ESL Case Study
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Completing this case study was very a very challenging undertaking. It was not difficult to find a second language learner to base this case study on. The school I was placed in; Northstar elementary is a very diverse school. The classroom that I was placed in reflects that diversity; there are children of many different cultures in Mr. Olsen’s room. The challenge came when I asked the parents of the student I was working if I could interview them for the purpose of this project. In the end it seemed paranoia or distrust won out and I was not able to ever complete that interview. Instead, I interviewed a fellow student from the school of education here at Westminster and found some interesting parallels between my classmate and the student I worked with in Mr. Olsen’s class.

**Tutoring sessions**

When I approached Mr. Olsen looking for a student to work with for the purpose of this study, he suggested Maritza. Maritza is a Hispanic student that is struggling with her reading and is part of a daily pull out program called “Reading Naturally”. He stated that Maritza is a hard worker that is striving to improve academically and that she could use the extra help. When asked Mr. Olsen if he thought she was receiving any kind of academic support at home he informed me that Maritza’s parents where very supportive of their daughter but they spoke very little English so they were not able to help her with her school work. Mr. Olsen asked me to sit with Maritza while she worked with this computer based program and offer her help, which I did for twelve ½ hour sessions.

I spent the first day getting to know Maritza. I asked her how she feels about her reading and she said “Sometimes good, Sometimes bad”. She went on to explain that she gets
frustrated with the speed that she reads as opposed to her classmates, especially the ones that are also pulled out to use the same program. I told her that starting tomorrow, the only person she should worry about is competing against herself and that we are not going to worry about the other kids sitting at the computers next to her.

I decided to use this first session to simply observe her reading and see what she needed work on. I was informed that the goal for Maritza was that she was to be reading 110 words a minute by the end of February. When I watched Maritza read, the first thing that struck me was that she was reading way to fast, like it was a race. She was making a lot of mistakes, skipping words and whole lines of text and getting really confused and frustrated. I also noticed that she seemed to be looking at the beginnings of words and then guessing the rest of the word. I found out later that this is a very common strategy that many second language learners use.

When it came to time to answer the comprehension questions about the text she had read, she could not really answer the questions correctly. This did not come as a big surprise as I did not think that there could be much of a chance that she was understating what she was reading. At the end of the half hour Maritza was reading 59 words a minute, 40 to 45 if I subtracted the error she made, and not understanding what she was reading at all. I decided that the first thing that we would need to work on was getting her to slow down and pay attention to every word in these passages. I thought that this would actually increase the words she read per minute and help her with her comprehension. I was correct, but once we had this problem was under control I found a very different problem with “Reading Naturally” itself.

After just a few days of working with Maritza, she was reading more confidently, taking the time to figure words and her words read per minute had increased to the 68-75 word per minute. I had not worked with Maritza for several days when she opened the program and started
a new passage on bats. She was indeed reading faster. Her first cold timing was 67 words per
minute. With each practice reading her reading time increased a few words. She was still making
some substitutions and guessing and I once again asked her to pay close attention to each word in
the text. All in all she was reading really well until she put on the headphone that were attached
to the computer, she then started to make a lot of mistakes. I had assumed that the headphones
were playing music or some other sounds designed to cut down on the distractions of having
other students so close to her reading. I finally asked her what was going on in the headphones.
She told me that the “computer lady” was reading to and that she read too fast. I then told her we
would not be using the headphones anymore. This was the first time that I questioned if this was
the best program for an ESL student.

**Cultural Identity in the Classroom**

One of the most interesting things that happened during our time working together
happened when we the pull out program early one day and I continued working with her while
she read from the Basil in her class. While reading the story Maritza came across to the words
“quê pasa” and read them with exuberance and the best expression I had heard her use up until
that point. She quickly looked up at me in an ashamed way, covered her mouth and told me “that
she hates to speak Spanish now”. I told her that her language was beautiful and that she really
should not feel like that. This exchange really made me focus in on the fact that I was not just
working with a struggling reader, I was also working with a student that was struggling with
language and culture. From what I have learned I believe that Maritza was exhibiting a behavior
that you might expect from someone in the cultural psychological captivity stage of negotiating
her cultural identity. (Banks, 2005)
Funds of Knowledge

This conversation also made me consider if her background knowledge was also something I need to consider while helping her with comprehension. I can conclusively say that “Reading Naturally” does not play to the cultural backgrounds, or funds of knowledge, (Gonzalez, 2005) that most ESL students bring to school from their lives outside its walls. Maritza read passages that had to do with such varied subjects as: Gargantua the gorilla, horned toads, sea cows, bats, Harriet Tubman, king cobras, the Allosaurus and even Saundra Day O’Connor. She could have cared less about most of these subjects because they are not relevant to her culturally and she did not have the background knowledge needed to understand what she was reading. She was simply going through the motions in hopes of getting a score that would allow her to move on to another uninteresting story.

When Maritza was reading about Saundra Day O’Connor, for example, I had to explain to her what the Supreme Court was, What an Associate Justice of that court was, explain the concept of and how to pronounce the word politics, and that Stamford is a college on the east coast. As she was reading she also told me that she didn’t know what a windmill was. I explained by drawing a picture and telling her where she might have seen them before and she realized that she knew what they were, just not the English word. The book “Teaching Hispanic Students” states that textbook materials and lessons should validate students’ culture and history. The authors also say that students’ higher-order thinking and language learning should be promoted (Griego-Jones and Fuller, 2008, 96). “Reading Naturally” does not accomplish these goals; it did help Maritza read 106 words per minute by our last session together, but I don’t think she would have ever understood what words she read meant without someone there to explain them to her.
While I helped Maritza, I often wondered with a certain amount of guilt how much the second language learners seated around us reading understood themselves.

**Interviews and Shared Experiences**

Because I was not able to interview Maritza’s parents for this project, I did a short interview with Maritza and a longer one with Denise Camacho. Denise is a classmate I attend classes with at Westminster College. I very surprised to find that even though these two people went to school in very different times and part of our country, they had had some very similar life experiences. Both Maritza and Denise were born in the U.S. to parents who spoke little to any English. Another similarity that was present in both of their lives was that both of their fathers would both speak English if they were in situations that it was necessary, such as business and school meetings with Americans.

Both Maritza and Denise told me that they felt that they had lost some of their Spanish fluency while learning English. I saw that in my conversations with Maritza when she would try to remember a word in Spanish and then tell me that if her older brother was there he would know. Denis told me in her interview that she “can speak Spanish fluently but I do feel that I have lost some of my Spanish. When I get papers from my kids’ school in English and Spanish I rather read it in English. It’s a weird feeling when I see things in Spanish it almost makes me dizzy looking at the words, it feels foreign to me but if I try I am able to read it. It is intimidating though.” (Camacho, 2008)

When I asked Denise what kinds of challenges she faced in school she told me that she was the part of the majority in her elementary grades. She also told me that when I she was in middle school there was always an aid who spoke Spanish. She went on to tell me “I didn’t want
to learn English because I felt that I was betraying my culture.” (Camacho 2008) In the 6 and 7th grade Denise made friends who only spoke English after being moved to English classes. She told me that this was the first time she felt a need and desire to speak English. She went on to tell me “During 7th and 8th grade is when I felt that I was getting better with my English. Some of my friends would help me by correcting me when I said something wrong. Back home in Mexico my cousins would make fun of me for speaking English and that was hard because I felt that I could never be part of both cultures. I wasn’t good enough in Spanish because sometimes I would forget words or say it in English at the same time I wasn’t good enough with English because I had an accent and struggled with words.” (Camacho, 2008)

I asked Denise if she felt that her young children faced the same kinds of challenges that she faced in school. She told me that she chose not to speak Spanish to her children when they were young because she wanted them to learn English first because in hopes to avoid some of the problems she faced in school. Denise went on to tell me that “My children are in a school that is mostly populated by Spanish speakers. In a way they are going through the same things I went through but with Spanish speakers.” (Camacho, 2008)

One other commonality I found between Denise and Maritza is that even though their parents could not help them academically at home. Their parents both encouraged them to take full advantage of their educational possibilities. Both of their fathers have encouraged their daughter to pursue higher education. Denise took this encouragement to heart and I hope that Maritza does as well. Many people think that immigrants to our country and people of lower socioeconomic means, often one and the same, do not value education. Many studies show the opposite is true. (Gorski, 2008, 33) As a future educator I will strive to take this into account and
offer all parents a way to help me create a classroom in which all of the students’ lives outside of school, their funds of knowledge, are used to foster genuine and valuable learning opportunities.
Works Cited


This was my first time sitting with Maritza, a second language learner who is struggling with her reading. When I approached my mentor teacher looking for someone to tutor in his reading he suggested that I go sit with Maritza during her pull out time, from 9:00 to 9:30, during which she uses the “reading naturally “program. He stated that she is a hard worker that is really interested in learning and that she could us the extra help. I spent the first day getting to know Maritza. I asked her how she feels about her reading and she said “Sometimes good, Sometimes bad”. She went on to explain that she gets frustrated with the speed that she reads as opposed to her classmates that are also pulled out to use the same program. I told her that starting tomorrow, the only person she should worry about is competing against herself and that we are not going to worry about the other kids sitting at the computers next to her. I also met with Scott, the person who supervises the program, and asked if there was any training that I would need for the program. He told that the program was pretty straight forward and that I would be O.K.

This was the first time I sat with Maritza and watched her read. I decided to use this first session to simply observe her reading and see what she needed work on. I was informed by Scott that the goal that had been decided upon was that Maritza was to be reading 110 words a minute by the end of February and then new goals would be decided upon. When I watched Maritza read, the first thing that struck me was that she was reading way to fast, like it was a race. She was making a lot of mistakes, skipping words and whole lines of text and getting really confused
and frustrated. I also noticed that she seemed to be looking at the beginnings of words and then guessing what the rest of the word was. When it came to time to answer the comprehension questions about the text she had read, she could not really answer the questions correctly. This did not come as a big surprise as I did not think that there could be much of a chance that she was understating what she was reading. At the end of the half hour Maritza was reading 59, (probably more around 40-45 if I were to count the mistakes she made) words a minute and not understanding what she was reading at all. I decided that the first thing that we would need to work on was getting her to slow down and pay attention to every word in these passages.

11-4-08 and 11-5-08

These two sessions were spent working on getting Maritza to slow down. I told her what I had observed the week before and told her that I think it would help her a lot if she slowed down when she read so she could pay attention the words on the page and what the passage was trying to tell me. Maritza expressed frustration at not being able to reach the goal set in the program (at this point it was 80 W.P.M) and being able to move on to a new passage, that was why she was reading so fast. I asked her to slow down and told that I actually thought she might end up reading more words, even though that sounds crazy. She agreed. I told her to take a breath and relax before she started reading. I saw an immediate change. She was still skipping some words, substituting words (i.e. “a” for “the”), and guessing a little, but not as much as the first day I had observed her. By the end of 11-4, she was reading at a slower but more purposeful rate. She seemed less flustered and more willing to try.
On 11-5 we worked some more on reading at a good pace and making sure that she paid attention to the whole word and not guess. By the end of that day I was shocked at the progress that she had made in those two sessions she was reading more confidently, taking the time to figure words and her words read per minute had increased to the 68-75 word per minute! I told her to keep up the good work the rest of the week and I was very impressed with the hard work she had done over the last couple of days.

11-11-08

When we walked out to the computer banks, Scott met me and told me that Maritza had been meeting or exceeding her W.P.M goals over the last few days. I complimented her and told her I was very excited to see her read. We sat down and started a new passage on bats. She was indeed reading faster. Her first cold timing was 67 words per minute. With each practice reading her reading time increased a few words. She was still making some substitutions and guessing and I once again asked her to pay close attention to each word in the text. She was reading really well until she put on the headphone that were attached to the computer, she then started to make a lot of mistakes. I had assumed that the headphones were playing something to cut down on the distractions of having other students so close to her reading. I finally asked her what was going on in the headphones. She told me that the “computer lady” was reading to and that she read too fast. I then told her we would not be using the headphones anymore.

11-12-08

We continued working on the bat passage. She did really well on the reading portion of the program, her last timed reading that day was 91 words a minute with just a few substitutions and she was not guessing at all. Her expression while reading was also sounding really great. She was still struggling with the comprehension questions however. I decided that
comprehension would be what we would work in following sessions. We finished early that day so I continued working with her in the classroom while she read from the Basil in her class when something happened that almost broke my heart. While reading the story Maritza came across to the words “qué pasa” and read them with exuberance and the best expression I had heard her use up until that point. She then looked up at me in an ashamed way, covered her mouth and told me “that she hates to speak Spanish now”. I told her that her language was beautiful and that she read those words so well that they almost sounded like music! I also told her that I wished English sounded like that sometimes. This really made me focus in on the fact that I was not just working with a struggling reader, I was also working with a student that was struggling with language and culture. This exchange made me consider if her background knowledge was also something I need to consider while helping her with comprehension.

11-17-08

When I returned to work with Maritza, Scott informed me that she had asked for her timing to be increased to 100. He did and she had passed two stories the day before. She started a new text passage on Harriet Tubman. I helped her figure out some of the more difficult words and explained who Harriet Tubman was and talked about the Underground Railroad a bit. She kept saying “Tudman” instead of “Tubman” I kept trying to correct her, but as I was informed of by one of my ESL professors, this was probably more of a function of how Spanish words work rather than her reading the word wrong. She had a really hard time with the word Philadelphia. I broke the word into chunks on a piece of paper and slowly uncovered them. This help her read the word correctly. For some reason she also insisted on putting on the headphones, and the reading voice tripped her up again. She answered the compression questions with a lot more ease as I help her reason out what the question was asking and what the story was trying to tell her.
Before we started reading, I wanted to try and get her thinking about what she remembered about the Harriet Tubman story. I was very pleased that she remembered most of the major details of the story. She practiced reading the story a couple of times before trying to pass it. She was skipping some words, like “a” and “the”, and struggled with Philadelphia a little. But ultimately she passed the story with 115 words read with one mistake. We started a new passage on Sandra Day O’Connor of all people. I had to explain to her what the Supreme Court was, what an Associate Justice of that court was, what politics was and how to say it as well as that Stamford is a college on the east coast. As she was reading she also told me that she didn’t know what a windmill was. I explained by drawing a picture and telling her where she might have seen them before and she realized that she knew what they were, just not the English word. I was also very happy that she read the words “El Paso” and “Los Angeles” properly in Spanish and this time she was not ashamed.

She was starting on a new story on the king cobra. Her cold reading was 78. I once again had to explain what several things were in order for the story to make sense. These words included Burma, Asia and Worship. She easily passed this reading once she understood what all of the words in this meant. I also noticed that here comprehension was getting a lot better and she could more easily identify the main idea of a story when she did not have to try and negotiate the meanings of some the words included in the passage.
She started a story on Thick Kneed Birds. I had to explain what a leech was as she thought it meant “dirtyness”. She is really paying a lot of attention to words and self correcting when she needs to. She nailed the main idea of the story, but unfortunately she only read 88 words this time because she was sick.

12-3-08

She remembered most of the major details of the Thick Kneed Bird story. Her cold reading was 109 words a minute. She was reading great and self correcting as needed. She is rarely skipping words any more. She passed the reading with 106 words a minute.

12-16-08

This is our last session. She is working on story about the Allosaurus. She remembered the major details of the story. She is doing really well and skipping less and less. Her first timed reading was 100 words with three mistakes. She ultimately passed the timed reading with 106 words and easily passed the comprehensions questions. She told me that she doesn’t like to do this (reading naturally) anymore. When I asked why she told me that it is always the same and it was boring. I could see where she was coming from, but I made sure to point out that it had helped her improve in her reading a great deal. I told her that I was so proud of her and that I was sure she could meet any goal that they set for her. I also informed my mentor teacher that I thought that she needed a break from Reading naturally and he agreed.
Reflection

I found this experience to be one of the most valuable and frustrating projects that I have completed as part of my time here in the school of education. I loved watching this hardworking little girl improve in her reading as time went on and look forward to repeating this process many times in the future.

I am very frustrated with the program that she was using while I tutored her. I really wonder if she would have made the improvements that she did without some one there helping her, and only her. Scott, who supervises the students during this pull out time, is in charge of four other kids besides Maritza. I often wondered if the other English language learners from her class understand what they are reading. This program is also riddled with punctuation errors and some sentences start with “and” or “or”. This is something that really concerned me as these were students that are probably struggling with their writing as well and they are having bad writing techniques modeled for them on the computer screen.

This experience also really brought home the fact that reading instruction must be relevant to students. Maritza read about Gargantua the gorilla, horned toads, sea cows, bats, Harriet Tubman and king cobras. She could have cared less about most of these subjects. She was simply going through the motions in hopes of getting a score that would allow her to move on to another uninteresting story.

I really saw the importance of asking a student what parts of a story or text passage are confusing of hard to understand. Once I started doing this Maritza was able to concentrate on
what the writer was trying to tell her without trying to figure out what some of the words meant and I saw her reading comprehension improve by leaps and bounds.

All in all, I think that Reading Naturally is a well meaning but very flawed program. I certainly don’t think it is the best program for ELL students that are struggling with reading. I left our last session hoping that Maritza will continue to improve in her reading and I think with the proper instruction she will.