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Improve Language Skills

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Annotation: This article explores the development of writing skills in thecontext of science using the mode continuum, a linguistic framework for plan-ning the connection between science instruction and writing. Using specificresearch-based methodology, this article demonstrates the steps to advancestudents from speaking to writing in the science classroom.

Keywords: English learners, mode continuum, teacher-guided reporting, writing.

Science teachers need specific strategies to develop writing skills along withscience content. Fortunately, research has demonstrated that science-teachingmethodology can accomplish both the teaching of science content and vari-ous language skills, including writing. A technique suitable for and utilized byscience teachers is the mode continuum. The mode continuumis a process that leads students from speaking to writing in science. The modecontinuum also lends itself very well to concurrently incorporating listeningand reading skills. In general, the mode continuum is an effective tool to usein planning a science program. It allows teachers to design science lessons thatare situation-embedded, allowing students to use their oral language skills todiscuss academic topics. This leads them to the more academic, less situation-embedded, written forms of English. This is especially critical for English lan-guage learners at various levels of English proficiency in our contentclassrooms.

The mode continuum consists of four specific phases:

1. doing an experiment,

2. introducing key vocabulary

3. teacher-guided reporting, and

4. journal writing.

phase one, students are assigned to groups and conduct experiments inaspecificareaortopic. Itisrecommended that the teacher design variousex-periments that are related to the same concept. There are books that focuson a particular topic and can provide the basis for classroom experiments.For example, VanCleave (1993) in her book Gravity lists 20 different experi-ments related to the concept of gravity, each one covering a different problem. Merrill (2002) has also published a book of science activities all addressingthe concept of gravity. The teacher provides both written instructions along with pictures to help students conduct their assignedgravity experiment. Visual aids assist students in orga-nizing and making sense of information that is pre-sented. The objec-tive is for students to use their current vocabulary andprior knowledge of the topic to engage in the experi-ments. Students are told that, at the end of the exper-iment, they will have an opportunity to describe andexplain to their peers what they did in their groups.

phase two, the teacher introduces key vocabu-lary verbally and in writing by listing key terms on theboard. After students have spent some time developingan understanding of gravity using familiar words and ex-ploratory talk, the teacher spends time with each groupand reinforces the scientific concepts and vocabularythat he or she has identified in the lesson objectives.

A science program designedt omeet the sciencecon-tent and writing needs of students must have a numberof components. It is critical that learners receive pur-poseful and systematic instruction that addresses bothscience content and language development. First, it must provide students with oppor-tunities to listen, speak, read, and write. It also mustuse a hands-on, project approach to science learning.Furthermore, it must provide an opportunity for stu-dents to work cooperatively to develop both socialand academic language skills. Most importantly, it must provide the teacher with aframework to address the writing and science needs ofstudents. The mode continuum provides such a framework. It incorporates all these copmonents into an organized approach to teach content and develop language.The process provides an authentic and meaningful con-text for students to develop the more academic vocab-ulary of instruction.

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