

One of the things I was most excited to try out after taking your class last week was teaching kids about sentences. I work hard each year to get my first graders first to recognize sentences, and then to write them correctly, with a capital letter at the beginning and a period at the end. Just getting them to understand what a complete sentence is often takes most of the year, and some still struggle with it into second grade.

Although I'm sure it works beautifully with older kids, I was interested in trying it out with my brand-new writers. We brainstormed four different "who" cards, and wrote them (with a small picture for my struggling readers) on the same color index card. We then brainstormed four different "what happened" cards, and did the same with another color index card. By this time, the kids were really wondering what we were going to do with the cards (for some reason, they just LOVE index cards), and I had 100% of their attention.

We then talked again about what comes at the beginning of a sentence, but this time I had them all make a "muscle man-type" pose whenever we said the word "capital," to symbolize the big, strong, capital letters. There were a lot of giggles at first, but after 2-3 times, they were **very** into it. They loved stomping their feet for a period as well.

When we actually got into making the sentences, they were enthralled! We randomly chose cards, and got some very silly sentences (a favorite was "A happy girl laid an egg."). The kids could not WAIT for their turns to be a part of the sentence, and even my most reluctant readers were happily reading the cards when it was their turn.

Aside from having a lot of fun in class (which is great in and of itself), the kids really GOT it. Afterwards, they wrote in their journals, and I was truly amazed. I had to practically throw them out of the room to go to recess (no one wanted to stop writing), and every single kid had written at least one sentence. One of my struggling writers had written three (correctly!), and didn't want to stop! I am definitely going to try this with my older students as well, and I will share the activity with my colleagues.

I took more than just this one activity from your class, however. You really got me thinking about many things, especially about comfort zones and being inside or outside of them. I work in an immersion elementary school as the English teacher. Every year I get new students who have just arrived from Germany, and know very little or no English. In my class, these kids are way outside their comfort zones. In their

German classes, my native English speakers are often outside of their comfort zones (which also explains, I now believe, some of the behavior that their German teachers see that is often missing in my class). It is especially difficult for my new third graders, because by that point, we're doing a lot of reading, writing, and projects, and all of our units are pretty vocabulary-intensive. They've also learned to be pretty self-conscious (much more so than my often fearless first graders) and many won't speak English until they're sure they won't be making a mistake. I try to make my class as welcoming as possible, and give all my students, but especially my ESL students, many chances for small successes upon which they can build for later bigger successes.

Keeping what you taught us in mind, I considered the upcoming oral reports on different places in Portland that my third graders would be giving the class. I let my two newest arrivals, know that they were in charge of their projects, and could stop whenever they wished. I gave them alternatives to speaking in front of the class. I had them practice with some of the animal pillows from our reading corner, with each other, with an English-speaking friend, with my parent volunteer, or a small group of friends, if they wished. They had the power to choose how to practice, knowing that I would support them with whatever they chose. If, on the day of the reports, they decided that it was still too scary, opting out was also a choice.

After speaking with the entire class about bravery (the lion!) and supporting one another (we have done many support and group-building activities before, as this is my third year with this group of kids), I was thrilled to see my students encouraging and supporting. This class, which often has difficulty with listening to each other, was fully engaged. They encouraged the students, spit on their dinosaurs with them, and clapped wildly for them after giving their reports! The class was both surprised and impressed with both their bravery and their great English skills. It was a great learning experience for both my new kids, and the rest of the class, not to mention for me!

There were many ideas you talked about that either sparked something in my brain as familiar ("Hey, I've been doing that without even realizing it!") or as a motivator ("I can't wait to try that in my classroom!"). I look forward to many more opportunities to implement "brain-friendly" techniques with my young learners!