Language! Curriculum Modification for a Small Non-Traditional School

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American education today faces a failure of almost epidemic proportions. Record numbers of students are either illiterate or reading at grade levels significantly below their age groups. *Language!* is just one of the many literacy intervention curricula that have emerged in an effort to ameliorate a situation which, despite many schools' best efforts, continues to deteriorate at a frightening pace. Within the context of an educational system polarized by the Whole Language versus Code-Based Instruction debate, *Language!* offers an intriguing compromise between the two pedagogies. Even as explicit code-based phonological instruction acts as a central basis to the curriculum, *Language!* also incorporates creative writing, literature, and grammar.

Language! has been successful in the traditional public school setting, but what happens when this sequential, cumulatively organized curriculum is implemented within a non-traditional setting? How well adapted is this curriculum for older, under-prepared high school students with poor attendance and lives complicated by a variety of factors ranging from drug use, gangs, pregnancy, poverty, poor health or abuse? This article offers an examination of a case study of just such a school which, after having adopted the *Language!* curriculum, discovered the impracticality of implementing the curriculum as it is and successfully modified the curriculum

to meet the needs of a highly diverse, non-traditional setting.

Language! is a research-based curriculum, designed to "teach students all the essential skills of reading, language comprehension, and composition in a systematic, cumulative, sequential curriculum" (Moats xiii). Rather than presupposing student skills, the curriculum begins at the simplest level, that of the phoneme, and advances sequentially to word level, then sentence level and then text. Designed as a three-year program, it focuses on the structure of the English language, looking directly at the rules that govern orthography, phonology, and grammar in the hopes that a stronger understanding of the structure of English will afford greater comprehension and confidence, as well as increased fluency. A typical lesson can include segments on phonetics, orthography, vocabulary, reading, or grammar concepts. Emphasis is placed on repetition and drill through games and in-class exercises. Aside from unit end "mastery" evaluations, little emphasis is placed on worksheets or deskwork.

With such an emphasis on in-class participation and cumulative learning, it is not surprising that student attendance is a major factor in the curriculum's success rate. According to Jane Fell Greene, *Language!* was initially tested with "45 incarcerated students ages 13-17, who were compared to a non-treatment control group in the same correctional program" (qtd. in Moats xiv). In such a setting, attendance certainly posed no significant problems and as the results of the study show (students, on average, improved their reading and writing skills by three grade levels), the curriculum was highly successful.

Indeed *Language!* can cite numerous studies which highlight its success. With over 40 study sites in nine states, laudably, *Language!* has undergone the most rigorous of evaluations in order to assess its own strengths and weaknesses through statistical analysis ("Implementation"). Across the board, it has only the most encouraging results to report. Indeed, with pre-and post-tests typically reporting leaps in student test scores and grade level skills, *Language!* has proven itself an extremely valuable and effective curriculum. However, it is interesting to note that none of these test sites, though intentionally varied by demographics,

took place in a small, non-traditional school setting where attendance is also handled in a non-traditional manner.

City Academy, a small urban charter school on the East side of St. Paul, Minnesota, was created to serve a population of students who, for a variety of reasons (incarceration, drug problems, and gang issues are just a few examples), were unable to attend and graduate from their mainstream public high schools. Typically, these students struggle to attain basic literacy as well as grade level performance, much less competency, in other subject areas. The challenges involved in teaching students from this population are numerous and complex. One could not possibly assume that teaching these students only involves academics. Rather, in order to teach academics, a teacher must provide opportunities for students to learn a wide variety of personal and social skills.

The structure of City Academy helps to provide these opportunities by allowing teachers to work with students individually, keeping class sizes small (typically 10 or less), providing student "advisers" who guide students through an individualized graduation plan, and creating a safe, communal setting for students. Within this safe and supported environment, the responsibility for a student's education is placed entirely on the student, especially responsibility for student conduct and attendance. In order to graduate, a student needs to accomplish a set of academic and developmental standards. How that occurs varies widely from student to student. There are many ways to graduate from City Academy.

Within this highly differentiated environment, a standardized curriculum is somewhat troublesome. *Language!* was certainly no exception. The very first, and ultimately the largest, hurdle to the success of *Language!* was student attendance. Typically when students begin to attend City Academy, their attendance is highly erratic. Rather than penalizing students, the school aims to encourage and reinforce students' success. Often it takes several months, or sometimes more, and much encouragement and personal attention and effort to accustom a student to attending school regularly. However, with *Language!* it proved extremely problematic for students to be dropping in and out of such a se-

quentially-based, group-centered class. Furthermore, the progress of students who were regular attendees was hindered by students who needed to catch up on what they'd missed while absent.

Another major problem with *Language!* was the apparent simplicity of subject matter. Initially many students were offended by having to spend a class period with words as simple as *cat*, *bat*, and *hat*. The J & J readers were particularly resented in the beginning for their large print and simple, childish stories. Also troublesome was the vocabulary used throughout much of the first half of Level 1. While certainly relevant to the decoding level of the students, words like *tat* or *lad* or *din* felt archaic and far outside their experience.

It was also very difficult to convince students of the legitimacy of in-class, group-based activities. Long acclimatized to reams of worksheets and deskwork, students were utterly unaccustomed to spending an entire class period in activity and then leaving without (in their view) any tangible accomplishment. This also proved problematic for absent students who, upon reporting for missed work, would have to be informed that there was no work they could "make-up;" rather, they had missed in-class activities (which in reality were extremely valuable opportunities to learn and practice) but which students could not conceive of as meaningful or important.

In the first year of implementation, *Language!* was run according to its specifications for the first half of the school year. The teacher who taught it had been trained for five days at an official training session. Students were tested and were placed in three separate classes according to need. For the classes who scored higher on the pre-tests, the first few weeks were accelerated in order to reach each student's tested level. For students who scored lower on the pre-tests, classes were taught at the pace dictated by the lesson plans provided by the curriculum which emphasize much repetition and practice. Despite the best of efforts, the curriculum failed to retain student attendance. By mid-school year, it was clear that several modifications would have to be made to the curriculum.

First a higher-level grammar component was incorporated. This grammar component was designed by the *Language!* teacher to complement the grammar strands dictated by unit; however it outstripped the depth and complexity indicated by the *Language!* lesson plans. Like much of the *Language!* curriculum, the grammar component was largely taught through game and in-class activity; however it also required written exercises. These written exercises were used not only as comprehension checks but also as opportunities for practicing skills. This grammar component helped to appease students' embarrassment over what more than one student called "baby work."

In an attempt to further appease students' frustration with the apparently simplistic level of the class, many of the lessons were abridged and accelerated. As for the J & J readers so disliked by the students, the teacher found it helpful to make them into a game as well, causing comprehension to be a means, rather than an end. By concentrating primarily on decoding, playing games like backwards reading or speed reading, students could stop feeling embarrassed over reading simple stories and just enjoy playing around with the words instead. Invariably, they still comprehended the story, but they felt less pressure over the fact that they thought the story itself was childish.

It was also necessary to create more flexibility within the curriculum to accommodate students with poor attendance. Admittedly, there is not much that can be taught an absent student; however, by loosening up the structure of the *Language!* classes, it was possible to make students' in-class time more meaningful and relevant, even if they had missed several previous class periods. By continuing with regular class-wide routines like the phonics drills, fluency builders and spelling activities advocated by *Language!*, students coming irregularly to class could still participate and learn while students who regularly attended benefited from the repeated exposure to these activities. However, instead of continuing whole-group activities for the entirety of the class, it was found extremely helpful to divide the class up into smaller groups. The regular attendees were then provided with a project to complete either in their group or individually.

These projects were created to correspond to strands taught by the respective unit. They ranged from word games and writing or reading assignments, to grammar games and assignments. While these students were busy, it afforded the teacher time to address the concepts absent students had been unable to learn. Rather than simply dividing the class period in half in order to accommodate these different groups of students, the period was varied into multiple segments, weaving back and forth between whole group activities and small group projects.

In conclusion, *Language!* is an extremely valuable curriculum. Not only its scientifically researched basis and construction, but also its significant integration of Code-Based and Whole Language literacy strategies are a model for other literacy curricula. Taken as designed, it is perhaps best suited for mainstream public high schools. However, there is no reason why it could not be successful in a non-traditional, small school setting, provided it is accompanied with thoughtfully designed modifications matched to specific student and school needs.

Works Cited

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