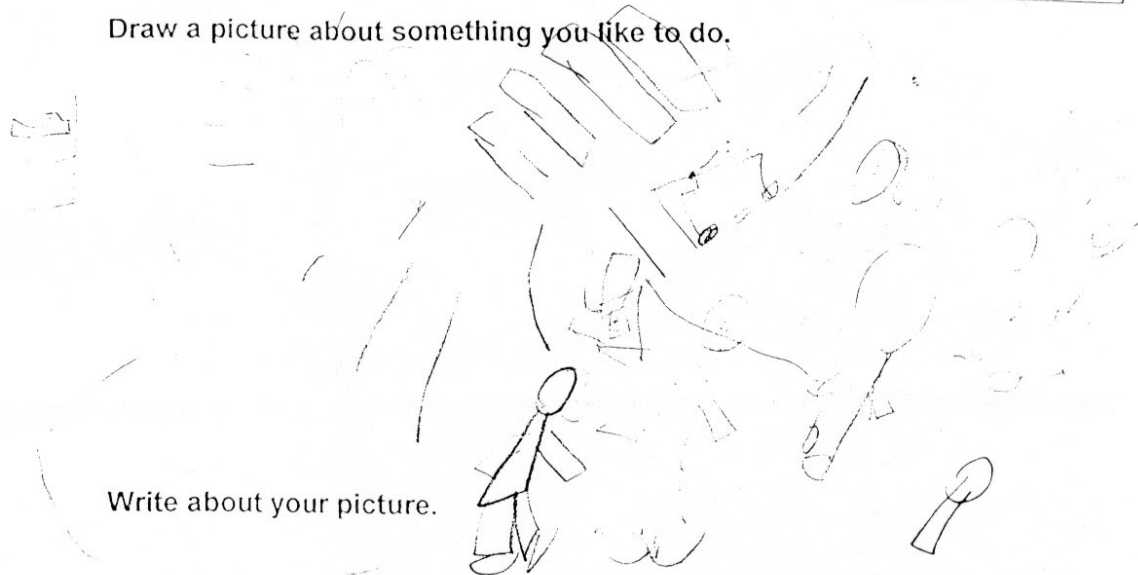
I like Skmpok X  
I got gampo  
I B B O

Translation: I like ? I got? I ?

# Anchor paper – Level 2

## FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester)

Draw a picture about something you like to do.



Write about your picture.

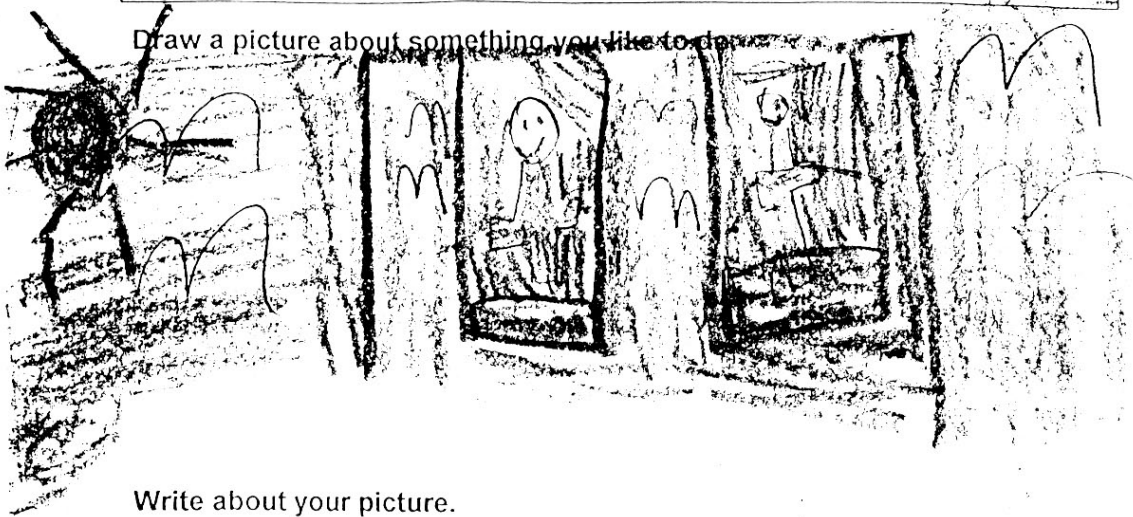
me and my fes and my buthr  
and my mom and my dad. I wet  
on The roller coaster.

Translation: me and my friends and my brother and my mom and my dad. I went on the roller coaster.

## Anchor paper – Level 3

### FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester)

Draw a picture about something you like to do.



Write about your picture.

I like to play on  
the swen.

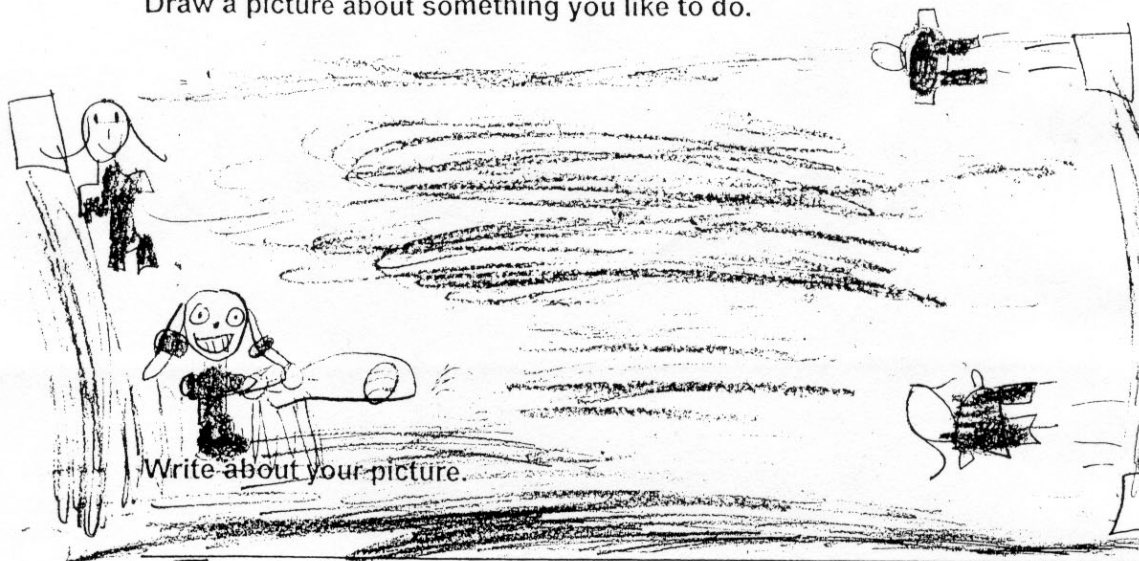
We are singing a song.  
I like to swen  
with my fis.  
and we have fun.  
on the swen.

Translation: I like to play on the swings. We are singing a song. I like to swing with my friends and we have fun on the swings.

# Anchor paper – Level 4

## FIRST GRADE WRITING SAMPLE (First Trimester)

Draw a picture about something you like to do.



Write about your picture.

I like to play baseball.  
I like to bring snacks for my  
I like playing on the field.  
I like eating the snacks.  
I like bating too. I like to  
mack a homerun. I plad for  
two yers. I want to play  
again.

Translation: I like to play baseball. I like to bring snacks for my I like playing on the field. I like eating the snacks. I like bating too. I like to make a homerun. I've played for two years. I want to play again.



## Appendix C

Survey conducted on December 2

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. How many books do you have at home?

0



2. Do you like to write in class?

Yes

No

3. Can you write a list?

Yes

No

4. Can you write a recipe?

Yes

No

5. Do you get letters at home from friends or family (grandma)?

Yes

No

6. Do you get birthday cards from friends or family?

Yes

No

7. Do you know how to spell many words?

Yes

No

8. Do you like to write in your journal?

Yes

No

9. Do you think writing is important?

Yes

No

10. I like when my classmates help me with my writing?

Yes

No

11. When I write in my journal I feel:



12. When I write a letter I feel:



13. When my teacher writes back to me in my journal I feel:



14. I worry about how I spell when I write.

Yes

No

15. I like writing to my mom and dad.



No

16. I like watching my teacher write.

Yes

No

17. I like to talk to my friends in class when we are writing.

Yes

No

18. I have a journal at home.

Yes

No

After school I

Watch TV or play videogames



Go to practice



Do my homework



Play with my toys or ride my bike



## Appendix D

Sample Letter written to principal

Jan. 23, 2006

Dear Mr. Ettner,

This week we are going to learn about an amazing bird. We are going to study penguins. Did you know penguins do not fly? Penguins are birds that live in the southern hemisphere. Most penguins are black, white and yellow. Some penguins are bluish-gray. Penguins spend most of their time in the water. I love learning about penguins.

Sincerely,  
Mr. Prieto

## Appendix E

Student generated list of interesting facts about penguins

### Penguins

- Sharp pointy feathers
- Stripes
- Spiky hair
- Dots on their face
- Some lay eggs
- Some are huge
- Live in South Pole
- Some are small
- Slide on ice
- Swim deep and far
- Dive hundreds of feet
- Some get eaten by killer whales or leopard seals
- Swim fast
- Fairy penguin – Little Blue
- Macaroni penguin – red eyes, yellow eyebrows
- Emperor penguin
- Rockhopper penguin
- Live in colonies also called rookeries