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Cover Page Footnote

Firstly, I want to give my thanks to Rev. Kenny Hoskins, Director of the Oakdale Neighbors, for his true leadership in supporting the goals, missions, and functions of the Learning Cafe! Secondly, I want to acknowledge the enormous contributions of Ms. Lisa McManus for her steering role of the establishment and supervision of the Cafe. Lastly, I want to give my gratitude to all the volunteers who work and worked at the Learning Cafe.

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by Rui Niu-Cooper



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Figures 1 & 2. GVSU students help at the Learning Café with literacy, mathematics, and mentoring. Older teens participate as tutors for the younger students. Leadership development has shown to be a big impact during the Pandemic. Encouragement is one of the Learning Café's core values.

While English Learners (ELs)—students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who are non-native English speakers—accounted for around 6.3% of Michigan students during the pandemic years of 2019-2022, COVID-19 extended the already significant school achievement gaps between ELs and their non-EL peers (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Content proficiency gaps are evident across subject areas and grade levels on high-stakes standardized tests. For instance, based on the 2020–21 *Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress* (M-STEP), a state-level achievement test, the proficiency gaps between EL 3rd–7th graders and their non-EL counterparts are 16.1% – 32.4% in ELA, peaking in 6th grade (32.4%), and 12.1% – 23.1% in Math, peaking in 7th grade (23.1%) (MIschooldata, 2022).

With the rapid increase of ELs in Michigan and around the United States (Cherfas, et al., 2021; MIschooldata, 2021; Piazza, et al. 2015), scholars have been exploring ways to narrow or close the achievement gap (Codrington, 2014; Fisher, et al., 2011; Scogin, et al., 2018; and Thomason, et al., 2017). This is an admirable yet difficult goal, as shown in both the research literature and my own experience as a faculty member at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), where I focus on preparing K-12 teachers to teach ELs. Among

other challenges, EL students face low English language proficiency, culture shock, and conflicts arising from the incongruity between their home culture and that at school (Pang, 2010). Many ELs find reading comprehension especially difficult since, of course, they are still in the process of learning the English language (Brown & Broemmel, 2011). In addition, ELs from refugee backgrounds experienced trauma before they arrived in the U.S. (Gross, 2020). Such experiences inevitably impact their learning of Math, Science, and Social Studies because the subject matter content is not accessible to them (Batt, 2008).

Along similar lines, it is more likely for ELs to experience low parental school involvement rates, often from a lack of time and transportation (Cassity & Harris, 2000). Parents from a refugee background, in addition to dealing with low English language proficiency and low English literacy skills, also tend to lack 1) a systematic education of their own, 2) knowledge of American education and community resources, and 3) an extensive social network (Niu-Cooper, et al., 2021). More critically, EL teachers and paraprofessionals are often marginalized from other teachers. This is because, traditionally, EL teachers have mainly provided support to ELs' content-area teachers. Many EL teachers are engaged in pull-out or push-in models, where they either go to different classrooms to pull ELs out, or they help ELs understand English-language content—either by physically sitting by ELs in their content classrooms (Baker, 2011) or by helping remotely from a location far away (Brooks, et al. 2010). Thus, we must work with intention and diligence to support EL students, both inside and outside of school contexts.

Building on practical experience gained from working with refugees at Oakdale Neighbors, this article advocates for a Learner Self-Narrative-based (LSN-based) approach to better support EL students. Oakdale Neighbors is “a Christian Community Development Organization established in 1996, with a vision to help create a neighborhood of vitality and grace by discovering, developing, and connecting neighbors' skills and resources,” in Grand Rapids, MI (Oakdale Neighbors, n.d.). I designed the LSN-based approach based on my

understanding of the literature, professional experience with African refugee students and their parents who participated in the Oakdale Neighbors Learning Café (ONLC), and my own expertise in EL teacher preparation. The LSN-based model is designed to increase learners' engagement in teaching and learning, therefore, to narrow the academic achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs. Much of its development took place in the context of the ONLC, an after-school tutoring program run by Oakdale Neighbors.

Background and Context

Statistical evidence shows that the majority of resettled refugees have a low level of literacy proficiency in their own language, partly due to a lack of formal schooling or lack of education prior to arriving in the U.S. (Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions, 2018). This low literacy in turn significantly impacts their English language development, as well as their children's development. Meanwhile, a 2016 law mandating that all Michigan students meet reading benchmarks by the end of third grade (Michigan Department of Education: Early Literacy Initiative, 2019) sharpened the challenges that ELs face, notably in reading confidence and progress in reading and writing development. Because these students' “lag in reading proficiency can take more than three years to overcome” (Michigan Radio Stateside Staff, 2017), this law added pressure to reach the set reading standards in a limited time; so many ELs had to repeat 3rd grade due to their lack of English reading skills, poor testing skills, and trouble understanding the requisite background knowledge required to comprehend test items.

My own research on this population echoes key findings in the literature. In 2019, my study *Africa Refugees' Perspectives on Their Needs to Integrate into the Local Educational System* was funded by the Catalyst Grant at GVSU, resulting in a co-authored book chapter on strengthening the home/school/university partnership to support refugee students (Niu-Cooper, et al., 2021). Most prominently, the study revealed a disconnect between our African refugee participants' understanding of the various kinds of texts (textbooks, school



Figure 3. Students share the books that they are currently reading as part of the after school program.

newsletters, school announcements, etc.) that were used at ONLC.

After the study, because the majority of Oakdale Neighbors parents and their children participate in the tutoring program, I wanted to share these findings with the ONLC staff. Oakdale Neighbors serves the most vulnerable, marginalized, and low-income population in Kent County (Tower, 2017), with the goal of “helping neighbors improve their lives and create a neighborhood of vitality and grace” (Boman, 2019). The neighborhood schools have a minority enrollment above 94% and rank in the bottom percentiles for math (10-19%) and reading (15-24%) (MISchooldata, 2017). The online instructional model used during the COVID pandemic aggravated the achievement gap between Oakdale Neighbors’ students and students in other areas of Grand Rapids (Boman, 2021).

Emergence of the LSN-based Approach

In Fall 2021, many of the leveled books available through the Fountas and Pinnell program” (hereafter, F&P) were adopted to support ONLC learners, using grant funding from AmplifyGR, a non-profit based in Grand Rapids. After two tutoring semesters, ONLC staff members and I observed improved literacy skills among our learners. However, I still saw a disconnect between the F&P stories and our learners’ life experiences, which significantly hindered their literacy

development (debriefing note with tutor C, 2021). Previous research likewise highlights the challenges ELs face when they learn in classrooms (Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2014) and the text–learner disconnect (Jennerjohn, 2020). The literature further illustrates an association between learners’ socio-economic status (SES) and their school achievement (Lam, 2014; Lareau, 2000), as well as a significant connection between literacy skills and academic achievement (Rabiner et al., 2016). I met with the ONLC staff to start mapping these factors onto the realities of the ONLC participants and to discuss possible solutions. Seeing the potential for ELs to make reading and writing meaningful and, therefore, to better retain their learned knowledge, I wanted to design a curriculum that could offer insight to other literacy and EL educators who are invested in ELs’ reading and writing success.

Inspired by “reality pedagogy” (Emdin, 2017) and considering our learners’ Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), we revised direct instruction for ELs on reading and writing to use the proposed LSN-based approach. Reality pedagogy is a teaching and learning approach in which the teacher recognizes and delivers teaching and learning activities based on the reality of the students’ cultural and/or community experience (Emdin, 2017). The ZPD refers to what learners can achieve with guidance and encouragement (Vygotsky, 1978). The LSN-based approach that was generated based on my own professional experience includes six key practices: (1) tutors model and scaffold oral storytelling or information-sharing, based on the pictures in the existing curriculum; (2) learners orally construct their own stories based on these pictures; (3) tutors support learners with linguistic, language, cultural, and content teaching; (4) tutors record learners’ stories via Microsoft Word’s Dictate tool; (5) tutors use transcriptions of learners’ stories as reading materials; and (6) tutors teach reading and writing skills based on the new reading materials.

The design of this approach was further guided by Karlsson’s (2015) argument about learners’ autonomy and identity in the process of writing and by Pinnell and Fountas’ (2009) concept of “extending reading



Figure 4. A tutor-tutee pair working on online Mathematical modules with newly received laptops through GVSU Laker Effects Competition.

power through writing” (p. 293). This approach underscores learners’ identity, emphasizing developing oral literacy before written forms to leverage ELs’ limited English language proficiency. To prepare tutors for the six practices listed above, we selected and prepared our tutors carefully:

Practice 1: We carefully selected tutors who have the interest—and patience—to work with pre- and low-literacy students and their parents whenever parents can.

Practice 2: Qualified tutors are thoroughly trained with the F&P *A-Z Leveled* books, including the relationship between color-coded levels and students’ grade level literacy competencies, the configuration of the lessons in the books, and the comprehensive assessment tools attached to each lesson.

Practice 3: After our tutors gained an overall understanding of the materials, they are trained in basic literacy skills. This training emphasizes that reading includes phonics, word building, sentence structures, reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Likewise, it emphasizes the point that writing includes skills such as spelling, encoding, decoding, and composition.

Practice 4: More advanced training in literacy education included teaching skills like how to grip pens/

pencils, the orientation of writing letters, and the orientation of general reading and writing to meet our refugee participants’ needs. The purpose of this activity is to get our tutors to rethink and reflect on their assumptions about their students.

Practice 5: To supplement this basic training, we show tutors how to look at the pictures of the leveled books in order to orally construct stories based on their own experiences. In this process, we emphasize including some of the key vocabulary from the books to support our refugee students’ academic language development.

Practice 6: As a final part of training, we demonstrate how to use the Dictate function in Microsoft Word to convert an oral story into written text, how to correct dictation errors to match the learner’s speech, how to ask clarifying questions to capture the learner’s original story, and how to use and extend the story to support their students’ literacy development.

Practice 7: Throughout the tutoring process, starting from the tutoring Week 1, we provide on-site support to our tutors by demonstrating how the LSN-based approach can be utilized during the tutoring and answer any questions that tutors might have to ensure the quality of the LSN-Based approach implementation.

The LSN-based Approach Outcomes

During the ONLC tutoring sessions using the LSN-based approach, I observed students’ increased interest in storytelling, as well as more engagement in studying the expanded stories, from both the student participants and their parents (fieldnote, 10/3/2021). Though a full analysis of the observation data is still in progress, my preliminary findings suggest that the LSN approach positively contributes to the literacy development and the vitality of the ELs served by Oakdale Neighbors. Based on debriefs with tutors after tutoring sessions, field notes, and a report from the ONLC volunteer supervisor, developing and integrating the learners’ self-generated materials also increased tutors’ understanding of refugee ELs and how to work with them more effectively. Further details related to these results will be published in an upcoming study report.

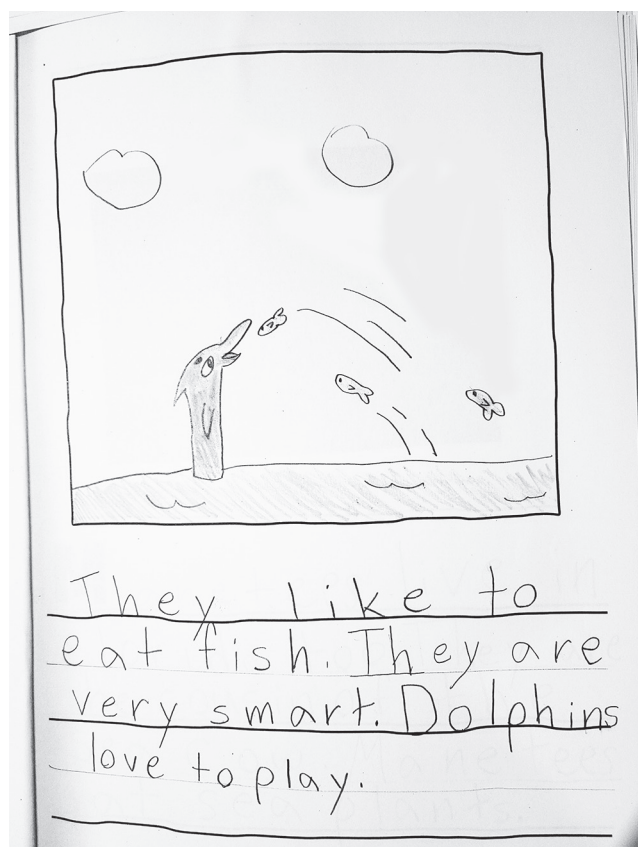


Figure 5. A written work from a second grader who shared a story that she heard from a friend who went to Florida. After sharing her story, she constructed the writing with her tutor's support.

Meanwhile, the LSN approach is a promising avenue for training future EL teachers at the university level. In particular, I contend that integrating LSN into a master-level ESL methodology course would better prepare teachers to engage ELs from a refugee background—a substantial population in Michigan's local schools. Specifically, the LSN approach has the potential to address gaps between texts and other students' life experience. Further research is needed in different contexts, of course, but the initial evidence from the ONLC tutoring process, including anecdotal evidence from tutors, is promising. Overall, the goal of the LSN-based approach is to connect learners' self-generated texts to their own experience, making reading and writing more meaningful to them. From this perspective, the approach contributes to the field more broadly, as it could help other tutors of EL students engage in a similar process.

Finally, my strongest hope is that this proposed approach will encourage schools to move away from using existing decontextualized textbooks and instead allow ELs to construct their own stories. Of course, we cannot lose sight of our ultimate goal that demands that we both meet curricular standards *and* help our students become proficient in English. Yet, as Adichie (2009) argued in her TEDTalk, "The Danger of a Single Story," proficiency can arise from students bringing in their own stories rather than hoping to reach generic readers with generic readings. The long-term goal of the LSN model is to meaningfully teach reading and writing to ELs to promote their English literacy development, all the while inviting them to elevate their own stories in conversation with the tutors, teachers, schools, and communities that serve them.

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