Writing with a Purpose

By Aimée Dione Williams

My School

MacKenzie School is situated in a residential middle-class neighborhood. The area consists of a mix of newly built homes and older homes that were built in the late 1940s and 1950s. During the last 20 years, increasing Asian immigration, among other factors, has transformed the area greatly. The area is now predominantly Asian, notably Chinese and Korean. The school addresses the needs of its diverse population by translating monthly newsletters into Chinese and providing translators for Chinese, Korean and Japanese parents during parent-teacher conferences. The school library also has Chinese and Japanese books that the students or parents can borrow. Most of the students at MacKenzie originate from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China and Korea. A large percentage of these students do not speak English as their first language and approximately a quarter of them receive English Language support.

MacKenzie School is a large two-storey building with three portable classrooms, adjacent to a community park. The 516 students are in one of three programs: English track, Early French Immersion or Late French Immersion. There is also a Chinese language school that rents the school at night, and many of our students attend these classes.

Over half of the student population attends Early French Immersion. This is a popular program whose goal is to produce bilingual students. From Kindergarten to Grade 3, instruction is given completely in French. Then in Grades 4 through 7, instruction is gradually given in English. In high school, the French Immersion students attend classes with the English students except for a few classes that are taught in French.

My Class

I teach a Grade Three French Immersion class. There are 24 students in my class: 11 males and 13 females. Two students are pulled out of class twice a week for additional Language Arts support and another gifted student is pulled-out once a week. All of my students speak French and English and several speak an additional language (primarily Mandarin or Cantonese).

Community Literacy Practices

I went about learning about the literacy practices of my students in several different ways. First of all, to get the children thinking about the different reasons they read and write, we went on a literacy tour of the neighborhood. We only traveled about a block in forty minutes! The students noticed print everywhere. They pointed out everything from the print on the street signs to print on the litter that was on the ground to the print that was on their own clothing.

A few days later I did my own literacy walk around the area. I started at the community park adjacent to the school where I noticed print such as graffiti, coyote alert signs, rule signs, writing on food labels of garbage that was on the ground and advertisements for basketball & baseball registration. While walking to the nearby stores, I noticed street signs, speed limit signs, addresses, real estate signs, classified

adds posted on street posts, bus stops, a 'lost kitty' sign posted on a tree. When I arrived at the stores, which are located on a fairly busy street, I saw print everywhere. Most of this print was in English, but several signs were in Chinese and the stores had Chinese characters on the windows and inside of them. It would take too long to note all that I saw, but basically all the stores were covered inside and out with print including: signs, advertisements, prices, product descriptions and hours of operation. There were also bus stops, newspaper boxes and street signs located in front of several of these stores.

Family Literacy Practices

Finally, I learned about my students' literacy practices by asking the parents. I sent a short survey home with each child. Here are the questions that I included:

1. List the texts that are being read and written in your household on a regular basis.
2. Who reads and writes what texts in your household?
3. What do people read and/or write these texts for?

I included several examples of each of the questions so that the parents would not think that I was interested only in story book reading and children's literature. The parents reports that they read and wrote regularly the following texts: food labels, grocery lists, restaurant menus, bills, newspapers, calendars, school newsletters, emails, work reports or presentations, magazines, recipes, web pages, letters, books/novels, flyers, notes to family members, articles (for work or professional development), to do lists, textbooks (especially by older siblings or work related), manuals and schedules.

Many of the literacy activities performed by the mothers were related to their family's daily living routines such as scheduling activities, reading school newsletters and corresponding with the school, making shopping lists, writing cheques, reading bills, food labels, and calendars. Several mothers also read for work purposes. Only a few claimed to read regularly for pleasure. Fathers, on the other hand, reported reading newspapers, magazines (such as National Geographic and Discover), online material for work and pleasure, writing cheques and writing reports for work. The children in these houses are read to by parents and siblings for pleasure, read and write homework assignments, greeting cards, novels, magazines, instructions, recipes, notes and websites.

Authentic Literacy Lesson

From all the information gathered about the familiar literacy practices of my students, I decided that we would create board games for which they would write the rules. Although none of the parents who responded to my questionnaire reported reading game rules specifically, I knew from conversations with the children that all of them have had some, if not lots, of experience with board games in their homes. Further, several parent noted that they read instructional manuals and rule lists with their children.

Please note that I will be describing this unit as if it was taught in English to make it more accessible to the readers. As I have already mentioned, however, I

teach a Grade Three Early French Immersion class, therefore the examples of my students' work included here will be in French. Furthermore, some of the details that I explain during the mini-lesson have to do with the French language, but the mini-lesson could be taught in any language.

Setting up the Authentic Lesson

Although I had already planned on having my class create board games and writing the rules to accompany the game, I set it up so that the children would suggest the activity. This was actually quite simple because I was sure of how my class would respond to the scenario that I presented them.

Class Meeting

Once a week we have a classroom meeting where we discuss problems and congratulate people. The students and I can also write on the agenda, which is posted on the wall, if there is something that he or she would like to discuss with the class. For this week, I wrote that I wanted to discuss rainy indoor days with them. During the classroom meeting, I told them a story about two Grade 2 students who came to talk to me at lunch hour one day last week because they did not know what to do when the weather dictated 'an indoor day.' I told my class how these younger kids felt sad and bored during rainy days because they did not have many friends and they did not have any indoor games to play. As it rains frequently where we live and there are many indoor days, the students could all relate to these bored younger students. I asked my class what we could do for Grade 1 and 2 students like these, and they came up with some very good ideas. We decided to narrow our list down to the two most popular ideas: playing with the younger kids during lunch and making games for them to play. As I anticipated, the students set up an authentic purpose for creating the board games!

Genre Knowledge Assessment

Now that the purpose of the lesson was established, I led my class in brainstorming different sorts of games that they could play indoors. We made a long list of board games that they like to play and posted them on the wall. The children were welcome to add the name of a game to the list whenever they thought of a new one. These children certainly had a lot of previous experience with playing games, which confirmed that this was an authentic literacy practice for them.

Next we talked about what is usually included in a board game and we listed these on another list. These included: the game board, game pieces, game cards, play money, dice, pencils and an instruction manual. This last item became the focus of our next couple of lessons.

The Games

Authentic Purpose

Why do games have written rule books? Have you ever tried to play a game, but could not find the instructions? If so, what happened?

This is how we began our discussion into the purpose or need to write game rules. The Grade 3 children had no problem understanding why games need rules. One child explained it well: "You would not know how to play the game without rules." Another child added that you need written rules in case nobody is there to explain how to play the game.

> # Why do we need to write rules for the games that we create?
>
> Writing clear rules helps others learn how to play a game that

Several of my students had stories about playing games for the first time and how their parents read the rules to learn how to play. I asked them why they needed their parents to help them read the rules, and the children told me it was because often the instructions are difficult to understand and their parents are better readers. I asked them if they wanted their rule books to be difficult for others to follow, and they were all in agreement that it did not make sense to make instructions that other children would not understand. The students decided that they needed to write clear instructions that other children would understand so that they would know how to play the game.

A Closer Look at the Rules

A recurring statement that my students made when we were talking about the purpose of rules was that it was their parents, not them, who read game rules. I thought that we should talk about who they would be writing their rules for before starting on the activity. First of all, I simply asked them who they thought would need the rules for the games that they would make. They all agreed that it would be the Grade 1 and 2 students because they would be the ones that are playing the games. I then asked them to think of other people, even adults, who might read their game rules. Here is the list they came up with:

> # Who will we be writing our game rules for?
>
> - Primary students
> - Supervision-Aids
> - Teachers
> - Older students
> - Maybe even some parents

As a homework assignment, I asked the class to think about what game instructions usually look like, what is usually included in them and what makes good instructions. To help them with this, they were to look at the games that they had at home and to note in their journals what they liked and did not like about the instruction manuals so that the next day they would have something to share with the class.

The class was quite enthusiastic about this task and several of the children brought the instructions from some of their games to school the following day. This turned out to quite handy since I decided to make a few copies of each set of instructions so that the class could compare the instructions in small groups. In their groups they compared how the instructions were organized and what kind of

information was included. We decided as a class that all the instructions included how many players can play, an object, contents or equipment, setup information, how to play and how to win the game. The class noticed that some games also had an introductory paragraph about the game, scoring directions, pictures and diagrams.

> What's included in a board game:
>
> - Number of players
> - Object of game
> - List of equipment
> - How to setup the game
> - How to play the game
> - How to win the game

As for what the instructions looked like (the format), the class noticed that some parts of the instructions were written in sentences, some in point form, but most of them were written in numbered form. As I mentioned above, I also asked the children to make note of what they did and did not like about the game rules that they looked at. When we discussed this, most of them decided that they liked the rules that were simple, easy to read and included pictures and diagrams.

<div align="center">Embedded Skills Lesson on Action Verbs</div>

I made six copies of the 'setup' section of the game *Clue* for the class to look at in groups of four. I gave each group a couple of highlighters and asked them to highlight all the action words they found. We then wrote all the words they found on the overhead projector and discussed if they were all indeed action words (many were not).

I asked the class what they noticed about the action words that they found. One of the students pointed out that most of them were at the beginning of the sentences, which was something that I wanted them to be aware of. Similarly, I wanted them to see that there was no subject before the action verb at the beginning of the sentence. They did not notice this on their own, so I asked them to discuss with their groups why there was no subject before the verbs in the sentences. One group explained that it was because the action words are meant for whoever is reading the instructions. Another group remarked that having no subject before the verb is the same as having 'you' before the verb.

Finally I wanted my students to look at the endings of the verbs (in French imperative, verbs usually end with an 'e' or an 's'). I had them make a list of the verbs that ended with an 'e' and a list of the verbs that ended with an 's', and then to figure out a rule of why some verbs take an 'e' at the end and why others take an 's'. The groups had a difficult time coming up with a rule, and none of them came up with the

correct rule (verbs with the infinitive ending 'er' have an 'e' and verbs ending with 'ir' or 're' have an 's'), but it gave them the chance to look critically at the language that was being used.

        After we had tested their hypotheses and discovered that they did not work, I presented the actual rule to them which they copied down in their French Language notebook. I then wrote ten new action words in their infinitive form on the board that they were to conjugate to their imperative form in their notebooks as a grammar exercise. As I looked over their books that evening I noted that all but three students were writing their verbs correctly. I worked with these three students for about 10 minutes the next day while the others were writing in their Journal.
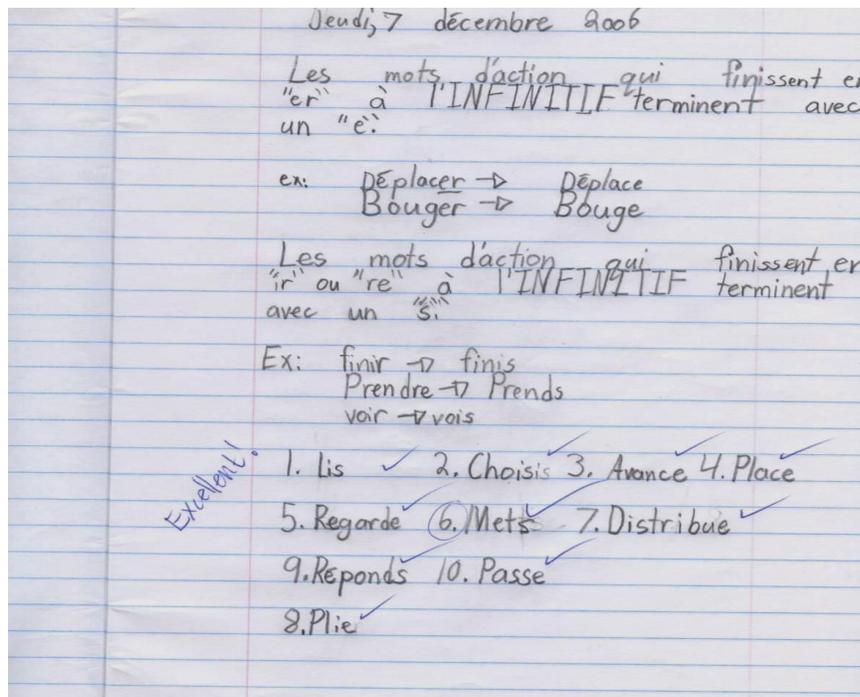
Skills Assessment

        During our next lesson I assessed the students on what they had learned about action verbs. Although, I had already looked at the verbs they had conjugated in their French notebooks, I wanted to see if they would be able to conjugate verbs correctly in the context of a set of game rules.

Go Fish

        I prepared a text about how to play the game *'Go Fish'*, with blanks where the action words should go. I included a list of verbs that they could use at the bottom of the page; however, these verbs were in the infinitive form so the students had to conjugate them correctly within the text. We did the first sentence together to help the few students who had difficulty comprehending the directions.

        Only two students in the class had a difficult time with this task. Unfortunately, these were two of the three students who I had already given additional instruction to the previous day. This made me realize that they did not really understand my explanations and that I would have to take another approach

with them. I decided that I would hold off working with them until after I had modeled how to write rules with the class because I would be doing a lot of review and explicit teaching about action verbs while writing.

Modeling the Procedure

I decided to create a game collaboratively with the class as a model. I believed that the actual creation of a good quality game that would stand up to use would be difficult for the students, having had no prior knowledge of how to do this**.**

What kinds of games do Grade 1's and 2's like?

First of all we discussed what kinds of games Grade 1's and 2's like and what their interests are. We brainstormed a variety of ideas and then voted on our favorites. The winning idea was to create a game similar to *Snakes and Ladders*, but with a dinosaur theme.

Planning

I did a sketch of what I thought the game should look like and showed it to the class to see if they wanted to make any changes. They were happy with what I had sketched. Next we made a graphic organizer to help us write the instruction manual. We included all the game elements that we had previously discussed in class (object of game, equipment, setup, how to play and how to win) on the graphic organizer. With the class' input, I modeled what needed to be included on the organizer to help us write the instructions later. When this was done, we were ready to start writing our instructional manual,

Collaborative Writing

We wrote the instructions collaboratively on the overhead projector, and because we had already done the graphic organizer it actually was not as difficult as I had anticipated. A key element was that our game was not too complicated, so it was easy to write clear and concise rules. While writing, I put a particular emphasis on the action words to review what I had previously taught the class.

Making the Game board

I then showed them the materials that I had collected to make the game board and explained how I planned to use them. I did not make the game board in front of the class because it would have taken up too much class time. Instead I made the board on my own, and put it on display afterwards so that the students could use it as an example or ask me questions about how I completed it. I also typed up the rules that we created for the game, added a small diagram of the game board in the 'setup' section and then put this on display beside the game board.

Creating the Games

Step One: Conducting interviews

The students asked if they could conduct interviews with their Grade One reading buddies as research for their own games. I told them I thought that was a fabulous idea, and the Grade One teacher let us interview her class that day.

Step Two: Planning

The students had been thinking about the type of game that they wanted to create since our original discussion. I had also said that they could work in pairs so they had been deciding who they wanted to work with. I put them into pairs based on who the students wanted to be partnered up with and on whom I thought would work well together. I then gave each pair a blank piece of paper so that they could sketch ideas for the appearance of their game. I also gave them a blank copy of the graphic organizer that we had prepared when making our collaborative game.

Some pairs got a lot accomplished during this period and others barely started. Because I noticed that some pairs needed more time to brainstorm and organize their ideas, I said that they had two days to finish their rough plans for their games and that they could work on them in class whenever they had finished their work or they could work on them outside of class if it was necessary. By the end of the week all of the groups managed to hand in their sketches and their graphic organizer to me.

Here is an example of one student's blueprints:

Over the next couple of days, I met with each pair separately to go over their plans. The sketches were generally well done, so I had each group explain to me how they were going to make their final copy. I gave some pairs a few suggestions if I thought that there were going to be major problems, but mostly I just gave encouragement and let them be creative. I figured that if they ran into some difficulties later, it would be a good opportunity for them to work together and think critically about how to solve the problem. I did, however, correct all the words that were misspelled on the game board to ensure that they did not make the same errors on their final copies. The words that reoccurred (such as, *advance*, *token*, *ahead, square*…) were added to our word wall.

The graphic organizers, however, were not as complete as I hoped. Most of the children had a hard time grasping the fact that the rules are written for someone who has no idea of how to play the game. Instead they wrote the games as from their own point of view; leaving out many details and steps. I explained to the class as a whole that I was having a hard time understanding what their games were about by looking at their organizers. I reminded them that they were going to be writing their rule books for people like me who have never played the game before and so other people might not understand their rules either. What do you need to include in your rules in order to for them to make sense to the reader, I asked them. We wrote down their answers on a large piece of paper that we put up on the wall.

- What do Good Rules Have?
- Lots of details
- Write the rules in the right order
- Number the steps
- Don't leave out any steps even if they seem obvious to you
- Correct spelling
- Lots of action words

After our discussion, I returned their graphic organizers and asked them to make additions and changes based on what they had just told me. When they were done (or thought they were done) I met with the pairs again, and this time I highlighted the sections that I still thought were incomplete for them to continue working on. The organizers were much clearer and more detailed following this. Here is an example of one of the group's graphic organizers after it had been

corrected:
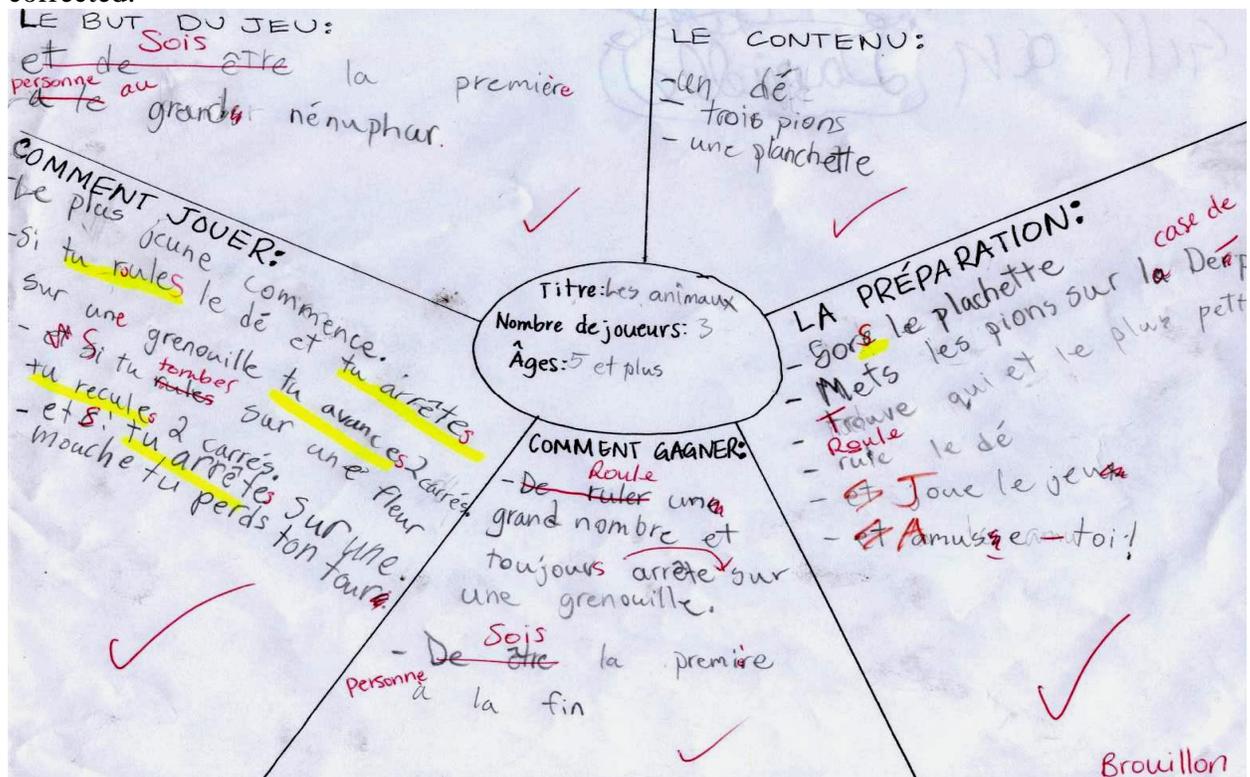
Step Three: Writing the Rules

     We started the lesson with a quick review of the importance of writing the instructions for somebody who has no idea how to play the game and why it is important to write the steps in a logical order. I provided each pair with a template of how to set up their instructional manuals, so that they did not forget anything. I did, however, let them know that they were welcome to add anything they wanted and that they did not have to use my format for the good copy. Surprisingly, all the pairs got right to work and stayed busy for the next hour. I visited each of the pairs while they worked, but except for questions about spelling, they did not want much help. When the students were happy with what they had written, they shared their instructions with another pair and then handed them in to me for editing.

Step Four: Editing

     I read each set of instructions on my own and highlighted the parts that were confusing or unclear. I also underlined all of the spelling mistakes and grammatical errors that the students were able to correct on their own. I, however, corrected the more difficult words and syntax problems for them (otherwise I believe that the editing process becomes too daunting). I met with each pair separately while they were working on the game boards.

     Most of the students typed up the good copies of their rule books during our computer periods. A few of them did not want to type them, however, and wrote up their good copies on their own time.

Step Five: Creating the Game Boards

   I handed out the rough sketches that the students had done to help them work on their projects. Although I had corrected the spelling mistakes that the students had written on their sketches, I emphasized the importance of using our word wall and making sure that all their words were correctly spelled on their final copies. I knew that some of them would also make changes and add things that were not included on their rough drafts so I asked them to double check before writing any new words on their boards.

   This was the fun time of the project, and I encouraged them to be as creative as they like. The students had collected lots of materials, such as dice, stickers and card board, during the last couple of weeks for the games. They had also come to me if they needed something that they could not find at home and I provided them with colored paper, pipe cleaners, glitter glue, stickers and chart paper. I gave the students two afternoons to work on their game boards, which was plenty of time for most of them. Some of the more perfectionist students required more time to finish on their own time. Here is an example of one group's final copy of their game board rules:

LE JEU DES MOTS:ÉDITION CLASSIQUE

Age: 7 à 9 ans   Nombre de personnes: 2 à 5 jouers

Le contenu :
- 1 dé
- des sacs de cartes
- la planchette du jeu
- des pions (A a E)

Le but du jeu :
De aller à la fin (carre #60).

La préparation du jeu :
1. ouvre le jeu et mets le jeu sur une surface plate.
2. mets les cartes dans le carré au milieu.
3. ouvre le sac des pions.
4. distribue les pions.
5. le plus jeune reçoit le pion « A ».
6. puis le deuxième plus jeune recoit le pion « B ».
   etc ...

Comment gagner :
Épeller tout les mots qui sont dans la lettre et catégorie appropriée.

Comment jouer :
1. mets les pions au départ.
2. le plus jeune roule en premier .Il/Elle bouge au chiffre/carre appropriée
3. choisis une carte pour le carré ex. à l'école
et regarde la lettre sur le carré.

The Final Projects

The students were very proud of their projects! I laminated the game boards and instructions so that they would last longer. The students were so excited to play their games with the younger students that we arranged to play the games with the Grade One class during class time instead waiting for the next rainy indoor day. Here are three Grade One students playing the game!

Post Assessment

After the games were finished I checked to see if all the pairs had correctly written all their action verbs. Each student also completed a self-evaluation about their work ethic and how they worked with their partner.

Reflections

I believe that the greatest thing about this lesson, and any other authentic literacy lesson for that matter, is the students are highly motivated to read and write. When literacy becomes functional for them, the quality of their work increases tenfold. I was so pleased with the instructional manuals that my students produced, and they were excited to do it because there was a reason for writing them. I was also able to include grammar instruction when we worked on action verbs which usually caused their eyes to glaze over. I believe that the fact that they wanted their rules to be written correctly helped them pay closer attention to the grammar lessons that I taught. Furthermore, they had the opportunity to apply their new skills to the writing of their rules.

I must say that for me is the greatest thing about teaching authentic lessons is the effect it has on some of the less enthusiastic students. There are a couple of kids in my class who drive me crazy with questions such as, *Do we have to do this*? or *Why are we doing this?* Although I do have reasons for teaching what I do, my students do not always understand my reasons, and I believe that this impedes their learning. With this lesson, on the other hand, the class comprehended *why* we were learning about action verbs: In order to write instructions. Nobody questioned why we were learning about verbs, and better yet, they were motivated to learn about grammar!

References

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Beck. L. I., McKeown, G. M., & Kucan, L. (2003). Taking Delight in Words: Using Oral Language to Build Young Children's Vocabularies. <u>American Educator,</u> 15, 36-46