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## Peer Review and Feedback in the Middle School English Learner Classroom

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Peer Review and Feedback in the Middle School English Learner Classroom

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in TESOL

Hamline University

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	4
Overview of the Chapter.....	4
Personal and Professional Significance.....	5
Important Definitions.....	7
Project Rationale.....	8
Summary.....	10
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	11
Overview of the Chapter.....	11
English Language Learners.....	12
Writing Skills.....	16
Middle School.....	19
Cooperative Learning.....	22
Peer Review and Feedback.....	24
Summary.....	29
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	30
Overview of the Chapter.....	30
Project Overview.....	30
Connection to Research.....	32
Setting and Participants.....	33
Assessment.....	34

Timeline.....35

Summary.....36

CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion.....38

    Overview of the Chapter.....38

    Context.....38

    Key Research.....39

    Limitations.....41

    Implications.....42

    Sharing Results.....43

    Benefit to the Profession and Future Research.....43

    Summary.....44

REFERENCES.....45

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

Throughout my career as an English Language Development (ELD) teacher, I've often been asked for advice from teachers, both mainstream and other EL teachers. "How can I help English learners (ELs) in my classes?" This question may be broad, similar to the previous, or more specifically related to a specific subject or domain. Many teachers realize that ELs have a different set of needs compared to native English speakers. However, even with the needs recognized, oftentimes teachers are uncertain about how to address those needs.

The domain of writing brings an entirely different challenge to teachers of English learners. There are ELs who may excel at the domains of listening, speaking, and reading but struggle elaborating their thoughts into writing. Writing can be a subject that teachers may avoid rather than attempting to grapple with it in their classes. When teachers do not spend time explicitly teaching and having their students practice writing, students may be missing essential elements of writing that cannot be naturally picked up through practice. It is a disservice to students when they miss out on essential writing skills because their teachers are not confident in their ability to teach those writing skills.

The focus of this capstone is to utilize previous research that has shown effective methods for teaching writing skills to middle school English learners. Peer review and feedback is a method that has been proven to improve writing skills of EL students.

While there is a significant amount of research that shows peer review and feedback is an effective activity to increase writing skills, there is still hesitancy for teachers to implement it in their classrooms. My capstone strives to answer the research question: *How can I integrate peer review and feedback activities into instruction in order to improve the writing skills of middle school English language learners?* With this research question, the goal of my capstone project is to create a curriculum unit that focuses on theories and activities of peer review and feedback that have been shown to improve writing skills of middle school ELs.

In this introduction chapter, I will explain: the professional and personal significance of this capstone project, definitions of importance, the project rationale, and conclude this chapter with a preview of the remainder of the capstone project.

### **Professional and Personal Significance**

I am in my third year as an ELD teacher in a Minnesota school district located in a first ring suburb of Minneapolis. The school is a combined middle and high school, there are 998 students in grades 6-12. The percentage of students that receive free or reduced lunch is 82%. The total population of English Language Learners is 17% of the student body. Between middle and high school there are a total of five ELD teachers where we teach courses based on both grade level and proficiency level. I am the sole middle school new-to-country teacher and sixth grade ELD teacher. I teach students who have an entering level (level 1) of English in grades 6, 7, and 8. Students in these classes have an English proficiency level of either emerging (level 2), developing (level 3), or expanding (level 4). Most of the students were born in the United States or have lived in the United States for three or more years. The native languages spoken by the students

are extremely diverse as I have students who speak Spanish, Vietnamese, Somali, Hmong, French, Tigrinya, and Mandingo. I am focusing my capstone project on the sixth grade ELD class. There are components from the project that I plan on incorporating into my new-to-country classes, but the curriculum unit will be created with the sixth grade ELD class in mind.

Starting from when I was a student to being a current teacher, writing is a concept I have never been fully comfortable with. When I was a student in K-12 education, I remember spending time on creating writing pieces, but the focus was typically not on improving my writing. This became especially true from middle school into high school. I believe I missed out on valuable writing skills that I could have learned while in secondary school. I do not want my students to have a similar experience. Middle school is an excellent time for students to learn and practice new writing skills, they are maturing and are able to learn and focus in a different way than previously. From a student perspective, I want my students to continue their writing growth even though it may be believed that students learn the essential writing skills in elementary school and there is no need for new practices in writing.

From a teacher perspective, writing is a domain that can come naturally to students but can also be a struggle for others to grasp. There is also a common misconception that if a student is a proficient reader then they are automatically a proficient writer. This is not the case, the two domains are not interchangeable. Writing requires students to voice their opinions in a way that is different from the spoken word. I, along with other teachers, can feel intimidated by the thought of focusing an extended period of time on the improvement of student writing. What if it's boring? What if the

students do not show any improvement? I admit that I have hesitancy about writing, which is why I decided to focus my capstone project on this important topic. As a teacher, I am continually attempting to improve my practice for the betterment of my students. Becoming a more effective writing teacher will help my students become more effective writers, which will benefit them throughout their education and beyond.

I chose to focus on peer review and feedback for my capstone project for a couple different reasons. The first reason is the proven effectiveness of peer review and feedback in a middle school ELD classroom when it is appropriately implemented. The second reason is because of the collaborative learning that is involved with peer review and feedback. I am continuously searching for methods of teaching that take the focus and center away from the teacher and push it to the students. When the learning is student centered, students are more likely to take ownership of their learning and are more likely to learn new perspectives and ideas from their peers. Students have the ability to help each other improve their critical thinking skills when they are provided with the appropriate scaffolds.

### **Important Definitions**

Throughout this capstone project, there are terms used that warrant further explanation. The first definition is the one used most frequently throughout the paper, which is English Learners (ELs). The slightly longer definition, which is referring to the same group, is English Language Learners (ELLs). According to the state of Minnesota, an English Learner is a student in any grade from K-12 whose parents identified them as someone who learned a different language prior to learning English. The student also completed a valid assessment that determined the student's ability to use English in an



academic setting (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). The majority of this paper will contain the shorter version (ELs). In the school I currently teach at, the course that ELs take is known as English Language Development (ELD). The curriculum unit I created for my capstone project takes place in a sixth grade ELD class. I refer to myself as an ELD teacher in this paper, and teach ELD courses for students of varied English proficiency levels.

This paper also addresses cooperative learning. According to Zook (2018), cooperative learning is using small groups of students or partners to work together to uncover new concepts and help each other in their learning process. Cooperative learning takes the emphasis off of teacher-centered learning and focuses more on student-centered learning. The benefits of cooperative learning are addressed in depth in the Literature Review Chapter.

The last term that will be addressed in this section is peer review and feedback. Peer review is the process of allowing students to analyze a classmates' work and identify the positives and constructive criticisms. The students then conference with each other to determine ways to improve the writing piece. The author of the writing then goes back and revises their work based on the feedback provided by the peer. Peer review and feedback is a collaborative process, with students using their critical thinking skills to assist in the learning process of their peers.

### **Project Rationale**

Based on my experience as a teacher working in multiple school buildings and districts, I've noticed that writing is not addressed in the classroom as often as other subjects. Why is writing not utilized and practiced more in the classroom - especially in

secondary grades? Students are taught the basics of writing in elementary school and provided time to practice these new skills. However, writing skills seem to be put on the back burner in middle school. Students will have writing assignments in various courses, but may not be learning new writing skills. Also, what about ELs who may have missed those crucial early building blocks of writing?

As an educator, I have a responsibility to ensure that my students are receiving the support they need to learn any new skill or improve upon a previously learned skill. Even though I have less confidence in teaching writing skills compared to other subjects, it is vital for me to obtain more knowledge and skills related to teaching writing. My English Learners in middle school are at a disadvantage compared to their peers who are already native English speakers. This will be discussed in more detail in the Literature Review Chapter. My role is to support them in their language learning process so that they can be more successful in their other courses.

In addition to bettering myself as a teacher, another goal of this capstone project is to help other teachers obtain more skills for teaching writing to ELs. I hope other educators will be able to use activities and ideas from this curriculum unit and be able to alter it in a way that will work for their classroom and students. The idea of using peer review and feedback to improve English Learners' writing skills can seem to be a daunting task, however there are benefits when it is incorporated into the classroom efficiently. In addition to the increase of writing skills, students are practicing critical thinking skills along with cooperative learning skills. All three of these skills are essential for student growth and success in their educational career and beyond to their post education career.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, a few topics were addressed. The topic of the capstone project was stated along with the reasoning for creating this project. The research question was stated, which is the guiding force behind the curriculum unit. I explained my personal and professional significance that inspired the completion of this capstone and the creation of the curriculum unit. I also addressed important definitions that will be continuously used throughout this paper along with a brief explanation of their importance to this capstone. The rationale for this project was explained as to how it benefits myself, other educators, and EL students.

The remainder of this capstone project contains three more chapters. Chapter two details the review of literature I completed in order to guide my creation of the curriculum unit. Chapter three focuses on the description of my project, which details the setting and the participants, the timeline, and more. The final chapter (chapter four) is the conclusion. In the conclusion I will reflect on what I have learned, and potential implications due to the creation of this curriculum unit.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Overview of the Chapter

This chapter explores the previous research on peer review and feedback in the writing process. Providing peer review and feedback to ELLs has been shown to improve the quality of their academic writing (Rollinson, 2005). However, it is possible that peer review and feedback can have a negative impact on students when introduced incorrectly. Fortunately, there are methods that can be administered to ELLs that will increase writing abilities. It is a benefit to both teachers and students when there is an effective routine established to incorporate review and feedback in the classroom. Students are able to take the skills gained (both social and academic) and incorporate them into future courses and careers.

The purpose of this project is to create a unit that will help teachers be able to guide students towards the ability to peer review and provide feedback to their peers' academic writing assignments. With this ability, the end goal is the improvement of writing skills for both the reviewer and the reviewee. The research question that is the basis of the project is:

*How can I integrate peer review and feedback activities into instruction in order to improve the writing skills of middle school English language learners?*

This chapter examines the current literature that focuses on the research question. First, English language learners as an entirety will be discussed, focusing on the

challenges that they face. The second sub-topic will address the writing skills of English language learners, specifically the importance of having strong writing abilities. Next, the research focus will narrow in on writing skills specific for middle school English language learners while also addressing the social aspect that middle school students face. After acknowledging the specific needs of middle school students, research will focus on collaborative learning methods that can help improve ELLs' writing skills. The last sub-topic of research will focus on the peer review and feedback process along with the benefits of it. These five sub-topics will align with each other to create an extensive amount of focused research to address the research question.

Previous research does slightly answer the research question, but there is still more to be done to address the question. This capstone project will attempt to fill in the gap in research. The gap is that teachers do not have a curriculum unit with theories and activities backed by the previous research that they can use to effectively implement collaborative peer review and feedback in their English Language Development courses. The goal of this capstone project is to create a cohesive curriculum unit that contains the activities already proven to improve the writing skills and collaborative learning skills of middle school ELLs. The curriculum unit can be utilized by teachers in its entirety or can be altered to fit the needs of the teacher and the students.

### **English Language Learners (ELLs)**

English language learners (ELLs) make up a significant portion of the school system in the United States at 9.1% of the total school population in the 2011-2012 school year (US Department of Education, 2014). They are also the fastest growing group of students in K-12 schools across the country (Harper & de Jong, 2004).

According to the state of Minnesota, an English Learner is a student in any grade from K-12 whose parents identified them as someone who learned a different language prior to learning English. The student also completed a valid assessment that determined the student's ability to use English in an academic setting (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Although a large number of school districts across the country have a population of ELLs, many teachers are unaware of how best to serve their students' needs. Oftentimes, new to country students are placed in mainstream classes and expected to perform in English at grade level (Harper & de Jong, 2009). This section will focus on the challenges faced by ELLs in education. The first part of this section will give attention to how ELLs are marginalized and the second part of this section will focus on what teachers need to know about their ELLs in order to best serve them.

Schools will often place emphasis on the methods that benefit the majority group of students. Chen (2020) stated that schools should not focus on a mono-cultural perspective as it does not benefit an entire group of students, it only benefits students from that one culture. The one culture is typically white, native English speakers. When schools only focus on that majority group of students, the students in the minority groups are the ones that suffer. ELLs are included in the minority group. Many ELLs are placed in mainstream classes with no EL support because it is believed that students will easily learn English through social interaction and schoolwork within a year or two (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Due to being pushed into mono-cultural classrooms beyond their English speaking ability level with no EL support, students face a "double-barrier" in education - both a language and cultural barrier (Chen, 2020). Unfortunately, when ELLs are placed in such deficit classroom settings, teachers can have a negative perspective towards their

ELL students. These students have a great amount of life skills, experiences, and abilities that could be brought to the table, but teachers see them as unsuccessful due to the focus on the mono-cultural perspective (Chen, 2020).

When looking specifically at classroom practices and strategies, teachers may unknowingly be putting their ELL students at a disadvantage by the methods that are used in their classroom. When analyzing classroom talk, Harklau (1994) has noted that the majority of spoken words in the mainstream classroom is teacher-led discussion, which is not accessible to ELLs. Said teachers may speak too quickly, provide no visuals, and/or do not repeat what has been said. Certain teaching styles can often confuse ELLs. When a teacher changes a topic quickly to a story un-related to the lesson, ELLs may not be able to adjust to the shift in subject. These students also struggled understanding teachers who frequently used sarcasm. When teachers are the main contributors to the voice in the classroom and do not provide necessary support and guidance for ELLs to follow along, the students cannot intake the lesson the way it was intended.

Writing is another domain where ELLs are not able to reach their full abilities in the mainstream classroom when particular methods are the main activities involved. According to Harklau (1994), even though there is opportunity for ELLs to write in the classroom, the majority of writing has been found to include copying information down from textbooks, fill-in-the-blank, or multiple choice responses. Those methods of writing are not enough for ELLs to learn how to create independent writing pieces in the English language.

According to research, there are methods and activities that can help teachers better serve their ELLs. A necessary allowance for teachers to provide to their ELLs, particularly for new-to-country students, is the opportunity to adjust to life in the United States (Harklau, 1994). It is unreasonable to expect these students to automatically be aware of schooling norms in a new place (country, state, school, etc.). Harper and de Jong (2004) point out that teachers need to understand that all ELLs do not develop their language abilities at the same pace, just as native English speakers do not learn new skills at the same pace. As an overall mission for an inclusive classroom, a culturally responsive one that includes the perspectives and life experiences of ELLs is needed (Chen, 2020). When teachers understand these guiding principles, it can serve as a base for teaching ELLs in their classrooms.

For any activity that will be done in the classroom, scaffolding is beneficial to ELLs in order to help them access the curriculum (Chen, 2020). In addition to providing scaffolds to the curriculum, the activities should be structured and interactive. When an activity is appropriately structured, interactive, and with the necessary scaffolds, it will provide students with an attainable challenge to practice using English based on the level they are at (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Earlier in this section, the lack of student discussion in the classroom was discussed. A three step method to involve ELLs in classroom discussion is to first provide a model for the students to use before asking them to respond. Second, provide a long enough wait time for students to formulate their thoughts. Lastly, call on students individually to ask for their opinions (Harklau, 1994).

In this section, English Language Learners in education were discussed. Even though the population of ELLs in the United States is growing rapidly, they are often not



provided with appropriate methods to help them succeed in the classroom. There have been methods discussed in this section that are found to provide support to help students improve their English while also learning the necessary content. However, the few methods discussed in this section are not the only methods that are useful for teachers to implement in their classrooms. The next section will discuss the current research on writing skills that have been found to improve writing practices for ELLs.

### **Writing Skills**

Of the four domains that ELL students strive to improve on, writing can be one of the more difficult domains to master (Pang, 2017). Writing in an academic context in a non-native language can be daunting for students. Many ELLs are missing those vital writing skills that are needed to be successful in the classroom. Young ELLs may lack the necessary grammatical rules and proper use of vocabulary, which are required to be a skilled writer (Pang, 2017). This section will discuss the importance of students being able to use writing skills effectively. The first part of this section will focus on the writing skills that ELLs struggle with. The second part of this section will address methods that can be used to improve those writing skills.

When ELLs work on a piece of writing, there are challenges they face that are different from the challenges of writers who write in their native language. Young ELLs are learning two different languages at the same time and may struggle to remember the different writing rules between the two languages (Pang, 2017). One method of writing that is commonly used in classes is referred to as “summarizing”. ELLs may struggle with summarizing texts that they have read (Pang, 2017). Argumentative writing is another method used in classrooms. This type of writing requires a skill where students

need to provide evidence to back up the opinion they are taking, which is not something that can be assumed ELLs are able to do without providing support (O'Hallaron, 2014). The two writing skills mentioned above are not the only ones that ELLs struggle with, but they are two important considerations. In the Andrei et. al (2015) study, teachers were aware that ELLs have their own specific writing needs, but were unsure how to best accommodate those needs. The following section will address methods that teachers can use to strengthen these important skills.

When it comes to overall writing skills, teachers should encourage students to spend time reading and writing in their native language, because being able to read and write in the native language has been shown to improve the ability to read and write in the second language (Pang, 2017). One method that Pang (2017) found to help ELLs become more comfortable writing is the opportunity to have an independent journal to practice skills that their teachers want them to focus on. In a study done by Andrei et. al (2015), teachers participated in a book club that focused on writing for ELLs. The teachers discovered a few strategies that would better support their EL students. The first strategy was to create writing rubrics that accommodated the minor grammar mistakes and developing language that are typical of ELLs in their writing practices. The second strategy was "linked assignments", where students would be given activities to slowly build on what they write, which would progressively delve a little deeper into the necessary writing skills for the current writing piece. The last strategy that teachers discovered in their book club was to shift the emphasis from grammar to focus more on meaning-making and the overall process of writing in order to build ELLs' confidence in their writing ability.

In the first section of this topic, summarizing was an acknowledged skill that ELLs struggle with. The ability to write a book summary is a building block for being an effective writer. Pang's (2017) findings discovered methods to focus on that will help ELLs better understand the skill of summarizing. It is important for students to understand vocabulary in different social contexts, not simply from an academic standpoint. When ELLs truly understand vocabulary that is necessary to the current activity, they are more easily able to use the vocabulary in their writing. In addition to understanding the vocabulary, scaffolding is necessary for students to be able to effectively write a summary. The first step to scaffold summary writing is to begin with a one sentence summary. Once students are able to write a one sentence summary, the next step is to incorporate visual scaffolds such as a venn diagram to highlight key points that should be included in the summary.

In addition to summarizing, writing an argumentative essay is another skill where ELLs need increased support. In 2014, O'Hallaron led a study and discovered methods and activities that were found to be effective in strengthening student's writing of an argumentative essay. Brainstorming with peers along with guidance from the teacher provided a helpful starting point for ELLs to understand that a stance needs to be taken when writing an argumentative essay, and to begin thinking critically about potential evidence to support their stance. Brainstorming provides an auditory method of the pre-writing process, while graphic organizers provide a visual step in the pre-writing process. Graphic organizers allow students to record their own personal thoughts and ideas. The last method that was discussed in O'Hallaron's study was to provide sentence starters for ELLs. Sentence starters are a scaffold that will assist students to not feel

“stuck” on how to structure their writing. When they are not occupied with the structure, this allows the student to strengthen their claim and evidence.

Writing skills are necessary for ELLs to possess in order to be successful in the classroom. In this section, the writing skills that ELLs struggle with plus methods and activities that teachers can use to strengthen these skills were discussed. There are other methods that can be used to build up the writing skills of ELLs, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The following section will focus on middle school ELLs, a group of students that have important needs and differences from elementary and high school age ELLs.

### **Middle School**

Adolescence can be a stressful time for students. For adolescent students that are also ELLs, the stress can be amplified. Being an ELL can have a significant influence on the students' identity (Harklau, 2019). Young people need socialization in their education to improve their ability to work with others and develop social language. This section will discuss the trials that middle school ELLs face socially and academically. The first part of this section will address the challenges that middle school ELLs face. The second part of this section will focus specifically on methods teachers can implement that are beneficial for middle school ELLs.

According to Harklau (2019), adolescence is a time when the development of social identity and the student's conception of themselves is formed. This age is typically a difficult time for students, who are also more likely to be moldable by the influence of others in the middle school years. This time could possibly be even more problematic for middle school ELLs. Unfortunately, research on adolescence has focused mainly on the

dominant white, middle class culture (Harklau, 2019). Due to this focus on the majority culture group, any other adolescent experiences are not as firmly understood.

Middle school ELLs typically face a tougher challenge academically compared to the challenges their younger siblings face. Middle schoolers need the language capabilities to be able to complete more complex schoolwork while also needing the advanced social and academic vocabulary that is required (Yoon, 2020). A study done in California found that middle schools are severely lacking when it comes to providing support for their ELLs (Viadero, 2010). She advises that it is necessary to invest more towards teaching teachers how to support their ELLs, create smaller schools, and find ways to involve parents in their children's schools in an impactful way. This is just a brief explanation of how middle school ELLs struggle academically, the next section will address how middle school ELLs struggle socially and internally.

Immigration is an experience unique to ELLs that shapes both their own ethnic identities and their position in society based on their identified group (Harklau, 2019). The prejudices of society in relation to being in the language minority can cause the student to become stressed and thus resulting in a coping mechanism. Potential coping mechanisms may be: not participating in particular school activities, isolating themselves from their peers, or engaging in unhealthy choices. The build up of society's prejudices in addition to the added stress and coping mechanisms could possibly lead to detrimental outcomes such as a lack of school success. Due to these circumstances, middle school ELLs are more likely than majority culture students to have a lack of personal competence. This lack of personal competence can lead to ELLs allowing potential limited social access instead of defying them.

\_\_\_\_\_ In this section, habits that teachers can incorporate into their teaching to benefit middle school ELLs will be addressed. Yoon (2020) claims that since adolescent ELLs are more aware of their identity and are more likely to accept peer pressure, teachers need to consider this when creating a classroom environment. When creating lessons and implementing ideals and theories, teachers need to recognize the developmental stages of their students.

In addition to the importance of creating inclusive environments, inclusive curriculum needs to be incorporated as well. Implementing a curriculum that contains multicultural literature that mirrors ELLs' backgrounds (ethnic, cultural, and linguistic) can be motivational for students. When students see themselves in what they are learning about, they can be the "cultural experts" (Yoon, 2020). Another important aspect of creating a multicultural curriculum is to incorporate "multimodal communication". Multimodal communication is ensuring that the many ways middle schoolers communicate with each other is allowed and encouraged in the classroom. This includes speaking, illustrating, writing formally and informally, emailing, blogging, messaging, etc. When teachers integrate these different elements into the activities, it accommodates the differing identities of all students, including ELLs. This approach has been proven effective by multiple studies (Danzak, 2011; Lindahl & Hansen-Thomas, 2018). The final practice that teachers should consider adapting into their teaching is the acceptance of differing accents. Due to negative attitudes towards accents, ELLs may be discriminated against (Beinhoff, 2013). Teachers need to create an environment that stresses the belief that everyone has accents, and no accents are better than others. When middle school ELLs are in a classroom that acknowledges their identity and sees their

identities as a positive, students are more likely to participate in learning activities (Yoon, 2020).

As was stated previously, middle school ELLs face a unique challenge both academically and socially. In this section, the challenges they face and what teachers can do to help overcome those challenges were discussed. These challenges cannot be solved by administering only the ideas suggested in this section. The next section will address another method of learning that can benefit middle school ELLs, which is cooperative learning.

### **Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning is a type of learning that can bring the socialization that middle school students need while also improving their academic skills. According to Zook (2018), cooperative learning is using small groups of students or partners to work together to uncover new concepts and help each other in their learning process. When there are social aspects of language learning being used, scaffolding is a natural occurrence and all students benefit (Hanjani & Li, 2014). Students can learn a great amount from their peers. When teachers act as guides of learning and the students are the drivers, students can take ownership of their learning. This section will discuss the benefits and potential shortfalls of cooperative learning for middle school ELLs. The first section will focus on social benefits of cooperative learning, while the second section will focus on the academic benefits of cooperative learning.

There have been many academic benefits found when cooperative learning is utilized. In a study conducted by Shi and Han (2019), they concluded that group work helped improve the middle school student's motivation, interest, and overall attitude

towards learning. ELLs were also found to have improved their language skills and the ability to use the provided learning tools. It was also noted that cooperative learning improved the learning strategy that students were targeting and advanced students' critical thinking skills. However, there were a couple shortcomings that were acknowledged in the study: students were extremely nervous while participating in the cooperative learning activity, and some students did not choose to do any extra work outside of the assigned roles. These shortcomings are important to consider when a teacher plans on incorporating cooperative learning activities into their curriculum.

Another study done by Hanjani and Li (2014) found additional positive benefits of cooperative learning. The researchers found that cooperative learning benefited ELLs no matter what their proficiency level was. This is encouraging because teachers do not need to worry about the students' proficiency level interfering with the work of cooperative learning when correctly scaffolded. An additional positive benefit discovered was that students naturally provided scaffolds when working with each other, meeting students where they were at according to their ability level and then progressing together.

How a teacher incorporates themselves into cooperative learning is an important piece of the puzzle. As mentioned previously, teachers should take on the role of a facilitator. Initially, students should be introduced to cooperative learning activities through the teacher by modeling. Eventually, teachers gradually give more responsibility to the students. Students will then be able to work cooperatively, with the teacher occasionally guiding the students to a deeper level of learning. When ELLs are less



reliant on the teacher and more reliant on their peers, the benefits of cooperative learning can more easily be noticed (Shi & Han, 2019).

Cooperative learning can also benefit the social aspect of the lives of middle school ELLs. The concern of middle school ELLs struggling to find their identity and feel a sense of belonging in their classrooms was addressed in a previous section of this literature review. Van Rysin and Roseth (2018) concluded from their research that cooperative learning is able to improve student involvement and confidence in the classroom. The researchers found that cooperative learning had lessened the stress and bullying that the minority cultures in a school typically face. When students are encouraged to develop a positive social relationship with their peers, the ELLs have the ability to overcome the struggles they faced regarding the additional challenges unique to their group. Overall, emotional problems were reduced and students were more easily able to relate to one another.

Based on this research, cooperative learning can be a positive step in the right direction to improve the learning environment for middle school ELLs. In this section, the important role of the teacher in cooperative learning was discussed. This section also addressed how cooperative learning can benefit middle school ELLs both academically and socially. Now that the benefits of cooperative learning as a whole have been discussed, the next section will focus on a cooperative learning method that has been shown to improve the writing skills of middle school ELLs.

### **Peer Review and Feedback**

One method of cooperative learning that can be beneficial to improving the writing skills of middle school ELLs is peer review and feedback in the writing process

(Rollinson, 2005). Peer review is the process of allowing students to analyze a classmates' work and identify the positives and constructive criticisms. The students then conference with each other to determine ways to improve the writing piece. The author of the writing then goes back and revises their work based on the feedback provided by the peer. Students providing feedback to their peers can be intimidating to both the students and the teachers. This section will focus on peer review and feedback in an academic writing setting. The first part of this section will address the known benefits of peer feedback and review. To counter the benefits, the second section will address potential shortcomings of peer review and feedback. The final section will acknowledge methods of implementing peer feedback and review that have found success among middle school ELLs.

There have been numerous studies with the focus on peer review and feedback that have seen positive results (Hanajani & Li 2014, Allen & Mills 2014, Abou Saeed et. al. 2018). This section will pinpoint specific examples of how peer review and feedback has improved the writing skills of ELLs. According to Kim (2015), one of the greatest advantages of receiving peer feedback is that the writer can learn how the reader is understanding the writing. This allows the writer to gain a different perspective on their work and provides a better understanding of themselves as a writer and the student can be aware of the writing strengths and weaknesses they have. Students can take this knowledge they have gained from the peer reviewer and apply it to a future writing assignment, thus improving writing skills for the long-term instead of the improvement being a temporary fix.

In addition to the long term benefits of peer review and feedback to an ELLs' writing, there are other skills that can be gained. For example, providing feedback can be as important and useful as receiving the feedback. Both Kim (2015) and Rollinson (2005) noticed that students are practicing their critical thinking skills when reviewing the writing of their peers. This allows for students to also become more critical readers, and to analyze their own writing more critically. When ELLs develop critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, they are more likely to use these skills in the future.

From a collaborative learning perspective, the nature of peer review and feedback has the possibility of a high number of collaborative dialogues between the reviewer and the reviewee when it is conducted properly (Rollinson, 2005). One of the goals that was previously mentioned of collaborative learning is the ability of the teacher to be a guide instead of the focus. With peer review and feedback, the teacher is in the background, which may be motivational for students (Rollinson, 2005). ELLs may prefer the more informal method of working with a peer compared to conferencing with a teacher. Rollinson also noted that students will most likely make the changes suggested by their teacher without asking for clarity related to the changes. This leads to students being less likely to maintain the writing in their own voice. When students conference with peers, there is a higher possibility of negotiation. This negotiation can be positive as the student both defends their ideas and attempts to understand the provided feedback.

It is important to look at potential challenges and shortcomings that peer review and feedback can bring. The process itself can be time consuming due to the nature of all the steps that are necessary to correctly implement peer review and feedback, especially in a classroom of students that are unfamiliar with the method (Rollinson, 2005). When

students do not have experience with the process, Kim points out that expectations can be different between students. Students may also focus solely on small, less meaningful changes such as grammar and do not address big idea changes such as the message that was intended in the writing and the necessary themes that needed to be addressed (Hanjani & Li, 2014). These issues can affect all students, both ELLs and native language speakers. The next section will address concerns about peer review and feedback unique to ELLs.

According to Kim (2015), the following challenges that can occur during peer review and feedback are particular to middle school ELLs. If the students have an extremely low level of English proficiency, they may have difficulty in articulating any problems or suggestions to their peers. Having a low level of English proficiency can also contribute to ELLs having a lack of confidence in their ability to provide suggestions they give to others and being uncertain of feedback that is given to them from their peers. There are also cultural considerations that need to be addressed. For example, ELLs may prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback due to the amount of value and respect some cultures place on teacher input. Lastly, there are cultures that prefer not to provide critical feedback to their peers. These issues and concerns are valid when it comes to implementing peer review and feedback in an ELL classroom. The next section will address useful applications that can be utilized to help lessen the impact of the above concerns.

When peer review and feedback is carried out in a way that is carefully planned, it can go far in helping ELLs be able to better engage in the activity and improve their

writing skills (Kim, 2015). Kim addresses three steps that are vital to a successful rollout of peer review and feedback.

1. Training before peer review

This will be mainly a whole class discussion. It is important for students to understand the value of peer review and feedback, and to be aware that even professional writers elicit feedback from their peers (Rollinson, 2005). The class needs to come to a consensus on what to look for when reviewing a piece of writing. A brainstorming session about good qualities of writing can be done to create the rubric students will use to review pieces of writing.

2. Training during peer review

The second step is the time for students to begin to practice reviewing pieces of writing in an informal, no pressure environment. To address concerns about English proficiency levels, providing ELLs with sentence starters can be an effective way students will feel more confident providing feedback. Students should be given ample time to practice reviewing with a partner. During this practice time, it may be beneficial for teachers to have students focus on one specific piece of the rubric at a time. Focusing on one piece of the rubric may lessen anxiety for some students. Rollinson points out that while providing feedback, there should be a mix of oral and written feedback. This goes back to the idea of collaborative learning in that students will negotiate why there needs to be a change or why the writing should be kept the way it currently is.

3. Training after peer review

For the final step, students should be given time to reflect and process on the

feedback that was given to them. Students should be aware that not all feedback has to be taken, but students should provide a sound reason why they will not use specific feedback. When students are allowed time to reflect, they are more likely to use the feedback appropriately to adjust their writing as needed.

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 discussed the previous research of middle school English language learners' writing skills, specifically focusing on the cooperative learning technique of peer review and feedback in an English Language Development classroom. As was previously stated, middle school ELLs face challenges that are unique compared to other middle school students, or ELLs in an elementary setting. Middle school ELLs also have obstacles to overcome that are specific to writing in their non-native language. Although this group of students face these unique obstacles, previous research has addressed possible theories and activities that can provide solutions to these challenges. The next chapter will address the details of my curriculum unit, including the research that I focused on to create the curriculum unit.

## Chapter 3

### Project Description

#### Overview of the Chapter

This chapter contains a foundation of the curriculum unit that was created for this project. The purpose of this project is to answer the research question: *How can I integrate peer review and feedback activities into instruction in order to improve the writing skills of middle school English language learners?* Information that was found and analyzed in the literature review was utilized in creating this curriculum unit. I want to create a curriculum unit that has been found to effectively improve the cooperative learning and writing skills of English language learners (ELLs). This chapter will provide a project description, explain how the project connects to research from the literature review, describe the setting and participants, define the timeline, and include a chapter summary.

#### Project Overview

For this project, I designed and implemented a 4 week curriculum unit for middle school ELLs. The independent variable for this unit is the process of peer review and feedback. The dependent variable for this unit, that will be influenced by the independent variable, is the students' writing skills. The students' English proficiency levels range from 2-Emerging, 3-Developing, and 4-Expanding. The focal point of this curriculum is to provide lessons and activities that the students can engage in that incorporate cooperative learning by means of peer review and feedback. The domain of writing is the

main focus for this unit. However, due to the nature of the activities, students also utilized the reading, listening, and speaking domains as well. Specifically, argumentative writing was the type of writing that students peer reviewed and provided feedback on.

The Minnesota State Standards for Writing Benchmarks, includes argumentative writing in it's 6th grade standards (MN Department of Education, 2017):

*6.7.1.1 Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.*

*a. Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly.*

*b. Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.*

*c. Use words, phrases, and clauses to clarify the relationships among claim(s) and reasons.*

*d. Establish and maintain a formal style.*

*e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the argument presented.*

Due to the inclusion of argumentative writing in the sixth grade writing standards, is a reason why I decided to focus on peer reviewing argumentative writing.

I chose to create a peer review and feedback curriculum unit because I found a vast amount of previous research that encouraged utilizing the peer review process for middle school ELLs. However, I could not find a resource that contained the appropriate lessons and activities for teachers to be able to easily incorporate into their own English language classes. The next section will provide more detail about the previous research that encourages the use of peer review and feedback in the EL classroom.



### **Connection to Research**

The creation of my unit was inspired by previous research. Much of this previous research was briefly discussed in the literature review. In this section, I will focus on the research that I most utilized to create the unit.

In designing the unit, I followed the guidelines of Wiggins and McTighe's (2011) Understanding by Design (UbD) unit format. This format focuses on unit creation from the end to the beginning, in that order. First, I needed to establish what long-term and short-term learning goals I wanted my students to gain from the completion of this unit. Second, is the creation of the assessment. It is necessary for the assessment to be able to accurately evaluate if the students have obtained the short-term and long-term goals. Once the assessment was determined, activities were created that follow an appropriate scope and sequence to guide students to the learning goals. This backwards approach to unit design ensures that I created a unit that focuses on the critical thinking required to fully engage in the peer review and feedback process. The students will be able to utilize the cooperative learning skills they learned not just in this unit, but in future units in the English Language Development classroom and in other classroom settings.

When it came to deciding how to implement productive activities, the research provided by Kim (2015) was abundantly useful to me. Kim explained there are three steps involved in implementing peer review and feedback. The first step takes place before peer review - to prepare students for the process, the second step is training during peer review - how to effectively review and provide useful feedback, and the final step is focused on students using the feedback they received to improve their writing.

Throughout the unit, it was important for me to emphasize to students that the focus of peer review and feedback should be more than grammatical fixes. Students should help each other with the themes and flow of their writing (Hanjani & Li, 2014). Previous research has also pointed out that students need to learn the value of the various perspectives of their peers, as some cultures value the opinion of the teacher more than the opinion of peers (Kim, 2015). During the training before providing feedback, I strived to help students see the value in each other's opinions because of this research.

### **Setting and Participants**

The setting of my project was at a secondary school (both middle school and high school) in a first-ring suburb of Minnesota, where I am a middle school English Language Development (ELD) teacher at the school. The school's population is 998 students in grades 6-12, 17% of which are ELLs. The percentage of students that qualify for free or reduced lunch is 82%.

I implemented this curriculum unit in two of my classes, of which the average class size is 10 students. The classes that I implemented this unit in are ELD 6 (6th grade) classes. This class is a year-long course where the students have the same peers throughout the school year. I was the only instructor in the class. Since there are four other ELD teachers at the middle and high school, I did share this unit and my findings with my colleagues.

For both classes, all of the students are ELLs. None of the students are new-to-country or have an English proficiency of Level 1 (Entering). The students' English proficiency levels range from 2-Emerging, 3-Developing, and 4-Expanding. Most of the students were born in the United States or have lived in the United States for

three or more years. The native languages spoken by the students are extremely diverse. I have students who speak Spanish, Vietnamese, Somali, Hmong, French, Tigrinya, and Mandingo. It is possible, but unlikely that students working together happen to speak the same native language.

### **Assessment**

This curriculum unit contains a pre and post assessment. The pre-assessment was an informal survey about the students' previous experiences with peer review and feedback. Since the students are only in sixth grade, their experiences with peer review and feedback will be minimal, if existent. I wanted to know if this process will be an entirely new experience for the students, or if they have already had a brief introduction. Based on the results of this survey, it helped me determine next steps for introducing the curriculum unit. If some students are familiar with the process, it may benefit to partner them with students who are unfamiliar with the process. Or, it might be more beneficial to partner experienced students with other experienced students and vice versa. The pre-assessment helped guide my decisions for the remainder of the unit.

The post-assessment involved a rubric that I used to assess the students' completed writing. The writing piece that the students created was peer reviewed at the end of the unit. Once the writing was reviewed and feedback was received, the students then edited their draft. With the finalized draft, I used the rubric to assess their writing. After the writing was assessed, I began a comparison of the students' previous piece of writing. An intended goal is that students improved their writing skills in the most recent piece of writing compared to the previous writing. This improvement will be in part due to the completion of the peer review and feedback unit.

The students also conducted a reflection at the end of the unit. This reflection was a brief questionnaire about how their experience with the unit was. Students answered yes or no questions, open ended questions, and answered questions based on a likert scale. I utilized these reflections to compare the responses to the students' results on the writing rubric. I also took their feedback into consideration when I plan on implementing peer review and feedback in the future.

### **Timeline**

I implemented this curriculum unit in January 2021. By this time, classroom norms and routines were in effect and the students were comfortable both in the classroom space and with their peers. In order for peer review and feedback to work effectively, students needed to be trusting with each other. Therefore, a positive classroom environment was created before the unit began.

In total, the curriculum unit will be approximately four weeks long. The first week concentrated on introducing the topic of peer review and feedback. The majority of students were unfamiliar with the term and process, which meant the initial stage was for students to understand the goal of this unit. In the second week, we began to practice activities that will allow students to experience giving and receiving feedback in a low pressure environment. The third week was the focal point of the unit. Students began peer reviewing their classmates' writing (from a writing piece done earlier in the year) and providing feedback. During the fourth and final week, students then looked over the feedback they received and further edited their writing. Students also spent time reflecting on their experience from this unit. The reflections included an evaluation of if they believed the unit benefited them or was a detriment to them. In addition to the

reflections, students participated in a conference with me about their improvement from the original paper to the newly edited one. In the next section, I will explain the reflection and evaluation process that students underwent and I will also address how I used the reflections and evaluations.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I addressed the methods pertaining to my curriculum unit. The specific methods that I focused on were the project overview, connection to research, setting and participants, timeline, and assessment.

The project overview explained the independent and dependent variables of this unit, English proficiency levels, the Minnesota standard I utilized, and the type of writing students will use in the unit.

In the connection to the research section, I focused on components of the literature review that I incorporated into my unit. There are already excellent theories and activities created for peer review and feedback with ELLs. I pulled those ideas and made them my own in the curriculum unit.

The settings and participants addressed the specific dynamics of the class. The dynamics addressed where the school is located and the demographics of the school, plus the specific student population in my classroom that participated in the curriculum unit.

In the timeline section, my focus was on the abilities of students at the time of the implementation of the unit. The classroom environment and the norms established played a role on when the unit was implemented.

There were multiple pieces of assessment involved in the unit: a pre-assessment, a post-assessment, and a student reflection/self-assessment. The assessment was an important piece of the unit, due to the theories I used from Wiggins and McTighe (2008).

The next chapter will contain the conclusion of my curriculum unit. The conclusion will discuss the implementation of the unit, the results of the unit, and my own reflection of implementing the unit. The conclusion chapter will also answer my research question of: *How can I integrate peer review and feedback activities into instruction in order to improve the writing skills of middle school English language learners?*

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

Chapter Four is the final chapter in my capstone project. This chapter will explain the context of my project - the purpose and reasoning for my interest in this topic. The key research that I utilized in creation of this unit will be discussed along with the limitations that I experienced while creating this capstone project. In order for other teachers to implement this unit and for other students to complete the unit, there are implications that I will define in detail in this chapter. I will also explain how I plan to share the results of my curriculum unit with others. Lastly, I will suggest ideas for further research when it comes to peer review and feedback in the middle school English learner classroom.

#### **Context**

The purpose of this capstone project was to answer the question, *How can I integrate peer review and feedback activities into instruction in order to improve the writing skills of middle school English language learners?* My response to this question was to create a curriculum unit that focused on allowing middle school English language learners (ELLs) to practice and implement peer review and feedback with their peers. This unit included interdisciplinary work that students were able to edit and improve for a grade increase in their English course.

The focus of this capstone was to utilize previous research that has shown effective methods for teaching writing skills to middle school English learners. Peer review and feedback is a method that has been proven to improve writing skills of EL students (Rollinson, 2005). While there is a significant amount of research that shows peer review and feedback is an effective activity to increase writing skills, there is still hesitancy for teachers to implement it in their classrooms. I have been one of those teachers who are hesitant to implement peer review and feedback in my sixth grade English Language Development (ELD) class. This hesitancy is what motivated me to research effective methods of implementing peer review and feedback to middle school ELs that would improve their writing skills and cooperative learning skills.

While the main focus of this project was to improve the writing skills of ELLs, an additional focus was the importance of cooperative learning in a middle school setting. I wanted the students to be able to practice working cooperatively in order to create a stronger sense of community. My hope is that this community building will continue into their other current classes and into the future. When students realize they can rely on each other when it comes to school work, I'm hopeful that students will continue to work with each other for improvement of skills.

### **Key Research**

When it came to deciding how to implement productive activities, the research provided by Kim (2015) was abundantly useful to me. Kim explained there are three steps involved in implementing peer review and feedback. The first step takes place before peer review - to prepare students for the process, the second step is training during



peer review - how to effectively review and provide useful feedback, and the final step is focused on students using the feedback they received to improve their writing.

Throughout the unit, it was important for me to emphasize to students that the focus of peer review and feedback should be more than grammatical fixes. Students should help each other with the themes and flow of their writing (Hanjani & Li, 2014). Previous research has also pointed out that students need to learn the value of the various perspectives of their peers, as some cultures value the opinion of the teacher more than the opinion of peers (Kim, 2015). During the training before providing feedback, I strived to help students see the value in each other's opinions because of this research.

When searching for appropriate materials, I was grateful for the ideas that I came across from various creators on Teachers Pay Teachers. These creators have already designed beautiful materials that I easily adapted to fit the needs of my students and my goals for this unit. Searching for materials may not be research in the traditional sense, but I spent a large amount of time researching a vast amount of ideas for activities. I tried to picture my students completing these activities in the classroom; were they engaging enough? Could I alter the activities to promote cooperative learning in addition to promoting a stronger ability to revise writing?

The research of Rollinson (2005) provided insightful ideas that I considered when creating the curriculum unit. Specifically, Rollinson pointed out that peer review and feedback has the opportunity for a high number of collaborative dialogues when implemented correctly. This inspired me to take on the additional goal of collaborative learning being a focus in this unit. An additional point from Rollinson was that when students conference with peers, there is a higher possibility of negotiation. This

negotiation can be positive as the student both defends their ideas and attempts to understand the provided feedback. This negotiation can potentially be more effective than a student taking the suggestions of a teacher without question. When students question and negotiate, a deeper understanding can occur.

### **Limitations**

One limitation that I came across while starting to create this curriculum unit was my lack of knowledge about peer review and feedback. Conducting the research at the start of this endeavor for the literature review was beneficial in providing a starting point. However, having never implemented peer review and feedback in my own teaching career, I wasn't confident in what teaching strategies and activities would prove most effective in achieving my goals for this project. The research was able to provide a fountain of knowledge about peer review and feedback and cooperative learning. This newly obtained knowledge was quite useful, but did not supply the same knowledge that classroom experience provides. When crafting the curriculum unit, I utilized the research along with my own teaching knowledge. This process involved using my best judgement in order to create a unit that achieved my goals and answered my research question.

Another limitation that occurred during this process is due to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). This unit requires a frequent amount of small group and partner work. Specifically, the station activity calls for students to work with a multitude of their peers within a short time span. My school district's policies that were created due to the pandemic called for limitations to the amount of partner work that can be completed within a class period. Students need to have assigned seats in order to implement contact tracing. If students are moving around the room and working with someone else, the

allotted time needs to be less than fifteen minutes due to the ability for the virus to spread after fifteen minutes of exposure while wearing masks. When implementing the group work and partner activities, there are adjustments that need to be made in order for the activities to happen in a safe environment.

### **Implications**

After creating this project, I realized there is an implication that needs to be addressed. Since this curriculum was created specifically for middle school ELLs, there is assumption that an English Language Teacher will be implementing the curriculum. This curriculum was created with the assumption that the teacher has knowledge of best practices for ELLs, and may not be as detailed as necessary for teachers who have little to no experience working with ELLs. However, this curriculum can be utilized by any teacher, whether they have training and/or experience related to teaching ELLs or not. With that in mind, teachers who are struggling to meet the needs of their ELLs might benefit from differentiating the provided curriculum. Introducing sentence starters to the students could help the students build confidence in their ability to provide feedback. Students in the class with limited English proficiency could greatly benefit from focusing specifically on the feedback they want to provide, instead of also having to think about how to word the phrases correctly. Students could also benefit by being provided with a visual that gives the students ideas on what revisions they should be looking for. This could potentially ensure that students are providing useful feedback instead of generic feedback that is not thought provoking. I hope explaining the intention of this curriculum along with ideas for differentiation will allow for other teachers to utilize the curriculum in a way that will benefit them and their students.

### **Sharing Results**

I plan to share what I've learned from creating and implementing this curriculum unit with the EL teachers that I currently work with, both middle school and high school teachers. These EL teachers have expressed interest in learning about the curriculum unit and ways that they can adapt activities and materials to fit the differing grade levels and proficiency levels. They also would like to learn more about the results that come from implementation of the unit, such as the teaching strategies and activities that seemed effective and the teaching strategies and activities that were not as effective.

In addition to sharing results with my EL colleagues, I also plan on sharing the results with other middle school teachers, specifically the English Language Arts department. These teachers also focus on improving the writing skills of their students and also have ELLs in their classes. I hope that this curriculum and its resources will be able to assist other teachers in better supporting ELLs.

### **Benefit to the Profession and Future Research**

I believe that this curriculum unit will be beneficial to the teaching profession in that teachers have a starting point for how to implement the beginning stages of peer review and feedback in a middle school English Language Development classroom. This unit provides teachers with an outline that can be used as a guideline for how to order activities in an effective manner. The activities are ordered and scaffolded in a way that students will not feel lost or overwhelmed when trying to master a new skill. I also believe that teachers will not feel as lost or overwhelmed when they are following this curriculum unit and adapting it as needed to better fit their students.

An idea for future research that I have for myself is how to keep the momentum

of peer review and feedback going. Now that students have been introduced to the topic and had a small amount of practice and implementation, it is not the time to stop this process. I would like to generate more progress when it comes to peer review and feedback. A future goal of mine would be that our classroom is in a place where students automatically carry out peer review and feedback for an assessment without teacher coercion. For other teachers conducting research about peer review and feedback, an idea for further research is to create a curriculum unit for students who already have experience with peer review and feedback. What would the “next step” for peer review and feedback look like in a classroom?

### **Summary**

In Chapter Four, I have come back to the research question and context of my capstone project. I also highlighted research that was essential and at the center when I created my curriculum unit. The limitations I experienced with the creation and implementation of this unit were also addressed along with the implications that were not specifically divulged in the capstone project. I concluded chapter four with how I plan to share the results of my project with others and ideas I have for future research for both myself and other teachers. I believe this curriculum unit is a stepping stone that will improve the writing skills of my middle school English language learners.

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