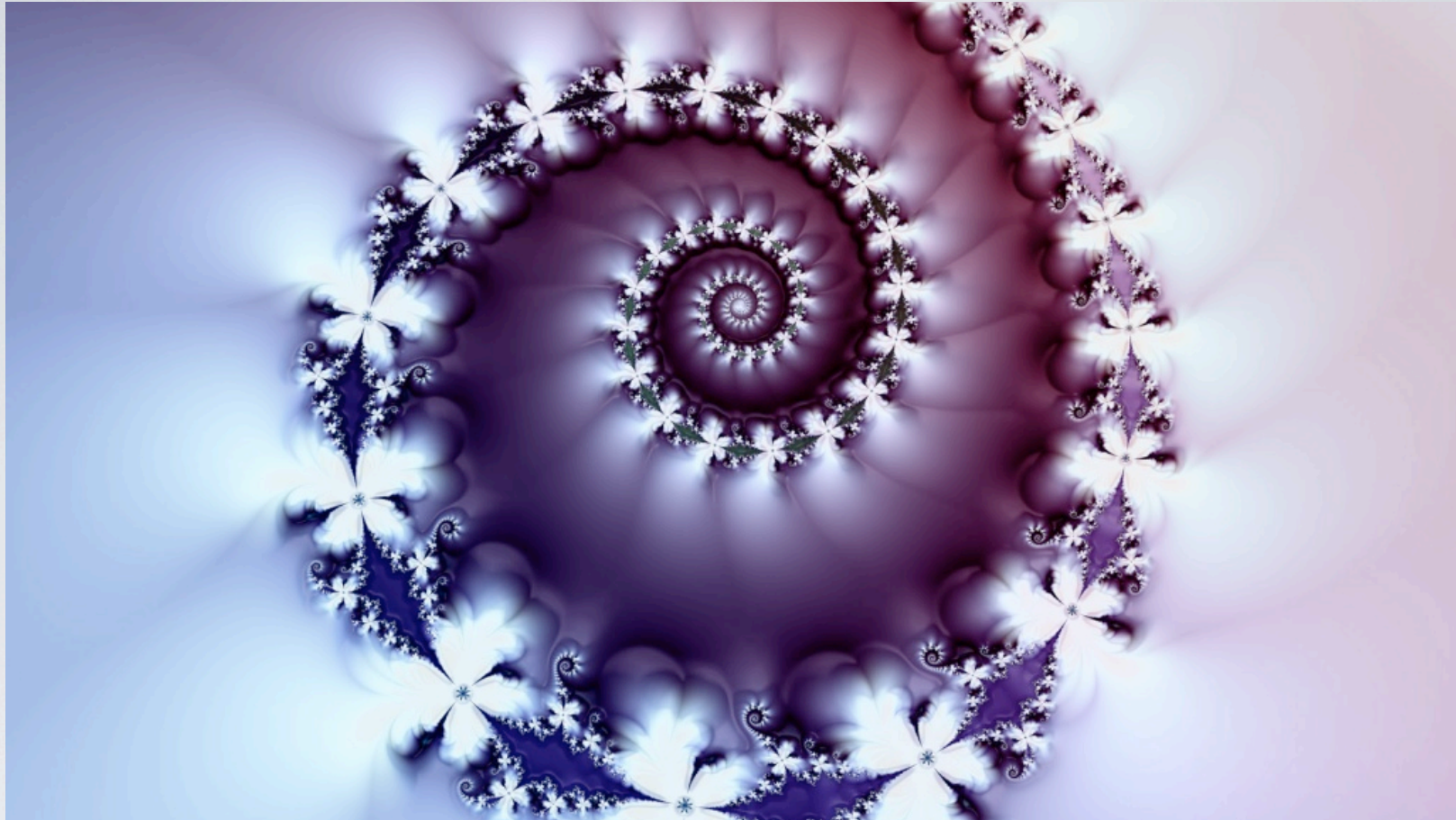


Supporting Access to the Language & Content of Complex Texts for EL & LM Students



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Disclaimer

No curriculum map to show, just a demonstration of how to provide the language support needed by many students.

Instructional support for ELs & LMs in Elementary School

- In this session, I'll describe the attention to language needed by many children in the elementary years.
- Learning to read, write, and learn about subject matter is a huge challenge any child. Doing so while learning the language of instruction is an even bigger one.
- The approach I will be describing is *a necessary augmentation* to reading instruction—*it cannot supplant reading or language arts instruction*. I'm not declaring another reading war! ☺

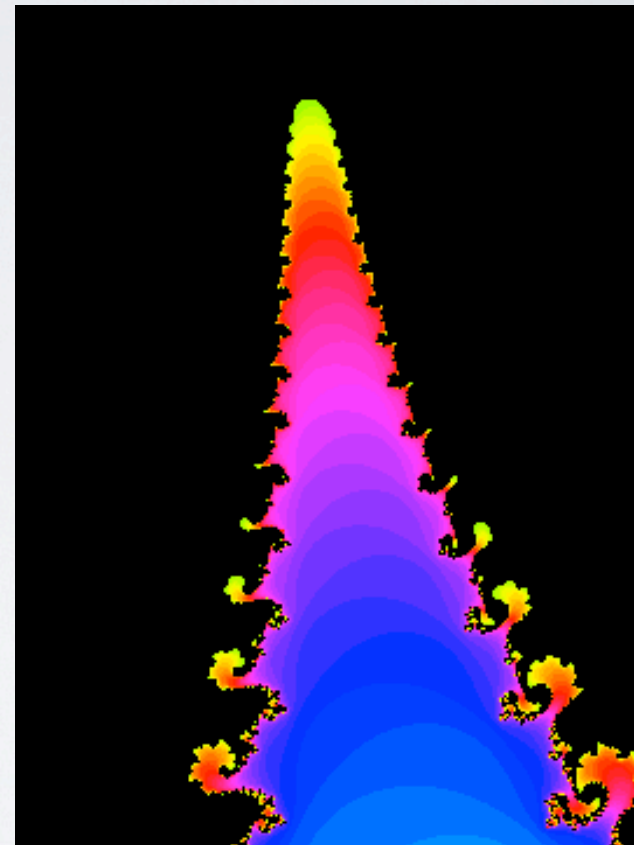
What it is
What it isn't

The approach

- Something that evolved (with my help) in schools in NYC (Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan) over the past 5 years—pre-Common Core, but in the same spirit;
- Question—how to jumpstart language and literacy development in students' whose efforts had stalled. Little progress beyond the intermediate level—long-term ELs.
- My work with LTELs—it's clear language is issue in learning, although kids did not see it as such. Problem? They “read” their assignments, but understood *casi nada!*

Language differences

- True of many students in our schools (consider the gaps between groups in NAEP scores, and you'll know which ones)!
- They are speakers of varieties of English—they find the academic registers used in texts to be more difficult to untangle than do speakers of “standard English” who have only the spoken register.



So what help is needed?

- I've argued that the language of academic discourse is different enough from ordinary spoken language that it could as well be a foreign language to students who are unfamiliar with it and its structures, conventions, and forms.
- I have also mentioned that instructional support in the form of “conversations” about the language students encounter in complex texts is the way to help them gain access to meaning and the language as well.
- ¿Sound flakey? Why not just teach kids academic language?

Can't be *taught*; must be *acquired*

- There is no way in which academic language could be “taught” or “covered” in a unit, or a language course, as one might teach ESL or French as a foreign language.
- It is much too pervasive and varied for that kind of treatment. academic language can be learned only through literacy, and through discussions focused on the relationship between forms, structures and meaning.
- Children need to have their attention called to such relationships because they do not notice them on their own. The goal is for *attention to language* becoming *a habit*. When that happens, kids are in a position to acquire it.

Support for language learning

- The only way to learn the registers used to carry out academic work is through literacy, and that's only if students actually interact with complex texts in which it figures.
- Such texts, however, aren't easy to interpret because they are, as we have seen, often jammed packed with information. Many students need help unpacking the information from those texts.
- The most meaningful support is provided by teachers engaging students in instructional conversations in which they draw the students' attention to the ways in which meaning relates to words, phrases, clauses in texts they are working on.

What students need

- Instructional support from teachers on how language works in course materials the class is working on each day. This is across the curriculum.
- These instructional interludes should be part of larger lessons, but are nonetheless bounded events in which the students understand and expect that special attention will be given to the language used in texts.
- Instructional conversation (preplanned)—engagement of students in discussion focused on various aspects of a sentence or two chosen from those texts for their grammatical features or complexity.

Instructional conversations work only if the conversations really are conversations.

They do NOT if teachers just tell student how language works, or try to teach them how it does!

What does this instructional support look like?

- These conversations are anchored in instructional units in which students learn content through various activities, including reading informational texts and writing.
- Mostly science and social studies topics, avoiding ELA initially, because of a lot of anxiety about making AYPs.
- Each day, teachers draw a sentence or two from the texts students are reading to feature in an instructional conversation they carry out with the students.
- The sentences selected are complex and important enough to deserve attention and discussion.

Want to see what it looks like?

- In this video, a science teacher at a school in Queens works with a group of English learners. They are 4th & 5th graders, just a year or two into English.
- Teacher has broken the sentence down into phrases and clauses for discussion. Her questions draw student attention to each part in turn.
- The subject of this sentence is a complex noun phrase:
 - *“The wires behind your wall that carry electricity to lights and appliances.”*
- In this video, Teacher focuses on each part in turn, getting the kids to see how each part contribute to the meaning of sentence.
- Notice what Teacher does with the term, *“appliances”* which the students did not know.



The bigger picture

Attention to language across the curriculum

- Although the instructional conversations I advocate are a crucial piece of the approach, access to language and content is not the only thing students need in order to learn what they must learn.
- In fact, where this strategy has worked really well, it has been a part of something much larger—units of instruction organized around content from subjects such as social studies or science.
- There is in every activity, however, a concern with language, and how it works in communication about the content.

An early elementary unit

- The teachers (push-in ESL & classroom teacher) have designed a 2 month long unit on butterflies.
- The bigger theme: “transformations”—the changes over the life cycles of amphibians and some insects. Earlier in the school year, the class studied the growth of tadpoles to frogs.
- There have been many rich, hands-on activities, as necessary for early elementary: there’s a cage in the classroom where the children have observed the changes taking place over the complete life cycle of the butterfly.

Compelling & complex texts

- Instructional objectives rather than language goals drive the choice of materials and activities as typically happens in ESL.
- A lot of attention to the fine use of language in texts by authors, and the sentences teachers chose for discussion are always interesting and complex.



Integrated learning

- In addition to the usual language arts curriculum the class is following, reading and writing is infused in this integrated science unit.
- The children have kept written notes of the changes taking place in the butterfly cage in their observational notebooks.
- The teachers have been reading relevant passages from Sara Nelson's *Butterflies*, a Nature Watch publication, as the children observe the changes taking place in the cage.

The Fourth Stage: The Butterfly

Butterflies drink nectar and lay
eggs on the leaf.

Kaitlin

Butterflies can fly. Butterflies have
four wings. They flap their wings.

ALISSA

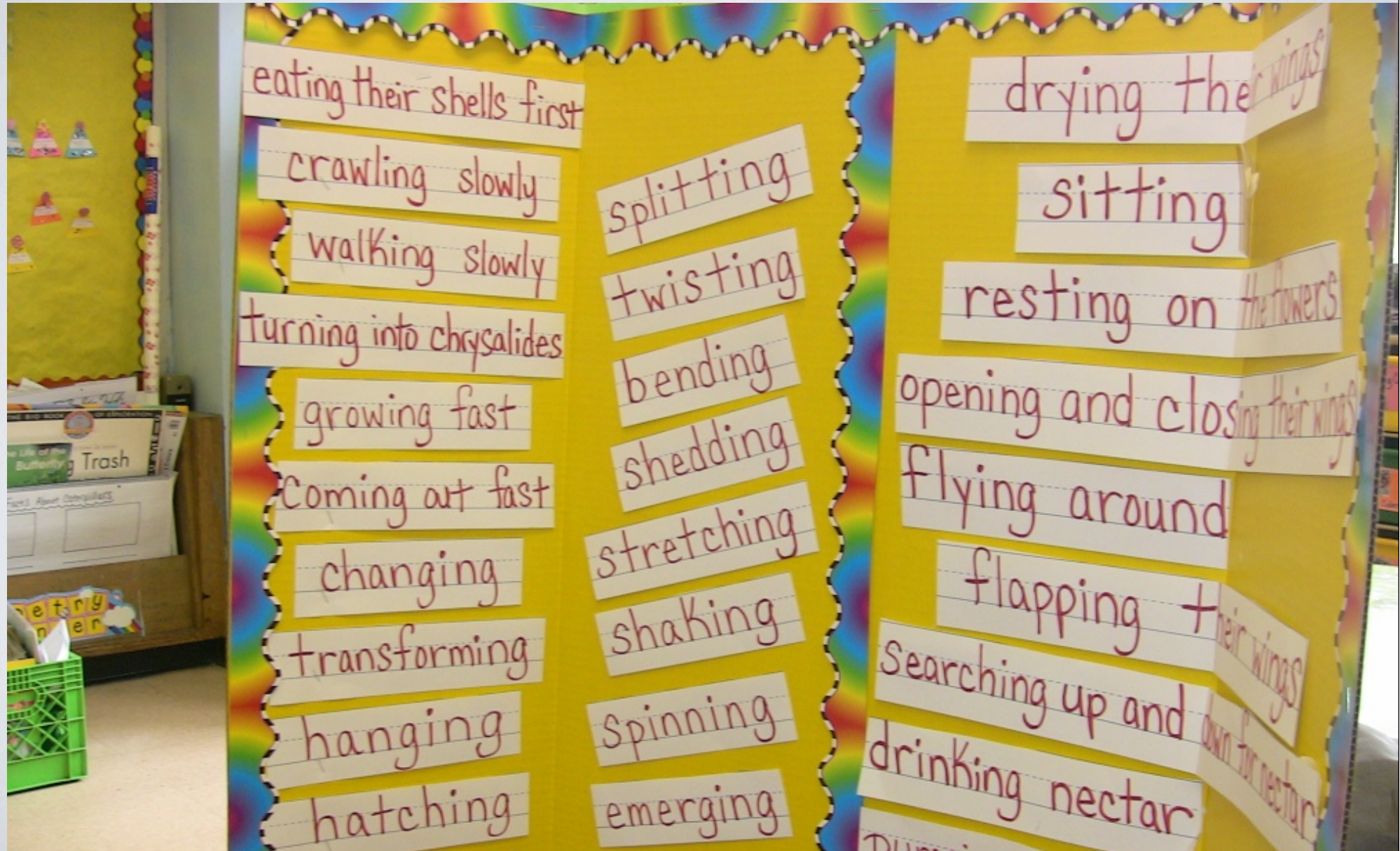
Butterflies sip nectar. Butterflies pump their
wings. Sometimes they are resting on the
flowers.

Nalani

Butterflies open and close their wings
to extend their wings and
flap their wings.

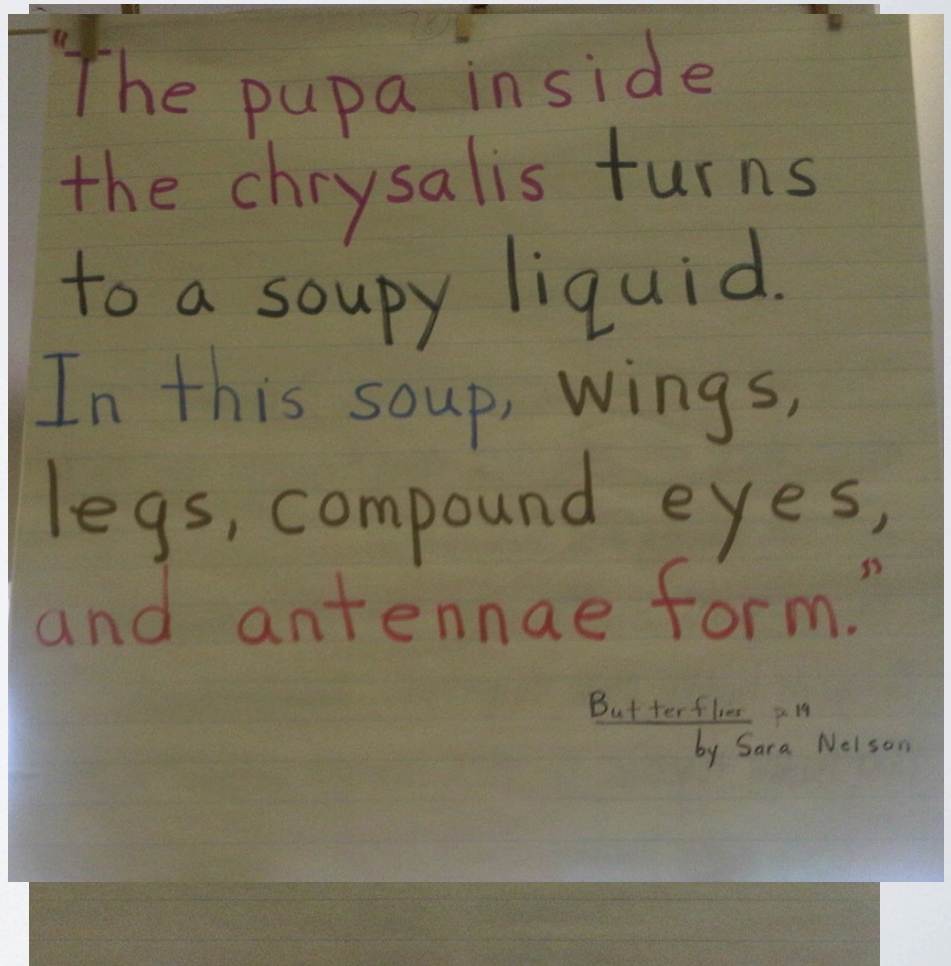
Emani Makoa

Words in phrases are more meaningful than vocabulary items by themselves



A juicy sentence each day

- Each day, teachers select a sentence from the passage they read to the children as the focus of an instructional conversation.
- They decide in advance how to break the sentence up for discussion, copy it onto chart paper.
- They prepare conversational starters to focus the children's attention on each part in turn.



Another video--

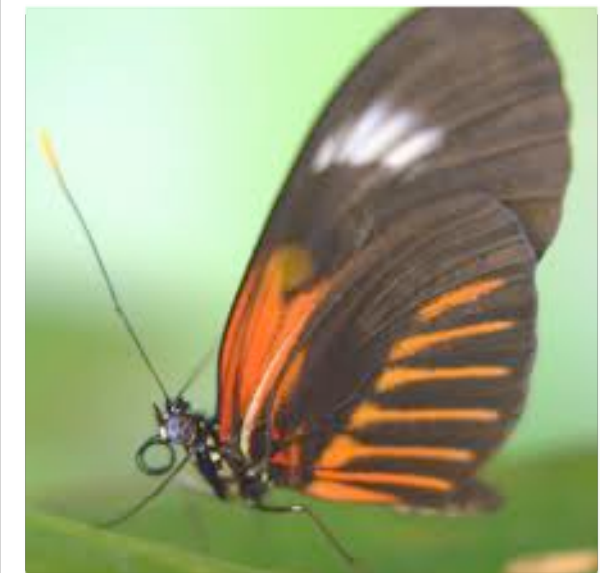
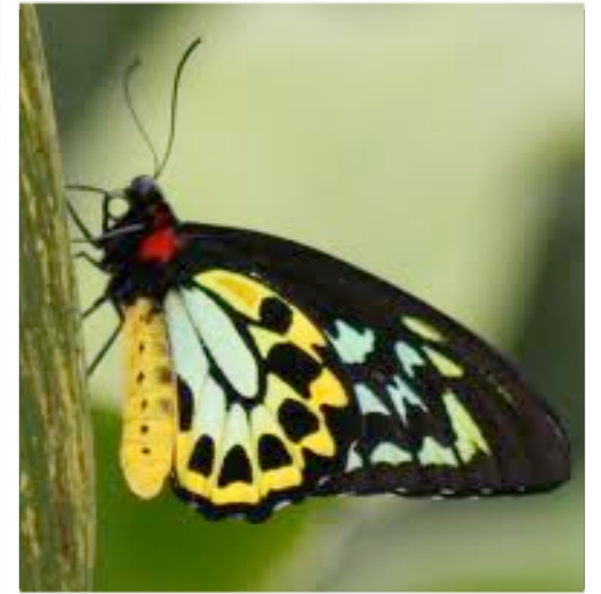
The class has been going through a second book, *A Butterfly's Life*, by Irene Kelley. They have used up the juiciest sentences in the text, so the one they are working on is from the book jacket!

***It's a Butterfly's Life* by Irene Kelly exemplifies the purpose, conventional organization, language usage & style of informational texts.**

¶1 Butterflies and moths are insects in the Lepidoptera order. There are about 17,500 different types of butterflies and 160,000 types of moths in the world. Butterflies and moths are a lot alike, but they are not exactly the same.

¶2 Butterflies are out and about during the day. They have bodies without much hair and skinny antennas with knobs on the ends. When a butterfly is resting it holds its wings straight up or out at its sides.

¶3 Most moths come out during the night. They have plump, furry bodies and slim or feathery antennae without knobs on the ends.





When a moth is resting, it folds its wings into a tent over its body.

¶4 Butterflies have three main body parts: the head, thorax, and abdomen. They have six legs but only four of them for walking. The feet are important because that's where the butterfly's taste buds are.

¶5 You may not be able to taste a cupcake by standing on it, but a butterfly can!

¶6 A butterfly does not have teeth. Instead, it eats by using its proboscis, which is a tongue that works like a straw. Most butterflies feed on nectar from flowers, but some like rotting fruit and tree sap.

¶7 As a butterfly drinks from a flower, pollen sticks to its body. When it visits another flower, the pollen falls off, and presto—the plant is pollinated. . .





Author's note from the book jacket:

“What is a butterfly’s life? It’s full of twists and turns as a butterfly glides on air currents. It’s full of dips and dives as a butterfly shows off for its mate. The most awe-inspiring event in a butterfly’s life is its metamorphosis as it transforms from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis, emerging as a creature of delicacy and grace, filling our sky with color.”

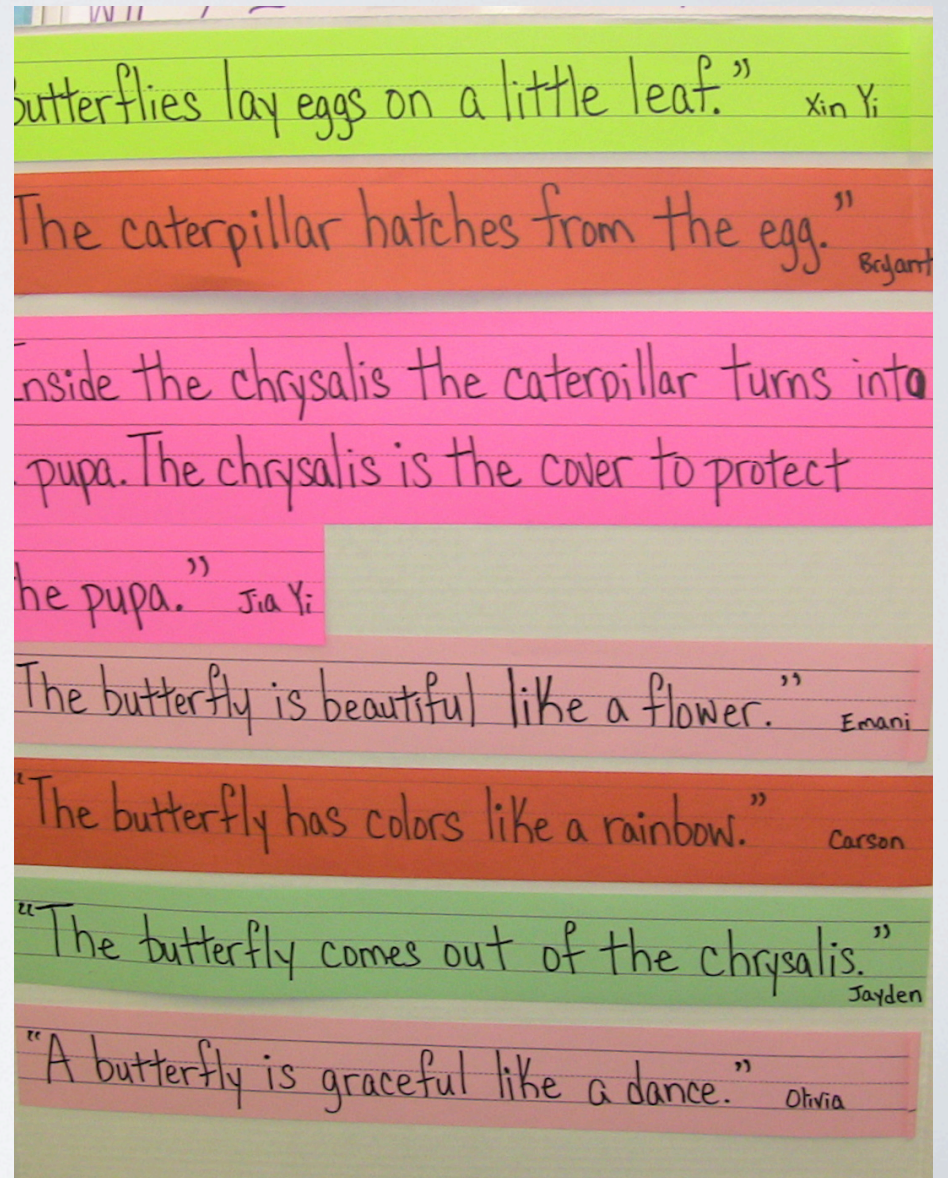
From I. Kelly's "A Butterfly's Life"

The most awe-inspiring event in a butterfly's life is its metamorphosis as it transforms from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis, emerging as a creature of delicacy and grace, filling our sky with color.

/The most awe-inspiring event
in a butterfly's life/
is /its metamorphosis/
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/filling our sky with
color

Teachers were ingenious...

- Notice the different colors they used in creating this chart to indicate the parts they had identified as they divided it up for discussion.
- During the discussion, they wrote down the ideas they and the children extracted from each chunk in the same color as used in this chart.
- This way the children could map the information they had identified in the sentence (by deconstructing it) back to the original phrases and clauses.





BTW, not only were the kids kindergarteners, most were ELs too!

- The kids were learning biology, and to read, write & speak English all at once, and they were just in their first year of school.
- This is what the Common Core State Standards means, I believe, when it argues for integrating literacy development across the curriculum.
- These kids got phonics, but they got much more than that. They were given access to literacy and learning.

How to make it happen

Questions

- What professional development is needed to prepare teachers to support academic language development in all students, and especially English learners?
- How do you convince them, and most importantly, site administrators that this kind of instructional support will make a difference in how ELs and LMs fare academically? Why do administrators need to be convinced?
- What do teachers need to know about language to engage students in meaningful discussions about its use in academic texts? How ready are they to do so?

Some observations

- To help students learn how language works in texts, teachers must know enough about English grammar to slice and dice it into pieces for discussion and analysis in class.
- Few American adults today (including teachers) have much meta-knowledge about English grammar—and do not feel confident talking about it.



Recap

Method: Instructional conversations

- The conversations are part of larger instructional events---rich and engaging units, for example, focused on topics related to science, math, technology, social studies, or language arts.
- These conversations are specially designed discussions, focused on language and meaning, in which teachers engage students in talking and thinking about the language used in texts the students are working on.
- Teachers take a sentence or two, or a short passage even from the materials students are working on each day, plan conversational starters that focus on aspects of the language they have decided are worth talking about, and guide students in talking about them, and seeing how it all works.

The conversations

- Each begins with the selection and study of the text that will serve as the basis of a conversation (ca. 15-20 minutes per day)!
- Ideally, the excerpt is a sentence (or two) that gets to the heart of things, and is so crammed with information---*that it begs for discussion.*
- The first step is for teachers to take a close, close look at the parts of the sentence or two. What are the parts, and what does each contribute to meaning? (This is instructional preparation).

What do teachers need to know about language ?

- They need to be aware of phrase and clause boundaries, but they don't necessarily need to know the grammatical terminology to talk about them.
- They should be able to find the subject of a sentence (which is often a complex NP with many parts) and its predicate (again with its various necessary parts).
- They should be able to look at each part of a sentence and determine what that part communicates, and be able to say what it does.