

Teaching Secondary English Learners to Understand, Analyze, and Write Interpretive Essays About Theme

With ongoing explicit strategy instruction, modeling, coaching, and opportunities to practice, English learners can attain the academic literacy necessary to perform successfully as interpretive readers and analytical writers.

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Many teachers of struggling students and English learners (ELs) avoid teaching and requiring students to write analytical essays because they feel the skills required are too sophisticated for the population they serve. Yet, more than 20 states have established high-stakes exams that assess higher level reading and writing abilities. A study of prototype test items for high school exit exams across the United States (Fillmore & Snow, 2003) revealed the degree of academic literacy expected of all secondary students, including ELs, who are assessed on their ability to perform a range of complex tasks including summarizing texts, using linguistic cues to interpret and infer the writer's intentions and messages, assessing the writer's use of language for rhetorical and aesthetic purposes, evaluating evidence and arguments presented in texts, and composing and writing extended, reasoned texts that are supported with evidence.

One common way to assess a student's ability to interpret and infer the writer's intentions and messages is to ask him or her to identify, analyze, and interpret theme. For example, the multiple-choice section of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) includes questions regarding which sentence best describes the theme of a particular literary selection, and the on-demand writing assessment often asks students to present an interpretation of the author's message. In a national survey of 2,351 high school and college teachers administered by The College Board to identify skills teachers thought were most important for students entering college, respondents rated identifying the theme of a text and making inferences and drawing conclusions as the most important reading skills, and writing a clear, coherent essay using supporting details as the most important writing skill students should possess (Milewski, Johnsen, Glazer, & Kubota, 2005).

Numerous researchers (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Kong & Pearson, 2003) have noted that districts often adopt a reductionist "skill and drill" curriculum to meet the needs of ELs. How ironic, then, that a panel of distinguished researchers convened by the Educational Alliance at Brown University concurred that ELs are most successful when teachers have high expectations, explicitly teach and model academic skills

and strategies, help students understand challenging texts and concepts, and scaffold guided practice activities for writing in a variety of genres (Coady et al., 2003). In short, ELs need more instruction and practice in what Langer (2000) would call higher literacy to succeed academically.

Teaching Writing: A Softball Analogy

Over an eight-year period, members of the UC Irvine site of the California Writing Project (UCIWP) conducted a professional development program and longitudinal research study called the Pathway Project in partnership with the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD), a large, urban, low-socioeconomic-status school district where 93% of the students speak English as a second language and 69% are designated as limited English proficient (LEP). The aim of the project was to help students develop the academic literacy to succeed in school and continue their education in college.

During the Pathway Project, we conceptualized our pre/post on-demand writing assessment—which we administered in October and again in May of each school year to determine student growth over time—as being something akin to slow-pitch softball. Our goal was to provide teachers with pedagogical strategies to explicitly teach, model, and provide practice in the cognitive strategies that research suggests experienced readers and writers use to construct meaning from and with texts, thereby enabling them to improve their interpretive reading and analytical writing abilities.

In our creation of prompts for the pretest designed to assess those abilities, the equivalent of tryouts in our softball analogy, we were not trying to eliminate some students from the “team” at the outset but rather to establish a baseline of students’ strengths and areas for growth so that we could design appropriate strategies to help students progress as readers and writers. Therefore, we worked to develop prompts with specific instructions regarding essay content and structure to lob over home plate, so to speak, to see how far students could hit the ball. Although most on-demand writing assessments are administered once at the end of the year and the results usually arrive too late to influence instruction, student performance on this timed on-demand pretest essay each year informed

our design of a sequence of scaffolded reading and writing activities, culminating in the revision of each student’s pretest into a multiple-draft essay, as preparation to compete more successfully on the posttest.

In the final year of the project, after we had developed and administered prompts focusing on setting, plot, character, and symbolism, we created a comprehensive prompt calling for an interpretation of theme in “The Scarlet Ibis” by James Hurst (1998) and “The Medicine Bag” by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (1991). Because we knew from teacher reports that students were having difficulty understanding what theme is, going beyond the literal to analyze theme in literature, and articulating and defending theme statements in a well-constructed essay, we wove a definition of theme into the prompt in Figure 1 to make the “ball” easier to hit.

Although we expected that some students would struggle with constructing theme statements, we were dismayed to find that we had underestimated the difficulty of the task and the texts and that our prompt elicited a majority of responses, across grades 6–12, like those that follow. Our analysis of these tryouts is included in the italicized commentary:

The theme I am going to write about is the characters. There are two main characters Doodle who is born crippled and his brother that has to cart him around.

Strike 1. This student has confused theme and character.

Family, now what does the word family refer to? In the story, “The Scarlet Ibis” written by James Hurst, the word family is used as one of the themes in the story. Though the story has many themes I will talk about this theme “family.”

Ball 1. This student is having difficulty differentiating between a topic and a theme.

The theme of the story is death because Doodle died in the story.

Strike 2. This student has identified plot as theme.

“The Scarlet Ibis” teaches the theme never give up. Doodle never gives up and he learned to walk. He owes it all to his brother.

Base Hit. Here we have a genuine theme statement. However, the author will have difficulty marshalling the evidence to drive the argument home because the narrator’s motivation for teaching Doodle to walk and ultimately pushing his brother past his limits is embarrassment at having a disabled sibling.

Figure 1 Pretest Prompt for “The Scarlet Ibis”

A Word About Theme

The theme of a literary work is the writer’s message or main idea. The theme is what the writer wants you to remember most. Most stories, novels, and plays, and sometimes poems, have more than just one theme. Some themes are easier to spot than others. A character might say something about life that is clearly important. For example, in E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, Wilbur says at the end, “Friendship is one of the most satisfying things in the world.” That’s a statement of one of the book’s themes. But often, you have to be a bit of a detective to discover the theme or themes. The author leaves clues, but it is up to you to put them together and decide what the important message or lesson is.*

Writing Directions

After reading “The Scarlet Ibis,” select one important theme to write an essay about. Create a specifically worded theme statement that expresses the author’s main point, message, or lesson in the story. Explore how the author communicates this theme through the relationship between the characters as the story unfolds. Pay special attention to the following:

- How the narrator reacts to the arrival of his little brother
- How he interacts with Doodle based upon how he views him
- The symbol or symbols the author uses to show the changing relationship between the characters
- What the narrator learns by the end of the story

Through the interaction of his or her characters, an author is able to convey a message about life that is clearly important. Explain why the theme the author communicates is especially significant. Throughout your essay, use specific references to the text to support your ideas and follow the conventions of standard written English.

Note. “The Medicine Bag” prompt parallels “The Scarlet Ibis” prompt.

*Adapted from *Reader’s Handbook: A Student Guide for Reading and Learning* by L. Robb, R. Klemp, & W. Schwartz, 2002, Wilmington, MA: Great Source.

The price Doodle pays for never giving up on winning his brother’s approval is his life.

The story is about a boy named Doodle who is an invalid and his brother that is ashamed of him. One day Doodle’s brother decide to teach him to walk....

Strike 3. This student, like most students in our study, responded to the prompt by retelling the story rather than addressing the questions that it poses.

Clearly, we had a lot of coaching to do to help students to learn “the rules of the interpretive game” (Scholes, 1985, p. 30) so that they could better understand, analyze, and write interpretive essays about theme.

A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction

Reading and writing have often been perceived as distinctly separate processes—as flip sides of a coin—with reading regarded as receptive and writing as productive; however, researchers have increasingly noted the connections between reading and writing, identifying them as essentially similar processes of meaning

construction (Tierney & Pearson, 1983). Experienced readers and writers purposefully select and orchestrate cognitive strategies that are appropriate for the literacy task at hand (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Tierney & Pearson, 1983).

To help students develop confidence and competence, research suggests that teachers need to provide systematic and explicit instruction in strategies used by mature readers and writers, such as tapping prior knowledge, asking questions, visualizing, forming interpretations, monitoring, revising meaning, and reflecting and relating. Further, students need to develop declarative knowledge of what the strategies are, procedural knowledge of how to implement them, and conditional knowledge of when to implement a strategy, which strategy to implement, and why (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983).

In her analysis of effective reading instruction for ELs, Fitzgerald (1995) advised that “at least with regard to the cognitive aspects of reading, U.S. teachers of ESL students should follow sound principles of reading instruction based on current cognitive research done with native English speakers” (p. 184). Further, Meltzer and Hamann (2005) pointed out

that “research strongly indicates positive correlations between adolescent literacy and frequent use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies when reading and modeling texts” (p. 35).

Drawing on the strong research base in studies of both native speakers and ELs for taking a cognitive strategies approach to reading and writing instruction, the UCIWP staff designed a model of the cognitive strategies that make up the mental tool kit of a reader and writer, detailed in Table 1. In our Pathway professional development workshops, we introduced teachers—who participated in the project over multiple years—to an array of curricular approaches to cognitive strategy use in reading and writing, and we collaborated with them to generate the following research question:

To what extent will providing ELs in secondary school with declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge of and practice with cognitive strategies improve their reading and writing ability, as measured by a holistically scored, timed writing assessment; performance on statewide high-stakes reading and writing assessments; and college composition placement rates?

Scaffolding Strategy Instruction on Theme

Students’ pretest tryouts became the basis for our coaching and practice. Teachers met to analyze student work and strategize regarding how to scaffold reading and writing training that would enhance students’ performance. Building on Vygotsky’s (1986) and Bruner’s (1978) theories of learning and development, Applebee and Langer (1983) proposed a model in which “the novice reader or writer learns new skills in contexts where more skilled language users provide support necessary to carry through unfamiliar tasks” (p. 168).

During our eighth and final year, Charlie AuBuchon (fourth author) and Thelma Anselmi (third author), UCIWP Teacher/Consultants who had been in the Pathway Project since its inception, worked with Carol Booth Olson (first author), the UCIWP Director and Pathway Project Director, to develop prototype materials for helping students to understand, analyze, and write interpretive essays about theme. These materials, which we called tutorials

(Bruner, 1978), were shared with the larger group of teachers who critiqued and improved upon them.

All 55 teachers, grades 6–12, were asked to teach the theme unit over a two-week period, but they were encouraged to modify the materials as needed, depending on their grade level. We didn’t want to prevent students’ own deeper thinking as they revised their pretests on either “The Scarlet Ibis” or “The Medicine Bag,” so we selected “The Horned Toad” by Gerald Haslam (1995) as the “training” text for our lesson scaffold because it has a story line that is similar to the paired stories in our assessment.

The cognitive strategies focused on by each of the lesson activities are noted in italics in the titles in the following section. Because the cognitive strategies approach was our aim throughout the entire study and we had statistically significant results for seven consecutive years, we cannot claim that these materials on theme are solely responsible for the gains in students’ reading and analytical writing. However, in a cycle of three paired prompts and the pretest revision materials developed during the last three years of the project, the theme materials produced the largest gain scores. (See Olson & Land, 2007, for results for all eight years of the study.) In a replication study in two other school districts with similar demographics and performance profiles to SAUSD, the theme materials also yielded significant results. (See Olson & Land, 2008.)

Coaching for Interpretive Reading

Introduction: Why Teach “The Horned Toad”? (Planning and Goal Setting)

Teachers explained to students that they were going to practice identifying and analyzing theme in “The Horned Toad” and then use this deeper look at theme to revise their own pretest essays. As they guided students through the reading and writing scaffold, teachers worked to make visible the cognitive strategies students use to construct meaning.

Exploring the Title (Tapping Prior Knowledge, Visualizing, and Making Predictions)

The next step was to draw students’ attention to the title of the story and remind them that, even before they start reading, experienced readers tap prior knowledge

Table 1 Cognitive Strategies Used to Construct Meaning From and With Texts

Strategy	Techniques
Planning and goal setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Developing procedural and substantive plans ■ Creating and setting goals ■ Establishing a purpose ■ Determining priorities
Tapping prior knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mobilizing knowledge ■ Searching existing schemata
Asking questions and making predictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Generating questions about topic, genre, author, audience, purpose, etc. ■ Finding a focus, directing attention ■ Predicting what will happen next ■ Fostering forward momentum ■ Establishing focal points for confirming or revising meaning
Constructing the gist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Visualizing ■ Making connections ■ Forming preliminary interpretations ■ Identifying main ideas ■ Organizing information ■ Expanding schemata ■ Adopting an alignment
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Directing the cognitive process ■ Regulating the kind and duration of activities ■ Confirming reader/writer is on track ■ Signaling the need for fix-up strategies
Revising meaning: Reconstructing the draft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Backtracking ■ Revising meaning ■ Seeking validation for interpretations ■ Analyzing text closely, digging deeper ■ Analyzing author's craft
Reflecting and relating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stepping back ■ Taking stock ■ Rethinking what one knows ■ Formulating guidelines for personal ways of living
Evaluating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reviewing ■ Asking questions ■ Evaluating/assessing quality ■ Forming criticisms

Note. Adapted from *The Reading/Writing Connection: Strategies for Teaching and Learning in the Secondary Classroom* (2nd ed.) by C.B. Olson, 2007, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

and use that knowledge to make predictions regarding what that text will be about. Teachers placed the title “The Horned Toad” in the center of a cluster and asked students to speculate about the content of the

story. Students predicted that the story would take place in the desert, would involve a child and a toad, and maybe would be about a prickly person who seems rough on the outside until you get to know him.

Responding to the Text Using Cognitive Strategies Sentence Starters (All Strategies)

Teachers read the text out loud as students followed along. “The Horned Toad” concerns a boy of mixed heritage living in Oildale, California, whose Spanish-speaking great-grandmother comes to live with his family after she has lost her husband and has been displaced from the countryside in Arroyo Cantua. A “bewigged, bejeweled Spanish spitfire,” Great-Grandma dubs the boy’s father Ese Gringo and gives orders from the moment she arrives. She and the narrator get off on the wrong foot from the start when he tries to impress her with a captured horned toad and she recoils, telling him the toad spits blood from its eyes, a ploy to convince the boy to return the creature to a vacant lot where it belongs.

Later, Great-Grandma begins to grow on the narrator; the two become friends, and she even comforts him when the horned toad is crushed on the pavement as it tries to return to its rightful place. When Great-Grandma dies, the narrator violates the family rule that children should be seen and not heard by interrupting a discussion among the adult relatives regarding funeral arrangements and insists that she be buried in Arroyo Cantua rather than in the manicured grounds at Greenlawn. After the oral reading of the text, students reread the text silently, used the cognitive strategies sentence starters in Table 2 to record their thoughts and feelings, and shared and discussed responses in small groups.

Differentiating Between a Topic and a Theme (Expanding Schemata and Clarifying)

Because simply giving students a definition of a theme did not enable the majority to grasp the concept, teachers provided a detailed explanation, described in the following section.

How Is Topic Different From Theme?

A story’s theme is different from its topic or subject. The topic is simply what it’s about. The theme is the author’s point about a topic. However, to identify a theme, sometimes it helps to generate a list of topics or big ideas in a story. Common topics for themes that you’ll find in stories are usually abstract nouns that deal with human relationships and include terms

like *alienation, belonging, courage, family, friendship, hope, identity, prejudice, respect, revenge, trust*, and so forth. Think of a topic as the *What* of the story and the theme as the *So what?*

Therefore, a theme statement must be a complete sentence (with at least a subject and a verb) that states the author’s message about life or about human relationships. A good theme statement applies to people in general, not just to the specific characters in the story. Here are some examples of theme statements:

- Prejudice is a destructive force in our society.
- Growing up means taking responsibility for yourself.
- It is important to accept people for what they are on the inside and not the outside.

The distinction between the topic as the *What* of the story and the theme as the *So what?* seemed to turn on a lightbulb for many students. Students were then asked to reread the text and note any topic words that they felt captured the big ideas of the story.

Generating Theme Statements (Forming Interpretations)

Collaborating with a partner, students selected three topic words that they felt were most relevant to the text and developed three theme statements. We asked them to generate three possibilities because students often grab on to the first interpretation that comes to mind whether or not it can be supported with evidence. The teachers then asked for volunteers and recorded the sample theme statements alongside the topic word, as in the following examples:

- First impressions—Things are not always as they appear.
- Loss—Loss can bring people together.
- Family—When you’re family, you take care of your own.
- Growing up—Part of growing up is learning to see things through others’ eyes.

Developing a Character Relationship Chart (Organizing Information)

Returning to the story for a closer analysis of how theme is revealed through the actions and interactions of characters, students filled out a chart focused on what the characters do, what the characters say, and what the characters think and feel at the beginning, middle and end of the story. Then, students reviewed their three theme statements and selected the one they felt a writer could best support in an essay.

Interpreting Symbols (Analyzing Author's Craft and Visualizing)

Helping students to visualize symbols and images and represent them artistically can improve their ability to grasp the significance of symbols in texts and relate them to theme. To this end, we engaged student groups in creating a symbol collage out of magazine pictures, computer art, and hand drawings to demonstrate universal symbols, personal symbols, and textual symbols. Although some groups selected a picture of a home or a family for the center of their collage, most identified the horned toad as the key symbol. When asked what the horned toad represents, most students linked the horned toad to Great-Grandma but they tended to say, "The horned toad is symbolic of Great-Grandma"—period.

We taught students to add a "because" to these kinds of statements and to give a reason. We also taught them to consider why the symbol is significant and what it reveals about theme by asking themselves, *So what?* and then elaborating. The following is a student example:

The horned toad is symbolic of Great-Grandma because they are both out of place and only wish to return to where they belong. The narrator learns that you can crush a person's spirit if you impose your will upon them and ignore their desire to be where they feel at home.

Coaching for Analytical Writing

Once students had progressed through the reading scaffold, they analyzed student essays on "The Horned Toad" to explore how to construct an effective essay with a well-articulated theme statement.

Table 2 Cognitive Strategic Sentence Starters

Strategy	Sentence starters
Planning and goal setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ My purpose is.... ■ My top priority is.... ■ I will accomplish my goal by....
Tapping prior knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I already know that.... ■ This reminds me of.... ■ This relates to....
Asking questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I wonder why.... ■ What if...? ■ How come...?
Making predictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I'll bet that.... ■ I think.... ■ If _____, then....
Visualizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I can picture.... ■ In my mind I see.... ■ If this were a movie....
Making connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This reminds me of.... ■ I experienced this once when.... ■ I can relate to this because....
Summarizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The basic gist is.... ■ The key information is.... ■ In a nutshell, this says that....
Adopting an alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The character I most identify with is.... ■ I really got into the story when.... ■ I can relate to this author because....
Forming interpretations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What this means to me is.... ■ I think this represents.... ■ The idea I'm getting is....
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I got lost here because.... ■ I need to reread the part where.... ■ I know I'm on the right track because....
Clarifying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To understand better, I need to know more about.... ■ Something that is still not clear is.... ■ I'm guessing that this means _____, but I need to....
Revising meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ At first I thought _____, but now I.... ■ My latest thought about this is.... ■ I'm getting a different picture here because....
Analyzing author's craft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A golden line for me is.... ■ This word/phrase stands out for me because.... ■ I like how the author uses _____ to show....
Reflecting and relating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ So, the big idea is.... ■ A conclusion I'm drawing is.... ■ This is relevant to my life because....
Evaluating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I like/don't like _____ because.... ■ My opinion is _____ because.... ■ The most important message is _____ because....

Note. Adapted from *The Reading/Writing Connection: Strategies for Teaching and Learning in the Secondary Classroom* (2nd ed.) by C.B. Olson, 2007, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Figure 2 Do/What Chart

Do	What
Select	One important theme
Write	An essay
Express	The author's main point, message, or lesson
Explore	How the author communicates this theme
Pay (Discuss)	Attention to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How the narrator reacts to Great-Grandma
(Discuss)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How the narrator interacts with Great-Grandma
(Interpret)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The symbol or symbols that reveal their changing relationship
Explain	Why the theme is significant

Creating a Do/What Chart (Analyzing Author's Craft and Visualizing)

Students often fail to respond to the prompt adequately because they haven't taken the time to thoroughly examine what they are being asked to do. We presented students with a prompt on "The Horned Toad" that was identical to the prompts on "The Scarlet Ibis" and "The Medicine Bag" (described earlier in this article) and demonstrated how to underline verbs that describe what the student needs to *do* in the prompt in green and the words that indicate *what* the task is in blue. From these results, students construct a Do/What Chart beneath the prompt, as in Figure 2.

Assessing and Color-Coding Student Essays (Evaluating, Visualizing, and Analyzing Author's Craft)

Many struggling readers and writers, especially ELs who have had little practice, think that the point of writing a literary response-based essay is to prove that they understood what they read by *retelling* the story—and yet this type of response will only merit a 1 on the 4-point scale on the CAHSEE. To model effective and ineffective interpretive essays on theme, we provided students with the two essays that are available at www.gse.uci.edu/uciwip. Teachers designated colors for three types of assertions that make up an analytical essay. For example, they might say,

Plot summary reiterates what is obvious and known in a text. It is *yellow* because it's kind of superficial and lightweight. We need some plot summary to orient our reader to the facts, but we want to keep plot summary to a minimum. Commentary is *blue* because the writer goes beneath the surface of things to look at the deeper meaning to offer opinions, interpretations, insights, and "Ahas." Supporting detail is *green* because it's what glues together plot summary and commentary. It's your evidence to support your claims.

Note the blend of plot summary, supporting detail, and commentary designated by the color in parentheses at the end of the following sentences:

When the narrator's horned toad is crushed on the pavement, Great-Grandma consoles him over the loss of the pet. (Yellow)

She joins him in grieving and strokes his back, and then she picks up the horned toad and mutters, "The poor little beast." (Green)

Like the horned toad, Great-Grandma is out of place. (Blue)

The horned toad is symbolic of Great-Grandma because they are kindred spirits who need to return to where they belong. (Blue)

Starting with the weaker paper, students color-coded each sentence almost entirely in yellow, whereas they coded a balance of yellow, blue, and green sentences throughout the stronger paper.

Color-Coding Students' Own Essays and Revising Essays (Revising Meaning)

Working with a partner, students color-coded their own pretests and revised them into a multiple-draft essay as practice for the posttest, paying particular attention to adding more commentary and evidence.

Study Results

This study sought to determine to what extent providing secondary ELs with declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge of and practice with cognitive strategies would improve their interpretive reading and analytical writing ability. To control for the threats to validity of testing by treatment interaction, the two prompts on "The Scarlet Ibis" and "The Medicine Bag" were systematically administered to approximately 2,000 6th–12th graders; half

the students took one pretest and half took the other. Each Pathway teacher was paired with a control teacher at the same school with a class at the same ability level whose students were not in the project.

Fourteen pre/post pairs of assessments were randomly selected from each teacher's class and coded to disguise all information identifying the writer, age, school, grade level, time of testing, and status (treatment or control). Papers were each scored by two scorers using a 6-point rubric focusing on quality and depth of the interpretation, clarity of thesis, organization of ideas, adequacy of textual evidence, sentence variety, precise/descriptive language, and correctness of English language conventions.

Table 3 shows students' writing assessment scores. Both Pathway (treatment) and control groups had statistically significant gains from pretest to posttest, but the Pathway group's gains were substantially greater with a large effect size, Δ (Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981), of 0.80. Although 6th-grade Pathway and control students had comparable pretests, the treatment group's higher pretest scores in grades 7–12 are not surprising given that many of these students had received cognitive strategies instruction for multiple years. This positive duration effect is also evident in the replication study (Olson & Land, 2008).

California High School Exit Exam Scores (CAHSEE)

We have questioned whether or not the training in academic reading and writing that Pathway students received would transfer to improved pass rates on the CAHSEE, which is a requirement for receiving a high school diploma. Although the goal of our project was not to teach to the test, we were keenly aware of the “gatekeeping” impact of these high-stakes tests and the degree to which Hispanics and ELs lag behind other groups on state and national assessments (Applebee & Langer, 2009). Pathway students receiving instruction on theme passed the CAHSEE at notably higher rates than the state, district, and control group averages. (See Table 4.)

Placement in College Composition Courses

SAUSD students comprise 53% of first-year students enrolled at Santa Ana College (SAC). Research at SAC

Table 3 Writing Assessment Scores, SAUSD Grades 6–12, 2003–2004

Measures	Treatment (<i>n</i> = 812)	Control (<i>n</i> = 637)	Difference
Pretest score	5.53 (SD 1.77)	4.60 (SD 1.74)	+ .93 <i>p</i> < .0001
Posttest score	6.96 (SD 1.76)	5.30 (SD 1.74)	+ 1.67 <i>p</i> < .0001
Gain	+ 1.43 (SD 1.97) <i>p</i> < .0001	+ .70 (SD 1.79) <i>p</i> < .0001	+ .741 <i>p</i> < .0001 Δ = .41

Note. The possible range of scores is 2–12. Data were analyzed by Land (second author) using a repeated measures ANOVA. Δ refers to Glass's Δ , a measure of effect size, which is calculated using the control group standard deviation only. Adapted from “A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction for English Language Learners in Secondary School” by C.B. Olson & R. Land, 2007, *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(3), pp. 269–303.

Table 4 Pass Rates of Students Taking the English Portion of the 2004 CAHSEE

Group	Percentage
Treatment ^a	93
Control ^b	66
Overall school district	62
Overall state Hispanic	62
Overall state EL	39
Overall state	75

Note. Adapted from “A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction for English Language Learners in Secondary School” by C.B. Olson & R. Land, 2007, *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(3), pp. 269–303.
^a*n* = 179. ^b*n* = 184.

shows that students placed in lower levels of English composition are less likely to complete the AA degree. Table 5 shows that the placement rates at SAC for Pathway Project students were substantially higher than those of other SAUSD students. Particularly noteworthy is the average placement rate in English 101 of 25% (the transfer course to the University of California) as opposed to the overall SAUSD students' placement rate of 13%.

Table 5 SAUSD 2004 Placement Percentages Based on the Santa Ana College English Composition Test

Class placement (course number)	Treatment	Control
Introduction to Written Communication (N50)	3	14
Basics of Effective Writing (N60)	16	34
Introduction to Composition (061)	56	39
Freshman Composition (101)	25	13

Note. Adapted from "A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction for English Language Learners in Secondary School" by C.B. Olson & R. Land, 2007, *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(3), pp. 269–303.

The Softball Analogy Revisited

In the Pathway Project, our goal was to “level the playing field” so that the mainstreamed secondary ELs in SAUSD could make enough progress over time to compete successfully in school. Although the “home runs” in our scaffolded instruction on theme (two top scores on a 6–point scale) were rare, few students struck out on the posttest, and we saw a steady movement around the “bases” from pretest to posttest for the majority of students, grades 6–12. Figure 3 includes a sample introduction to the pretest and posttest essay on theme from the same student in October and again in May.

Figure 3 Pretest and Posttest Essay Introduction

Written in October by an 11th-grade EL student. Scored a 2 and a 2 by two readers on a 6-point scale.

Student Code: 85308 (pretest)

Family, now what does the word family refer to. In the story "The Scarlet Ibis" written by James Hurst, the word family is used as one of themes in this story. Though the story has many themes I will talk about this theme "family." The word family is used and known as a universal theme like love, hate, death, etc. But the theme family is used in this story.

In the interest of enlisting students as coresearchers, we asked them to review their own pretests and posttests, look for evidence of their growth over time as readers and writers, and describe what they noticed about their performance. Overall, the majority saw evidence of gains in their strategic reading and analytical writing ability. Typical student comments included the following:

- By rereading my posttest as well as my pretest I have really seen growth in my writing skills. In the beginning, I just summarized the story and did not follow the prompt. Now I use a thesis, analyze theme, and provide concrete details to support my opinion.
- Using the yellow, green, and blue pencils to underline my pretest really showed me that I was just summarizing. I knew I needed to put more blue comments in my posttest and to use quotes to back up my main points. I believe what mostly helped me was taking topics and then writing theme statements to go with them in a well-structured essay.

The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) pointed out that the motivation of adolescents to read and write depends upon a number of factors. “Chief among these,” they said, “is the adolescent’s perception of how competent he or she is.... It is the belief in the self (or lack of such belief) that makes a difference in how competent the individual feels” (p. 87). The affective benefit of our cognitive strategies approach

Written in May by an 11th-grade EL student. Scored a 4 and a 5 by two readers on a 6-point scale.

Student Code: 85308 (posttest)

"Oh no, it's Grandpa," Martin said when he saw Joe Iron Shell walking down the street with dogs yipping at his heels. In "The Medicine Bag" written by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, the narrator apparently is ashamed of his Great-Grandpa. So, he tries to hide his grandpa from his friends. He hasn't learned yet that family is one of the most important things in life that anyone will ever have. Therefore, appreciate them and don't be ashamed. Through his interactions with Great-Grandpa, Martin learns to take pride in his heritage and to understand that your family is a big part of who you are.

to understanding, analyzing, and writing interpretive essays about theme was that students felt more confident about coming up to bat in the future.

Implications for Practice

We see our research as adding much-needed substance to the foundation of empirical studies of effective literacy strategies for an under-researched but growing population—secondary ELs in regular classrooms (Klingner & Vaughn, 2004). Indeed, our study indicates that with ongoing explicit strategy instruction, modeling, coaching, and opportunities to practice, ELs can attain the academic literacy necessary to perform successfully as interpretive readers and analytical writers.

Our work validates the promising practices for ELs advocated by members of The Education Alliance (Coady et al., 2003), who concurred that ELs are most successful when their teachers engage in sustained, high-quality professional development, have high expectations for their students, expose students to a rigorous curriculum, employ a variety of strategies and guided practice activities to help students read and write about challenging texts, and involve them in collaborating with each other and the teacher as members of a learning community. Further, it highlights the efficacy of implementing a cognitive strategies approach for ELs by using a range of pedagogical strategies to make visible for ELs the thinking tools accessed by experienced readers and writers during the process of meaning construction (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Finally, it reinforces the importance of using formative assessment as a diagnostic tool for designing instruction to enhance student learning, allowing all members of the team to participate successfully in the “interpretive game.”

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