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Editorial Article

Every Learner, *Every* Text: Inclusive and Evidence-Informed Practices

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ABSTRACT

The Spring 2026 issue of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy*, themed "*Every* Learner, *Every* Text: Inclusive and Evidence-Informed Practices," highlights the ongoing interplay between evidence-informed literacy instruction and responsive, inclusive teaching. Across an interview with Nancy Frey, research articles, and classroom-based teaching tips, each contributor explores how literacy educators can support learners through instructional practices grounded in research while also honoring student identity, voice, belonging, and access. Topics in this issue include current perspectives on literacy instruction, dialogic inquiry in syllabus design, usage-based grammar instruction, Science of Reading lesson planning, social-emotional learning through children's literature, and authentic literary response through picturebooks. Collectively, the articles demonstrate that effective literacy instruction does not require educators to choose between rigor and responsiveness. Instead, this issue emphasizes how evidence-informed teaching and inclusive literacy practices can work together to create meaningful learning experiences for all students.

KEYWORDS

literacy instruction; inclusive pedagogy; evidence-informed practice; Science of Reading; children's literature; social-emotional learning; dialogic inquiry; grammar instruction

In literacy education, we are often positioned between two important commitments: fidelity to evidence and fidelity to the learners sitting in front of us. One side calls for explicit instruction, evidence-informed practices, structured routines, and measurable outcomes, while the other emphasizes identity, belonging, representation, voice, and meaningful engagement with texts and with one another. At times, these conversations are framed as competing priorities. Yet the strongest literacy instruction has never truly belonged to one side or the other. Instead, effective literacy teaching exists in the space where rigor and responsiveness work in unity (Beauchemin et al., 2026). This Spring 2026 issue of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy*, themed "*Every* Learner, *Every* Text: Inclusive and Evidence-Informed Practices," highlights scholars and practitioners who navigate that space thoughtfully, demonstrating that research-informed instruction and human-centered teaching are not opposing forces, but complementary ones.

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Research and Practitioner Pieces: Centering *Every* Learner and *Every* Text

The phrase "*Every* Learner, *Every* Text" reflects two central ideas woven throughout this issue. First, every learner deserves access to literacy instruction grounded in intentional, evidence-informed practice. Second, every learner deserves opportunities to encounter texts that invite reflection, connection, curiosity, and a sense of belonging. Some articles in this collection lean more heavily toward instructional systems and evidence-based frameworks, while others emphasize empathy, identity, and inclusive classroom communities. Together, however, they remind us that literacy instruction is most effective when it remains attentive to both the science of learning and the humanity of learners (Bailey & Wilkinson, 2025; Beauchemin et al., 2026). The opening interview with literacy scholar Dr. Nancy Frey further reflects the balance between evidence-informed literacy instruction and responsive, human-centered teaching, while also highlighting the importance of listening to the voices of dedicated educators and researchers shaping literacy practice today.

An Interview on Literacy, Research, and Responsive Practice

This issue opens with "Through a Literacy Lens: An Interview with Nancy Frey" by Dr. Matthew Sroka and Dr. Vicki Luther. Drawing from her work in secondary schools and teacher education, Frey reflects on declining reading motivation (Bone et al., 2025; Webber et al., 2025), the relationship between achievement and motivation, technology in today's schools, including the use of artificial intelligence, and the importance of productive classroom discussion and writing. Throughout the conversation, Frey emphasizes that meaningful literacy instruction depends on creating opportunities for students to experience success, think critically, and actively engage with texts and one another. At a time when educators continue navigating shifting technologies and instructional demands, the interview offers a thoughtful reminder that effective literacy instruction remains grounded in responsive teaching, professional collaboration, and meaningful human connection.

Centering Voice, Reflection, and Inquiry

The research section continues with Dr. T. Hunter Strickland's "Introspection and Dialogic Inquiry in Creating Young Adult Literature Course Syllabi." Drawing on Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and dialogic pedagogy, Strickland examines how course syllabi and instructional materials reflect tensions between institutional authority and student-centered teaching practices. Through an analysis of young adult literature course syllabi, the article highlights how teacher educators create space for student voice, choice, and dialogic engagement while navigating the broader educational and political discourses that shape classroom instruction.

Usage-Based Grammar Instruction and Adverbials

In "From Awareness to Application: Examining the Effectiveness of Usage-Based Grammar Instruction on Adverbials," Dr. Pouya Vakili shifts attention toward explicit language instruction and applied learning in an undergraduate writing class. Grounded in usage-based grammar theory, the study examines how intentional, contextualized teaching can strengthen both conceptual understanding and written application. Rather than treating grammar as isolated memorization or correction, Vakili demonstrates how students develop deeper language awareness when learning emphasizes meaningful use and transfer. Vakili's work reinforces the value of structured,

evidence-informed teaching while also reminding readers that grammar learning is most effective when connected to authentic communication and writing.

Representation, Belonging, and Neuro-Affirming Literacy Spaces

The issue then turns to questions of representation, inclusion, and neuro-affirming literacy instruction, as outlined in Dr. Terry Husband's "Using Neuro-Affirming Picture Books in Early Childhood Classrooms." Drawing attention to the role picture books can play in shaping children's understandings of neurodiversity (Amador, 2024), Husband explores how thoughtfully selected texts can support children with neurodiverse learning needs while also encouraging empathy, advocacy, and more strengths-based perspectives among their peers. Through both research-informed discussion and a practical classroom application centered on dyslexia, the article highlights the importance of literacy spaces where children experience affirmation, belonging, and opportunities to see diverse ways of learning and thinking represented in meaningful ways.

Teaching Tips: Evidence-Informed, Inclusive, and Authentic

The final section of the issue offers three teaching-focused pieces that connect research-informed practices with practical classroom application. In "From Blocks to Blueprints: Using the Science of Learning to Strengthen Science of Reading Instruction," Dr. Carla Williams presents a streamlined planning framework designed to reduce unnecessary cognitive load while protecting the essential components of effective literacy instruction. Drawing on principles from both the Science of Learning and the Science of Reading, the framework emphasizes explicit instruction, cumulative review, retrieval practice, and meaningful transfer. Rather than adding complexity to teachers' work, the article offers a practical structure that helps educators maintain clarity and intentionality in literacy planning.

In "Teaching Across Differences: Using *Elvis & Romeo* to Foster Inclusive Classroom Communities," Dr. Renee Cowan explores how children's literature can support social-emotional learning and relationship building in elementary classrooms (Deliman et al., 2024). Centered on the story of two very different dogs who gradually learn to appreciate one another, the article offers practical strategies for helping students develop empathy, perspective-taking, and inclusive behaviors through literacy instruction. By embedding discussion and collaborative classroom routines into daily learning experiences, the article highlights how thoughtfully selected texts can help students build meaningful connections with both literature and one another.

The issue concludes with "Story Events and Student Questions: Pairing *Books Aren't for Bears* with a Strategy for Literature Circle Talk" by Dr. William Bintz and Shabnam Moini Chaghervand, an article that highlights the power of picturebooks and authentic literary response in literacy classrooms. Centered on the picture book *Books Aren't for Bears*, the article introduces a practical instructional strategy designed to help students identify important story events, engage in meaningful discussion, and develop personal connections to literature. Through literature circles, reflective questioning, and interdisciplinary learning opportunities, the authors emphasize that literacy instruction is most meaningful when students are invited to actively respond to texts, share their thinking with others, and see reading as an experience for everyone. Fittingly, the article closes with a warm invitation that captures the spirit of both the piece and this issue as a whole: "Happy reading!"

Moving Forward with *Every* Learner in Mind

Taken together, the contributions in this issue invite readers to consider what it means to teach literacy with both intentionality and humanity. Across interviews, research studies, and classroom teaching tips, this collection reminds us that literacy learning is about more than isolated skills. It is about helping learners make meaning, build relationships, engage with ideas, and see themselves within the worlds that texts create. As you engage with this issue, we invite you to reflect on your own literacy spaces and consider how instruction can remain both evidence-informed and responsive to the diverse learners in our classrooms.

The work of literacy educators continues to evolve alongside changing classrooms, technologies, and student needs. Yet across those changes, one idea remains constant: literacy instruction matters deeply because learners matter deeply. We extend our sincere appreciation to the authors and reviewers whose scholarship and commitment made this issue of the *Georgia Journal of Literacy* possible. It is our hope that the ideas shared throughout this issue encourage continued reflection, conversation, and action as educators work to honor *every learner* and *every text*.

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Practitioner Article

Through a Literacy Lens: An Interview with Nancy Frey

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Dr. Nancy Frey, Professor of Literacy at San Diego State University and prolific co-author with Douglas Fisher, explores pressing issues shaping literacy education across K–12 contexts. Conducted as part of the Georgia Association of Literacy Advocates' Literacy Learning Series, the conversation addresses declining reading volume among adolescents, the relationship between achievement and reading motivation, the role of close reading in building student success, and the opportunities and challenges posed by technology and artificial intelligence in today's classrooms. Frey also reflects on the conditions necessary for strong literacy instruction, including teacher collaboration, professional trust, and task design that positions students for meaningful success. Drawing on current research and her ongoing work in secondary classrooms, Frey offers practitioners a grounded, candid perspective on what it means to teach literacy well in contemporary schools.

KEYWORDS

reading motivation; adolescent literacy; close reading; artificial intelligence; teacher collaboration

As part of our work with the Georgia Association of Literacy Advocates, we, Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther, invited renowned author, educator, and literacy expert Nancy Frey, Ph.D., to lead a session for our professional development Literacy Learning Series. As a professor of literacy in the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University, Dr. Frey has published extensively in highly reputable journals and through various book collaborations with co-author Dr. Douglas Fisher.

Because we wanted to dig deeper into ongoing issues impacting the field of literacy, we asked if she would also be willing to be interviewed. She graciously agreed, and what follows is the result of that conversation. In this interview, Frey reflects on the current state of literacy education across K–12 environments, drawing on her scholarship, her ongoing work in high school classrooms, and other relevant research. Frey discusses the role of technology and AI in schools, the importance of trusting both teachers and students, and, perhaps most notably, emphasizes the role of success in helping students to become more motivated readers. Frey offers a thoughtful window into literacy, framing the discussion through a literacy lens while emphasizing that these strategies and methods are applicable across all content areas.

The following conversation offers readers practical ideas and instructional approaches for contemporary K–12 classrooms.

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Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

In terms of literacy, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges currently facing educators across grades K–12?

Nancy Frey:

I think my answer is probably an expected one, in that we really have seen just a huge decline in the amount of reading volume that people of all ages are engaged in, adults included. And adult reading is, of course, tremendously influential on the amount of reading that happens for children and for adolescents as well. When they see reading around them, that certainly helps, but it's really amazing how the reading volume drops off in the middle years. Less so in early elementary, but a huge drop "off the cliff," for kids who are in grades 4 through 8. That has a cumulative effect over time. I mean, we all know "eyes on text" is what makes the difference, and when there's such a reduction in those habits and those dispositions around that, it makes having occurrences of that happen in the classroom that much more challenging.

Honestly, I think a lot of teachers are trying to compensate in the wrong way, with either not assigning reading because, you know, "the kids don't read," or teachers reading aloud to them as a replacement for students actually reading. There's good, strong evidence of the importance of interactive read-alouds at the primary level. The case doesn't hold when you're talking about older readers.

I was in a 7th-grade class not too long ago. It was identified as an honors class, and the kids were reading *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 2016), which is a good, solid book to be reading at that age, but by "reading," what I mean is they had a book in front of them. It was a paperback book, which I was happy to see. There was an audio narration of the book. The teacher pressed play. There was a kid at the front who used his finger to follow along on the projected text. I'm not sure what it was that the students were supposed to do with that, and I can tell you, from standing in the back of the classroom, that out of 30 kids, about four of them actually had their eyes on the text. That's not reading, and that's not effective.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

There is a lot of concern about reading engagement and reading stamina, specifically with adolescents. We're even hearing and reading about schools adopting shorter texts or using more excerpts instead of reading whole novels. Have you seen this in your work, and what are your thoughts on this shift?

Nancy Frey:

With all due respect around the importance of being able to read whole novels, that's not actually what's in the standards. What's in the standards isn't that you read these particular texts, but rather that you're developing the skills, and you can use a variety of texts in order to do so. So, I have less of an issue with whether it's short text, or excerpts, or a whole novel, and my concern is always, are you actually using that to teach the skills and the concepts that young readers and writers need to understand? What is the best vehicle for doing that? Is it a whole piece of text? Selected excerpts? Or is it a combination of both? I

think the bigger issue is not the text's format, but whether the skills and concepts are actually being taught.

When it comes to reading for adolescents, the skill of reading across texts is not just vertical reading, but also horizontal reading. Can you read across texts? Can you engage in critical reasoning, especially when you have two pieces of text that disagree with one another? Being able to create those kinds of opportunities may, in fact, require that some of the texts are shorter pieces of text, and that some are informational, etc.

One of the things that we do at the high school where Doug Fisher and I teach is this: if there is a more complex target text that the teacher is going to be working with, and there are a range of other related texts that students can choose from, we actually arrange them into three categories, from "easier" to more complex. Students are engaging with a target text in class, but they're also required to write a literacy letter to their English teacher every week, and we have a format for that. So, every kid might be reading something else off the reading list, but they're responding, "Here's what's going on in the book that I'm reading right now." Let's say the particular focus for that week is setting. The second paragraph is about how the setting impacts the book the student is reading, and the third paragraph focuses on students' recommendations and thoughts as they are engaging in the reading.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

What advice would you give to educators who are trying to increase students' reading motivation, both inside and outside of the classroom?

Nancy Frey:

I think that what's at the center of the difficulty is that many of us have it backward. Motivation does not predict achievement. Achievement predicts motivation. For students to achieve, they've got to feel success, which means you have to have regular doses of success that are happening again and again and again because that's what motivates you. Success is what motivates you; it doesn't happen the other way around. There's a really interesting longitudinal study called the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (Orri et al., 2021), and it's used time and time again. One of the major findings was exactly what I just said: success or achievement predicts motivation, not the other way around.

There's also been some really interesting work called the Remembered Success Effect (Finn et al., 2025). The researchers worked with 3rd graders and 6th graders, and so you can imagine you've got two groups. One group of students completed only the required grade-level math assignment. The second group completed the same 10 math problems, but they also began with three familiar review problems and ended with three additional familiar review problems. It turns out that the kids have, essentially, a "success sandwich," because they remember the success. "Hey, I did okay on these first three. That's achievement, that's success. Now I've got motivation to push through for the next 10 that we're working on right now, and I'm going to finish up with three more that are familiar." And here's how they tested it. Students were assigned 10 required math problems as their "must-dos." After finishing, they could choose to complete optional extension activities, or "may-dos," but those activities were not required. Students who experienced the "success sandwich" approach were statistically significantly more likely to choose the

optional extension activities than students who completed only the grade-level problems. It's achievement success that fuels motivation, not the other way around.

Think about that in your own life. What are you more likely to engage in? It's the things that you feel like you already do pretty well or that you've already had some success with.

Matthew Sroka:

I think about my own kids. My own kids pursue those activities, whether it's art or sports, that they're more inherently good at. That's what they want to spend their time doing. So what you said makes a lot of sense. It also reminds me of the classic book *Why Students Don't Like School* by Daniel Willingham (2021). Students need to be faced with a puzzle or a problem that is solvable, and I think sometimes you see this, and math is a great example, where if it becomes something where they can't really understand, they immediately shut down, right? So, it makes sense that it would happen in reading and writing, too.

Nancy Frey:

The work that Doug Fisher and I have done with close reading is an example of that. How do you build success from the beginning? In close reading, as you know, you're going after a shorter piece of text. Maybe it's a paragraph or something like that. But the questions that you ask start with: What does the text say? How does the text work? And then, what does the text mean? And that gets more complex, and those initial questions are literal-level questions, and I have seen this time and time and time again. The kids who like close reading the most are the ones who would otherwise be described as struggling readers, because we spend some initial time on literal-level stuff, and they start to feel successful. They feel like, I can do this, I can find _____ in the passage.

And then, moving into that second phase, we explore how the text actually works. Now we're going to get a little bit more complex. We're going to talk about text structures, and author's purpose, and those sorts of things. And then we move into the really complex stuff, which is, what does the text mean? Not what does the text say, but what does the text mean? And that's when you're getting into a whole lot of critical analysis. But in the meantime, the kids who are still participating are the ones who felt successful early on in the reading and weren't just left there in the dust, looking around, going, "Why does everybody else get this and not me?"

Matthew Sroka:

That's really true and interesting. It makes me think of John Strong from the University of Buffalo. He started the Read, STOP, Right program (Strong et al., 2025). I remember talking with him about this because he does the reading intervention, and they're spending so much time with one text, doing close reading. I said to him, "We want to motivate kids to read, and doesn't this over-teaching the text just kind of take the fun out of reading?", but he had the same argument. Students need to see success, and when they're successful with this text, they're more likely to go on and read on their own.

If all students have done in school is struggle or feel like they can't, then they're not going to be motivated to do it outside of school either.

Nancy Frey:

Definitely not.

Vicki Luther:

I talk about close reading in my classes with my undergraduate students all the time. I feel like a lot of times we, as educators, don't dig back down to the levels students really need, but when we do, they do find success.

Nancy Frey:

Absolutely. Taking in a longer piece of text and zeroing in from time to time on the more complex passages involved helps. And having that discussion, you warm up the text, and now they've got a really good ladder to be able to carry them through the next parts of the text. You definitely are not going to do that with every single passage, for sure. But again, success is what creates motivation, not the other way around.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

How do you see technology currently shaping literacy, for better and for worse? What concerns or opportunities do you see in the rise of AI and its influence on our reading, writing, and thinking?

Nancy Frey:

I just spent two days at an elementary school. It is shocking to me, shocking!, how much time little kids are spending on devices. Literally, I don't know how to teach that way. Essentially, we're just outsourcing all the work that we do to computer programs that little kids are supposed to engage with. I also think that the loss of students talking to each other, having discussions, interacting with their teachers, and picking up a pencil and writing on a piece of paper is a tremendous loss for students. That's the downside of today's technology in schools.

I know AI is, of course, something that we all give a lot of consideration to. And AI, like any other technology, can be a positive and a negative in that regard. I think that one of the things we have to think closely about as a field is how we change our tasks to make them more AI-resistant. I mean, you can shake your fist and say, "These kids, they're just copying and pasting!" Well, guess what? They've been doing that for centuries. It's just different ways of being able to do it. For centuries, they've been doing that. We must change the tasks of what it is that we're doing.

Vicki Luther:

I agree, and it is so funny to me how we always hear about the pendulum switch.

Nancy Frey:

At my school, we use a grid that was published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2025). And with each of the tasks that students do, the teacher scales it from 0 to 4. Zero is absolutely no AI: AI forbidden. This goes all the way up to 4, where students

must use AI in a way to complete this assignment. This grid shows students a scale for what is appropriate and what's not appropriate with AI usage.

For example, I was in an English class at school the other day, and students had to engage in a round of at least five "give and takes" exchanges with the chatbot on a particular topic they were learning, and that's what they had to submit. And what the teacher noted is, "I get to know a whole lot about what it is that kids know and don't know already, based on the quality of the dialogue that they've had with the chatbot." So, we have to think more creatively about how it is that we create tasks for students to do that are a bit more AI-resistant and help them to be able to utilize AI in ways that are ethically responsible.

There's a balance there. Absolutely. And, quite frankly, it is cheaper, because we know that public schools don't have the dollars that they should have. And it is cheaper in the long run to buy a program than it is to hire more instructional coaches. Where's the teacher support? And what is it that districts and states are able to do with the limited amount of public dollars that they have? They can't afford to hire all the instructional coaches and others like them that would really help to support teachers, so instead they buy more curriculum. A lot of that curriculum is push and play.

I will also kind of expand on something that you said, Vicki, and that was the idea of the pendulum. And I don't know if that is a perfect metaphor. I don't think that we really swing in that way. I think it's a lot more like a drill that goes around and comes around again and again, but every time that it comes back around, it also goes deeper. We'll know more the next time it comes around. And I think that we do know some things about curriculum and fidelity and those sorts of things, and we have learned. We've done a lot of learning in the last 20 years, but we don't necessarily have great solutions.

Teachers don't get enough support. I mean, they simply do not get enough support. Everybody wants to talk about Finland. Right? Look at Finland! Look what Finland is able to do. Look at how much support those teachers get. Even the notion that every day, you don't teach bell-to-bell, that you have not just a prep period, but that you have specific opportunities to be able to be in each other's classrooms, and so on. That's something that doesn't happen in the U.S. That simply does not happen. It's not available.

Matthew Sroka:

A little over three years ago, when I made the transition from teaching high school to the college-level, my mind was almost blown because I had a lot more freedom with my time, and that freedom was used to do research and also to interact with colleagues about my courses, and how I wanted to change them. And in high school, I felt like I was just living day-to-day, surviving, because of the nature of the schedule.

Nancy Frey:

Exactly, exactly. There was a really interesting study that came out of the UK, and it was 7th through 12th grade, specifically, and it was pretty complex, about not only what the principal's role and impact and effect on student achievement, but also the teachers' impact and role in student achievement (Burgess et al., 2023). And what they found was really interesting. They found there was a strong correlation, not causation. We know the difference between the two, but there's a strong correlation between the amount of time and the frequency with which teachers are in other teachers' classrooms. The same didn't

hold for principals. Principals being in other teachers' classrooms didn't have a direct impact on student achievement. Principals being in teachers' classrooms, super important to note here, are all these other things that happen from administrators regularly being present in teachers' classrooms. But it's not student achievement.

The impact on student achievement, or, correlatively, on student achievement, was the number and frequency of times teachers were in other teachers' classrooms. And to create that, we must look at school climate. Are we professionally generous? Do teachers have time to be in each other's classrooms?

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

What does strong literacy instruction look like in today's classroom? If you were to walk into a classroom, what would you want to see?

Nancy Frey:

First of all, at the school where we are, we always ask kids these three questions: (1) What are you learning about today? (2) Why is that important? (3) How are you going to know that you were successful? So, first things first, I want students to reliably answer those three questions in developmentally appropriate ways. Certainly, when you're talking about the littles in particular, they're probably not going to be able to articulate a really sophisticated answer like that, but they can show you. They can show you what it is that they're learning. So that's the first thing.

And the second thing is productive noise. I want to hear the productive noise that's happening. And you all know from being in and out of classrooms many times, you know the difference between productive noise and unproductive noise, right? Where it's just chaos, but when you've got that hum going on, you've got kids that are engaged in meaningful discussion with one another. I love it when I walk into a classroom, and I know whose classroom I'm walking into, and it still takes me a beat before I can find the teacher. Because the teacher isn't necessarily always standing at the front of the classroom. Now, there are times when that's exactly where the teacher should be, but I love being able to go into Haley's English classroom, as one example, and I often have to look around a little bit for her to be able to find out where she is, especially at this time of year, because that productive noise is happening.

And maybe I should say this too. I want to see kids writing, writing, writing! Writing on a regular basis and having regular opportunities to write. You have to have lots of short, constructed responses that you're going to engage in every single day.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

What gives you hope about the future of literacy education?

Nancy Frey:

The people in the field; people who are entering teaching, as well as those who have stayed with it for a career, give me hope. The hope is that the educators who are involved, the educators, the leaders, the coaches, those who choose to come in, and those who choose to stay. That's our hope.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

> What advice would you give novice teachers going into the field of education, especially literacy education?

Nancy Frey:

> The advice is to trust that your students possess the wisdom and creativity to learn. Trust your students. You know, sometimes teachers talk too much because they don't trust that their students can actually conceptualize where they need to go. And the best teachers we know are the best teachers that know how to "shushy-wushy." Let the students struggle and wrestle with an idea for a bit. They'll get there! So, trust your young people, trust the people that you're teaching.

The authors would like to thank Dr. Frey for her time and expertise. We left the interview session energized and hopeful for the future of literacy education.

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Research Article

Introspection and Dialogic Inquiry in Creating Young Adult Literature Course Syllabi

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ABSTRACT

This article theorizes the use of Bakhtinian dialogic analysis as a method for examining course syllabi and related instructional materials in teacher education for young adult literature (YAL). Drawing on Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia, authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, and double-voiced discourse, the study analyzes 20 YAL course syllabi collected from secondary English teacher educators across the United States. Findings show that YAL course syllabi function as heteroglossic documents where institutional expectations, standards, and other authoritative pressures interact with instructors' efforts to create student-centered learning spaces. The analysis highlights how teacher educators incorporated student choice, discussion-based learning, and flexible assessments to flatten classroom hierarchies and encourage dialogic engagement. The article argues that a dialogic analysis of educational documents can help educators critically examine the ideological tensions embedded in course materials and intentionally design more inclusive, student-centered learning environments.

KEYWORDS

Bakhtin; dialogic pedagogy; heteroglossia; young adult literature; teacher education; course syllabi; student-centered learning

"Don't discuss politics, religion, or personal lives in the classroom."

The paraphrased quote above was something I drilled into my new teacher's head as an undergraduate student in the first weeks of my secondary English education program years ago. This seeming fact of life for teaching tracked with my own experiences as a secondary student, where teachers kept their personal views and opinions largely hidden from students. As a teacher years later, cracks in the foundation of this truth formed as living and teaching in a small community made teachers' personal lives much more transparent, as students saw us outside the school as part of the community. As I started to do research in English methods and looked more closely at how dialogic teaching grew and evolved in teacher education beyond what I practiced as a high school teacher, I saw even more clearly how the discourses of teachers' personal lives as well as authoritative discourses that surround education influenced much of what ends up in planning for courses through the creation of course syllabi and other classroom materials and what actually happens in the classroom. Dialogic teaching practices and the analysis of these discourses within teaching texts, such as course syllabi, can provide a way to see how the political and the personal influence teaching in literacy teacher education. This article highlights how one English education professor sought to understand how discourses in education influenced the decisions faculty make by studying young adult literature (YAL) methods course syllabi and supplemental materials as sites of tension for both personal goals as teachers making student-centered decisions, and the push for authoritative discourses in education to control what was being taught in literacy teacher preparation courses. YAL, as a tool in teacher preparation, often supports teacher candidate

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reader identity and encourages student-centered practices alongside traditional reading instruction (Strickland, 2020, 2021).

Authoritative pressures within educational contexts make it difficult to create and sustain dialogic teaching in secondary spaces, and this is mirrored in teacher education (Stewart, 2010, p. 10). There is a fear among dialogic teachers that outsiders (such as administrators, other teachers, or professors) view their classrooms as loud, mismanaged spaces where student voices hold power rather than the expected monological voice of the teacher (Fecho & Amatucci, 2008, p. 6). If educators who practice dialogic pedagogy want to use Bakhtin's concepts in creating their classes and in their interactions with students in both secondary classrooms and teacher education, then methods for practical use must continue to be developed (Fecho, Falter, & Hong, 2016). One way to do this is to use Bakhtin's concepts to critically examine educational documents, other texts, and classroom spaces for the push-and-pull of heteroglossic competition (Eigler, 1995, p. 197). This is as much true in English teacher education in 2025 as it is in K-12 classrooms.

The literary theories and concepts of written and spoken language of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) have been particularly useful in developing a framework for teaching through dialogic pedagogy (Bingham, 2000; Depalma, 2010; Fecho et al., 2012; Miles, 2010). In particular, Bakhtin's (1981a) concepts of heteroglossia (different, competing voices) and the spectrum of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses (pp. 342–345) have been applied to teachers' understanding of classroom discourse (see Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Fecho & Amatucci, 2008; Fecho et al., 2016; Stewart, 2010) and the opportunities that dialogic teaching can open up for classroom teachers. For those who are unfamiliar with the concept:

> Dialogically organized instruction, or instruction designed to provide students with frequent opportunities to engage with core disciplinary concepts through sustained, substantive dialogue . . . is typically overshadowed by lecture, recitation, and seatwork–forms of interaction privileging the authoritative voice of the teacher in tight control of classroom interaction. (Caughlan et al., 2013, p. 213)

It is difficult even for the teachers who believe in dialogic teaching to give up this authoritative and monological voice to raise up the voices of students (Juzwik, 2004, p. 546), but "none of us who choose to call ourselves dialogic teachers get it right all of the time. None of us have perfect dialogic classrooms, but we choose to go for it anyway" because that is the best thing for students (Strickland, 2019, p. 2). This realization that dialogic pedagogy is an imperfect theory but one that can open classrooms to the living heteroglossia within them allows educators to tap into the many ideological discourses that are part of their classrooms.

An issue addressed in this article is a gap between how teaching has been traditionally taught with a focus on canonical literature and an authoritative analysis confirmed by teachers, and an understanding that a flattening of hierarchies between students and teachers is needed in order for student voices, opinions, and interests to be highlighted (Hays, 2016, p. 72). When teachers subscribe to dialogic pedagogy and plan with student voices in mind, there is potential for more student-centered engagement in the classroom, breaking the monologic tradition of teacher-student interaction in classrooms. Thus, the political influence of authoritative discourses of the teacher educator, the university, and the government can be recognized, and their influence lessened in the name of student autonomy. These data drawn from this study will further this idea by answering the following research questions (RQ):

> **RQ1**: How does a method of Bakhtinian textual analysis specific to course syllabi and related materials, as intended curriculum, allow teachers to develop more student-centered practices?
>
> **RQ2**: What limitations do Bakhtin's concepts create when looking at course syllabi as authoritative documents?

While the focus of this study was on YAL courses within the broader field of secondary English teacher education, the methodology used here has application beyond the English education classroom. If course syllabi are examined, however potentially flawed they might be as political documents (Albers, 2003), as representations of the tension between where authoritative discourses (discourses that seek to control knowledge) in education meet with the internally persuasive voices (the personal discourses competing against that authoritative control) of teachers and teacher educators in course design, then having a proven method for how to analyze these texts can have huge implications for using Bakhtin's work in education.

Teachers at all levels can make intentional choices about how courses are designed (Stallworth et al., 2006) and planned with an active room for student voice to thrive. If this is important, then "We must be engaged in reflective thinking in the classroom, in front of our students (doubting, assessing the validity of argument, etc.)" (Vasiliev, 2018, p. 5). Using the evolving method developed in this study, instructors can, individually or with their departments, examine syllabi for the discourses and ideologies inherent in them as authoritative texts given to students. Then, educators can develop them further to start their classes in a student-centered space that is more inviting and less authoritative, where the instructor's monological viewpoint is not the only one valued.

Finally, as this study of these course syllabi was meant to allow a theory to be formed on how the syllabus is a socially and politically constructed document serving the purposes of heteroglossia within education and classrooms specifically, using Bakhtin's theories differs from traditional content analyses. While discourse analysis itself examines speech acts, body language, and intent:

> Dialogic analysis is different from other kinds of qualitative analytic methods in that the researcher assumes an equal rights perspective to the studied meaning-making event, effectively positioning oneself as a participant in the primary dialogue, rather than as a final authority with a bird's-eye view or as opinions, juxtaposed among other opinions. (Matusov et al., 2019, p. 22)

That being said, the findings from this study are meant not to be the final word, but the beginning of a conversation about how the syllabus can be a dialogic epicenter of an educational space, and that dialogic educators can and should examine how these sometimes: broad, concise, wordy, basic, informative, confusing documents can be so much more in our classrooms than something discussed on the first day of class. Syllabi can set the tone for dialogic instruction throughout a course and show students that their voices matter.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To examine how the course syllabus is a heteroglossic text (Depalma, 2010, p. 438), the data from this study will be used to discuss inherent authoritative and political discourses that influence course design, and then examples will be shared of the internally persuasive discourses that are also present and where utterances are inherently double-voiced. In this section, Bakhtin's concepts

of the utterance, heteroglossia, authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language, and double-voicedness are personally conceptualized and explained, with examples of how they were used in the analysis of data in this study. There is some debate over the definitions and uses of many of these concepts, but the descriptions below explain how they were used in this work. In the following section, much more detail will be provided to explain the methods used to analyze these course syllabi, after further elaborating on the theoretical and conceptual framework drawn from Bakhtin's broader body of work.

The Utterance

These concepts are applied to documents in which the living dialogue, ideologies, and competing discourses are centered in the "complete speech act" or "utterance" (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 264). In the context of this study, the utterance might be a single statement, such as an objective or goal for the course, or a brief explanation of various course policies and descriptions. For example, one syllabus stated the course goal is for students to "Confront questions about diversity and representation in literature for young audiences." In this stated goal, much is said about the instructor's hopes, the social discourses important at the state and national levels, and how they relate to the course content.

When the individual utterances of these syllabi are pulled out and analyzed alongside one another to understand the instructional choices these instructors made when designing these courses, questions can be raised about how the authoritative and internally persuasive discourses of education compete within the field as a whole. By doing this type of analysis, an understanding of much more of instructors' decisions in crafting course documents was found, and this also begins to build a better understanding of how to craft syllabi so that student voices are as valuable (Lin, 2014, p. 66) as professors' voices in classrooms that are built upon "engaged dialogic practice" in teacher education (Fecho et al., 2016).

Heteroglossia. Bakhtin (1981a) referred to a "living heteroglossia" (p. 272), which is the basis for next concepts. Bakhtin's theory on language involves the root element of the utterance spoken or written and given with the expectation of a response (Juzwik, 2004, p. 545). To Bakhtin, language is always in a state of tug-of-war. He wrote:

> The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 272)

This active participation (Bakhtin, 1984) implies that language cannot be controlled and is not static, but rather is in a constant state of tension, moving away from centralization.

Voices within syllabi are also active and evolving, even though one could argue that a course syllabus is a finalized document. Those of us who teach based on syllabi know that courses continue to evolve after the syllabus is created, as we learn students' interests, voices, and hopes. Active participation of language in heteroglossia means that there are always more utterances potentially embedded within dialogue. It is this never-ending back-and-forth that creates a living dialogue, even within a text like a syllabus.

When thinking about outwardly static textual documents like course syllabi, however, dialogic analysis must also look for instances of hybridity to see how the various competing voices

of heteroglossia meet at sites of tension within the document. If "a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs . . . to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two semantic and axiological belief systems" (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 304), then analysis can show how one utterance, like the diversity goal shared above, reflects these competing discourses at the same time.

As an utterance, one objective or goal in a syllabus might reflect the tension of two competing discourses of education, like the voice of the teacher, the voice of the standards, and social discourses at local or national levels. By examining this tension, instructors can ensure that information is not closed off authoritatively before students come into contact with it.

Authoritative and Internally Persuasive Discourses. The different, competing voices of heteroglossia, represented in the interplay between various utterances, are constantly shaped by both authoritative and internally persuasive discourses (Stewart, 2012). Authoritative discourses, or discourses imbued with authority and privilege, to Bakhtin, are the official words, finalized and complete without space for other voices (Bakhtin, 1981a, p. 20). The internally persuasive discourse, or discourse reflecting the personal context, experience, and desires of the individual (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 345), in opposition, is always striving against the closed-off and final nature of the authoritative word.

An important starting point for understanding Bakhtin's concepts of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses is to think of them as a continuum. Language is constantly moving on this continuum as authorities seek to control meaning while the individual seeks to make meaning for themselves based on context, experience, and history (Coulter, 1999, p. 7). In a syllabus that represents a classroom context, the authoritative and final word of the teacher can be the one most prized, which creates a monological point of view; but the dialogically minded instructor, on the other hand, seeks to not only recognize the other voices present within the heteroglossia but also see that they are given more space (Coulter, 1999, p. 9).

The syllabus, as a representation of this hypothetical classroom, can be viewed the same way as utterances on the syllabus can serve to reinforce the authority of the instructor or show where the instructor seeks to allow the internally persuasive discourses of their students to guide learning. Sometimes, like in the example above, an utterance on the syllabus shows both. The pressures of educational authorities often make this difficult as "too many classrooms–constricted by imposed testing, standards, and instruction–skew in a monological direction, even though the teachers inside those classrooms, if given informed choice, would choose otherwise" (Fecho et al., 2012, p. 478).

Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces of Language and Discourse. When looking at how the authoritative and internally persuasive discourses in a heteroglossic context interact (Matusov, 2007, p. 230), one must understand that the tensions of these discourses are "continuously shaped and pulled in different directions by interacting forces of stability and change (Nystrand, 1997, p. 12). The forces of stability and centrality, Bakhtin referred to as centripetal forces, and the free-thinking forces of change he referred to as centrifugal forces (Bakhtin, 1981b, pp. 270–272). How these forces interact can reveal interesting tensions within texts. Internally persuasive discourses of an individual centrifugally pull away from standardization and finalization as the centripetal pull of authoritative discourses seeks to control them.

Educational documents like course syllabi are prime sites for unpacking and exploring these conflicting forces because all educational contexts operate within local, state, and national

hierarchies of power (Day, 2010, p. 81). Teacher educators and educational researchers operate within a bureaucratic system, often focusing on standardization and conformity of teaching and learning in a quest for data, but, as individuals, face tension as internally persuasive discourses interact with educational demands that are out of their control, even as students operate with a similar dichotomy of power with those teachers (Farmer, 1998, p. 203).

Tensions within Dialogue

When looking at educational documents or classroom recordings, researchers can examine when the authoritative word is asserted and when the internally persuasive word pushes back. Matusov and Lemke (2015) explained that Bakhtin spoke of internally persuasive discourse in opposition to authoritative discourse to "contrast a discursive process of free persuasion versus a discourse process of imposition and coercion" (p. 7). Matusov and Lemke's analysis emphasizes the negative implications of the authoritative word in comparison to the free-thinking, internally persuasive voice within heteroglossia.

By analyzing classroom documents such as course syllabi for their dialogic potential, teachers and researchers can deconstruct the authoritative voices inherent in classroom discourse and seek solutions (Matusov & Lemke, 2015, p. 8). Teachers who value their students' voices in the classroom must be willing to analyze the discourses they intentionally and unintentionally (Stewart, 2012) share with students through authoritative documents like course syllabi. Thoughtful construction of class materials begins this work and is the aim of the discussion of this study's findings and the theorizing here on using Bakhtin for dialogic analysis.

The different, competing voices inherent in dialogue through heteroglossia show how authoritative discourse seeks to control language and push meaning towards a monologic goal (Bingham, 2000, p. 27). However, Bakhtin stressed that "[e]very utterance participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)" and this illustrates that utterances are not wholly authoritative or internally persuasive but reflect many of each in the dialogism of the utterance (p. 272). It is with this idea in mind that Bakhtinian analysis can proceed with varied texts.

At the level of the individual utterance, analysis can show how meaning is shaped by both forces, and at the site of their tension, meaning can be understood in a more profound way. When one voice is valued above others, a hierarchy of power is created, but Bakhtin "saw centrifugal forces in language eroding the centripetal, specifically weakening the seals limiting who can participate and who can produce knowledge within certain speech genres" (Stewart & Boggs, 2016, p. 144). Looking at YAL course syllabi for these sites of tension helps explain, in part, how the intersections of authority and the individual represent a struggle to be heard even before syllabi are given to students, and how the centrifugal forces of language make space for themselves even amid the pressures of centralization.

Double-voiced Discourse. The last concept important to the work in this study was Bakhtin's notion of double-voiced discourse, in which a hybrid utterance reflects multiple discourses simultaneously. He explained that double-voiced discourse serves two speakers simultaneously and expresses two distinct intentions: the character's direct intention and the author's refracted intention. In such utterances, multiple voices are heard (Bakhtin, 1981a). This concept of double-voiced discourse is important for analyzing educational documents such as course syllabi. If an utterance is double-voiced and internally dialogized, then this means that "A

potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages" (Bakhtin, 1981b, pp. 324–325). If two discourses are embedded within one utterance, then analysis can show how the hybrid nature of the utterance gives more than one meaning.

When thinking of teacher educators, as is the case in this study, double-voiced discourse can be understood through an analysis of individual utterances (Bakhtin & Sollner, 1983) in their teaching materials. An example of double-voiced discourse from one of the course syllabi studied is when a teacher educator describes an assignment where "Each student will write a term paper analyzing 3–5 works of one author of young adult novels," and follows this statement with 'YOU MUST GET PERMISSION FROM ME BEFORE YOU CHOOSE YOUR AUTHOR!" The internally persuasive discourse embedded within the authoritative discourse of directions here is that the instructor hopes to give students choice in the YA author that they are interested in studying, while at the same time infusing the words with the authoritative and monological viewpoint that the instructor's permission makes a choice valid and that students must comply with the instructor's demands. The teacher educator uses all capital letters to lend authoritative weight to the utterance and, at the same time, expresses a hope that students can choose.

Here, it can be seen how one statement constitutes a hybrid construction (Eigler, 1995) of both free choice and authoritative power. Using Bakhtin's concepts to analyze dialogue for double-voiced discourse provides a fuller picture of meaning (Holquist, 1983). Examining how various discourses interact in an educational document will allow researchers to unpack what is valued and encouraged within a given space. Once this analysis is complete, instructors can build on their results to develop future course materials that reflect all competing voices in their classrooms.

Understanding Hierarchies of Power in Course Syllabi. In secondary English educational contexts, the voice of the individual student is often not heard amid the authoritative voices of other stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, parents, or school boards (Stewart, 2010). The syllabus is inherently dialogic with the push and pull of internally persuasive and authoritative discourses brought to it by faculty, even though it does not include student voices, as it is created before the instructor comes into contact with the hypothetical class on the first day. However, dialogic analysis (Matusov et al., 2019) of course syllabi can show instructors how to anticipate the voices and needs of their future students when creating the course syllabus.

Bakhtin's concepts offer a way to examine the power hierarchy between teacher and student (Stewart & McClure, 2013) by focusing on the influence of authority on an individual's utterances. Bakhtin (1981b) explained that "the authoritative word (religious, political, moral, the world of a father, of adults and of teachers, etc.) . . . does not know internal persuasiveness" and its opposite the "internally persuasive word . . . is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society" (p. 342). It is important for teachers and researchers to analyze the discourses in education to make room for the voices of others in heteroglossia, so that the instructor's voice is not finalized or closed off to students and pedagogical practice becomes more student-centered. Bakhtin (1981b) explained:

> The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the world of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. (p. 342)

Ultimately, there is a struggle for the marginalized, internally persuasive voice of the student and sometimes the teacher to be heard in educational contexts where the authoritative word is accepted as finalized (Bakhtin, 1984).

In the face of the "unconditional allegiance" (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 343) demanded by the authoritative word, the internally persuasive word is stifled, but it is impossible to remove internally persuasive voices from heteroglossia. Bakhtin argued that independent thought pushes away and separates itself from the authoritative word and, in some cases, completely rejects it. Heteroglossia continues to push for varied voices and perspectives to interact (Bakhtin, 1984), creating dialogue even where monologic voices are valued. This means that "Internally persuasive discourse . . . draws participants into contact zones that allow transactions to occur because more than one perspective is available for consideration by the larger group" (Stewart, 2010, p. 11). The course syllabus is created with the intention of a transaction to occur between instructors and students, often on the first day(s) of class.

Consequently, heteroglossia, along with authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, are prime concepts to use while examining educational texts like course syllabi. Bakhtin may have applied his work mostly to literary analysis, but, especially in a closely related field like English Education, educational researchers can find huge value in using his work. Bakhtin (1981b) believed that:

> Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal even newer ways to mean. (p. 346, emphasis in original)

This openness of internally persuasive discourse and its resistance to an authoritative final word has implications in education (Fecho et al., 2010, p. 428). Teachers and researchers can make room for marginalized voices by recognizing when the authoritative voice of schooling seeks a monological point of view and then resisting it. Historically, in teaching, the teacher's language has been the only voice of value in a classroom (Depalma, 2010, p. 440). This article will address this issue by analyzing YAL course syllabi for sites of tension within the heteroglossia and inherent dialogism of the documents.

Review of Relevant Literature on Syllabus Study

To analyze YAL courses in secondary English teacher education, first, an understanding of how Bakhtin's concepts could be used as a lens for examining course materials as textual representations of instructional design was developed. When I decided that dialogic analysis (Matusov et al., 2019) was the right path, I then looked for texts that I felt would best highlight the tensions between the larger discourses of education and the individual teacher. The goal was to be able to take course materials like the course syllabus, analyze the documents for how they represent various, competing educational discourses within the heteroglossia of the documents, and then be able to see where the tensions between authoritative ideologies came into contact with the centrifugal forces of instructors seeking out internally persuasive goals for themselves and their students in double-voiced utterances.

Smagorinsky and Whiting (1995) set the stage for analyzing the syllabus in English teacher methods coursework, arguing that understanding how methods are used in the field more broadly

can allow teacher educators to build on that foundation in the future. The YAL course syllabus was chosen for this study because of this potential. They argued that "In spite of the limitations of studying course syllabi to gain information about the methods class, the documents do have a story to tell, even if that story requires some inference on our part" (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995, p. 101). It is important to understand, in a broad sense, how courses are designed in the field if there is hope of improving them for students in the future. Further, "The syllabi give us a sense of what the overall approach and implementation of the course will look like, what students do and how they are assessed, and what theories students are exposed to in their orientation to the field" (p. 101). This allows an examination of inherent discourses within syllabi to provide an understanding of what discourses influence course design in YAL in English teacher education and then suggest ways in which student-centered practices can continue to be used in the field in the future.

Pasternak et al. (2014) followed up on Smagorinsky and Whiting's study by continuing to examine the idea of what English methods are by studying research articles that specifically studied English methods. They argued that "the field must move forward to consider how methods courses need to evolve as a way to respond to new forms of literacy, new technologies, more diverse student populations, an increased state of accountability for schools, and increased emphasis on field/university connections" (p. 174). Their goals were to understand how methods had changed in the two decades since the Smagorinsky and Whiting study and to show how the emphasis on research articles, in addition to course syllabi, was the new mode of sharing cutting-edge research on methods, whereas the course textbook had been the focus of study for Smagorinsky and Whiting.

This team then conducted further research on English methods using both a questionnaire and a study of course syllabi. Caughlan et al. (2017) suggested:

> To more fully understand what is being taught in a methods course as well as compose a current national portrait of English teacher education, research is needed that clarifies the changes in concept and practice that have taken place in secondary English teacher education programs in response to the changing curricular, cultural, political, and economic contexts. (p. 270)

These three studies influenced the design of the present work in a myriad of ways, with the hyperfocus of YAL methods as a distinct part, separate but included, of English methods research.

Method

The present study was designed to capture the breadth of English methods across the country in the late 2010s to show a shift in how YAL methods had become a more profound part of English education. The three studies mentioned above all shared that YAL was a part of English methods in at least some small way, but it was hypothesized that a shift had occurred in the research where YAL methods were carving out a space for themselves on the foundation of greater reading and English methods work, but distinct in its own practices and spaces for dissemination.

This study theorizes the use of Bakhtin's concepts as a lens for dialogic analysis of texts, specifically course syllabi and other classroom materials as intended curriculum. Building on dialogic teaching methods and analysis (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Hong et al., 2017), the method was designed to show how faculty who subscribe to dialogic pedagogy (Strickland, 2019) can analyze their own materials for the push and pull of various educational discourses in how they create experiences for their students. As this method is novel, it is built upon decades of use of dialogic theory (Bakhtin, 1981a, 1981b), establishing a base for rigor and trustworthiness. The

goal in following this method would be to train faculty to recognize and highlight how syllabi are controlled by authoritative entities like their university, which requires certain elements of the syllabus to appear, and their own student-centered practices at the same time.

Participants and Data Collection

Data were drawn from 17 of 48 secondary teacher educators who published with *The ALAN Review* during 2017–2018 (Volumes 44.2–46.1). Volumes from these two years were chosen to find teacher educators who were actively using YAL in teacher education. Authors published in The ALAN Review were chosen as this journal is the special interest group of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that focuses particularly on literature for adolescents. These 17 educators submitted 20 course syllabi, including materials such as reading lists, course calendars, and assessments.

The first read through of the 20-course syllabi was done to categorize the materials into the major focuses of the course. Three categories emerged as materials were examined: those courses that focused entirely on YAL methods (13), those that were broadly reading pedagogy courses that largely focused on YAL (4), and, finally, literacy or reading across the curriculum courses that had YAL as at least a part (3; Figure 1).

Figure 1: Three Categories of Syllabi Submitted for Review

1. YAL Methods Courses	**2.** Reading Pedagogy Courses that Largely Focus on YAL	**3.** Literacy/Reading Across the Curriculum Courses that have YAL as a Part

This categorization was done in anticipation of related authoritative discourses to be highlighted, depending on the major focus of the course. The second read-through, after categorizing the syllabi, allowed for dialogic analysis to begin on courses that focused entirely on YAL and pedagogy.

Data Analysis

Initial codes were created based on Bakhtin's concepts to look at these documents as Bakhtin might have. The codes focused on various discourses in YAL in teacher education, like: "defining YA, adolescence, or the genre," "diversity, representation, and social justice," "national and global discourses," and "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" discourses. A second read through of the course syllabi and related documents was then conducted, and data were marked according to these codes. Then, I used Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia, authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, the centrifugal and centripetal nature of language, and the concept of double-voiced discourse to develop a methodology for analyzing course syllabi and related educational texts as representations of competing discourses of education.

Subsequent read-throughs of the data were conducted, focusing entirely on course goals and objectives to understand the particular purpose of the course design, the major discourses at play within YAL classes, and, finally, how double-voiced discourses were represented across the course syllabi. Codes were created to better represent the tension between the greater authoritative and internally persuasive discourses and ideologies present in the heteroglossia of YAL courses within the field of Secondary English Education, and a constant comparative method was used to refine these codes as new data were analyzed. "Authoritative discourses," "internally persuasive

discourses," "hybrid constructions," and "global discourses" were all used to code, sort, and understand data drawn from the course syllabi.

What was particularly compelling about searching for these codes was the discovery of sites of tension between various discourses. The double-voicedness of the course syllabi in this study suggested a hybrid nature of the genre, as both an agent of authority and an expression of individuality on the part of the teacher educator. For example, a syllabus could show its focus on teaching preservice teacher candidates to be engaged in critical education, where they work towards goals of social justice with their students, while simultaneously emphasizing strict adherence to standardized practice and curriculum. Thus, one document could reflect discourses of free thinking and action while also insisting that preservice teachers follow a predetermined curriculum.

As the data were organized and dialogic analysis began, sections of the course syllabi that represented multiple discourses were further analyzed. These sections showed the heteroglossic nature of the document as a living, evolving educational text. To use Bakhtin's concepts to analyze course syllabi, each document had to be treated as both a finalized representation of the teacher educator's intention for the course and an unfinalized, flawed document that reflects both the educator's wishes and the authoritative pressures that shape them. While potentially authoritative texts, course syllabi also have the potential to focus on student-centered learning where instructors flatten the hierarchy between themselves and their students in order to open the class to its heteroglossic potential.

Findings and Discussion

Through the analysis of the 20 syllabi submitted by participants, it was found that most classes involving YAL did not, in fact, focus on a single aspect of the broader discourses surrounding YAL pedagogy (Glenn et al., 2009). More often, they had glaring tensions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses apparent in their course design. The nature of education shown in these syllabi reflected the pressures of greater national bodies, while sometimes in direct opposition to centrifugal (individualizing) hopes of the course instructors. While some course syllabi positioned the instructor as the only authority in the classroom, others showed a more student-centered approach to learning.

The double-voiced nature of these course syllabi is presented to students when course materials are covered at the beginning of a new semester. To best explain how Bakhtin's concepts were used in conducting a literary analysis on these syllabi, examples from the 20 course syllabi will be highlighted below to show how a flawed, yet required document can be dialogically analyzed for a greater understanding of how the various discourses in education brush up against each other in the living heteroglossia of teacher education. For example, in one syllabus, the instructor states, "I trust you to be prepared, but if discussions lag (*sic*) I reserve the right to require daily reading journals." In this utterance, the instructor first builds trust with students (an internally persuasive discourse), then asserts authority by claiming ownership of the discussion (an authoritative discourse). The competitive nature of this double-voiced utterance can leave students confused as to how they should act.

To read across these 20 course syllabi, findings show what the major authoritative and internally persuasive discourses in the syllabi are, and how those discourses compete to be heard within the text. Examples of double-voiced utterances will show how the syllabus, as a document, often represents the tension between various educational ideologies. Finally, suggestions will be made for how instructors can develop their course materials in the future so that the centrifugal

pull of the individual can be highlighted even in courses where authorities seek to close off knowledge.

The Tensions Within YAL Course Syllabi

Many of the courses in this study focused on preservice teachers reading many YAL while learning pedagogical methods for English education. These courses often adopted a tone that set preservice teachers to understand that they must be readers themselves in order to best teach secondary students how to be active and independent readers (Alston & Barker, 2014; L'Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007; Moni, 2000; Powell-Brown, 2004; Stallworth et al., 2006; Winograd & Rosen, 1994). While many of these courses started with conceptual work around defining YAL as a literary genre or with the concept of adolescence (Falter, 2016; Lesko, 1996; Sulzer & Thein, 2016) or the youth lens (Petrone et al., 2014; Sarigianides, 2012), these classes also were full of the tension between both the internally persuasive pull of instructor and student to be independent and interest driven readers while beset by the push of authoritative discourses that seek to control what students should be reading in secondary classrooms.

Authoritative Discourses in Young Adult Literature Courses. There were two distinct paths that the authoritative discourses took in examining these 20 course syllabi. One is where the instructor, as the voice of authority in the classroom, laid out demands for students in the course materials or set themselves up as the monological "sage-on-the-stage" from which students would learn. The second is where the authoritative discourses of national bodies, standards, and other external voices could be seen as having demands on the information being shared between instructor and student.

It is impossible, even for teachers who subscribe to a dialogical pedagogy model, to completely relinquish authority in their classrooms (Fecho et al., 2016). The natural hierarchy created by the teacher-student relationship in an educational context is easier for some to get past, but colleges and universities, local school boards, parents, and administrators expect that instructors at all levels be in "control" and hold authority in the classroom. However, many teachers see a way to flatten that hierarchy (Fecho et al., 2010) by adopting student-centered practices.

When the syllabi from the courses that focused on entirely on YAL methods (13/20) were analyzed, the most often noticed utterances of authoritative discourses were where instructors set forth strict expectations for student behavior and work ethic. At first glance, such utterances seem completely necessary, but it is how the instructor provided information to students that set the foundation for whether the classroom heteroglossia would be stifled or allowed to flourish. In contrast, the attempt to make space for students' internally persuasive discourses can be seen when instructors include student interests and needs in their syllabi to direct learning.

One example of the double-voiced nature of these documents comes from one syllabus where a "love of reading" is valued above all else. In this course students will read "over 10 Young Adult Novels" but this individual focus is followed by another course outcome where students will "Write coherent and persuasive justifications of YA literature based on scholarship, ELA standards, NCTE position statements, and other resources." This statement reflects many discourses meeting at a site of tension within the heteroglossia of this syllabus. It can be seen that the authoritative discourse of state standards seeking to control the dialogue and create "good" practice, the adherence to a national body, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), as well as the instructor's intention that students will be scholars who can justify the texts they are

choosing to present to students in a way that will satisfy the subsequent authorities that are stakeholders in their secondary classrooms.

This course provides students with 16 separate course objectives and outcomes, and the heteroglossia of the context is loud and clear in this section. One objective is focused on the internally persuasive nature of students becoming interest-led readers themselves, and is followed by others that reflect the needs of the instructor to control the learning outcomes for students in this class, even while reflecting the internally persuasive discourses of the students. These two short sections within multiple pages of one syllabus show that it is not just the voice of the instructor that is heard, but that multiple, competing discourses (heteroglossia) are present at once.

Another example comes from a different syllabus, where the many voices of heteroglossia meet the authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. Also found within a list of 10 course outcomes, this instructor tells students that they will "Investigate issues in the field of YAL such as the canon debate, censorship, and literary quality," then that they will "Examine and articulate historical and popular conceptions of adolescents as well as how they are positioned in society and in texts," and also that students will "Demonstrate a social justice orientation toward teaching and YAL, including consideration of how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation relate to the school and classroom context." While the course description describes this class as a "is a rigorous, reading-intensive course designed to introduce pre-service teachers and interested students to young adult literature," these three outcomes reveal distinct tensions within the broader study of YAL.

The discourses obvious to analysis are the concept of the adolescent, the argument of the use of the literary canon versus modern and contemporary literature like YAL, and then finally how YAL and English education can be used to create a classroom with a social justice orientation (Alsup & Miller, 2014; Glasgow, 2001; Glenn, 2014). The double-voiced nature of one short section on these syllabi can show how one utterance follows and competes with others and can reflect the authoritative discourses of the instructor as well as the global discourses surrounding the study of YAL.

The 20 course syllabi analyzed in this study were full of various competing authoritative discourses that influenced course design. Reading across the data, beyond the examples shown previously, other authoritative discourses present in the data were: college and university vision and mission statements, a number of separate state standards along with the Common Core, and the NCTE Standards, state teacher candidate dispositions, the Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS), the American Psychological Association (APA), the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards, and Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) Standards. These discourses sought to control the instructor's language and the outcomes for students in course materials. The hybrid nature of so many of the utterances shows how the push of these authorities is met by the independent pull of teacher educators as they design their courses.

Internally Persuasive Discourses in Young Adult Literature Courses. Student choice was the vehicle that instructors most often used to help flatten the hierarchy between themselves and their students (Comer, 2011, p. 241), and this was done to show that even where it is the instructor's prerogative to create the course and "control" the learning that takes place, it is still possible to put the learning into the hands and interests of the students. Instructors in these YAL classes sought to help preservice teachers realize that, as shown in the objectives on one syllabus:

> While research shows a direct correlation between reading and achievement, many teens choose not to read. Therefore, participants [preservice teachers] will explore the ways to entice young people to read–acknowledging their wide range of abilities, funds of knowledge, and broad interests . . . including interest in non-traditional and multi-modal texts.

An opening up of knowledge and learning beyond what students might expect, like this, was one way that many of these instructors chose to teach their preservice teachers how to recognize the value of students pursuing texts that were internally persuasive to them.

An example of how a course met both the internally persuasive needs of its students and was double-voiced with many discourses of education can be seen in a portion of a syllabus. The teacher educator writes, "A wealth of titles in all genres will be read, discussed, interpreted, and examined for quality of writing, interest and importance to adolescents, cultural relevance, and relationship to curriculum standards." This utterance is decidedly double-voiced, as analysis shows the tension between the discourses of the quality of YAL, student interest, and the relevance of YAL, cultural relevance, and the subsequent echoes of diverse perspectives in literature, and then it ends with an authoritative nod toward curriculum standards. Students in this course will quickly know that the class goes beyond just reading of YAL, and they will understand that the genre is in a state of "becoming" (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 393).

The double-voiced nature of course syllabi is not limited to course descriptions and goals, objectives, or outcomes; it can also be seen in course assessments. In one of the classes, the instructor assigned a "Free Choice Reading Portfolio," with the only stipulation that students must read "3,000 pages of texts written for and about adolescents." In the corresponding section where advice is given to students, the instructor writes that students will "Select texts from a variety of authors, forms, genres, subjects, and marketed age levels. [but that they] Do not read over 1,000 pages of the same author, genre, or form." The heteroglossia found within this assignment is varied. Even with the free choice nature of the assignment, the authoritative discourse of the instructor is still present in the direction to "not read over 1,000 pages of the same author, genre, or form," but the freedom for students to choose a variety of texts for young adults is the loudest voice. Another discourse embedded within this single utterance is students choosing texts from "marketed age levels," where the larger discourses of publishing and marketing of YAL come through. In this assignment, students are given the power to seek out what interests them, what stories and authors are internally persuasive to them, and are bound only by the loosest of guidelines.

Professors of these YAL courses made many instructional decisions, like the "Free Choice Reading Portfolio," that put the power back into the hands of students. These student-centered assignments, goals, and outcomes begin to flatten the hierarchy between student and teacher, even if it cannot ever be completely equal. What is interesting is the tension in teacher educators' decisions: whether to have students read YAL independently, read a YA text together as a class, or read canonical literature at all. If instructors examine the choices they represent in course materials for their double-voiced nature, then the authoritative nature of course design can make way for the internally persuasive discourses that drive students to learn.

The examples above highlight only a couple of the ways in which the internally persuasive discourses of instructors sought to put student learning first and to resist a monological viewpoint. One way that instructors added diversity of voices to the heteroglossia of their classes was by having students interact with external voices discussing YAL. Some of these voices were through the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE, journals like *The ALAN Review*, the *Journal*

of Children's Literature, *Study and Scrutiny: Research in Young Adult Literature*, *English Journal*, *English Education*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Language Arts*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Voices from the Middle*, and the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.

Students participated in twitter chats with others about YAL, they read from awards lists like the Michael L. Printz Award, the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, the Coretta Scott King Award, the Scott O'Dell Award; they read NCTE position statements; they engaged in discussion on the youth lens; they sought out information on the YA Literature Symposium; they read blogs like Dr. Bickmore's YA Wednesday (yawednesday.com), Guys Lit Wire (guyslitwire.blogspot.com), Guys Read (guysread.com), Teen Reads (teenreads.com), and We Need Diverse Books (diversebooks.org). Most importantly, students were given the freedom to choose what to read, whom to read, how to read, and then how to showcase their learning in a variety of choice-based assessments and assignments.

Suggestions for Student-Centered Instruction

The present study theorizes how Bakhtin's concepts of discourses within texts can reveal much about the influences on faculty decisions in course design. The potential is for any faculty member at any level to mimic this study of their own materials to examine their work for sites of tension between the student-centered choices they are making and the authoritative control of the state, standards, and national discourses of politics and opinion on education. It is a distinct choice of course creators and syllabus designers to push back against discourses of control, making decisions that provide more space for student-led curriculum and growth.

Readers of dialogic pedagogy research and teacher education are often looking for a how-to guide on how to implement dialogic instruction in their classrooms (Strickland, 2019). Researchers in teacher education (see Fecho et al., 2016) have begun to provide an approximate guide to show how taking little steps towards dialogic engagement in the classroom can have an impact even while arguing that it is impossible to have a "correct" way of dialogic instruction. This study highlighted many strategies that teacher educators in YAL in secondary English teacher education have used to create a more student-centered, dialogic learning space. However, the following instructional decisions highlight how these teacher educators flattened the hierarchy between themselves and their students to foster the heteroglossia of their classrooms.

Choice Reading. While all of the 20 course syllabi analyzed in this study had required elements to them like textbooks or other readings, those that adopted more student-centered practices often limited the whole-class or required readings to those that covered necessary content while leaving open much of students' reading of YAL to either guided choice reading lists and categories, or they were fully open to students reading any YA author or book as long as they continued to read for the entirety of the course. While the authority of the instructor could not be completely dissolved, as they created and ran these classes, many chose to allow students to direct much of the learning for the semester.

Choice reading was the most often used strategy to foster student-centered learning and to cultivate the growth of heteroglossia in these YAL courses. Teacher educators did this by allowing students to independently choose books that they wanted to read. With encouragement, instructors promoted this reading by attaching low-stakes assessments to their readings (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Low-Stakes Assessments Attached to Readings

• Keeping up with a Goodreads log of their reading or reviews of books.
• Writing personal reflection papers or Microsoft Flip videos to prepare for class discussion on their choice reading.
• Creating social action projects based on the perspectives and issues found in the books that students choose to read.
• Creating book trailers and talks to help expose secondary students to new authors or books they might be interested in.
• Pairing student-selected YA and their movie adaptations.
• Engaging both whole-class readings of YA and student-directed independent reading.
• Working with students who work with after-school reading programs, where they mentor secondary students on reading YAL and read alongside them.
• Using book clubs and literature circles to build a community of readers in their classrooms.

These reading strategies and associated assessments helped students direct their learning while receiving support from teacher educators teaching the courses. These practices allowed student voice in the classroom heteroglossia to be of equal value with that of instructors, helping develop dialogic instruction.

Most course materials analyzed in this study included a directive for students to read 1–2 YA books each week, in addition to the instructor-chosen required course materials, to help develop students' pedagogical knowledge. While this course requirement is, by nature, authoritative direction from the instructor, the openness with which most instructors explain their course policies would help students understand that their professors seek as much freedom as possible for students while meeting the expectations of a college or graduate school class.

More importantly, these course syllabi showed that instructors made room for student discussion often and that many took on the role of facilitator much more often than they sought to be "the sage-on-the-stage." The purposeful decision to let students read what they wished and to help them build a community of readers within these courses shows that course materials, with the tensions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses coming into contact within heteroglossia, create the foundation for student-centered learning.

Choice Assessments. The 20 courses examined in this study were primarily reading-centered. However, as one might expect, each course and teacher educator had a number of assessments planned for their classes to better understand student development and learning. Many classes included term papers that might be expected in college and graduate school classes, but more often than not, instructors used assessment as a means for allowing student-centered learning to take place. These assignments were more often focused on how students might want to take their learning and experience with YAL in internally persuasive directions rather than just completing work as assigned.

A number of assignments across these 20 course syllabi, such as the reading strategies listed above, involved student choice as a determining factor. While the direction to complete assignments is authoritative (assignments will be assigned grades by the instructor who has the

power), student-centered instructors most often help students choose what best represents their learning. Figure 3 includes examples of student-centered assignments from these course syllabi.

Figure 3: Examples of Student-Centered Assignments Readings

• YA research papers where students "Choose a research topic of interest directly related to YAL."
• Create a piece of creative writing or a creative project to represent learning.
• Create a piece of creative writing or a creative project to represent learning.
• Multi-genre projects that follow an author or book and their major themes.
• Crafting lesson or unit plans for books and YA classes that students dream of teaching.
• Creation of bibliographies of diverse YAL as a resource for students.
• Research essays in the style of Keywords for Children's Literature (Nel & Paul, 2011).
• Observation of how YAL is identified in Libraries and Bookstores.
• Critical Remix Projects where students remix "the cover art of one of the YA novels" read.
• Social action project portfolios surrounding the reading of one YA author or novel.
• Creation of "Reading Ecosystems" where students plan for the reading learning environments in their future classrooms.
• Personal and reflective literacy narratives.
• Dialogue journaling with instructors and classmates.

The above assessments show how student-centered instruction can help raise the voice of the student in the syllabus so that the monological voice of the teacher is not the only one valued in the heteroglossic context of the represented class. Choice remained an undercurrent as the materials in this study were analyzed. The pairing of choice reading and choice writing for these YAL courses provides a model for how instructors can make decisions and create space for students in their classrooms. A number of syllabi in this study highlighted and nurtured student interest and internal persuasive needs.

Implications and Limitations

This study highlights the potential of dialogic analysis of course materials, such as the course syllabus, to help college professors purposefully choose more student-centered practices and recognize the political nature of syllabus creation. If the syllabus and related course materials are viewed as heteroglossic documents in which various discourses intersect at sites of tension and compete, then intentional care can be taken in how course materials are created and whose voice is valued. It is rare for a teacher to craft instructional materials with themselves as the sole,

unquestionable authority, but unintentional authoritative discourses are shared with students in education when external pressures infiltrate those materials.

Bakhtin's concepts provide a lens for examining how various discourses appear in educational documents and how subsequent tensions among them meet with other tensions. However, the course syllabus is, by nature, an authoritative contract that instructors create for their students to abide by. There is no way for teachers to fully separate themselves from their authority in the classroom and remain in the classroom, but dialogic pedagogy is not about replacing authoritative voices with chaos; it is about helping lessen the impact and pressure of authority on other voices.

Bakhtin did not necessarily intend his concepts to be used in a revolutionary way; he wrote them to help understand the interplay of voices in the heteroglossic context of written and spoken utterances. Course materials, such as the syllabus, inherently encompass a range of educational discourses. It is, however, revolutionary to expose the banking model of teaching (Freire, 1970) as lacking and to choose engaged, dialogic practice instead. The mission of dialogic engagement is to ensure sustained dialogue in educational contexts and beyond. This mission seeks to raise the marginalized voice in heteroglossia and give it equal standing with others.

While the syllabus and related course materials present a picture of the heteroglossic context of these 20 courses, further research would need to investigate how these teacher educators present this information to students and examine how dialogue is fostered or silenced in actual classroom instruction. Bakhtin's concepts, used here, help to understand the push and pull of the centralizing and individualizing forces of language in dialogue, but do not show how far those forces push and pull at one another or which ultimately gains more power.

Conclusion

Effectively, the course materials analyzed in this study showed that teacher educators in YAL and English education chose student-centered practices to foster students' voices and flatten the hierarchy between teacher and student. The syllabi and other materials were full of various educational and social discourses that might be expected but are rarely given much thought about how they influence students entering a new class. Dialogic analysis of course syllabi and related materials, as done in this study, gives teachers the power to allow authoritative or internally persuasive discourses greater room. When choosing the internally persuasive, teachers can help students see that they, too, have a voice that is valued in education.

Using Bakhtin's concepts to develop a method for analyzing course syllabi enables educators to view courses as living documents that reflect a diverse heteroglossia. The heteroglossia inherent in course design cannot be dismissed by claiming that the syllabus is not an important educational document. While a limitation might be that some instructors spend little time on syllabi or include only what is required by their colleges and universities, a Bakhtinian analysis of those documents, as shown in this study, will allow researchers and teachers to understand how those discourses compete for space to be heard and valued. More importantly, the messages given to students, regardless of the instructor's effort, remain within the text's heteroglossia.

As students are the main audience of course syllabi, it would behoove educators to understand that what they are showing their students is the most valuable ideology about teaching and education. For those valuing dialogic pedagogy, it must be acknowledged that "from a dialogic point of view, teaching values may involve suppressing the voices of others. Molding minds and hearts in a preset way is an anti-dialogic, monologic pedagogical goal. It leads to brainwashing

and extreme propaganda, which are arguably anti-educational" (Matusov & Lemke, 2015, p. 4). Then, syllabi can be created with the intention of creating space for the full value of heteroglossia in the classroom, rather than privileging a single voice.

There is significant potential for an instructor to conduct a Bakhtinian syllabus analysis with students using an old course syllabus, giving students the chance to co-create course expectations and policies as equals with the instructor. Often, such co-researcher/co-instructor models of course design are reserved only for graduate students, but such work with undergraduates would also prove to be fruitful. This study shows that the course syllabus is an ideological and sometimes political document that reflects the discourses of many beyond the instructor. It is important for instructors to understand that the language chosen in their course design reflects the tensions of these discourses as they meet one another. This can happen subconsciously as instructors' understandings evolved out of their own education and experiences, but one would not want to unwillingly pass these ideologies on to students thoughtlessly.

Individual departments and universities could internally investigate the discourses present in their course syllabi to create more inclusive spaces for students and faculty to learn together. If, as in the second syllabus of YAL in secondary English teacher education, faculty are of a mind to pursue social justice pedagogy, then course and syllabus design must be a thoughtful and intentional action. The method for syllabus analysis outlined in this article is just the beginning for understanding how Bakhtin's concepts can be used in the textual analysis of course materials. Further research can analyze how course assignments and rubrics further the social ideologies and intentions of the instructors, and then this analysis can be used alongside classroom observations to understand if dialogical teaching practices are put into action, specifically in reaction to authoritative discourses that seek to control voices in education.

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Research Article

From Awareness to Application: Examining the Effectiveness of Usage-Based Grammar Instruction on Adverbials

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of explicit, usage-based grammar instruction on adult learners' metalinguistic awareness and functional deployment of adverbials in an American college writing course (ENG-145). Fifty-one native English-speaking students participated in a pre–post instructional design targeting explicit understanding and application of adverbials grounded in usage-based linguistic theory. Metalinguistic knowledge was assessed using a 26-point pre- and posttest that measured definitional precision and categorical understanding. Results indicated improved conceptual clarity following instruction. To evaluate changes in production, adverbial frequency and distribution were analyzed in pre- and post-instruction writing samples. A paired-samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant increase in adverbial deployment from pre-instruction to post-instruction with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 3.29$). Readability analysis further demonstrated qualitative shifts in adverbial integration, indicating greater rhetorical appropriateness and syntactic flexibility rather than frequency gains alone. In addition, overall writing proficiency improved, with a higher proportion of students producing texts at elevated grade-level benchmarks following instruction. These findings provide quantitative evidence supporting the pedagogical value of explicit, usage-based grammar instruction in enhancing both grammatical awareness and meaningful application in college-level writing.

KEYWORDS

usage-based grammar instruction; explicit grammar teaching; adverbials, metalinguistic awareness; academic writing; pre–post instructional design; writing development

Debates over grammar instruction in U.S. education have persisted for more than half a century, oscillating between prescriptive formalism and communicative minimalism. Following influential claims that traditional grammar instruction does not improve writing quality (Clark, 2010; Pullum, 2012; Vakili, 2023; Wyse, 2001), explicit grammar teaching was progressively marginalized in many K–12 contexts. As Locke (2010) notes, grammar has remained one of the most ideologically charged and pedagogically unstable domains of English education. The cumulative effect of this shift is a cohort of native English-speaking adults who demonstrate fluent linguistic performance yet often possess limited explicit knowledge of grammatical structure or metalanguage.

This tension reflects a deeper theoretical divide within linguistics and applied linguistics. Generativist models sharply distinguish between competence and performance, conceptualizing grammatical knowledge as an abstract, internalized system that develops largely independently of instruction. In contrast, usage-based approaches (Ellis, 2009, 2010) reconceptualize grammar as emergent from language use: constructions arise through frequency effects, distributional learning,

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entrenchment, and analogy. Within this framework, grammar is not a pre-specified formal system but a dynamic inventory of form–meaning pairings shaped by experience.

Crucially, however, the pedagogical implications of usage-based theory have often been simplified. While it is true that grammatical regularities can be acquired implicitly through exposure, usage-based models do not entail that explicit instruction is redundant. On the contrary, explicit attention to constructions may facilitate noticing, strengthen associative links between form and discourse function, and accelerate entrenchment processes. In adult learners, whose cognitive resources allow for analytic reflection, metalinguistic awareness may serve as a mechanism of mediating between implicit pattern recognition and deliberate rhetorical control. Yet empirical investigations of explicit instruction grounded explicitly in usage-based principles remain limited, particularly with native English-speaking adults.

This gap becomes especially salient in relation to adverbs and adverbials. Despite their high frequency and structural heterogeneity (Quirk et al., 1985), adverbials occupy a marginal position in most pedagogical grammar. Jackendoff (1972) characterized them as "the least studied and most maligned," a description that remains strikingly apt. Adverbials are not merely optional modifiers; they encode temporality, aspectual framing, epistemic stance, causation, evaluation, and textual cohesion. In academic discourse, such functions are central to argument construction and reader positioning. Mastery of adverbials thus entails more than syntactic identification; it requires sensitivity to distributional patterns, scope relations, and discourse-pragmatic effects.

Moreover, prior research has predominantly focused on second- and foreign-language learners (Hinkel, 2004), often framing adverbial development as a matter of L2 complexity or transfer. Far less attention has been directed toward native speakers, for whom grammatical competence is assumed but metalinguistic control is rarely examined. This assumption warrants scrutiny. If grammar is conceptualized as a network of constructions emergent from use, then explicit conceptual knowledge of those constructions, particularly their functional variability, cannot be presumed, even among proficient native writers.

Although usage-based linguistics emphasizes the emergence of grammar from frequency-driven exposure and distributional learning, it does not entail that explicit instruction is incompatible with constructional development. On the contrary, explicit attention to grammatical patterns may increase perceptual salience, promote noticing, and facilitate abstraction of schematic representations from input (Bybee, 2006; Tomasello, 2003). For adult learners whose cognitive capacities support analytic reflection, metalinguistic explanation can function as a catalyst for pattern detection rather than a substitute for usage. In this framework, instruction operates as structured attention to recurring form–function mappings, accelerating entrenchment processes and strengthening associations between syntactic position and discourse effect. The present study, therefore, treats explicit grammar instruction as a usage-informed pedagogical intervention designed to enhance learners' awareness of constructional regularities within authentic writing contexts.

This study addresses the theoretical and pedagogical gap by investigating whether explicit instruction grounded in a usage-based grammar framework can enhance adult native English speakers' understanding and deployment of adverbials in academic writing. Specifically, the study first examines the extent of participants' baseline metalinguistic knowledge of adverbs and adverbials, thereby interrogating the assumption that native competence entails explicit conceptual clarity. It then evaluates whether targeted instruction, designed to foreground constructional patterns, frequency effects, and discourse functions, produces measurable gains in (a) participants'

conceptual understanding of adverbials and (b) their written use of adverbials, operationalized in terms of frequency, functional range, and rhetorical integration within academic texts.

By empirically testing the pedagogical efficacy of theory-driven explicit instruction within a usage-based framework, this study intervenes in longstanding debates about the role of grammar teaching in advanced literacy development. It reframes explicit grammar instruction not as a return to prescriptive formalism, but as a cognitively and theoretically grounded mechanism for expanding writers' control over constructional resources central to academic discourse. This paper is founded on two main research questions (RQ):

> **RQ 1**: How does explicit grammar instruction influence adult learners' use of adverbials in academic writing?
>
> **RQ 2**: To what extent does usage-based explicit instruction facilitate the integration of adverbials into authentic writing tasks?

The first research question will also examine two related dimensions: (1) students' metalinguistic knowledge of adverbs and adverbials, and (2) their deployment of adverbials in authentic writing following explicit instruction. Additionally, the second research question will seek the answers to two related aspects: (1) how students integrated adverbs and adverbials in their writing tasks, and (2) how this deployment altered their writing tasks.

By examining both learners' conceptual-grammatical knowledge and their use of adverbial constructions in writing, this study provides classroom-based evidence on how usage-informed, explicit grammar instruction can support the development of grammatical resources.

Literature Review

Theoretical Positioning: From Structuralist and Generative Models to Usage-Based Linguistics

Debates surrounding grammar instruction and language acquisition reflect broader theoretical assumptions about the nature of grammar and its development. Early behaviorist perspectives conceptualized language learning as stimulus-response associations reinforced through repetition (Skinner, 1957), treating grammar as observable behavior shaped by environmental conditioning rather than as an internal cognitive system.

Generative grammar proposed an alternative account grounded in innate linguistic structure. Chomsky (1965) argued that linguistic competence derives from an internalized system of abstract rules supported by a biologically determined Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Although generative theory profoundly influenced linguistic research, it has been criticized for underemphasizing usage patterns, variability, and cognitive learning mechanisms.

Constructivist and usage-based approaches challenge both behaviorist and strict nativist accounts by treating grammar as emerging from linguistic experience. Within this perspective, grammatical knowledge develops through interaction, exposure to frequency, and pattern abstraction (Bybee, 2006; Langacker, 1987; Tomasello, 2003). Grammar is therefore conceptualized as a dynamic network of constructions shaped by recurring form–function mappings.

The present study adopts a usage-based framework to conceptualize grammar as emergent from recurring form-function constructions. It aims at providing the theoretical basis for instruction that emphasizes pattern recognition, frequency awareness, and constructional comparison rather than rule memorization alone.

Usage-Based Mechanisms Underlying Grammar Development

Pattern Finding, Categorization, and Construction Learning. Usage-based linguistics assumes that learners detect recurring patterns in input and gradually abstract schematic representations from linguistic instances. Tomasello (2003) describes this process as pattern finding, whereby learners identify distributional regularities across utterances.

Categorization plays a central role in construction formation, as learners group linguistic elements based on shared functional properties and analogical relationships. Empirical research demonstrates that learners build abstract schemas from exemplars rather than acquiring fully specified rules in isolation (Ambridge et al., 2012; Diessel, 2017).

Experimental and corpus-based evidence further demonstrates that learners abstract constructional generalizations from patterned input and rely on constructional cues as predictors of event meaning (Goldberg et al., 2004; Goldberg, 2006). These findings suggest that instructional approaches emphasizing structured exposure and guided pattern identification may facilitate abstraction of constructional relationships more effectively than rule memorization alone. In the present study, this insight informs instructional activities in which participants analyze recurring adverbial constructions across texts.

Frequency Effects, Entrenchment, and Productivity. Frequency constitutes a central explanatory mechanism in usage-based theory. Type frequency contributes to constructional productivity, whereas token frequency contributes to entrenchment and accessibility (Bybee, 2006). Repeated exposure strengthens cognitive representations and facilitates implicit learning across lexical and morphosyntactic domains (Ellis, 2002, 2009).

Corpus-based research similarly shows that the frequency distribution of constructions predicts developmental trajectories and supports segmentation and category formation (Diessel, 2013; Lieven, 2010). Experimental classroom research confirms these effects in second language contexts, demonstrating that structured exposure to frequent constructions enhances learners' sensitivity to distributional patterns (Kartal & Sarigul, 2017; Nguyen, 2024; Vakili & Mohammed, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings indicate that frequency-based exposure can be operationalized pedagogically to support grammatical development.

Entrenchment and Chunking. Entrenchment refers to the strengthening of mental representations through repeated usage (Bybee & Beckner, 2010; Langacker, 1987). Closely related is chunking, whereby frequently co-occurring linguistic sequences are stored and retrieved as holistic units.

Research shows that exposure to recurrent lexical bundles supports the emergence of chunked representations, facilitating grammatical development and efficient language use (Ellis et al., 2015; O'Donnell et al., 2013). Classroom-based studies further demonstrate that instruction targeting lexical chunks improves fluency, coherence, and structural accuracy in writing (Albaqami, 2022; AlHassan & Wood, 2015; Tang, 2012). These findings support instructional approaches that highlight constructional chunks and recurrent syntactic frames in authentic language use.

Empirical Research on Grammar Instruction in Post-Secondary Contexts

Effectiveness of Explicit Grammar Instruction. Meta-analytic research provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction. Norris and Ortega (2000) report substantial gains in grammatical knowledge following explicit instructional treatments,

particularly when metalinguistic explanation is included. Similarly, Spada and Tomita (2010) demonstrate positive effects across grammatical structures and learner populations. Together, these meta-analyses establish explicit instruction as a well-supported pedagogical approach grounded in cumulative empirical evidence.

Intervention research in a tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context corroborates these findings. Studies show that explicit instruction targeting cohesive devices improves writing quality, textual coherence, and grammatical accuracy (Alawerdy & Alalwi, 2019; Vakili & Mohammed, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate that focused grammar instruction can produce statistically significant improvements, particularly when learners engage in rule explanation followed by structured practice and feedback.

However, much of this research focuses on second-language learners, leaving relatively limited evidence regarding explicit grammar instruction for native-speaking undergraduates.

Grammar Instruction for Native-Speaking University Students. While grammar instruction has been widely studied in L2 contexts, fewer empirical investigations address its impact on native-speaking undergraduates. Composition research nevertheless indicates persistent difficulties with sentence structure, clarity, and grammatical control among first-year writers (Eckstein & Chang, 2022; Vakili, 2023; Vakili & Mohammed, 2021).

Grammar-in-context approaches, therefore, integrate sentence-level instruction within authentic writing tasks to enhance rhetorical awareness and syntactic flexibility (Lancaster & Olinger, 2014). Rather than treating grammar as isolated rule memorization, this line of research situates grammatical knowledge within meaning-making processes, supporting the view that native-speaking undergraduates benefit from targeted, contextually embedded language instruction.

Writing-center intervention research further demonstrates measurable improvements in writing quality following structured feedback addressing organization, clarity, and language use (Tiruchittampalam et al., 2018). Together, these findings support the value of explicit, contextually embedded instruction for L1 writers in post-secondary settings, although experimental research targeting specific grammatical categories such as adverbials remains limited.

Instructional Techniques Employed in the Present Study. The instructional design of the present study incorporates three usage-based components:

1. Explicit rule explanation
2. Frequency-based analysis
3. Constructional comparison

Research shows that explicit attention to form is most effective when integrated with meaningful practice and communicative analysis (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Corpus-informed pedagogy further enhances learners' sensitivity to frequency patterns and usage constraints (Rodríguez-Fuentes & Swatek, 2022; Schmidt, 2023), while construction-informed genre pedagogy supports the analysis of grammar as networks of recurrent form–meaning pairings embedded in discourse (Wang & Lu, 2024). These components operationalize usage-based principles within an experimental framework examining changes in adverbial awareness and constructional accuracy among native-speaking undergraduates.

Adverbials and Academic Writing

Linguistic Characteristics of Adverbials. Adverbials constitute a functionally diverse grammatical category encoding temporal, causal, modal, evaluative, and discourse-organizing meanings (Quirk et al., 1985). They contribute to clause modification, stance expression, and textual cohesion but have historically received limited systematic attention in linguistic research (Jackendoff, 1972).

Descriptive grammar research documents their multifunctionality and syntactic mobility across registers (Biber, 1999), while Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) conceptualizes adverbials as realizations of circumstantial meanings that contribute to the experiential and interpersonal metafunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). Generative analyses further demonstrate that adverbial ordering reflects hierarchical structural constraints rather than free variation (Cinque, 1999; Haumann, 2007). Complementary corpus-based research shows systematic positional tendencies linked to discourse function and register variation (Biber & Conrad, 1999; Römer & Wulff, 2010). From a usage-based perspective, these findings support the view that adverbial constructions represent entrenched form–function pairings shaped by recurrent exposure (Diessel, 2019; Goldberg, 2006). In general, these perspectives position adverbials as structurally constrained yet usage-sensitive elements whose acquisition and deployment can be examined through frequency analysis, positional comparison, and constructional patterning, making them particularly suitable for experimental investigation in instructional contexts.

Empirical Research on Adverbial Use in Writing. Corpus-based studies consistently show restricted use of complex adverbial constructions in student writing. Learner–expert comparisons reveal category imbalance and limited repertoire diversity relative to professional academic writing (Lei, 2012). Similar patterns of overuse and underuse across semantic subtypes have been reported in cross-linguistic learner corpora (Appel & Szeib, 2018; Ha, 2016). Collectively, these findings indicate that adverbial distribution in learner writing diverges from expert norms in both frequency and category diversity, highlighting the relevance of frequency-informed instruction.

Beyond frequency imbalance, empirical L2 writing research also identifies patterns of misuse, contextual inappropriateness, and overreliance on a limited set of adverbials. For instance, studies published in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* show that forms such as *besides* and *actually* were not only overused but also misapplied in context, suggesting functional misunderstanding rather than purely frequency-driven divergence. Learner corpus research similarly demonstrates that different L1 groups display systematic preferences for particular linking devices, often repeating high-frequency forms while neglecting structurally or semantically appropriate alternatives. Research also documents contextual misuse and overreliance on high-frequency linking devices, suggesting functional rather than purely frequency-based divergence. These findings support instructional interventions that target the expansion of adverbial repertoires and improved form-function mapping in academic writing.

Pedagogical Research on Teaching Adverbials. Despite their importance in discourse, relatively few intervention studies explicitly target adverbial development. Meta-analytic evidence nevertheless confirms that explicit instruction that combines metalinguistic explanation with guided practice yields stronger gains than exposure alone (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010). Classroom-based investigations further show that structured attention to cohesive

devices improves textual cohesion and rhetorical organization (Biber et al., 2011; Norris & Ortega, 2009).

Corpus-informed instructional approaches provide more direct support. Data-driven learning interventions enhance learners' awareness of frequency distributions, collocational patterns, and syntactic positioning of discourse-organizing devices (Boulton & Cobb, 2017; Cotos, 2014). Systematic reviews similarly report consistent positive effects on grammatical development across contexts (Lee et al., 2019; Lusta et al., 2023), while longitudinal classroom research shows increased diversity and appropriateness of transitional expressions following sustained instruction (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014). Taken together, the limited scope of research explicitly targeting adverbials highlights a clear gap in experimental studies examining whether explicit usage-based instruction enhances native-speaking undergraduates' deployment of adverbials in academic writing.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a classroom- based, mixed-methods design to examine the impact of explicit instruction on undergraduate students' knowledge and use of adverbials in academic writing. The design integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture measurable changes in grammatical knowledge alongside functional shifts in written production. Rather than claiming causal generalization beyond the instructional context, the study evaluates pre- and post-instruction differences within a defined cohort to assess whether targeted pedagogical intervention is associated with observable changes in adverbial awareness and deployment.

Participants and Context

The study included 51 undergraduate students enrolled in three sections of ENG 145 (Academic Writing) at a Midwestern university during Fall 2023 and Spring 2024. Participation was voluntary. The sample represented diverse academic majors, with psychology and business administration as the most frequent disciplines and included students across academic levels. A retrospective self-report questionnaire indicated that 26 participants reported no prior formal grammar instruction, eight reported grammar exposure limited to literature-focused courses, and 17 reported prior formal grammar instruction. Approximately two-thirds of the participants reported minimal prior exposure to explicit grammar teaching, providing a relevant baseline for examining instructional effects.

Instructional Treatment

Instruction focused explicitly on adverbial categories, semantic functions, positional variation, frequency patterns, and constructional comparison within academic writing. The intervention was delivered through synchronous and asynchronous online instruction, including Zoom sessions and recorded lectures supplemented with guided textual analysis and PowerPoint-based explanations. Students engaged in explicit rule discussion, identification of adverbial constructions in authentic texts, comparative analysis of alternative constructions, and revision exercises. Writing assignments included autobiographical and genre-based essays, formal and informal letters, and a personal statement. Three writing tasks were completed prior to instruction and served as baseline measures, while subsequent writing tasks were completed after instruction to allow comparison.

The instructional treatment was designed to operationalize usage-based principles within an explicit pedagogical framework. Rather than presenting decontextualized rules, instruction emphasized repeated exposure to authentic adverbial constructions, guided identification of distributional patterns, and comparative analysis of alternative syntactic realizations. Explicit explanation was employed to increase attentional focus on form–meaning pairings and positional variability, thereby enhancing noticing and facilitating abstraction. Writing tasks immediately following instruction provided opportunities for meaningful reinforcement, supporting entrenchment through application rather than isolated drill. In this sense, the intervention sought to align with usage-based mechanisms, frequency, categorization, and constructional mapping, while leveraging adult learners' metalinguistic capacities to accelerate pattern recognition.

Instruction was not limited to identifying forms but also emphasized how adverbial structures function rhetorically in academic writing. It is worth noting that students were not instructed to include specific numbers or types of adverbials in their writing tasks. Rather, they were directed to notice how these structures signal relationships such as causality, contrast, and condition, and were encouraged to incorporate them into their own writing in ways that supported clarity and argument development.

Instruments and Analytical Procedures

Knowledge of adverbs and adverbials was assessed through a pretest and a posttest consisting of twenty multiple-choice items and four open-ended questions (see Appendix A and B). Additionally, students wrote a total of seven papers in response to the provided prompts (see Appendix C). The multiple-choice items measured recognition and application of adverbial concepts, while the open-ended questions captured:

a. definitional understanding,

b. attitudes toward grammar instruction, and

c. self-reported usage practices.

To minimize memorization effects, multiple-choice items retained structural equivalence across administrations but were rephrased in the posttest. Open-ended questions remained unchanged to allow for qualitative comparison.

The analysis of written production followed a systematic, iterative coding procedure informed by the instructional focus on adverbial structures and relevant usage-based frameworks. Initial coding categories were developed deductively and subsequently refined through repeated readings of the data to capture patterns in frequency, accuracy, and functional deployment. In addition to deductive category development, an initial phase of open coding was conducted on a subset of the data to identify emergent patterns in students' use of adverbials without imposing predetermined constraints. These inductive insights informed the refinement of the coding framework, resulting in the development of a codebook that specified category definitions, inclusion criteria, and illustrative examples. The finalized codebook was then systematically applied to the full dataset, ensuring consistency in the identification and classification of adverbial forms and functions across all writing samples. This combined inductive-deductive approach aligns with established qualitative analysis procedures (e.g., Vanover et al., 2021). This approach ensured both analytical consistency and sensitivity to variation in student writing.

The researcher manually coded all writing samples. Adverbials were identified and classified based on their syntactic position and functional role within the clause. Adopting a

functional perspective, the analysis extended beyond lexical adverbs to include phrases and clauses performing adverbial functions. The coding process focused on the range of adverbial types employed, their frequency, and their contribution to sentence meaning and overall textual coherence.

To ensure consistency, a systematic coding protocol was implemented in which adverbials were defined in terms of grammatical function rather than lexical form. The coding framework drew on established functional grammar models (e.g., Quirk et al., 1985), distinguishing among major functional categories (e.g., adjuncts) and their semantic subtypes (e.g., temporal, spatial, and process-related meanings). Each essay was analyzed through multiple readings, during which adverbial elements were annotated with attention to both clause-level syntax and discourse-level function.

In cases of functional ambiguity, classifications were determined based on the broader sentential context. Ambiguous instances were revisited during a second round of coding to ensure internal consistency. To enhance reliability, a randomly selected subset (20%) of the essays was independently coded by a second reviewer with training in functional grammar. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960), yielding a coefficient of $\kappa = .85$, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Given the study's primary aim of identifying general distributional patterns, the coding scheme prioritized functionally defined categories over fine-grained distinctions among closely related subtypes.

Written production was analyzed through frequency counts of adverbials, examination of positional distribution, and semantic categorization across pre- and post-instruction essays. As an additional quantitative indicator of structural change, the Flesch Reading Ease (Flesch, 1948) and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (Kincaid et al., 1975) metrics were applied to student texts. These measures were treated as proxy indicators of syntactic complexity rather than direct measures of adverbial development and were interpreted cautiously in conjunction with qualitative findings. In other words, these measures were used not as indicators of writing quality in isolation, but as tools for identifying shifts in syntactic complexity and readability. Increases in grade level, for example, were interpreted in relation to students' use of more complex sentence structures, including multi-clause constructions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis compared pre- and post-instruction measures using paired-sample t-tests to examine changes in test scores, adverbial frequency, and readability indices. The use of paired comparisons is appropriate because the same participants were measured at two time points. Where assumptions of normality were not met, non-parametric alternatives were considered. Effect sizes were calculated to assess practical significance beyond statistical differences.

Qualitative analysis followed an iterative coding process informed by established approaches to thematic and discourse-oriented analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vanover et al., 2021). Analysis proceeded through multiple cycles, beginning with open coding to capture emergent patterns, followed by focused coding using the developed codebook. Written data were coded for accuracy, functional expansion, positional variation, and instances of misuse or overgeneralization. Codes were applied systematically across datasets, with ongoing refinement through constant comparison. To strengthen reliability and analytic rigor, coding was conducted iteratively with cross-checking and revisiting of ambiguous cases to reduce interpretive bias.

Teaching Approach and Instructional Implementation

The instructional design of this study was grounded in a usage-based linguistics framework, which conceptualizes language acquisition as emerging from repeated exposure, pattern detection, and form–meaning mapping rather than isolated rule memorization. Within this perspective, adverbial instruction emphasized meaningful chunks, frequency awareness, categorization of functional types, and constructional comparison to strengthen learners' internalization of grammatical patterns. Tomasello's (2007) grammar dimension informed the pedagogical design, particularly the principles of frequency, chunking, analogy, distributional analysis, categorization, and entrenchment. These principles guided classroom activities that required students to identify adverbials in authentic texts, analyze positional and semantic variation, and produce original sentences using the same structures to reinforce pattern recognition and application. More specifically, instruction was delivered over multiple sessions and followed a structured sequence as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Usage-Based Explicit Instructional Sequence for Adverbials in Academic Writing

Instructional Step	Description
1. Introduction of Target Structure	Students were introduced to specific grammatical forms (e.g., concessive, conditional, and causal adverbials) through authentic academic texts.
2. Guided Analysis	Students analyzed how these structures functioned rhetorically in context, focusing on meaning, cohesion, and argument development.
3. Explicit Explanation	The instructor provided direct explanations of form, function, and variation, highlighting patterns of usage rather than prescriptive rules.
4. Controlled Practice	Students completed targeted exercises requiring them to manipulate and produce the structures.
5. Open-Ended Application	Students incorporated these structures into their own writing through guided prompts.

This instructional sequence followed a structured timeline aligned with data collection. Students completed a pretest in the second week of the semester. During the subsequent three weeks, they produced three writing assignments: an autobiography, a memoir, and a genre analysis, of which the first two served as baseline writing samples for pre-instruction analysis. Explicit instruction on adverbials was delivered during weeks six through eight and covered major semantic and functional categories, including spatial, temporal, process-oriented, and adjunctive adverbials. Instruction combined direct explanation with guided exercises, homework tasks requiring identification and production of adverbials, and synchronous group discussions via Zoom.

A post-test was administered at the end of week eight following completion of the instructional module. In the subsequent two weeks, students produced two additional writing tasks, a set of formal and informal letters and a personal statement, to measure post-instruction changes in adverbial use. The writing prompts in both pre- and post-writing assignments were designed to encourage the use of target grammatical structures within meaningful rhetorical contexts. For

example, students were asked to develop arguments that incorporated cause-and-effect relationships or to respond to counterarguments, both of which naturally elicited the use of adverbial clauses. Pre- and post-instruction writing samples were compared to evaluate shifts in adverbial knowledge, frequency, and application within academic writing.

Although instructional activities explicitly emphasized the identification, analysis, and rhetorical use of adverbials, students were not required to include a fixed number of adverbials, nor were they given prescriptive constraints regarding positional placement in their writing. Instead, prompts were designed to naturally elicit adverbial constructions (e.g., cause-effect reasoning, conditional argumentation, contrastive positioning), allowing for observation of authentic uptake and functional deployment. This approach ensured that any observed changes in adverbial usage reflected learners' developing control and awareness rather than compliance with imposed structural requirements.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability of Analysis

To enhance trustworthiness, this study employed multiple strategies consistent with qualitative and mixed-methods research standards (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Data triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple sources, including pre- and posttests, open-ended responses, and longitudinal writing samples, allowing for convergence of findings across data types. The use of authentic classroom writing contributes to ecological validity by reflecting naturally occurring language use rather than decontextualized performance.

Credibility was supported through iterative coding procedures, codebook development, and inter-rater reliability checks. A subset of the data (20%) was independently coded, yielding a Cohen's Kappa of $\kappa = .85$, indicating strong agreement (Cohen, 1960). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and ambiguous cases were revisited during multiple coding cycles. Dependability and transparency were addressed through explicit documentation of analytic procedures, including the integration of inductive (open coding) and deductive coding strategies, and the systematic application of coding criteria across datasets.

This study is best characterized as a classroom-based mixed-methods investigation that integrates quantitative measures with qualitative analysis to capture both measurable and functional dimensions of grammatical development. While pre–post comparisons allow for observing instructional impact, the design does not establish causal relationships. Instead, findings should be interpreted as indicating associations between instructional intervention and observed changes within the study context.

Despite these strengths, several limitations remain. The relatively small sample size and classroom-based design limit generalizability beyond similar instructional settings. Additionally, the instructional period (three weeks) may not be sufficient for full grammatical entrenchment. As such, observed changes are interpreted as developmental tendencies rather than definitive evidence of long-term acquisition or causal effect.

Data Analysis and Results

The results are organized according to the study's research questions and reflect both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of analysis. Quantitative findings are presented first to document measurable pre-post differences in metalinguistic knowledge, adverbial frequency, and readability indices. These statistical results are then complemented by qualitative examination of student writing samples and open-ended responses to provide a contextualized interpretation of how adverbials were integrated into authentic compositions. This combined analytic structure allows

for evaluation of both numerical shifts in grammatical deployment and functional changes in discourse-level application, while maintaining alignment with the study's quasi-experimental design and theoretical framework.

Effects of Explicit Instruction on Metalinguistic Knowledge and Adverbial Deployment

Research Question 1: How does explicit grammar instruction influence adult learners' use of adverbials in academic writing? This research question examined two related dimensions: (1) students' metalinguistic knowledge of adverbs and adverbials, and (2) their deployment of adverbials in authentic writing following explicit instruction.

Pre–Post Differences in Metalinguistic Knowledge. To assess changes in participants' explicit understanding of adverbials, pre- and post-instruction measures of metalinguistic knowledge were compared using paired statistical analyses. The analysis focused on accuracy in identifying adverbial forms, distinguishing between syntactic categories, and articulating functional roles within clause structure. Descriptive statistics were first used to determine overall score distributions at each time point, followed by inferential testing to evaluate whether observed differences were statistically significant. This approach permits evaluation of whether the instructional intervention was associated with measurable gains in conceptual clarity while maintaining attention to variability across individual participants.

Baseline knowledge was assessed using a pretest scored out of 26 points (three points for adverb definitions, three for adverbial definitions, and 20 multiple-choice items). Comparison with posttest responses indicated improvement in definitional precision and categorical awareness following explicit instruction.

Prior to instruction, many students demonstrated partial or form-based conceptions of adverbs. A common misconception restricted adverbs to *–ly* forms and limited their function to verb modification (e.g., "a word that modifies a verb and ends in *–ly*"). Others described adverbs as words that "add detail to a verb" or "answer how, when, and where questions," reflecting functional awareness but limited categorical precision.

Some responses revealed confusion between grammatical categories, such as defining adverbs as words that "describe an adjective" without reference to broader modification patterns or offering vague descriptions such as "a small phrase that helps introduce a subject." These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that learners often possess intuitive knowledge of usage but lack explicit grammatical terminology (Clifton, 2014; Vande Berg, 1999). The discrepancy between example generation and definitional clarity reflects the distinction between implicit competence and explicit metalinguistic knowledge.

Post-instruction responses demonstrated clearer functional and categorical definitions. Students more frequently described adverbs as members of a grammatical class capable of modifying verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or entire clauses. Definitions increasingly referenced grammatical function rather than morphological form alone. Notably, some students moved beyond *–ly* generalizations and acknowledged exceptions (e.g., fast, hard), indicating reduced reliance on surface morphology as the sole diagnostic criterion.

Knowledge of adverbials showed even greater initial uncertainty. Pretest responses often expressed unfamiliarity or conflated lexical realization with grammatical function. Post-instruction definitions, however, more consistently described adverbials as functional sentence elements, accompanied by appropriate contextual examples (e.g., "Hopefully, she can make it to the party next weekend."). These shifts suggest increased awareness of

distributional patterns and positional flexibility, mechanisms emphasized in usage-based accounts of grammatical development (Bybee, 2006; Tomasello, 2007).

Overall, the definitional data indicate improved terminological precision and functional classification following explicit instruction. Consistent with meta-analytic findings on form-focused instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010), the results suggest gains in declarative grammatical knowledge. These gains are best interpreted as increased metalinguistic awareness rather than complete mastery.

Pre–Post Differences in Adverbial Frequency and Positional Distribution. To examine whether shifts in metalinguistic knowledge corresponded with changes in written deployment, pre- and post-instruction compositions were analyzed for overall adverbial frequency and positional distribution within clause structure. Adverbials were coded according to syntactic category and clause position (initial, medial, and final), and normalized counts were calculated to control for variation in essay length. Comparative statistical analyses were then conducted to determine whether differences between pre- and post-instruction texts reached significance. This analytic procedure enables evaluation of measurable changes in the quantity and structural placement of adverbials, while distinguishing between simple frequency increase and broader variability in syntactic positioning.

To determine whether explicit instruction influenced actual grammatical production, adverbial frequency in pre- and post-instruction writing samples was analyzed for 51 students. Descriptive statistics indicated a substantial increase in adverbial usage following instruction. Pre-instruction writing yielded a mean of 11.57 adverbials (SD = 1.81), whereas post-instruction writing yielded a mean of 20.16 (SD = 2.93), representing an average increase of 8.59 adverbials per student. A paired-samples t-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(50) = 23.51$, $p < .001$. The magnitude of the effect was very large (Cohen's $d = 3.29$), indicating a substantial overall increase in adverbial deployment across the sample.

This shift demonstrates not only increased frequency of adverbial usage but also greater semantic precision, suggesting growing metalinguistic awareness. Through chunking and analogy exercises during instruction, students repeatedly encountered similar academic phrasing patterns (e.g., *through consistent practice*, *in response to feedback*), which likely facilitated the adoption of more sophisticated adverbial constructions.

Distributional awareness also improved. Pre-instruction writing showed a strong preference for clause-final adverbials, whereas post-instruction samples displayed greater positional flexibility, including sentence-initial and mid-clause adverbials that contributed to cohesion. This supports the claim that explicit attention to form within meaningful contexts can increase learners' noticing and functional deployment of grammatical structures.

Importantly, these data were drawn from assigned compositions rather than isolated grammar exercises, suggesting that increased usage occurred within authentic writing contexts. While the study design does not include a control group and therefore cannot establish definitive causality, the magnitude of the pre–post shift indicates a strong association between explicit instruction and expanded grammatical production.

Integration of Adverbials in Authentic Writing Contexts

Research Question 2: To what extent does usage-based explicit instruction facilitate the integration of adverbials into authentic writing tasks? This research question examined two related aspects: (1) how students integrated adverbs and adverbials in their writing tasks and (2) how this deployment altered their writing tasks.

Functional Integration and Discourse-Level Application. Beyond the statistically significant increase in overall adverbial frequency, qualitative analysis of post-instruction writing samples suggests improved functional integration within authentic compositions. Because the writing samples analyzed were graded coursework assignments rather than isolated grammar exercises, the observed increases reflect application within extended discourse contexts.

Pre-instruction writing often relied on limited temporal sequencing (e.g., then, later, after) with minimal variation in placement or rhetorical purpose. Adverbials frequently appeared in clause-final positions and functioned primarily as chronological markers. Following instruction, students demonstrated greater syntactic flexibility, including sentence-initial framing devices (e.g., Over the past several years), mid-clause modifiers, and more elaborated process constructions (e.g., through sustained engagement in writing-intensive courses).

This qualitative shift complements the quantitative findings. The substantial increase in adverbial frequency ($t(50) = 23.51$, $p < .001$) suggests that instruction supported greater production, while the discourse-level analysis indicates that these forms were embedded within meaningful argumentative and reflective contexts. From a usage-based perspective, the integration observed may reflect strengthened form–function associations resulting from repeated exposure and guided practice. Instruction emphasized categorization of adverbial types, identification in model texts, and analogy-based sentence construction. Such tasks align with mechanisms of pattern recognition and entrenchment, which posit that learners abstract constructions from recurring, contextually situated use rather than from isolated rule memorization.

Nevertheless, integration was not uniform across all participants. While most students demonstrated expanded deployment and rhetorical framing, a minority continued to rely on simpler adverbial forms. This variability is consistent with usage-based accounts of gradual development, in which acquisition depends on the frequency of engagement and meaningful interaction with target constructions.

Taken together, the findings suggest that explicit grammar instruction, when embedded within authentic writing tasks, may support both increased frequency and functional integration of grammatical forms. However, without a comparison group, the results should be interpreted as evidence of instructional influence within this specific classroom setting rather than as definitive proof of generalized transfer effects.

Structural Complexity and Readability Indicators. To examine potential changes in writing quality, both quantitative readability measures and qualitative discourse analysis were considered. Readability scores (Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level) were compared across pre- and post-instruction writing samples. Post-instruction texts demonstrated modest shifts toward greater syntactic complexity, as reflected in grade-level adjustments and

changes in reading ease scores. While readability metrics do not directly measure rhetorical quality, they provide an objective indicator of structural variation and sentence-level complexity.

Increased adverbial usage may partially account for these shifts. Expanded use of sentence-initial framing devices, embedded process modifiers, and multi-word adverbial constructions likely contributed to longer clause structures and increased syntactic density, which are reflected in readability calculations. However, readability scores should be interpreted cautiously. Such indices primarily capture sentence length and syllable count rather than coherence, argument strength, or stylistic sophistication. Therefore, they serve as supplementary indicators rather than definitive measures of writing quality.

Qualitative analysis of post-instruction compositions revealed clearer temporal framing, improved logical transitions, and greater discourse cohesion. Students increasingly employed adverbials to:

- Frame arguments (e.g., From a rhetorical perspective . . .)
- Signal causality (e.g., As a result . . .)
- Indicate contrast (e.g., In contrast . . .)
- Provide process elaboration (e.g., Through sustained engagement . . .)

Pre-instruction writing frequently relied on basic chronological sequencing. Post-instruction samples demonstrated a wider range of rhetorical functions and greater positional flexibility, suggesting increased metalinguistic awareness and control over grammatical resources. These discourse-level developments align with the substantial increase in adverbial production identified in RQ1 ($t(50) = 23.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.29$). The frequency gain appears to have been accompanied by functional diversification rather than mechanical overuse.

Although improvements were observed in both readability metrics and qualitative cohesion, it would be methodologically inappropriate to attribute global writing improvement solely to explicit grammar instruction. Writing development is multidimensional and influenced by familiarity with genre, feedback cycles, revision practices, and broader rhetorical training.

The findings instead suggest that explicit, usage-based grammar instruction may contribute to localized improvements in syntactic variation and discourse framing within authentic writing contexts. These improvements appear most pronounced in the domain of adverbial awareness and deployment rather than in holistic writing proficiency.

Summary of Findings Across Research Questions

Taken together, the findings across research questions indicate that explicit, usage-informed instruction was associated with measurable changes at both the metalinguistic and textual levels. Quantitative analyses revealed statistically significant pre–post gains in participants' conceptual understanding of adverbials, as well as increases in overall adverbial frequency and greater positional variability in written compositions. Qualitative examination of writing samples further suggested that these shifts were not limited to surface-level insertion but reflected more deliberate integration of adverbials into clause structure and discourse organization.

At the same time, the results demonstrate variation in the extent and consistency of these changes across participants, underscoring that instructional impact was neither uniform nor absolute. Improvements in structural complexity and readability indices were observable but modest, suggesting that enhanced grammatical awareness does not automatically translate into a comprehensive transformation of writing quality. Rather, the findings point to incremental

development consistent with usage-based accounts of learning, in which repeated exposure, attentional focus, and contextualized practice contribute gradually to constructional entrenchment.

Overall, the combined quantitative and qualitative evidence supports the conclusion that explicit attention to adverbial constructions can facilitate increased awareness and more flexible deployment in academic writing, while also indicating the limits of short-term instructional intervention. These results provide an empirical foundation for the interpretive discussion that follows.

Pedagogical Implications: What Explicit Instruction Looks Like in Practice

To make the instructional approach more concrete, this section outlines how explicit grammar instruction can be implemented in writing classrooms. Rather than presenting grammar as a set of abstract rules, instruction in this study treated grammar as a resource for meaning making. For example, when teaching concessive adverbials (e.g., *although*, *even though*), students first analyzed how these structures function in published academic writing to introduce complexity and nuance. They then practiced rewriting their own claims to incorporate concessions, thereby strengthening the depth of their arguments.

Similarly, instruction on causal adverbials (e.g., *because*, *since*, and *as a result*) emphasized how writers construct logical relationships between ideas. Students were asked to revise paragraphs by explicitly marking causal connections, thereby improving clarity and coherence.

These instructional practices demonstrate that explicit grammar teaching does not need to be decontextualized or prescriptive. Instead, it can be integrated into writing instruction in ways that directly support students' rhetorical goals.

Conclusion

This study examined whether explicit, usage-based grammar instruction influenced adult L1 English learners' deployment of adverbials in authentic academic writing. By combining quantitative pre–post analysis with qualitative discourse examination, the study aimed to evaluate both frequency-based change and functional integration.

The findings indicate a substantial increase in adverbial usage following instruction. A paired-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant rise from pre-instruction ($M = 11.57$, $SD = 1.81$) to post-instruction writing ($M = 20.16$, $SD = 2.93$), $t(50) = 23.51$, $p < .001$, with a very large effect size ($d = 3.29$). This result demonstrates a robust shift in grammatical production across participants.

Qualitative analysis further suggests that the increase was not merely numerical but functional. Post-instruction writing displayed greater syntactic flexibility, more varied rhetorical framing, and increased deployment of adverbials for cohesion, stance marking, and process elaboration. These developments align with usage-based accounts of language learning, which emphasize frequency, pattern recognition, and entrenchment through meaningful engagement rather than isolated rule acquisition.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted within the limits of the study design. The absence of a control group prevents definitive causal claims, and the classroom-based context restricts generalizability. Additionally, while readability metrics suggested modest increases in syntactic complexity, such measures do not fully capture broader dimensions of writing quality.

Rather than demonstrating that explicit grammar instruction serves as the foundation of writing improvement, the results more cautiously suggest that explicit, contextually embedded

grammar instruction can support measurable gains in targeted grammatical features within authentic writing tasks. When integrated with ongoing composition practice, grammar instruction may enhance learners' metalinguistic awareness and expand their repertoire of discourse-level resources.

Future research could extend this work by incorporating comparison groups, delayed posttests to examine retention, and additional measures of holistic writing quality. Longer instructional periods may also clarify whether observed gains reflect durable entrenchment or short-term production effects.

Overall, this study contributes to ongoing debates regarding the role of explicit grammar instruction in L1 composition by providing empirical evidence that usage-informed, context-embedded instruction can yield substantial increases in grammatical deployment without isolating grammar from meaningful writing practice.

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Appendix A: Pretest

A. Answer the following questions.

1. Have you ever had any formal grammar classes?
2. What is an adverb? Bring some examples.
3. What is an adverbial? Support your definition with examples.

B. What does the underlined portion of the sentence express?

1. He works in the bank.	a. means b. position c. direction d. condition
2. Jason was coming back from his travel to Europe.	a. position b. distance c. reason d. direction
3. Sadly, the flood destroyed the bridge connecting those two cities.	a. judgment b. manner c. claim d. cause
4. The man was politely admitted to the meeting.	a. respect b. manner c. emphasis d. condition
5. Kenzie drove to Chicago on Monday.	a. duration b. frequency c. position d. relationship
6. The results of the competition were released by the journalist earlier than expected.	a. means b. instrument c. agent d. manner
7. Frankly, he is not going to pass the test.	a. manner b. style disjunct c. content disjunct d. process disjunct
8. Bonita is evaluating her employees by interviewing them.	a. manner b. means c. instrument d. agent
9. Kenzie and Haley had traveled a very long way.	a. distance b. position c. duration d. cause
10. The meeting with the Jones dates back to 1989.	a. duration b. position c. direction d. distance
11. Travis has been working in the company for almost 8 years.	a. duration b. position c. direction d. distance
12. John is still working on his proposal for the conference.	a. position b. relationship c. frequency d. duration
13. Arguably, Mrs. Jenkins consults with her lawyer every now and then.	a. truth b. doubt c. judgment d. reality
14. They tried to solve the issue mathematically.	a. means b. instrument c. agent d. manner
15. They have been working on this machine since 10 a.m.	a. duration b. position c. relationship d. frequency
16. Mr. Foster says that he neglects his children.	a. manner b. relationship c. disjunct d. adjunct
17. The boy, apparently, has forgotten to lock the door.	a. claim b. doubt c. judgment d. respect

18. Like John, Mary has applied for the senior position in the company.	a. manner b. relationship c. position d. agent
19. The Johnsons go fishing once every month.	a. manner b. frequency c. position d. agent
20. Is Mary at home, by any chance?	a. claim b. doubt c. judgment d. respect

C. Answer the following questions in 2–3 short sentences.

1. How do you think knowledge about adverbs and adverbials can help you in your writing?
2. How do you think knowledge of adverbs and adverbials can help you in your reading?
3. What do you think about the following statements? Explain your answer in 2–3 short sentences.

    a. It is important for learners to know grammatical terminology.

    b. Explicit discussion of grammar rules is helpful for students.

    c. Learning grammar can make a student's writing more effective.

    d. I need to be consciously aware of a structure's form and its function before I can use it proficiently.

Appendix B: Posttest

A. Answer the following questions. (6 pts.)

1. What is an adverb? Bring some examples.
2. What is an adverbial? Support your definition with examples.

B. What does the underlined portion of the sentence express? (20 pts.)

1. Justine has been living in this apartment <u>for over 10 years</u>.	a. position b. frequency c. duration d. distance
2. My family has decided to move <u>to Chicago</u>.	a. position b. direction c. distance d. means
3. Jason has <u>already</u> done the tasks he was told <u>by his teacher</u>.	a. relationship-agent b. frequency-agent c. relationship-instrument d. frequency-agent
4. <u>Fortunately</u>, no one was injured in that accident <u>last night</u>.	a. disjunct-frequency b. adjunct-frequency c. disjunct-position d. adjunct-position
5. Laurel has to take the job <u>seriously</u> if she wants to get a promotion in her office.	a. manner b. style disjunct c. content disjunct d. illocutionary disjunct
6. Larry should be picked up <u>from school</u> because of the weather condition.	a. relationship b. distance c. direction d. instrument
7. Their first meeting <u>dates back to 2002</u> when they were both hired by the company.	a. relationship b. position c. distance d. frequency
8. Mariana has been <u>cleverly</u> doing the puzzles in the competition.	a. disjunct b. manner c. position d. instrument
9. Could he <u>possibly</u> have killed his father <u>with this knife</u>?	a. adjunct-means b. adjunct-instrument c. disjunct-means d. disjunct-instrument
10. He speaks several European and oriental languages as well as Arabic <u>very fluently indeed</u>.	a. manner b. style disjunct c. content disjunct d. illocutionary disjunct
11. A cure for chronic bronchitis is <u>yet</u> to be found.	a. position b. relationship c. means d. distance
12. He <u>immediately</u> stopped the machine after observing a small change in the final product.	a. position b. frequency c. duration d. direction
13. The boy broke his leg <u>running up the stairs</u>.	a. direction b. position c. distance d. instrument
14. The burglars used <u>an acetylene lamp</u> to break open the safe.	a. position b. means c. instrument d. manner
15. Jacob could see his high school classmate <u>on the bus</u> after a long time.	a. means b. direction c. position d. instrument
16. Chris was reading a book written <u>by Tolstoy</u> the other day.	a. agentive b. instrument c. position d. disjunct
17. They have planned to go cruising Europe <u>by train</u> for their summer vacation.	a. direction b. position c. instrument d. means

18. Frankly, the road had a very poor surface.	a. position b. means c. instrument d. disjunct
19. This class has always volunteered to do the decorations for the New Year.	a. frequency b. direction c. position d. agentive
20. You can stick the pieces together with glue.	a. means b. instrument c. direction d. position

C. Answer the following questions in 2–3 short sentences. (8 pts.; each question is 2 pts.)

1. Do you prefer explicit grammar teaching or implicit grammar teaching? (In explicit, the teacher presents the rules and principles and then provides examples to practice those rules. In implicit, the teacher provides examples and the students try to infer the rules; the teacher does not provide students with the rules.)
2. Do you think knowledge about adverbs and adverbials can help you in your writing? How?
3. Do you think knowledge of adverbs and adverbials can help you in your reading? How?
4. What do you think about the following statements? Explain your answer in 2–3 short sentences.
    a. It is important for learners to know grammatical terminology.
    b. Explicit discussion of grammar rules is helpful for students.
    c. Learning grammar can make a student's writing more effective.
    d. I need to be consciously aware of a structure's form and its function before I can use it proficiently.

Appendix C: Writing Assignment Prompts

Autobiography

Please tell me a little about your background. I am interested in who you are in general, but also, more specifically, in what kinds of writing you do and have done. How is writing (of any kind) part of your daily life? What experiences have you had that made you feel good about writing, and what experiences have been discouraging? What kinds of academic writing have you done in college? What kinds of writing do you anticipate will be important to meet your goals while you are in college or high school? What questions or concerns do you have about the reading and writing you will be doing for this class and beyond? How is English 145 (as described in the syllabus and the course reader) similar to or different from what you were expecting? What do you think is a good piece of writing?

Write as formally or informally as you like until you have one double-spaced page (in 12-point Times New Roman font, around 250 words). Don't stay up all night worrying about your grammar, but do proofread so that my first experience of your writing is a positive one.

Memoir Prompts

Choose a topic that meets the following criteria:

- Something you have STRONG FEELINGS about
- Something you KNOW A LOT about
- Something you can DESCRIBE IN GREAT DETAIL
- Something your AUDIENCE will be interested in (automatic if you write about something unique to you)
- Something your audience will feel was WORTH READING (automatic if you write about something unique to you)

Your memoir should meet the following expectations:

- It focuses and reflects on the relationship between the writer and a particular person, place, animal, or object.
- It explains the significance of the relationship.
- It is limited to a particular phase, time period, place, or recurring behavior in order to develop the focus fully.
- It makes the subject of the memoir come alive.
- It includes an introduction with an attention-grabbing opening.
- It includes details that set the scene.
- The word count is 800–1,000 words.

Please note: Your writing is confidential on all matters EXCEPT: (1) hurting yourself, (2) hurting others, and (3) illegal actions.

Letter Writing Prompts

Choose three of the five situations below and write a letter for each. Each letter should be between 200 and 250 words.

1. You have recently bought a product, but it is not as you had expected and there is a problem with it. Write a letter to the manufacturer and complain about the product.
2. You would like to apply for a job or internship. Write a letter of inquiry to that company or institution and show your interest in the position.
3. You have recently visited a business or an institution, but you were not satisfied with the services. Write a letter to make suggestions about that place. In your letter, state why you were not satisfied and how they can improve their services.

4. Write a letter to a messy roommate, a letter explaining a request to a parent, or a letter of apology to a friend. This is an informal letter, and your letter should make an impact or create ethos for the reader.
5. Imagine you are trapped on an island in the middle of nowhere. Write a message in a bottle to someone. This can be an SOS message, a message telling others how good your life is now, or a message about how bad it is. What message would you want people to find?

Personal Statement Prompts

Read the prompts below and write your personal statement. This paper should be 800–1,000 words. Pay attention to details and try to present yourself in the best way you can.

- There seem to be four distinct time periods captured in a personal statement:
- The first is the author's past. What has formed you into the person you are?
- This leads to the present. Who are you? How can you be summed up?
- A trickier time period to consider is the near future. Who will you be if you are given the opportunity you are applying for (whether a job, internship, public office, or scholarship)? How will this opportunity allow you to grow? How will you use the opportunity to help others or contribute to a common goal? How will you work with this opportunity?
- Finally, when you come out on the other end of the opportunity, in the distant future, who will you be? How will you be better? How will you have bettered the situation of others?

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Practitioner Article

Using Neuro-Affirming Picturebooks in Early Childhood Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the importance of using neuro-affirming picturebooks in early childhood classrooms to promote awareness, empathy, advocacy, and inclusion related to neurodiversity. Drawing on scholarship on diverse children's literature and disability representation, the article discusses how these books can support children with neurodiverse learning needs while also helping neurotypical children develop more empathetic, strengths-based perspectives. To illustrate practical classroom application, the article presents a hypothetical four-day instructional unit focused on dyslexia for a second-grade classroom. The article concludes with considerations for selecting neuro-affirming picturebooks that reflect diverse identities and align with strengths-based and social models of disability.

KEYWORDS

neuro-affirming picturebooks; neurodiversity; early childhood education; inclusive literacy instruction; disability representation; diverse literature

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), the student population in many early childhood classrooms has become dramatically diverse along the lines of race, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, and ability over the past two decades. Consequently, critical scholars (e.g., Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2021) argue for early childhood teachers to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of diverse people into the curriculum as a means of celebrating, affirming, and advocating for people from diverse backgrounds and creating humanizing and inclusive learning environments for all children. While many early childhood teachers have made much progress in diversifying the curriculum regarding race and culture, fewer early childhood teachers have incorporated the experiences of people with disabilities into the curriculum (Hansen et al., 2023).

Although approximately 20% of students in United States classrooms are neurodivergent, very few early childhood educators incorporate the perspectives and experiences of neurodivergent people in the curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The absence of experiences and perspectives related to neurodivergent people in the curriculum can often lead young children into developing biases, stereotypes, and ableist attitudes and actions toward neurodivergent people in the classroom and in the world around them (Hansen et al., 2023; Hiremath et al., 2025; Mullins, 2024).

In this article, I argue that early childhood educators should use neurodivergent-affirming (or neuro-affirming) picturebooks to promote neurodiversity awareness and advocacy among young children. I begin by defining key terms as they are being used in this article. Next, drawing on scholarship related to diverse children's literature and disability representation in picturebooks, I outline and discuss three reasons why using neuro-affirming picturebooks is necessary in early childhood classrooms. Then, I provide an example of how teachers might incorporate these picturebooks in a 4-day instructional unit on dyslexia. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of

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considerations teachers should embrace when selecting neuro-affirming picturebooks for use in early childhood classrooms.

It is important to note here that two conflicting models of disability (neurodiversity) exist within the broader scholarship on this topic: the medical model and the social model (Goodley, 2014). Goodley (2014) points out that the medical model of disability (neurodiversity) views disability exclusively through biological, genetic, hormonal, neurological, and physiological lenses. Consequently, people who are identified as being disabled or neurodivergent are often viewed as individuals who are impaired and in need of medical attention or treatment to fully participate in society.

In contrast, the social model of disability problematizes this notion and views disability (neurodiversity) through the lenses of the social, economic, cultural, and political factors, policies, practices, and systems that prevent people with disabilities from participating fully in various aspects of society. While the medical model focuses on identifying and addressing the deficits a neurodivergent person may have, the social model focuses on identifying the strengths and assets neurodivergent people possess. Additionally, the social model focuses on transforming the social forces, factors, policies, practices, and systems that prohibit people who are neurodivergent from fully participating in various aspects of society (Berglund, 2023). Furthermore, I draw from the social model of neurodiversity in this article.

Defining Key Concepts

The concepts I espouse here include neurodivergent, neurodivergent awareness, neurodivergent advocacy, and neuro-affirming picturebooks. The term neurodivergent is commonly used by medical professionals, theorists, and educators to recognize the neurological differences that exist within an individual's brain (Singer, 1999; Slagus & Kitchin, 2024). According to Dunne (2024) common categories of neurodiversity include the following: Autism Spectrum Disorders; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; Learning disabilities; Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD; Dyspraxia); Dyslexia; Tourette Syndrome; Bipolar Disorder; Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD); Synesthesia; Acquired Brain Injury; Epilepsy; and Mental Health Conditions. Furthermore, when I refer to a neurodivergent person in this article, I am referring to a person who has one or more of these conditions.

Neurodivergent awareness refers to the process of acknowledging, accepting, and valuing neurological differences in individuals (Dwyer, 2022). Essentially, neurodivergent awareness promotes the general idea that these diverse and creative brain differences often require responsive, adaptive, and inclusive teaching and learning strategies and environments (Singer, 1999). Neurodivergent awareness asserts that these cognitive differences have a direct impact on how people learn and behave. For this reason, neurodivergent people should be honored and celebrated for their unique perspectives and experiences, without experiencing deficit and/or judgmental views from others (Singer, 1999).

Much like disability advocacy, neurodivergent advocacy involves justice-oriented actions, initiatives, and systemic changes aimed at promoting equality, equity, and human rights for people with diverse brain wirings (Saunders, 2018). In addition, neurodivergent advocacy urges individuals to move from a medical and deficit-oriented model of working with individuals who are neurodivergent and toward a strengths-based, neuro-affirming, and humanizing approach (Mullins, 2024). Four key values that are frequently involved in neurodivergent advocacy include: 1) applying a neuro-affirmative approach; 2) appropriate and respectful language choices and usages; 3) anti-ableism; and 4) a social model of disability (Mullins, 2024). Furthermore,

neurodivergent advocacy focuses on making individual and systemic accommodations and changes to respond appropriately to the needs, interests, and strengths of people who are neurodivergent in society in general and in classrooms in particular (Mullins, 2024; Saunders, 2018).

Drawing from scholarship (e.g., Hiremath et al., 2025; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Leveto, 2018; Mullins, 2024; Thompson, 2018) related to neurodivergent advocacy, I define neuro-affirming picturebooks as (picturebooks) that acknowledge, center, and affirm the experiences and perspectives of neurodivergent people. These books contain main or secondary characters, or both, who are neurodivergent. It is important to note that, while most of the main characters in neuro-affirmative picturebooks are human beings, some neuro-affirmative picturebooks feature animals, creatures, or objects as main characters as well. Moreover, neuro-affirming picturebooks can be fiction or nonfiction.

Benefits of Using Neuro-Affirming Picturebooks

A substantial body of scholarship (e.g., Hammond, 2015; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Kingsbury, 2022) identifies a wide range of academic and social benefits associated with using diverse picturebooks with children from diverse and non-diverse backgrounds. A full discussion of these benefits is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, drawing from this body of scholarship, I highlight three potential benefits of using neuro-affirming picturebooks with young children in the following section.

First, using neuro-affirming picturebooks can create spaces in the classroom where neurodivergent children see themselves reflected, celebrated, and included (Hayden & Prince, 2020). Through ongoing and sustained interactions with neuro-affirming picturebooks, neurodivergent children are likely to develop higher levels of self-acceptance and feel fully included in the classroom (Mullins, 2024). For example, a second-grade teacher who has several children in her classroom who have ADHD might intentionally read *Rainbow Brain* (Menon, 2023) to create a dialogical space to help her students develop a better understanding of this neurological condition. In short, this book shares the experiences of a person who is both autistic and has ADHD (AuADHD). This book also helps readers understand that people with differently wired brains are not deficient. Using a strengths-based lens, this author highlights the fact that people who are autistic and have ADHD are often very creative, curious, sensitive, and deep-thinking people. Additionally, this book uses colorful illustrations and a positive and celebratory tone to describe the unique experience of having these two neurotypes together. In this sense, neuro-affirming picturebooks serve as "mirrors" (Bishop, 1990) for neurodivergent children. When books serve as mirrors for individual experiences, "literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience" (Bishop, 1990, p. 9).

In addition to creating spaces in the classroom where neurodivergent children see themselves reflected, celebrated and included, using neuro-affirming picturebooks can also help teachers dismantle implicit biases and deficit-oriented perspectives that young children often hold toward and about neurodivergent people in the classroom and in the world around them. Research (e.g., Aboud, 2003; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Dunham et al., 2011; Hamilton & Pottinger, 2024; Hayden & Prince, 2023) points out that it is not uncommon for many young children to hold biased, negative, and deficit-oriented attitudes toward people who do not share the same identity and/or group status as them. Conversely, children who regularly read about the experiences of neurodivergent people are more likely to develop anti-biased and strengths-based perspectives

toward neurodivergent people than children who do not read about them regularly (Mullins, 2024). For instance, a first-grade teacher who is noticing that some of the neurotypical children in the classroom are holding and expressing negative attitudes about an autistic child in the classroom might decide to read *A Friend for Henry* (Bailey, 2019) to help disrupt some of the stereotypes associated with people who are autistic. In short, this book tells the story of a young autistic boy, Henry, who hopes to make a friend in his classroom. Henry pays close attention to the details around him (e.g., how others move, speak, and play). Henry feels most comfortable when things are calm and predictable. Since his classmates don't always behave in ways he expects, building friendships can feel confusing and sometimes frustrating. In time, Henry learns that friendship does not need to match his exact expectations.

Using neuro-affirming picturebooks can also help neurotypical children develop a sense of empathy toward neurodivergent people in the classroom and the world around them (Katch, 2018; Mullins, 2024; Wee et al., 2022). Essentially, reading stories featuring neurodivergent characters on a consistent basis can help neurotypical children consider multiple perspectives about neurodivergent people and develop a sense of empathy and compassion toward the challenges that neurodivergent people experience in society (Katch, 2018; Mullins, 2024). For example, by reading books about dyslexia, such as *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998) and *Tom's Special Talent* (Gaynor, 2009) consistently in the classroom, children who are not dyslexic can develop a sense of empathy for people who are dyslexic.

Thank You, Mr. Falker tells the true story of author Patricia Polacco's struggle with learning to read and the teacher who changed her life. The story begins when the main character, named Trisha, is very young. When Trisha starts school, she discovers that reading does not come easily to her. Letters often look jumbled and tangled on the page, and no matter how hard she tries, she has difficulty making sense of them. Trisha feels ashamed and begins to believe that she is not smart, even though she is creative, artistic, and thoughtful. Everything begins to change when she moves to a new school and meets Mr. Falker, a warm and perceptive teacher. With the help of Mr. Falker and a reading specialist, Trisha slowly begins to decode words and finally experiences the joy of reading on her own.

Reading neuro-affirming picturebooks in the classroom can also contribute greatly to the social and emotional learning development in neurodivergent children (Dermata, 2019; Mullins, 2024; Schoppmann et al., 2023). Through reading about the perspectives and experiences of neurodivergent people on a consistent basis, children can develop the language and skills needed to handle (neurodivergent associated) challenges (e.g., meltdowns, sensory overloads, overstimulation, etc.) in positive, nonthreatening, and constructive ways (Dermata, 2019; Mullins, 2024). For example, a kindergarten teacher who has a child in her classroom who is experiencing self-regulation challenges due to sensory processing issues might select the book, *Wiggles, Stomps, and Squeezes Calm My Jitters Down* (Parker, 2021), in an effort to normalize instances when people experience sensory processing difficulties and to identify developmentally appropriate strategies for self-regulation. In short, this book explores what daily life feels like for a young child with sensory differences. The story is told from the child's perspective, allowing readers to experience the sensations, movements, and coping strategies that help the child manage overwhelming feelings.

Using Neuro-Affirming Picturebooks to Teach About Dyslexia

To illustrate the power and potential of using neuro-affirming picturebooks in early childhood classrooms, in the sections that follow, I describe how a hypothetical second-grade teacher named

Ms. Williams uses neuro-affirming picturebooks to teach a 4-day instructional unit on the topic of dyslexia. Table 1 provides a list of examples of neuro-affirming picturebooks that might be used in early childhood classrooms. While the broader focus of this article is on using neuro-affirming picturebooks across all categories of neurodiversity, it is important to note here that Table 1 only includes examples of picturebooks that center on the theme of dyslexia. This decision was made to remain consistent with the overarching theme of the 4-day unit shared later in this article. Thus, picturebooks representing all categories of neurodiversity were not included in this table. Considering the focus of this article is early childhood classrooms (K–2 in particular), I include only books deemed appropriate for most early childhood classrooms; therefore, young adult literature was excluded from this list. Furthermore, I include only books on this list that align with the social model of disability/neurodiversity.

Table 1: Examples of Neuro-Affirming Picturebooks

Title of Book	Author	Year	Description
The Alphabet War: A Story about Dyslexia	Diane Robb	2017	This book tells the story of a boy who struggles with reading and spelling. This has a dramatic impact on his self-esteem. He receives specialized help and eventually gains his self-confidence.
The Boy Who Learned Upside Down	Christy Scattarella	2013	This story centers on Alex, a boy who faces difficulties with reading and focusing in school. A supportive teacher helps him set a goal to earn a stuffed toy by doing well on a spelling test.
Brilliant Bea: A Story for Kids with Dyslexia and Learning Differences	Shaina Rudolph and Mary Vukadinovich	2021	This book tells the story of a young girl named Bea who struggles with reading, yet she is an excellent storyteller. Her teacher helps her audio-record her stories as a way of responding appropriately to her reading struggles.
Did You Say Pasghetti? Dusty and Danny Tackle Dyslexia	Tammy Fortune	2020	This book tells the story of a boy named Danny who is diagnosed with dyslexia, and he feels frustrated and insecure. He begins working with a reading specialist and a tutor who teaches him “special tricks” to train his brain and help him read more effectively.
Milo and the Wiggly Words: A Heartwarming Rhyming Story About Dyslexia, Confidence, and Learning in Your Own Way	G Money Cricket	2025	This book tells the story of a young fox named Milo who loves stories but finds reading very difficult. A kind teacher, Miss Maple, introduces him to specific tools and strategies that help him manage his reading challenges.
Molly’s Great Discovery	Krista Weltner	2024	This book tells a story of a girl named Molly who struggles to read, write, and spell. Eventually, she asks her teacher for assistance and learns how to advocate for herself.
Robby the Dyslexic Taxi and the Airport Adventure	Lynn Greenberg and Jonathan Greenberg	2025	This book tells the story of Robby, who is a taxi for the Creative Cab Company in the city of Greensborough. His dyslexia makes it challenging for him to read street signs. He

			learns to be successful by using his memory for routes he has already learned.
Sparkle: An Inclusive Kids Book Celebrating a Child with Dyslexia and Dysgraphia	Alexandra Hoffman	2025	This book tells the story of Jasmine, a girl with dyslexia, who struggles when it is time to read and write. She learns how to use wordless books to share her stories.
Tom's Special Talent	Kate Gaynor	2013	This book tells the story of a boy named Tom who struggles with reading and writing due to dyslexia and discovers he also has a unique talent for art and painting.
A Walk in the Words	Hudson Talbott	2012	This book tells the story of a boy who is a talented artist but struggles with reading. He learns to find success by moving along at his own pace and not comparing himself to others' progress.

Although the focus of this instructional unit is dyslexia, it can serve as a model for early childhood teachers designing and implementing instructional units of study on other topics related to neurodivergence. Table 2 provides an overview and a summary of the instructional activities included in this unit.

Table 2: Instructional Unit on Dyslexia

Step	Neuro-Affirming Picture Books Involved	Pre-Reading Activities	During Reading Activities	Post Reading Activities
1	***Thank You, Mr. Falker*** (Polacco, 1998)	Predictions	Critical Questioning and Dialogue	Create a Comic Strip to Summarize Key Events in Text
2	***A Walk in the Rain with a Brain*** (Hallowell, 2004) ***The Alphabet War*** (Robb, 2017) ***Ben and Emma's Big Hit*** (Newsom & Shamir, 2021) ***A Kids Book About Dyslexia*** (Travers, 2025) ***A Walk in the Words*** (Talbott, 2021)	Vocab-O-Gram Graphic Organizer	Making Connections	Quick Write
3	***If You're so Smart, How Come You Can't Spell*** **Mississippi?** (Esham, 2008)	3-2-1 Writing Activity	Character Analysis Graphic Organizer	Alternative Digital Story

4	***Molly's Great Discovery: A Book about Dyslexia and Self-Advocacy*** (Weltner, 2024)	Evaluating Controversial Statements	Critical Discussion	Advocacy Commercial

Teaching About Dyslexia

I chose to use a "hypothetical" teaching scenario because hypothetical scenarios can serve as efficient, non-threatening, meaningful, and effective methods for teachers (preservice and in-service) to study and develop solutions to similar problems, issues, situations, and challenges in the classroom (Alsaeed & Mohammad, 2023; Bernhardt, 2018; Yenen & Kızkapan, 2025). In this sense, hypothetical teaching scenarios are not intended to serve as a substitute for empirical data or research studies. Rather, hypothetical teaching scenarios are presented as opportunities for teachers to reflect on, learn about, and even reimagine their teaching practices (Alsaeed & Mohammad, 2023). Accordingly, the hypothetical teaching unit on dyslexia presented in the following section is intended to serve as a teaching and learning tool for early childhood teachers to reflect on, learn about, and expand their current teaching practices. To this end, the hypothetical unit on dyslexia discussed in this article involves a second-grade teacher named Ms. Williams. Ms. Williams has a class comprised primarily of non-dyslexic students. Nonetheless, three of the students in her class have been identified as being dyslexic.

Cultivating a Humanizing Environment of Mutual Respect and Honor

It is not unlikely that early childhood teachers may have classrooms with one or more dyslexic children in them (Robinson & Thompson, 2020). For this reason, it is critically important for teachers to teach in ways that are particularly sensitive, inclusive, and responsive to the social and emotional needs of children with dyslexia. To avoid inflicting social, emotional, or psychological harm on both dyslexic and non-dyslexic students, it is important that early childhood teachers embrace three commitments when implementing this unit. First, teachers should commit to using identity-first language. That is, language that affirms neurodivergence as an integral part of identity rather than treating it as a condition separate from the person (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Grant et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2026). Therefore, teachers should commit to using "dyslexic children" rather than "children with dyslexia" when implementing this unit, reflecting the preference expressed by many self-advocates within the neurodivergent community. In doing so, children begin to see dyslexia as a meaningful part of who someone is rather than something to be distanced from.

In addition, when teaching children about dyslexia or any other form of neurodiversity, it is important for teachers to avoid asking students to self-identify or discuss their experiences against their will. Asking students to self-identify may cause social, emotional, and psychological shame, hurt, and stigma for the child with dyslexia (Mankiw, 2021). Alternatively, teachers should consider meeting with the parents and guardians of children with dyslexia in the classroom prior to implementing the unit to determine whether they are comfortable sharing their experiences during the unit. Furthermore, if necessary or requested, children with dyslexia in the classroom should be given the option of being exempted from the unit.

Whenever possible, teachers should also look for opportunities to highlight commonalities between people with dyslexia and people without dyslexia. Through this process of highlighting the similarities between people with dyslexia and people without dyslexia, children without

dyslexia are less likely to develop stereotypes and biased attitudes toward people with dyslexia (Mullins, 2024). Furthermore, by embracing the previously mentioned commitments, teachers will alleviate potential educational harm and cultivate supportive, humanizing learning environments for all students in the classroom (Artman-Meeker et al., 2016). The following four-day instructional sequence provides one example of how these commitments can be translated into meaningful classroom instruction that promotes understanding, inclusion, and neuro-affirming perspectives related to dyslexia.

Four-Day Instructional Unit Sequence

Day 1: Building Background Knowledge on Dyslexia. To build background knowledge about dyslexia, Ms. Williams takes a few moments to introduce, explore, and define key vocabulary related to the topic. Ms. Williams introduces the book, *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998), to her students and asks them to make predictions about the story as she and her students take a "Picture Walk" (Ness, 2017) through the pages in the book. Ms. Williams records the students' predictions on chart paper to revisit at the completion of the reading.

As Ms. Williams reads the text aloud to the whole class, she pauses periodically and intentionally poses thought-provoking questions about the text. The goal here is to engage her students in a critical dialogue related to the topic (see Table 3). Whenever feasible, Ms. Williams strives to problematize (Freire, 1970) any stereotypical and deficit-oriented notions of dyslexia that may arise during this critical dialogue. After Ms. Williams finishes reading the book, she revisits the students' predictions and discusses how accurate they were. Ms. Williams then poses a few additional discussion questions to encourage her students to think critically about the major events in the text, as shown in Table 3. Lastly, students are directed to work in pairs and create a comic strip that summarizes key events in the text.

Table 3: Questions Posed During the Unit

Day	Central Texts Involved	Before Reading the Text	During Reading the Text	After Reading the Text
1	***Thank You, Mr. Falker*** (Polacco, 1998)	How do you think it feels when something is hard to learn, but other kids seem to "get it" quickly? Have you ever felt that way about something in school or at home? How do you feel when someone helps you with something that's tricky? Can you think of a time when a teacher, family member, or friend helped you learn something difficult? What does it mean to be "smart"?	Mr. Falker has the power to stop the bullying and help Trisha learn to read. How does he use his power as a teacher differently from the other adults in the story? Why is it important for teachers, or other grown-ups, to use their power to help students who are struggling? All the students in Trisha's class get the same lessons, but Trisha still can't read the way others can. Is treating everyone the same always fair?	How did Trisha change from the beginning of the book to the end? How did the kids' teasing affect Trisha? What could the other students have done instead of making fun of Trisha? Why do you think the author titled the book Thank You, Mr. Falker? What would you say to Mr. Falker if you were Trisha? Trisha was very good at drawing but struggled with reading. What does this teach us about being "smart"? Can

		Is there only one way to be smart, or can people be smart in different ways (like drawing, sports, building, or helping others)?	How does Mr. Falker make things more fair (equitable) for Trisha?	people be smart in different ways?
2	***A Walk in the Rain with a Brain*** (Hallowell, 2004) ***The Alphabet War*** (Robb, 2017) ***Ben and Emma's Big Hit*** (Newsom & Shamir, 2021) ***A Kids Book About Dyslexia*** (Travers, 2025) ***A Walk in the Words*** (Talbott, 2021)	What does it mean to be "smart"? Is there only one way to be smart, or can people be smart in different ways (like drawing, running, helping friends, or remembering things)? Have you ever worried that you weren't good enough or smart enough at something in school? How did that make you feel? Everyone's brain works a little differently. What are some things you understand or do well? What is something that can feel tricky or difficult for you? If you found a talking brain on the sidewalk, what do you think it might say to you? What questions would you ask it? Why do you think some kids learn to read, do math, or draw faster than others? Does that mean someone is smarter than other people?	Why is Lucy worried about not being smart enough? How do you think she feels when she first meets Fred? Fred says, "no brain is the same" and "each brain finds its own special way." What do you think that means? Ben loves everything about baseball. What do you notice he loves about the game? Why do you think baseball feels easier or more fun for him than reading? When Ben tries to read, the letters and sounds get jumbled up. How do you think this makes Ben feel?	How does this story change the way we think about being "smart"? Is there only one kind of smart, or are there many different kinds? What is one strength or special way your own brain works? Who in your life (a teacher, parent, friend, or coach) has helped you the way Ms. Kim or Emma helped Ben? How did they encourage you? What is one important lesson from Ben and Emma's Big Hit that you want to remember when something feels hard in school or while doing sports? How can we make our classroom a place where it's okay to struggle and keep trying?
3	***If You're so Smart, How Come You Can't Spell* Mississippi?** (Esham, 2008)	What does it mean to be "smart"? Can someone be very smart but still find certain things hard? Have you ever been surprised that someone who seems good at one thing struggles with something else?	Have you ever felt frustrated like Ben when learning something new? Why is Katie surprised when her dad has trouble spelling "Mississippi"? What does this show about how we sometimes think about smart people?	How does this story show that people can be smart in many ways? Have you ever felt like something was hard for you, even when other people thought you were "smart"? How does this book make you feel about that?

			How does Dad feel when he can't spell the word easily? How do you think Katie feels when she sees this?	What can we do to be kind and helpful to someone who has dyslexia or another learning difference?
4	***Molly's Great Discovery: A Book about Dyslexia and Self-Advocacy*** (Weltner, 2024)	What does it mean to be a good problem-solver or to have a big imagination? What are some things you love to figure out or create? Have you ever found something in school (like reading, spelling, or writing) tricky, even when you were trying your best? How did that feel? Is it always easy to ask for help when something is hard? Why or why not? When is asking for help a smart thing to do?	Why is reading hard for Molly even though she's smart and creative? How do you think she feels when she struggles? What happens when Molly gets diagnosed with dyslexia? How does learning the name for her struggle help her? Molly meets Leeann, who also has dyslexia. How does having a friend who understands help Molly?	What was Molly's "great discovery"? How did it change the way she felt about herself and her dyslexia? How did Molly's big imagination and problem-solving skills help her in the story? Why is it important to ask for help when you need it? How did self-advocacy make things better for Molly?

Day 2: Considering Multiple Perspectives on Dyslexia. During the second day in the instructional unit, Ms. Williams divides her students into five groups. Each group is presented with a different text set (Serravallo, 2023) to read related to the topic of dyslexia. In short, a text set is a group of different books that center around a similar theme, topic, or character (see Table 2). As a pre-reading activity, Ms. Williams instructs each group to take a picture walk through the books they were assigned to read and to identify three vocabulary words to explore in greater depth. Students are then asked to work collaboratively to complete a "Vocab-O-Gram" graphic organizer (Serravallo, 2023) as they read and discuss their text set in small groups. As a concluding activity for this day, students are asked to complete a "Quick Write" (Serravallo, 2023) based on what they learned from reading the text set assigned to them. Finally, Ms. Williams selects one representative from each group to share their learning and thinking with the other students in the classroom.

Day 3: Combating Myths, Stereotypes, and Deficit Thinking. Ms. Williams begins this day's lesson with the goal of dispelling myths, stereotypes, and deficit-oriented thought patterns that people in society often hold about people with dyslexia. As a pre-reading activity, she instructs her students to select a partner to work with for the subsequent activity. Then she hands each group of partners a single index card and instructs them to complete a "3-2-1" activity (Serravallo, 2023). Essentially, students are required to discuss and write three facts they learned about people with dyslexia, two things they found interesting or surprising, and one remaining question they still have about dyslexia. Next, Ms. Williams instructs each group of partners to share and discuss their index cards with another group. After a designated period of time, Ms. Williams brings the students back together as a whole group to discuss their index cards, and she documents the students' thinking on chart paper. Ms. Williams discusses the concept of "stereotypes" and "bias" and how some individuals in society tend to hold stereotypical and biased attitudes toward people who are

dyslexic. To this end, Ms. Williams shares background information for the book *If You're so Smart, How Come You Can't Spell Mississippi?* (Esham, 2008). In short, this book tells the story of a third-grader named Katie who admires her father and considers him to be one of the smartest people she knows. Katie is surprised when she asks him for help spelling the word Mississippi, and he says he can't spell it. Katie's dad explains to her that he has dyslexia, which makes reading and spelling difficult for him from time to time. This conversation motivates Katie to learn about dyslexia in greater depth. She researches what it means and learns that many talented and successful people often struggle with dyslexia.

Next, students are given a "Character Analysis Graphic Organizer" (Serravallo, 2023) and are asked to complete it as Ms. Williams reads the text. She lets her students know that they have the option to make either the "father" or the "daughter" the focus of the graphic organizer. Ms. Williams pauses periodically and strategically at specific points during the read-aloud to pose questions, promote discussion, and allow students time to complete components of their graphic organizers.

After reading the text, Ms. Williams further elaborates on the overarching theme that being dyslexic does not mean that a person is unintelligent. She then divides students into small groups and instructs them to create an alternative digital version of the text. She encourages her students to use the same overarching theme (as the book they just finished reading aloud) in their stories, while simultaneously creating different characters, settings, and other supporting details. Ultimately, the goal here is for her students to think critically about how stereotypical and biased information about people with dyslexia can lead to potential misunderstandings, prejudices, and even discriminatory actions.

Day 4: Promoting Justice and Advocacy. To promote justice and advocacy, Ms. Williams reads aloud *Molly's Great Discovery: A Book About Dyslexia and Self-Advocacy* (Weltner, 2024) on the final day of the instructional unit. In short, this book is about a young girl named Molly, who loves to explore, imagine, and figure out how things work. Although she enjoys learning, Molly notices that reading, writing, and spelling are much harder for her than they are for her classmates. After completing several assessments, Molly is diagnosed with dyslexia. As she begins to process this news, Molly meets Lexi, an imaginary companion who represents her dyslexia. Lexi reminds Molly that having dyslexia is simply one part of who she is and not something that defines her intelligence or potential.

Prior to reading the book, Ms. Williams divides her students into small groups. Each group is given an envelope with three controversial statements related to dyslexia. Students are then instructed to read the statements with their group members and discuss whether each is true or false and why. The primary goal of this activity is for students to use the information they learned in the previous three lessons to think critically about issues of equality, equity, and justice for people with dyslexia. Ms. Williams then discusses ways for people who are not dyslexic to advocate for people who are dyslexic and then records this information on chart paper. While reading the book, Ms. Williams pauses periodically and poses critical, reflective questions to facilitate dialogue on dyslexia, advocacy, and justice. Finally, as a culminating activity, students are asked to work in small groups to design, facilitate, and record a short 2-minute commercial that advocates for people with dyslexia in society.

Cautions and Considerations

As mentioned previously in this article, early childhood classrooms are becoming increasingly neurodiverse in composition. This suggests that early childhood teachers should incorporate neuro-affirming picturebooks as a means of affirming, centering, and humanizing neurodivergent people in the classroom and in broader society. As early childhood teachers search for texts to use in their respective classrooms, it is important to note that not all picturebooks with disabled (neurodivergent) characters are the same. While some picturebooks with disabled (neurodivergent) characters portray neurodivergent people in a positive light and from a strengths-based lens, others portray them through deficit-oriented, biased, and stereotypical lenses (Hayden & Prince, 2023; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019). For this reason, it is vital that early childhood teachers keep three considerations in mind as they decide which neuro-affirming books to include and which books to exclude in the classroom.

First, whenever possible, early childhood teachers should prioritize using neuro-affirming picturebooks that provide a multifaceted and/or nuanced view of the neurodivergent characters in the text. It is not uncommon for picturebooks featuring disabled characters to portray them in narrow, single-dimensional roles that focus almost exclusively on their disability (Kingsbury, 2022). Neurodivergent people are people who share multiple and intersecting identities (Dwyer, 2022). While highlighting and centering a character's neurodivergent classification is important, it is equally important to highlight and center other aspects of their identity. Furthermore, in doing so, children are better able to relate to these characters (Mullins, 2024).

In addition to prioritizing neuro-affirming picturebooks that portray neurodivergent characters in multifaceted and nuanced ways, it is also important for early childhood teachers to use neuro-affirming picturebooks with racially diverse neurodivergent characters whenever possible and feasible. Paciga and Koss (2022) point out that many children's books about people who are disabled (neurodivergent) contain only characters who are White. Consequently, whenever feasible, early childhood teachers should seek to incorporate neuro-affirming picturebooks with racially and culturally diverse characters to create affirming, celebratory, and inclusive spaces for neurodivergent students from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. This is not to suggest, by any means, that early childhood teachers should completely avoid using neuro-affirming picturebooks with White protagonists. Rather, the goal here is for teachers to be intentional about also including neuro-affirming picturebooks with both White and non-White main characters. In doing so, children of all cultural and racial backgrounds develop broader and more nuanced understandings of people who are neurodivergent.

Unfortunately, there are still many picturebooks on the market with main characters who are neurodivergent that focus on what I referred to earlier in this article as the medical model of disability (Berglund, 2023; Kingsbury, 2022; Matthews, 2009). This view of neurodiversity often perpetuates and even exacerbates deficit views toward people who are neurodivergent (Matthews, 2009; Saunders, 2000). Rather than including picturebooks that center the medical model of neurodiversity, early childhood teachers should prioritize using books that focus on the social model of disability/neurodiversity. While the medical model of disability/neurodiversity focuses on medical interventions and treatments that people with disabilities need to fully participate in society, the social model of disability points out and highlights the "social barriers which prevent equal opportunity and identifies a form of social oppression which can be overcome by social change" (Saunders, 2000, p. 26). By using only neuro-affirming books that center the social model of disability, children can develop empathetic, humanizing views of people who are neurodivergent in their classroom and in the larger world around them.

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Teaching Tips

From Blocks to Blueprints: Using the Science of Learning to Strengthen Science of Reading Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Teachers bring thoughtful, evidence-based elements into literacy lessons, and many plans capture that thinking in detail. Blocks to Blueprints is a streamlined 10–12-minute planning routine that helps teachers convert lesson blocks (instructional segments) into a usable one-page blueprint (a tight plan teachers can teach from and revise). The routine draws on Science of Learning principles—reducing extraneous cognitive load, using worked examples, and embedding retrieval practice—while protecting Science of Reading essentials such as explicit, systematic instruction and cumulative review. Teachers map a lesson into five non-negotiable instructional blocks, then translate each block into brief teacher language, observable student actions, and a quick evidence check. The result is a plan that is easier to teach and easier to improve. This article includes a printable one-page template, an example for grades 1–2, and a brief adaptation for grades 3–5 to demonstrate how the approach can transfer across grade levels.

KEYWORDS

science of learning; science of reading; cognitive load; retrieval practice; explicit instruction; lesson planning

Teachers' best literacy ideas deserve lesson designs that can hold up in the messy middle of real classrooms. When lesson plans reduce cognitive load and make essential instructional elements visible, teachers are more likely to enact instruction as intended. The Science of Learning reminds us that attention and working memory are limited (Baddeley, 2020; Sweller et al., 1998), so instructional design should simplify decision-making while protecting the core components of effective literacy instruction. Blocks to Blueprints is a simple planning routine that uses predictable lesson structures, worked examples (Sweller & Cooper, 1985), and retrieval practice (Dunlosky et al., 2013; Karpicke & Roediger, 2008) to strengthen Science of Reading–aligned instruction.

Many teachers already plan thoughtfully and effectively, using district templates, scripted programs, team-developed plans, or personal systems that align with their individual contexts. Blocks to Blueprints is not intended to replace those approaches or suggest that other planning methods lack value. Rather, it offers a streamlined overlay that helps teachers keep the most instructionally critical elements visible in real time, especially in busy classrooms where plans must be teachable, adaptable, and conducive to reflection.

Blocks to Blueprints is intentionally designed to strengthen Science of Reading-aligned instruction by protecting the components that make skill learning durable: explicit teaching, cumulative review, guided practice, and opportunities for independent application. At the same time, it keeps the end goal in view, with students using those skills to read connected text with understanding, reflecting the idea that skilled reading depends on both efficient word recognition

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and robust language comprehension. In other words, the framework supports teachers in moving from foundational skill construction to meaningful transfer, so students are not just practicing skills but applying them flexibly in authentic reading and writing.

Evidence Base in Brief

The Science of Reading literature converges on the idea that skilled reading develops through the coordinated growth of word recognition and language comprehension (Castles et al., 2018; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). The Simple View of Reading captures this relationship by emphasizing that reading comprehension depends on both decoding and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Scarborough's Reading Rope further illustrates how multiple subskills within word recognition and language comprehension become increasingly integrated over time, supporting fluent, meaningful reading (Scarborough, 2001). Recent syntheses reinforce that effective reading instruction requires explicit support for foundational word-reading processes alongside instruction that builds language, knowledge, and meaning-making (Castles et al., 2018). These principles are consistent with the Institution of Education Sciences practice guide recommendations for K–3 foundational skills instruction, including explicit instruction, cumulative review, and guided practice that supports accurate application in connected text (Foorman et al., 2016). Research also emphasizes that Science of Reading messaging can be oversimplified in practice; educators benefit from frameworks that preserve the Simple View's clarity while also reflecting advances in reading research and instruction (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

Science of Learning research explains why instructional routines and lesson designs matter for day-to-day teaching: attention and working memory are limited, so instruction should reduce extraneous cognitive load and keep essential information easy to access during performance (Agarwal & Bain, 2019; Baddeley, 2020; Sweller et al., 1998). Three design principles are especially relevant for planning. Worked examples reduce cognitive demands by making expert thinking visible and showing what success looks like before students attempt similar tasks (Sweller & Cooper, 1985). Retrieval practice strengthens long-term retention and supports transfer by requiring students to bring information to mind, rather than simply re-reading or re-exposure (Dunlosky et al., 2013; Karpicke & Roediger, 2008). Lastly, readers' attention significantly affects reading prosody, speed, word recognition, and comprehension (Yildiz & Cetinkaya, 2017). Since attention is malleable, we can chunk literacy work into segments that strengthen attention while also building meaning-making. Blocks to Blueprints draws on this combined evidence base by organizing instruction into five predictable blocks that move from support to independence. It then translates each block into brief teacher language, an observable student action, and a quick evidence check, making evidence-based reading content easier to enact, monitor, and refine in real classrooms.

Why "Blocks" Matter

Blocks to Blueprints aligns with core Science of Reading frameworks that define skilled reading as the coordinated development of word recognition and language comprehension. The Simple View of Reading frames reading comprehension as dependent on both decoding and linguistic comprehension, emphasizing that limitations in either component constrain understanding (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Scarborough's Reading Rope illustrates how multiple strands of word recognition and language comprehension become increasingly integrated over time (Scarborough, 2001). In practice, the blueprint protects explicit teaching and cumulative review within the word-

recognition strands while ensuring students apply skills in connected text and build meaning through vocabulary and knowledge. This supports the shift from accurate skill performance to comprehension and independent transfer.

In literacy instruction, the Science of Reading identifies the skills and instructional components that contribute to accurate, fluent, and meaningful reading, including the development of word recognition and language comprehension. The Science of Learning explains how attention, working memory, and long-term memory shape what students retain and can transfer. Instructional planning is where these two bodies of research intersect. Plans must protect evidence-based reading content, including explicit, systematic instruction, cumulative review, and opportunities to apply skills in connected text, while also incorporating design features that support retention, such as reducing extraneous cognitive load, using worked examples, and embedding retrieval practice.

Many teachers plan literacy lessons in ways that unintentionally increase extraneous cognitive load (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2011), including lengthy scripts, too many activities, unclear transitions, and limited space for checking understanding. When plans become unwieldy, teachers may abandon them mid-lesson, rely on memory, or rush through key parts. These are often the explicit modeling and cumulative reviews that students most need. Blocks to Blueprints solves a practical problem: teachers need a planning method that is (a) fast, (b) teachable, (c) aligned with evidence-based instruction, and (d) easy to revise after the lesson. The routine gives teachers a consistent structure they can rehearse, teach from, and improve with small adjustments.

The Routine in One Sentence

Build the lesson in five "blocks," then translate each block into a one-page "blueprint" with teacher language, student actions, and quick evidence checks.

The Five Instructional Blocks

To get started, sketch a lesson using five consistent blocks:

1. Retrieve & Review (2–5 min)
2. Teach (I Do; 5–8 min)
3. Guided Practice (We Do; 5–8 min)
4. Independent Application (You Do; 5–10 min)
5. Check & Connect (2–4 min)

The five instructional blocks align with familiar instructional frameworks, including the gradual release of responsibility: explicit modeling (I Do), guided practice (We Do), and independent application (You Do; Fisher & Frey, 2008). Rather than replacing existing routines, Blocks to Blueprints makes these established structures more visible and consistent during planning and instruction.

The Blocks to Blueprints framework includes two layers: the lesson blocks (what students experience during instruction) and the planning routine (how teachers create a one-page blueprint). The time ranges that follow describe typical instructional minutes within a literacy lesson, not during planning time. Planning the blueprint (Figure 1) is designed to take about 10–12 minutes because teachers quickly sketch the five blocks and then add three short lines for each: what the teacher will say/do, what students will do, and how learning will be checked. The included time

ranges are intended to communicate that planning can be completed efficiently; teachers may adjust timing as needed. The formatting guidance (rows/columns) is optional and included only to help readers quickly recreate the one-page template.

Figure 1: The Planning Routine That Builds the Five Instructional Blocks (10–12 minutes)

Stage 1. Name the Purpose (2 minutes)	**Do**	Write a single purpose sentence.
	Write	*Students will learn ____ so they can ____.*
	Example (/sh/)	"Students will learn sh spells /sh/ so they can read and spell words like ship and shop."
	Product	One sentence that anchors all five blocks.
	Quick Check	If your purpose has "and," narrow it to one target.
Stage 2. Sketch the Five Instructional Blocks (2 minutes)	**Do**	Draft the lesson skeleton using the same five blocks each time: 1) **Retrieve & Review** → 2) **Teach/ I Do** → 3) **Guided/ We Do** → 4) **Apply / You Do** → 5) **Check & Connect**
	Example (/sh/)	• **Retrieve:** review ch and th • **Teach:** introduce sh and model blending (*sh–i–p*) • **Guided**: read 2–3 /sh/ words together • **Apply:** read/write 2 /sh/ words independently **Check:** "circle and read the sh word" exit
	Product	A sequence that moves from support → independence.
	Quick Check	Every block has a job; if one is empty, you'll likely rush or skip it mid-lesson.
	Quick Check	If your purpose has "and," narrow it to one target.
Stage 3. Draft the One-Page Blueprint (4–5 minutes)	**Do**	For each of the five blocks, write three short lines: • Teacher says/does (brief, teachable language) • Students do (observable action) Evidence (a quick check for learning)
	Example lines (Teach / I Do, /sh/)	Teach / I Do, /sh/ • **Teacher**: "sh says /sh/. Watch: sh–i–p… *ship.*" • **Students:** repeat /sh/; blend with teacher **Evidence:** "Point to sh and say the sound."
	Product	A one-page plan you can teach from.
	Quick Check	If any cell becomes a paragraph, tighten it to a single line.
Stage 4. Tighten + Stress-Test (2–3 minutes)	**Do** (Tighten)	Choose one move: 1. Delete what doesn't serve the purpose 2. Reduce transitions/materials/examples Signal the critical feature (one routine, one visual cue)

	Do (Stress-test)	Answer three questions: • Where might students get stuck? • Where might I rush? What is my "evidence moment"?
	Example (/sh/)	Add a contrast pair in Guided if confusion is likely *(ship/chip).* Cut one Apply item to protect Teach time. Evidence moment = "boards up" for mapping *sh-i-p.*
	Product	A classroom-proof blueprint that protects the essential parts of the lesson.
	Quick Check	If time runs short, your first cuts should come from extras, not Retrieve or Teach.
	After the lesson (not a planning stage)	One-line revision (*30 seconds*) • **Write**: *Next time I will ____.* **Example**: "Next time, I will add one more We Do example before independent spelling.

Many teachers work within scripted or highly resourced curricula. Blocks to Blueprints is designed to function as a one-page overlay rather than a replacement for required materials. Teachers can map the program lesson into the five blocks (Retrieve, Teach, Guided, Apply, Check) and then add three short lines per block (teacher language, student action, evidence check) to clarify pacing, highlight the must-do instructional moments, and plan quick checks for understanding. If a school or district requires a uniform lesson-plan template, teachers can use the blueprint as the planning "source" and transfer key lines into required fields (objective/purpose, procedures, checks for understanding, differentiation).

Some teachers also attach the blueprint as a one-page lesson overview to accompany the required template, so the plan remains easy to teach from in real time. This makes the blueprint a living document instead of a one-and-done plan. Figure 2 shows how to first outline instruction using five predictable blocks, then translate each block into a one-page blueprint that specifies brief teacher language, observable student actions, and a quick evidence check. The result is a plan that is easier to implement and easier to refine.

Figure 2: Planning Stages → Instructional Blocks → One-Page Blueprint

Four Planning Stages (10–12 min)	→	One-Page Blueprint (what you teach from)
1. Name the purpose (one sentence)	→	Purpose line at the top of the page
2. Sketch the five blocks (lesson skeleton)	→	Five rows: Retrieve, Teach, Guided, Apply, Check
3. Blueprint each block (3 lines per block)	→	Three columns for each row: Teacher / Students / Evidence
4. Tighten + stress-test (Delete/Reduce/Signal + 3 questions)	→	Lean plan that protects key moments + clear evidence checks

Figure 3 provides a template to translate five instructional blocks into a one-page blueprint with brief language, observable student actions, and an aligned evidence check.

Figure 3: One-Page Blueprint Template

Lesson Purpose:

- Students will learn _____, so they can _____.

Target skill/knowledge: _____

Materials (keep to essentials): _____

Block	Teacher says/does (brief, teachable language)	Students do (observable action)	Evidence (quick check for learning)
1. Retrieve & Review (2–5 min)			
2. Teach / I Do (5–8 min)			
3. Guided Practice / We Do (5–8 min)			
4. Independent Application / You Do (5–10 min)			
5. Check & Connect (2–4 min)			

Tightening Move (*circle one*): **Delete / Reduce / Signal**

After-lesson note (*one sentence*): **Next time I will _____.**

Although the worked example in this article focuses on early decoding, the same one-page blueprint can be used to plan any part of the literacy block, including shared reading, writing, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. This is because the structure centers on clear purpose, intentional practice, and quick evidence of learning. To make the routine concrete, Figure 4 shows a full, classroom-ready worked example for grades 1–2, followed by a brief adaptation that

illustrates how the same five blocks transfer to grades 3–5. This worked example emphasizes phoneme–grapheme mapping, blending, and spelling because building secure word representations depends on connecting pronunciations to spellings and meanings through repeated, accurate mapping opportunities (Ehri, 2014).

Figure 4: Worked Example of a Decoding Lesson Blueprint

Lesson Purpose:

- Students will learn sh spells /sh/ so they can read and spell words with /sh/ accurately and automatically.

Target skill/knowledge: Digraph sh (/sh/ → sh), blending for decoding, phoneme–grapheme mapping for encoding.

Materials (keep to essentials): *sh* card, word cards (ship, shop, fish, dish, shell, rush), whiteboards/markers, 1 decodable sentence strip

Block	**Teacher says/does** (brief, teachable language)	**Students do** (observable action)	**Evidence** (quick check for learning)
1. Retrieve & Review (2–5 min)	"Quick review." Point to **ch**: "Sound?" Point to **th** "Sound?" Then: "Read these with me: *chip, thin*."	Choral respond to sounds; read 2 review words.	Listen for accurate sound + smooth reading; note who hesitates.
2. Teach / I Do (5–8 min)	"Today we will learn the digraph **sh**. **Sh** says /sh/." Show card: "Say /sh/." Watch my mouth as I say **sh.** **Worked example (decode):** "Watch: **sh – i – p**… *ship*." "I see **sh**, I say /sh/, then I blend."	Repeat /sh/; say /sh/ while noticing airflow and mouth position; track and blend with the teacher once.	"Point to **sh**." "Say the sound." (quick 3–5 student check)
3. Guided Practice / We Do (5–8 min)	**Blend together:** "Let's read these; my turn first, then together." (*fish, shop, dish*) **Map together (tap → map):** "Tap the sounds in *ship*: /sh/ /i/ /p/. Now map the letters: **sh i p**." Error-correction line: "Try again. Start with /sh/."	Blend words chorally; tap phonemes; write the word with teacher support.	Scan boards for **sh** at the start; 2 students explain: **"sh** says /sh/."
4. Independent Application / You Do (5–10 min)	"Now you try." **Read:** 4-word mix (2 *sh* + 2 review): *ship, fish, chip, thin*. **Spell:** Dictate 2 words: *ship, shop*. Prompt: "Tap → map → write." (Optional sentence: "She has fish.")	Read words to teacher/partner; tap and write dictated words.	Tally accuracy (read/spell). Look for error type: sound confusion vs. missing digraph.
5. Check & Connect (2–4 min)	**Exit:** "Circle the word with **sh** and read it." (ship / chip / thin) **Connect:** "When you see **sh**, your brain can say /sh/ fast. That helps you read smoothly."	Circle + read; quick share-out.	1:1 or small group exit check; jot names for reteach.

Tightening Move: **Signal** (one new spelling, a small word set, one routine: Tap → Map → Read)

After-lesson note: **Next time I will** (e.g., "add one more We Do contrast pair ship/chip if students confuse /sh/ and /ch/.")

Sidebar

Adaptation Snapshot (Grades 3–5): Morphology During Read-Aloud

Purpose: Students will learn the prefix *re-* means "again" so they can infer the meaning of unfamiliar words in connected text.

- **Retrieve & Review (2 min):** Quick recall of a previously taught prefix (e.g., *pre-* = before); students give one example word. **Evidence:** 3 rapid responses.
- **Teach / I Do (4 min):** Model chunking (*re* + *build* → rebuild = build again) with one worked example and one think-aloud. **Evidence:** choral response: "*re-* means ___."
- **Guided / We Do (5 min):** Students chunk and explain 2 words together (*reread, revisit*) using a sentence frame: "___ means ___ again." **Evidence:** listen for prefix + base + meaning.
- **Apply / You Do (5–7 min):** During the read-aloud, students identify one *re-* word and write a quick meaning inference with because: "___ means ___ because ___." **Evidence:** quick scan for accurate inferences.

Check & Connect (2 min): Exit: define one *re-* word and use it in a sentence; connect to comprehension ("chunking helps you unlock meaning"). **Evidence:** 3 sample exits.

Why This Works

Blocks to Blueprints is effective because it reduces cognitive load during lesson planning, protects explicit instruction, embeds retrieval practice, and makes evidence checks visible. For busy teachers, the blueprint reduces decision fatigue during instruction by keeping the next best teaching move visible in each block. Teachers plan with a stable structure and can focus their attention on the highest-impact instructional elements.

- **Retrieval first**: A short review strengthens prior learning and creates a bridge to the day's instruction.
- **Explicit instruction protected**: The I Do/We Do blocks prevent skipping modeling when time runs short.
- **Evidence is built in**: Teachers pre-plan quick checks, so assessment doesn't become an afterthought.
- **Revision is easy**: A single "after-lesson note" guides the next blueprint, allowing for small edits instead of total rewrites.

Quick Troubleshooting

- "My lesson won't fit on one page."
  - The purpose is too broad. Narrow the target, reduce materials, or remove extra activities.
- "Guided practice takes forever."
  - Use fewer examples but make them higher quality. Keep the same response routine (same sentence frame, same check).
- "I forget the evidence checks."
  - Put the evidence in the blueprint as a verb: circle, sort, write, underline, explain.

- "Students struggle during independent work."
    - Add one more We Do example or provide a worked example to imitate before release.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This teaching tip blends Science of Learning design with Science of Reading content. Blocks to Blueprints is designed to make strong literacy instruction easier to enact consistently. By organizing lessons into five predictable blocks and translating each block into brief teacher language, observable student actions, and an aligned evidence check, teachers protect essential Science of Reading practices while leveraging Science of Learning principles that support retention and transfer. Over time, the blueprint becomes more than a plan; it becomes a simple record of what worked, what students showed, and what to adjust next.

Next Steps for Classroom Use

1. Try it with one lesson tomorrow. Choose a single target skill and complete the one-page blueprint in 10 minutes.
2. Run a 5-day "blueprint streak." Teach from the blueprint for one week and use the one-line revision daily. Patterns will emerge quickly (e.g., too many examples, not enough guided practice, weak evidence checks).
3. Use it in PLCs or coaching cycles. Bring one blueprint, highlight the strongest block, then revise only one block using Delete/Reduce/Signal.
4. Collect lightweight evidence of impact. Track one indicator (e.g., exit checks, decoding accuracy, or vocabulary application) and use that data to refine the next blueprint rather than expanding the lesson.

Over time, the goal is simple: the blueprint makes it easier to repeat and refine strong instruction, so students move from supported skill practice to independent, meaningful reading.

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Teaching Tips

Teaching Across Differences: Using *Elvis & Romeo* to Foster Inclusive Classroom Communities

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ABSTRACT

This teaching tip explores how children's literature can support social-emotional learning in elementary classrooms. Using *Elvis & Romeo* (Soman & Davis, 2025), a picturebook featuring two dogs with contrasting personalities who gradually learn to appreciate one another, it demonstrates strategies such as story-based language, discussion prompts, and classroom routines like "Unlikely Pairs Week" to foster empathy, perspective-taking, and inclusive behavior. Embedding the story across daily activities helps students develop social skills, self-regulation, and meaningful peer connections while reinforcing literacy. The phased implementation framework also aligns with ELA standards in reading comprehension, speaking, and listening, allowing teachers to address SEL goals within standards-based instruction.

KEYWORDS

social-emotional learning; literacy instruction; children's literature; peer relationships; perspective taking; friendship development

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is a critical component of children's development, supporting their ability to manage emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions, skills essential for both well-being and academic success (Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning, 2026). In recent years, increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and social disconnection among children have highlighted the need for intentional instruction in these competencies, positioning SEL as a vital component of both academic and mental health support in schools (Tatsiopoulou et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). Children's literature serves as a powerful tool for strengthening these competencies (Parker & Cronin, 2025). Through engaging stories and relatable characters, picture books provide developmentally appropriate opportunities to introduce and reinforce SEL concepts (Mondi & Reynolds, 2020).

Thoughtfully selected texts, paired with structured discussion, allow students to explore difference, conflict, and belonging in a safe, low-risk context, practicing perspective-taking, social reasoning, and empathy (Deliman et al., 2024; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Morton & Akram, 2022; Neuenschwander et al., 2025). To illustrate this, when a story presents characters who are new, different, or experiencing conflict, students can practice navigating similar social scenarios, such as welcoming a new classmate or engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds, in a guided and supportive way. By embedding SEL into shared reading experiences, teachers can move students beyond surface-level messages of kindness toward a deeper understanding of relationships, social norms, and emotional regulation, while also enriching literacy development.

Children's literature provides a rich context for embedding SEL within literacy instruction, allowing students to explore emotions, relationships, and social challenges in a safe, structured way. One clear example is *Elvis & Romeo* (Soman & Davis, 2025), which demonstrates many of these SEL concepts in action. By portraying two dogs with contrasting personalities who gradually

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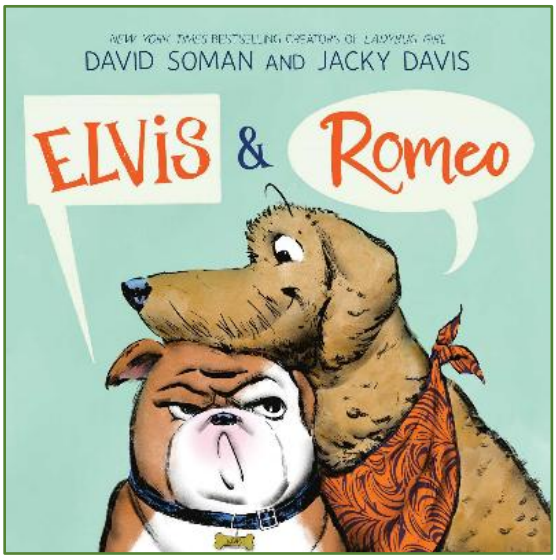
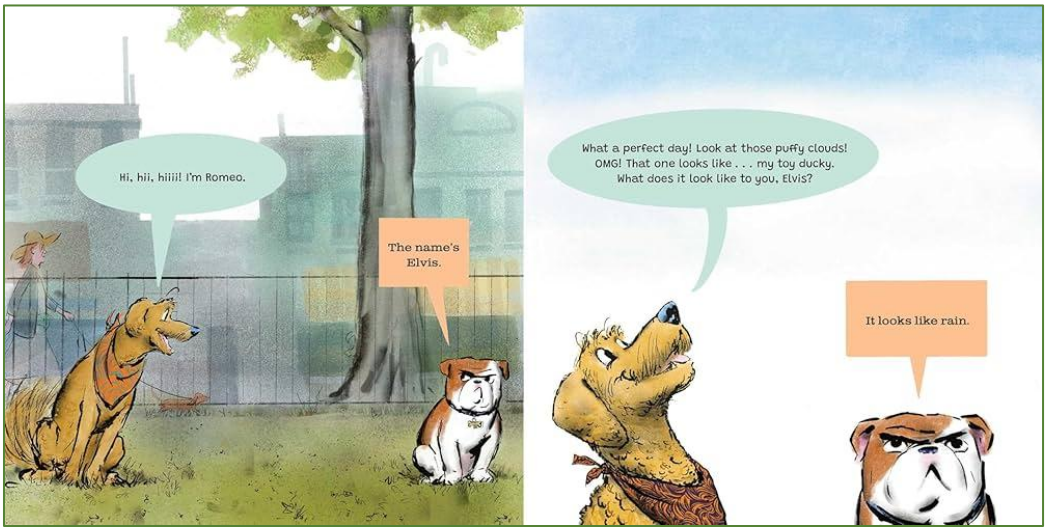
learn to appreciate one another, the book models perspective-taking, patience, empathy, and conflict navigation, while keeping students engaged through humor and relatable characters. Using texts like this one allows teachers to move beyond abstract discussions of kindness, providing students with concrete examples of social interactions that mirror real-life classroom dynamics.

***Figure 1: Book Cover and Sample Page from* Elvis & Romeo**





Children's Picturebook: *Elvis & Romeo*

Elvis & Romeo (Soman & Davis, 2025) is a contemporary children's picturebook designed primarily for early elementary readers (approximately grades K–3). The book is approximately 32 pages long and features full-color, expressive illustrations that emphasize character emotion through facial expressions, body language, and visual contrast between settings and characters. The illustrations (see Figure 1) play a central role in supporting students' inferencing skills and emotional interpretation, making the text particularly well-suited for social-emotional learning instruction.

The story follows two dogs with contrasting temperaments: Elvis, a grumpy bulldog who values routine and solitude, and Romeo, a playful labradoodle who seeks interaction and friendship. When Romeo moves next door, Elvis initially resists his attempts at connection, reflecting dynamics that are common in elementary classrooms, such as differences in social energy, friendship preferences, and responses to new peers. While Romeo remains consistently enthusiastic and socially driven, Elvis prefers quiet and space, creating a natural tension that evolves over time.

What makes the book particularly valuable for instruction is its realistic portrayal of friendship as a gradual and reciprocal process. Both characters slowly adjust to one another, illustrating that meaningful relationships develop through repeated interaction, patience, and perspective-taking (Ellinger et al., 2023; Meter & Card, 2016). The use of animal characters further supports engagement by creating psychological distance, allowing students to explore emotions and social dynamics without defensiveness. Research suggests that anthropomorphic characters can enhance empathy and perspective-taking while developing inclusive interpretation across diverse learners (Atherton et al., 2025; Hooykaas et al., 2022; Muhammad, 2020; Priiki & Kolehmainen, 2025).

Humor also strengthens the text's instructional value. Elvis's reluctance and Romeo's persistence create lighthearted moments that make social conflict approachable, reduce emotional barriers, and encourage reflection on peer relationships (Darwich et al., 2024; Paine et al., 2025). Together, the illustration style, character contrast, and playful interactions provide a layered foundation for teaching social-emotional concepts within literacy instruction.

Implementation Framework

While *Elvis & Romeo* illustrates how friendships can grow across differences, its lessons are most effective when integrated thoughtfully into classroom routines. A structured, phased approach helps students connect the story to real-life social experiences, practice perspective-taking, and develop inclusive, cooperative behaviors.

1. Initial Introduction (Week 1)

Introduce *Elvis & Romeo* through an initial read-aloud experience with minimal interruption to allow students to engage with the narrative as a whole. The instructional goal of this phase is to build initial comprehension, activate prior knowledge, and establish emotional and narrative engagement with the text.

Following the read-aloud, the teacher facilitates a brief, low-inference discussion to surface initial reactions and connections. Suggested prompts include: "What did you notice about Elvis and Romeo?" and "Have you ever felt like either character?" These questions are intentionally open-ended to encourage personal connection and invite multiple perspectives without guiding students toward a specific interpretation (Ghosh, 2024).

This phase serves as a foundation for later analytical work by ensuring students have an accessible entry point into the text and an opportunity to begin forming early understandings of character and relationship dynamics.

2. Explicit Analysis (Week 2)

During the explicit analysis phase, teachers facilitate structured discussion to help students deepen their understanding of character traits, relationships, and differences in temperament. Explicit

discussion helps students link the story to their own experiences and understand social differences (Muhammad, 2020). The goal of this phase is for students to move beyond surface-level comprehension and begin making connections between character actions, emotions, and real-life social interactions. Teachers may use guiding questions such as:

- "How are Elvis and Romeo different in how they like to spend their time?"
- "What do we learn about Elvis when he chooses to be alone?"
- "Why do you think Romeo continues to approach Elvis even when he pulls away?"
- "Have you ever experienced a friendship where people needed different types of space or interaction?"

This discussion can be facilitated as a whole-group conversation following a read-aloud or through structured small-group discussions, depending on classroom needs. Teachers may also incorporate turn-and-talk opportunities to ensure that all students have time to process ideas and rehearse their thinking before sharing with the larger group.

3. Language Development (Weeks 3–4)

Introduce story-based terms such as "Elvis time" for quiet, reflective moments and "Romeo energy" for exuberant, social engagement. These shared terms, paired with visual supports, give students tools to discuss behavior and feelings, fostering inclusion and community awareness (Allen et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2016).

To ensure these terms are reinforced over time, teachers can intentionally embed them into daily classroom language and routines. For example, students might be prompted with:

- "Is this an Elvis time or Romeo energy moment?"
- "How can we support both Elvis time and Romeo energy in our group work today?"

Ongoing reinforcement can also occur through visual anchor charts, classroom norms, and teacher modeling during transitions, group work, and conflict resolution. Teachers may revisit the vocabulary during morning meetings or reflection circles, encouraging students to self-identify their needs and respectfully recognize the needs of their peers. This consistent integration supports students in internalizing shared language for behavior and emotion regulation, strengthening both social awareness and classroom community cohesion.

4. Situated Application (Ongoing)

Integrate the framework's language, concepts, and routines into authentic classroom contexts where students can apply SEL skills in real time. The instructional goal of this phase is to support transfer of learning by embedding empathy, perspective-taking, and self-regulation into daily social interactions rather than treating them as isolated lessons.

Strategies such as "Unlikely Pairs Week," in which students from different friendship groups collaborate on structured academic tasks, create intentional opportunities for students to navigate difference, practice cooperation, and develop flexible social thinking. In addition, the establishment of an "Elvis Corner," a designated quiet space for sensory regulation and reflection, provides a consistent, accessible structure for self-regulation and emotional management throughout the school day.

These embedded practices help normalize differences in temperament and social needs, reduce stigma around emotional regulation strategies, and support students in developing respectful, adaptive responses to peer interactions. Over time, this ongoing application contributes to a classroom culture grounded in empathy, inclusion, and collaborative problem-solving.

5. Student Ownership (Throughout Year)

Support students in gradually assuming independent responsibility for applying the framework language and strategies in their daily interactions. The instructional goal of this phase is to shift from teacher-guided practice to student-driven use of SEL skills for self-advocacy, peer support, and social regulation. Students are encouraged to independently recognize their emotional and social needs, use shared language (e.g., Elvis time, Romeo energy), and select appropriate strategies for navigating interpersonal situations across differences.

This sustained practice promotes authentic internalization of SEL concepts, strengthens social autonomy, and builds students' capacity to make thoughtful, context-sensitive decisions in peer relationships (Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025). Over time, students begin not only to respond to social situations but also to proactively regulate, support peers, and contribute to a more inclusive classroom community.

Alignment to ELA Standards

Reading and discussing *Elvis & Romeo* also deepens alignment with English Language Arts (ELA) standards related to reading comprehension, speaking, and listening. As students engage with the text, they practice foundational literacy skills, such as identifying character traits, describing relationships, determining central ideas, and inferring character motivation. These skills align with expectations for reading literature, where students are asked to demonstrate understanding of characters, setting, and plot development through evidence from the text.

In addition, structured discussion of the story supports speaking and listening standards by providing opportunities for students to engage in collaborative conversations, build on the ideas of peers, and use textual evidence to justify their thinking. Through teacher-guided discussion prompts and peer interaction, students learn to articulate their ideas clearly, listen actively, and respond respectfully to differing perspectives.

The use of shared vocabulary and repeated discussion routines further strengthens academic language development and oral communication skills. In this way, *Elvis & Romeo* serves a dual instructional purpose: it promotes social-emotional learning while simultaneously reinforcing key literacy standards in reading, speaking, and listening. This integration allows teachers to address SEL goals within the expectations of standards-based instruction in meaningful, authentic contexts.

Conclusion

Contemporary elementary students face growing challenges in navigating social diversity. Post-pandemic social gaps, social media, and polarized communities make it harder to form relationships across differences (Dvorsky et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2021). *Elvis & Romeo* fosters these skills through reflection, play, and repeated interactions, helping students develop cognitive flexibility, self-awareness, and communication. When used in classroom instruction, students have responded positively to the text, demonstrating high engagement with the characters and frequently referencing the characters Elvis and Romeo in discussions of real-life peer interactions,

particularly regarding friendship differences and emotional regulation. Two dogs, one grumpy, one exuberant, show that differences need not be divided, and that patience and empathy can transform first impressions into meaningful connections. The story's lessons extend beyond the classroom, offering guidance for students, teachers, and communities alike.

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Teaching Tips

Story Events and Student Questions: Pairing *Books Aren't for Bears* with a Strategy for Literature Circle Talk

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ABSTRACT

Elementary students often struggle to launch and sustain genuine conversation in literature circles. This teaching tip pairs a recent picturebook, *Books Aren't for Bears* (Barry, 2023), with Story Events and Student Questions, a low-prep strategy in which students record a key event and a discussion question at each episodic pause during a read-aloud. Those captured events and questions then anchor peer talk in the literature circle. We describe the procedure, explain why this picturebook works well as an entry text, and offer companion titles for extending the conversation.

KEYWORDS

picturebooks; literature circles; response to literature; instructional strategy; interdisciplinary teaching

When most people hear the word *bear*, they first think of a large, strong, brown mammal with stocky legs and a long snout that likes to live in forests, forages for food to eat, and hibernates during the chilly winter months. Sometimes, they also think of famous television bears like Yogi Bear, Paddington Bear, Baloo, and, of course, Winnie the Pooh, who always enjoys a good pot of honey for dessert.

The main character in the picturebook *Books Aren't for Bears* (Barry, 2023) is also an endearing bear. He is not famous like the TV bears; instead, he is important in an unexpected way. Specifically, he matters because of the valuable lesson he teaches everyone about books.

Picturebooks occupy a unique and enduring space in literacy education. Research has consistently demonstrated that high-quality picturebooks serve as powerful vehicles for building vocabulary, strengthening comprehension, and developing a love of reading across grade levels (Wooten et al., 2018). Crawford et al. (2024) further argue that picturebooks function as stepping stones into the literary arts, offering children opportunities to make meaning through the interplay of text and illustration while supporting authentic responses to literature.

Beyond their literary value, picturebooks can serve as springboards for interdisciplinary learning by connecting narrative and visual texts to content knowledge in science, social studies, and the arts (Bainbridge & Pantaleo, 1999). Moreover, when teachers pair picturebooks with structured response strategies, students engage more deeply with text, develop critical thinking skills, and strengthen their identities with reading (Serafini, 2011). This teaching tip introduces one such pairing: a recently published picturebook with an accompanying instructional strategy designed to support meaningful literary response and classroom discussion.

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Picturebook

Books Aren't for Bears is a charming, colorful, and patterned picturebook about a bear who lives a comfortable, happy life in the woods. One day, however, while foraging in the forest, he finds something that changes his life forever. He discovers a book. He asks Owl to help him learn to read. Bear reads the book but becomes discontented, wanting more books to read. He searches through the forest but finds no more books. He does, however, find an abandoned bicycle. Bear uses the bicycle to travel to the big city to find its owner and, of course, more books.

Once in the city, Bear stops at a school, enters a classroom, and excitedly discovers books. The teacher, however, demands that he leave and shouts, "Classrooms are for children and books aren't for bears." Bear leaves reluctantly. Next, Bear enters a bookshop and finds more books. The owner, however, demands that Bear leave and shouts, "Bookshops are for people and books aren't for bears." Feeling dejected, Bear begins his walk back to the forest. Along the way, he sees a library filled with people reading books. The librarian welcomes Bear inside, where he receives a library card and takes home a large pile of books. Once home, Bear reads to his forest friends at the foot of Owl's tree and feels content once again.

Books Aren't for Bears is a charming and entertaining picturebook about a bear who discovers a love of books and reading. Unfortunately, pursuing this new love is challenging for Bear, as he is told repeatedly that books are for people, not for bears. Bear perseveres, however, and in the end learns that his new discovery changes his life and the lives of his forest friends forever.

This picturebook also features colorful illustrations with the names of books for Bear to read. For example, the book Bear finds in the woods is *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The books he finds in the classroom are *A Bear's World, Forest*, and *Bear Tales*. In the bookshop, Bear discovers *A Day Out in the Woods*. At the library, he selects *Goldilocks* and *World Travel*.

This book is special for several reasons, particularly because three key lessons emerge near the end of the story, making it especially meaningful. One lesson is the value of libraries in communities of all sizes. Another is the important influence of librarians on readers of all ages as they develop and extend their love of books and reading. The third lesson is that books are for everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, emphasizing inclusive access to reading.

Together, the narrative, illustrations, and lessons make this a picturebook that children and adults will return to again and again. Who knows? It may even help a non-reader or reluctant reader discover a love of books and reading, and it may also help readers discover something new about books and reading. In all cases, this picturebook is an entertaining and informative read.

Instructional Strategy

Background

Educators consistently strive to provide students with opportunities to engage with effective instructional strategies. *Story Events and Student Questions* is a simple yet powerful strategy for readers of all ages. We value this strategy because we believe it is important for students to read and discuss their reading in literature circles. Based on our experience, many students struggle to start and sustain genuine conversations about a book with others. We have found this to be the case, especially with younger students. This strategy, as described in detail below, helps students prepare for an upcoming literature circle discussion by writing down an important or interesting event from the text and generating a question to guide their discussion with peers.

Procedure

To start, we display the strategy's name and explain its purpose on the whiteboard or in a PowerPoint slide, then discuss it as a class. Next, we read the picturebook aloud, pausing at episodic changes in the story. These changes could include introducing a new problem or character, changing the setting, or shifting the time, etc. We pause at each episodic change for a few minutes, during which students record significant story events and personal questions on the strategy sheet (see Figure 1). After reading, we organize students in literature circles and invite them to use their questions to discuss the story with other members of the circle. As a culminating event, we invite students to write personal reflections on the overall experience.

Figure 1: Story Events & Student Questions

Story Events	Student Questions
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.

Note. Students record a key story event and a discussion question at each episodic pause during the read-aloud. Questions guide the literature circle discussion.

Moving Forward

We hope this short article will do for readers what this new picturebook, *Books Aren't for Bears,* did for us. It humored, motivated, and inspired us to read more picturebooks like this one. To that end, we recommend *Growly Bear: A Bear Who Discovers Its Best To Be Himself* (Adams, 2019), *Bears Make the Best Buddies* (Oliver & Claude, 2016), and *Hey Bear, Whoa Bear, and Whoa Bear's Reading Woes* (Schechter, 2024). We encourage readers to continue exploring picturebooks that spark curiosity and inspire imagination. Happy reading!

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