Classroom pets---feathered, furred, or scaled---can provide teachers with unbeatable opportunities for a range of differentiated learning activities. Our corn snake has been central to building literacy and language skills in our middle school ESL Language Arts classroom. We spend some time quietly observing our snake as he feeds and then use our observations to learn about the features of different kinds of writing and to build vocabulary. With a few tweaks, these activities will work well with students of all ages observing any kind of classroom pet.

Lesson Plan: **Snake Eats Mouse**
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**Snakes:**

*Caution!* It is important that students are given guidelines for behavior when working around any live animal in the classroom. Prior to beginning this lesson, the teacher and students review the Snake Rules for our class: 1. No screaming. 2. No jumping. 3. Treat the snake with respect. As we go over these rules, the teacher clarifies with examples and makes sure all students are comfortable with observing the snake as it feeds. The teacher reminds the students that the snake is a nocturnal animal. The lights will be dimmed during this activity and students are asked to remain very quiet as they observe.

**Objectives:** CC W2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content. a. Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information, using strategies such as definition, classification, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension. b. Develop the topic with relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples. c. Use appropriate transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts. d. Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.

**Materials:** mug, warm water, food item (mouse) encased in small plastic bag, tongs, anchor chart with labeled pictures of these items

**Set Up:** Tell students that they will be observing as the snake eats and writing about it afterwards. Place the bagged food item (chilled mouse) into the mug of warm water. Allow students to guess why the food item should be warmed slightly. *(The snake will be attracted to the warmth of the prey as it would be in the wild.)* Ask students to guess why feeding a captive snake live prey is not a good idea. *(The live prey may injure the snake.)* Review expectations for behavior while the snake is feeding. *(Students should avoid quick movements and loud sounds.)*

**Observation:** Lower the lights. Remind students to observe quietly and watch closely. Place the snake tank in a location where it is visible to all students. Using the tongs, remove the warmed food item and place it in a shallow dish in the snake’s tank. Because corn snakes are generally less active during daylight, the snake will generally be hidden at first. As it becomes aware of the food item, it will investigate using its tongue to smell. Consuming a mouse is not a quick business. You may want to provide whispered comments guiding students to analyze the snake’s behavior. For example, the corn snake will commonly wrap itself around the food item prior to consuming it. The food item will be rotated until the snake is eating it head-first. The snake may push against a hard surface as it is swallowing the food. It may “yawn” once the food has moved entirely into the snake to reposition its jaws. And, frequently, the snake will take a drink of water after it eats. The entire process is likely to take a little more than 10 minutes.
**Written Response:** Provide students with the opportunity to write about what they observed. This can take several different forms, depending on the students you have. You might want to provide students with a choice of assignments.

**Option 1: Cartoon Story Board** Students will complete a six-panel story board using words and pictures to show the sequence. Modifications to this assignment include providing students with a captions six-panel storyboard and having them add illustrations, providing students with six photographs of the snake feeding and having them order them and provide captions.

**Option 2: Verb Wheel** Students will pair up or work alone to create an oral retelling of what happened. On each of 6-8 index cards, they will write a verb used to describe one step of the process. Additional phrases may be added to the card to support the students’ English language development. The index cards are fastened to a picture of the event being described. As students retell the event, they refer to the verb wheel for help. The verb wheel is also available for support when students begin writing about the event. *(Note: The example of the Verb Wheel in the photos is from a shark attack retelling.)*

**Option 3: Focus on Structure** Students will use their observations to create a piece of writing. The writing may be in the form of an informative paragraph, a narrative, or any other type of writing. The examples below are taken from news articles written about feeding the snake. Students learned about the parts of a news article and typical structure and then practiced writing about feeding the snake.

**Assessment:** Students use this activity to prepare for reading, writing, and talking about snake-related topics. Students are then able to use what they learn to teach other students. The snake tank travels easily to other classes where students, even those with very limited English, are able to teach classmates what they’ve learned. The snake is also a popular feature at Family Nights where students share information and skills with their parents. Formal assessment is based on a portfolio of activities including both written products and presentations before peers and family members.
A Few Extension Activities:

Students use the vocabulary they gain while observing and feeding the snake again and again in other lessons.

We use our interest in the corn snake to build English proficiency, reading skills, and key science and math vocabulary. Supported by a few pictures, this reading becomes accessible to students with very limited English who have watched the snake eat.

This is another selection from a reading assignment. After watching the snake eat, students become very interested in exploring the reptile books in our classroom library. After locating a number of interesting reptile statistics, students read them together and master some key English related to numbers and units. These are skills they will need in all classes.

Simple assignments can be effective. We have many students with limited formal education. They practice writing sentences while peering into Viewmasters. (Yes, Viewmasters are still around!)
People have a lot of emotional reactions to snakes. We spend some time exploring our experiences with snakes as we practice listening and speaking.

Finally, we read and write little books about shared experiences. *Reptile Stories*, believe it or not, contains six little reptile stories from our classroom, all of them true. Even students who were not around to experience these particular dramas eventually begin to “remember” them!

One of the most rewarding outcomes of a classroom reptile is watching students overcome their initial fears through knowing and appreciating one particular pet. It changes the way students perceive reptiles everywhere.

*Adolf and the Snake*

The ESL students had animals in their classroom. They had a corn snake. They had some iguanas. They had a turtle. They had a small bird.

One day, Adolf came to me, Livingstone, in the morning before the bell rang. He was carrying his book bag on his back.

“Good morning, Adolf,” said Ms. Livingstone. “How are you?”

“Fine,” said Adolf. “Ms. Livingstone, I have an iguana at my house. It’s not poisonous. It’s in a small cage. We want to keep it in the ESL classroom for a few days. We want to show it to everybody. OK?”

*Turtle Eggs*

One day, Ms. Livingstone’s mother was digging a garden. She saw a turtle’s nest digging in the garden. The turtle’s nest was laying eggs.

Ms. Livingstone’s mother carefully dug up the turtle eggs. She took them to her house and put them in a little pot. Ms. Livingstone’s mother gave the eggs to the ESL classroom.

Ms. Livingstone’s mother said, “Watch the eggs. Maybe the eggs will hatch. It will be interesting. But then you must let the baby turtles go so they can live in the pond.”

Some of the eggs did not open. But some of the eggs did open. And out came baby turtles! What a surprise! These baby turtles were very cute.

Right after Ms. Livingstone and Luis Coja liked to look at the baby turtles. They were very small, but they were very active. They were fun to watch. Right after Ms. Livingstone and Luis Coja watched the turtles every day.

The baby turtles were small. They were a little bigger than a quarter. The baby turtles could jump and run. They liked to dig and hide.

But the turtles needed a lot of space. They needed water to swim in and a big tank. Ms. Livingstone’s mother said that it was time to put the turtles in the pond.

“OK,” said Luis Coja. “I love the turtles. We need the turtles to stay in the ESL classroom. Why do we have to let the turtles go in the pond? They might never come and we will never see them again.”

Luis Coja and Right after Ms. Livingstone’s mother on the telephone. They told us to let the baby turtles live in the pond.

“Boy,” said Ms. Livingstone. “The little turtles will live in the ESL classroom. They will not eat. They will not grow big. They will not be healthy.”

“But we love the baby turtles,” said Luis Coja, and we will never see them again.”

*The Lost Snake*

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