

Focus on Research

Using What We Know about Language and Literacy Development for ESL Students in the Mainstream Classroom

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Watts-Taffe and Truscott draw on the latest research in language learning and ESL to offer guidance to our readers for teaching second-language learners in integrated settings.

As of 1990, 14% of the U.S. school-age population lived in homes where a language other than English was dominant (National Association for Bilingual Education, 1993 as cited in Pérez, 1998a). In 80% of the states, the number of non-native English speakers has increased and is likely to continue to do so (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The vast majority (approximately 85%) of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students are educated in the mainstream classroom with little or no outside support for English-language learning (Schirmer, Casbon, & Twiss, 1996). However, research indicates that mainstream classroom teachers receive very little information, education, or support for working with ESL students (Constantino, 1994; Faltis & Hudelson, 1994; Garcia, Willis, & Harris, 1998). In fact, there is a dearth of research focusing specifically on successful approaches for monolingual, mainstream teachers (Fitzgerald, 1995).

As teacher educators responsible for providing preservice and inservice teacher education as well as writing about issues pertinent to teachers, we began this journey in an attempt to educate ourselves. This article touches on what we have learned about teaching ESL students using an integrated approach in the mainstream literacy classroom. Our recommendations support the premise that effective instruction should direct and support the practice and use of English language throughout the school day. Embedding language development in daily literacy activities would not supplant current practice but, instead, extend it in order to take advantage of the powerful influence that purposeful language use has for all children.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Research has taught us a great deal about how children become literate. Some of the most powerful lessons we've learned are these:

- reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking develop in an *integrated* manner (Au, 1998);
- language and thought are *socially constructed* (Vygotsky, 1987);

- language learning proceeds best when children use language for *meaningful purposes* (Au, 1998);
- what constitutes meaningful language use is influenced by an *individual's prior experience, culture, motivation, and goals* (Delpit, 1995);
- language learning proceeds best when children are encouraged to *take risks, experiment, and make mistakes* (Wells, 1986); and
- *modeling and scaffolding* are critical to successful language learning (Roehler & Cantlon, 1997; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

Despite the controversy over whether initial language development should be encouraged in the native language, in English, or both (Fitzgerald, 1995; Garcia & Padilla, 1985; Weber, 1991; Wong Fillmore & Valadez, 1986), it appears that these tenets of literacy development hold for both native English speakers and students learning English as a second language (Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 1996; Donato, 1994; Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999; Pérez, 1998a).

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

For many years, language proficiency was equated with the ability to communicate effectively in conversation with another person. However, oral language use is only one subset of proficiency, and oral language use in social situations is yet a smaller subset. Language proficiency includes both social and academic language (Cummins, 1994). Often, children who are competent users of social language are also assumed to be able to function within the parameters of academic environments which may require very different language skills.

According to Cummins (1994) social language skills, which he refers to as *basic interpersonal communication skills*, include the language needed to participate in a game on the playground and to interact with a small group in the cafeteria. This type of communication is often informal and is usually augmented by facial expressions, gestures, and body language. As such, it is thought of as *context-embedded*, meaning that it occurs within a communicative event rich with many language cues that lie beyond the actual spoken words.

Due to the richness of the context, precision in use of vocabulary and standard grammatical features is not required for successful communication. In addition, social situations usually allow for multiple attempts at communication aided by queries, furrowed brows, pointing, and so on because there is both the necessary time and motivation. The individuals involved in the discourse are engaged by choice and by the authentic desire to understand and/or be understood.

A second type of language, referred to as *cognitive academic language proficiency*, is the type that takes place in many classrooms (Cummins, 1994). This type of language differs from

social language in that it requires receptive and productive skills that are tied to academic thinking and reasoning (Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 1996). Unlike social language, academic language is often *context-reduced* in that gestures, body language, and facial expressions that could facilitate the communication process are absent or diminished. Further, it is often the case that academic communication takes place in limited time frames—sometimes as fleeting as the few seconds it takes for a teacher to ask a question about a science experiment and surmise, by the apparent lack of response, that a student does not know the answer. The focus is on content to be learned not on the language used to teach and learn that content.

Content-driven teaching, for *all* students, can result in teachers and students feeling constantly pressed for time, and therefore unable to engage in real dialogue about that content. It can also lead to inauthentic communication where there is less interest in understanding and being understood than there is in “covering” the material. Clearly, increasing the degree to which learning situations are context-rich is an important way of scaffolding the development of both language and academic competence among ESL students.

In addition to recognizing the difference between social language and academic language, and the difference between context-embedded and context-reduced language use, it is important to recognize that language proficiency refers to listening, speaking, reading, and writing and that children vary in the rate and manner in which they develop proficiency in each of these areas (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999). Contrary to popular opinion, oral language skills do not always precede written language skills. Nor is it the case that younger students learn English more quickly than older students (Cummins, 1994). However, it is the case that social language skills develop more rapidly than academic language skills. Research indicates that, while it takes up to two years to develop social language skills, *it takes an average of five to seven years for students to become proficient in academic language use* (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1994).

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ENTERING A NEW CULTURE

In addition to the challenges involved in learning a new language, ESL students are also faced with the challenge of learning a new culture. The terms *acculturation* and *assimilation* are often used to describe processes by which people establish membership in a new culture—that is, establish themselves to be like the rest of a group. While acculturation allows people to become part of a new culture at the same time as maintaining important aspects of their native culture, assimilation requires people to choose one cultural group over another—to discard aspects of native culture and replace them with aspects of the new culture, which is often described as “mainstream” culture. In a truly multicultural

classroom and society, acculturation is encouraged over assimilation (Banks, 1993). For ESL children, the issue of acculturation is acute, especially for recent immigrants. These children and their families are not only learning a second language, they are also learning a second culture—or, more accurately, set of cultures. They seek membership in the culture of the classroom as well as the larger culture of American society.

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Igoa (1995) has studied the emotional and psychological impacts of entering a new culture on immigrant children in the U.S. In their own words, immigrant children speak of extreme loneliness, frustration, and fear, all of which are associated with navigating a world in which everything is new and nothing is familiar. They describe periods of feeling mentally and emotionally exhausted during this time when they are “caught between two cultures,” (Igoa, p. 85) and many students go through a period of relative silence until they feel safe in their new environment. Needless to say, the importance of teachers’ and peers’ validation and understanding of the child’s culture cannot be overstated. This can take many forms, including making home-school connections, allowing the child to personalize her/his space in the classroom with items that make her/him feel safe, encouraging the development of strong peer relationships, and taking a multicultural approach to instruction (Igoa, 1995; Pérez, 1998b).

FACILITATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Given the interconnectedness of language development and cognitive development, research in the area of ESL education suggests that for ESL students, just as for native English speaking students, English-language learning should take place in conjunction with the learning of academic content (Donato, 1994). Therefore, it is neither necessary nor desirable to postpone academic instruction until students are proficient English-language users. After all, as Delpit stated with regard to the issue of “skills” instruction as it pertains to native English speakers, “Literacy is not something you can teach apart from literate behavior. You don’t learn to read; you learn to read something, and you read something because you want to know something, enjoy a text, or participate in a group . . .” (in interview with Teale, 1991, p. 542).

In addition to integrating literacy development with academic development, English-language learning is enhanced when students are encouraged to use the skills and strategies they have in their first language (Jiménez, 1997; Pérez,

1998b; Roberts, 1994). It is neither necessary nor desirable to pick one language over another. Rather, it is important to capitalize on the learner’s first-language knowledge in the development of English-language knowledge. Much of the knowledge students have about the processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in their native languages can and will transfer to English, making the task of learning English that much easier. Examples of skills and strategies that will transfer are: emergent reading skills (e.g., directionality and book handling), knowledge of text structure, prediction, setting purposes for reading and writing, comprehension strategies, and reader self-confidence.

Finally, it is important to remember that English-language learning is a lifelong process for all of us, even those of us for whom English is the native language. As Tedick states “In a way, it’s unfortunate that the term ELL (English Language Learner) is being used to describe ESL students because, really, we’re *all* English-language learners,” (D. Tedick, personal communication, November 12, 1998).

Given what we know about literacy development, the development of English-language proficiency, and the social, academic, and emotional challenges of entering a new culture, several instructional practices are recommended for multilingual classrooms. We have chosen to focus on a few that reflect a classroom environment where language is used in meaningful ways and where scaffolding regularly occurs to help children move from one level of learning to the next (Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 1998). In addition, we have selected activities that fit nicely within an integrated literacy classroom.

Using Language in Meaningful Ways

Using language in meaningful ways involves a focus on the message encoded in print rather than a focus on the code in and of itself. It also involves engagement of the learner in a desire to convey or understand a particular message. In this section, we will focus on writing and peer discussion groups as vehicles for meaningful language use.

Writing

Writing is one avenue for meaningful use of language. ESL learners can often participate in writing activities, even when their speaking skills are limited (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999; Hudelson, 1984; Urzua, 1987). Further, writing, especially when combined with other forms of visual expression, can be a safe haven for students experiencing a silent stage in their transition to the new culture (Igoa, 1995).

When using writing as part of integrated instruction, it is important to give second-language learners adequate time to compose with a focus on the content of the piece rather than on writing conventions such as spelling and grammar (Little & Sanders, 1989). Errors can provide feedback to the teacher, indicating how the learner is progressing in language

acquisition. Encouraging students to substitute the native-language equivalent for words they do not know, or know how to spell, during writing activities is also important as it helps ESL students build their confidence, use what they know, and focus on meaning in their communication (Fitzgerald, 1995; Hudelson, 1984).

We have used this technique with ESL students during journal writing. When responding to a text (whether given a prompt or left undirected), second language learners are told to use words from their first language in place of English words they don't understand yet, and to concentrate on the completion of their message. Students then go back to the writing with the teacher's help and replace these words with the correct English equivalents. These revision sessions have a natural place in an integrated classroom that uses the writing process, and they provide excellent teachable moments which can be used to elaborate on knowledge of vocabulary words (Wilkinson, Courtney, Robertson, & Kushner, 1992).

Peer Discussion Groups

Peer-led discussion naturally evolves during activities such as literature circles or book clubs (Raphael & Brock, 1993). Discussion groups provide children with real opportunities to share stories or books they have read and to use language in meaningful and purposeful ways (Garcia, 1999). Clearly, modeling language use in a real context is crucial for ESL students. However, opportunities where *other children serve as the models* are very important for second-language learners. These learners hear which words other readers use to describe some of the same reactions that they themselves may

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have had to a story. This is particularly important because children's reactions to the story may be very different from the teacher's. Children also model for one another the conditions under which certain language is used. These interchanges are powerful, authentic, and developmentally appropriate because they are directed by English-speaking children and based on a shared reading experience. Over time, as ESL students gradually become more active in peer-led discussions, they will experience the much-needed complement to multiple models of appropriate language use—that is, multiple attempts at using the language themselves (Cummins, 1994).

All children, including native English speakers, benefit from participating in discussions that are mediated by the teacher in order to provide a model for peer-led discussions. Discussions involving the teacher, or modeled by the teacher

in association with others, can include demonstrations of appropriate social conventions, such as turn-taking; appropriate linguistic conventions, such as building on another member's viewpoint, challenging another member's viewpoint, or helping a member clarify her/his viewpoint; and ways of maintaining the thematic focus of the discussion. Discussions of this type are sometimes referred to as "instructional conversations" and are very effective for second-language learners (Goldenberg, 1992; Pérez, 1996).

SCAFFOLDING INSTRUCTION

Scaffolds are thoughtful ways of assisting students in experiencing successful task completion. Here, we discuss ways of scaffolding the development of language as it relates to literacy instruction. Based on the early work of Bruner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) and Vygotsky (1987), scaffolds should be contextual, social, and temporary frameworks that build on acknowledged student strengths. Scaffolds used to support successful learning need to be designed with a specific situation or literacy event in mind. Such planning includes what students are to learn, how they will go about learning it, and ways to make the process successful. Using the social elements of learning, in the form of activities designed for small groups or pairs, proves to be advantageous and is a natural part of the scaffolding process. Even though scaffolds may take time to set up, they are worth it in the long run. Eventually, the amount of support needed lessens and, soon, scaffolds are no longer necessary. Scaffolding may occur spontaneously, as in elaborating on a vocabulary word using a frame of reference familiar to students. Scaffolding also may be planned, as in using a specially designed, graphic organizer during a cooperative learning exercise. We will now focus on three areas where teachers could easily use scaffolds to help ESL children learn language during integrated instruction: background knowledge, vocabulary development, and communication.

Background Knowledge

As previously discussed, second-language learners bring to the reading event numerous experiences that facilitate the construction of meaning. Reves (1993) reminds us that ESL students have background knowledge related to three areas: content (topic schema), language (linguistic schema) and text structure and organization (text schema). In learning a first language, ESL students develop a strong schemata of language-based elements that parallel aspects of English. At the same time, teachers should be aware that there are different ways of knowing that are culturally bound. Care should be taken not to reject answers that appear on the surface to be incorrect. Instead, teachers must find out what the student's thinking has been and how she/he arrived at her/his answer. Teachers can take advantage of students' existing literacy frameworks, as well as their rich cultural backgrounds,

to provide instructional scaffolds for integrated learning (Cummins, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1995; Schirmer, Casbon, & Twiss, 1996).

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Activating background knowledge is now a widely practiced prereading activity in integrated classrooms. However, this is particularly important for second-language learners because of cultural differences that may affect conceptual understanding. Making sure students think about what they know on a topic of study before new learning takes place is also important because it helps ESL students integrate new information into existing conceptual frameworks, which in turn, facilitates long-term memory and the transfer of information to new contexts. Several methods of activating background knowledge have been found to be effective for second-language learners, including the language experience approach (Hudelson, 1985), graphic organizers (Flatley & Rutland, 1986; Reves, 1993), and cooperative learning (Garcia, 1999).

Vocabulary Development

Teachers often remark that vocabulary is their main concern for ESL learners during instruction. Because vocabulary is linked to the way information is stored in memory, and because it is the means by which students express their thinking, vocabulary development is crucial for helping second-language learners interact with text. Elements of effective vocabulary instruction that appear universal include an emphasis on providing both definitional and contextual information about key words, elaborating on word meanings during teacher-led discussions, and providing opportunities for students to actively elaborate on word meanings themselves (Garcia, 1992; Stahl, 1985; Tikunoff, 1985).

It is also vitally important to distinguish between instruction involving a new word for a known concept and instruction involving a new word for a new concept and to devote the necessary instructional time to concept development. For new words representing known concepts, it is useful to encourage students to integrate the English words for known parallel concepts (e.g. provide places on vocabulary webs where students can add what the concept is called in their first language) into the discussion. In developing new concepts, it is useful to provide examples and non-examples, incorporate drama and visual representations, and provide multiple encounters with the concept over time (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1997). Finally, idiomatic expressions are very confusing for second-language learners. They should be used sparingly and, when they are, with an

explanation of their meaning. Idiomatic expressions that appear in texts will require explanation and discussion to facilitate comprehension.

Communication

Communicative interactions that promote language acquisition require the classroom to be perceived as a community where individual identities are recognized and risk taking is encouraged. Little and Sanders (1989) refer to this as "cooperative transaction" (p. 278). Teachers can encourage such transactions by having children use each other's names during discussions, providing cooperative learning activities, and fostering sharing using a circle formation. Teachers can also build a sense of community by encouraging joint or collaborative responses and exhibiting the attitude that all children in the classroom are academically able (Schirmer, Casbon, & Twiss, 1996; Tikunoff, 1985).

Clarity during instruction is an important aspect of communication for language development. It is helpful to ESL students when teachers and peers speak clearly and when classroom rules and directions are articulated in writing (preferably with accompanying pictures or symbols) as well as articulated orally, and also modelled. Structured classroom routines and clear expectations for success are equally important for second-language learners (Delpit, 1995; Little & Sanders, 1989). Post everything you can in your room and use exemplary manuscript printing whenever possible.

Daily read-alouds are also a valuable practice across the grade levels. Teachers can take advantage of these excellent modeling opportunities by using both verbal and nonverbal cues to help ESL students understand and participate fully (Hough, Nurss, & Enright, 1986). During read-alouds, teachers can pause to indicate a change in events, use exaggerated intonation to emphasize key concepts, and change the pitch or volume to stress certain aspects of the story or develop a sense of character. Teachers can also point to illustrations and use facial expressions and gestures to accompany actions in the story.

CONCLUSION

Multilingual classrooms offer rich opportunities to extend and expand upon what we already know about literacy development to ensure that ESL students receive the same opportunities for linguistic and cognitive growth as do native English-speaking students. In this article, we have attempted to discuss educational characteristics that are unique to ESL students as well as characteristics that are shared among all students. Specifically, we have focused on writing, discussion, and scaffolding in the areas of background knowledge, vocabulary, and communication, and have stressed their importance to the literacy development of ESL students.

We continue to see truth in the statement that "good instruction is good instruction." At the same time, we are aware

that good instruction happens as a result of conscious planning and reflection. Strong discussions, vocabulary instruction, and scaffolding, for example, are not widely observed in elementary school classrooms, despite the fact that they are strongly advocated in the literature (Goldenberg, 1992; Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 1998; Watts, 1995). So, while to some degree, meeting the needs of ESL students may be “business as usual,” we find ourselves continually challenged to examine our “usual business.” In so doing, we have developed a brief questionnaire (see Appendix A) designed to promote self-reflection on the degree to which classroom instruction is effective for ESL students. We hope it provides food for thought and, when appropriate, the impetus for change. ●

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APPENDIX A**A QUESTIONNAIRE TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT
OF TEACHERS WORKING IN LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE SETTINGS**

TEACHER'S NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Effective Literacy Practices for Second-Language Learners**Using Language Purposefully to Make Meaning**

- | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I provide opportunities for students to work together in mixed groups? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | While working together, do students discuss assignments? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do assignments have clear purposes given beforehand? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Is comprehension the goal of the work students do? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I emphasize the context of the written materials? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I encourage students to read at their reading level (not their oral proficiency level)? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I teach comprehension strategies? |

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- | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I encourage joint or cooperative student responses during instruction? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I speak clearly, provide plenty of wait time, and give clear directions? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | While reading, do I pause or use exaggerated intonation to make a point? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | While reading, do I use facial expressions and gestures, or point to illustrations? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I encourage students to substitute their native language for unknown English words (orally or in writing)? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Are the classroom rules and expectations for success and participation clearly stated? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Are classroom patterns and routines structured so that they are predictable? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I let students know that I think they are able to do well? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I use visual approaches to instruction (e.g. tables, charts, demonstrations)? |

Supporting Instruction in Your Classroom

- | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I activate/build what students know on the topic they are learning? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I activate/build students' knowledge about textbooks? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I use elements of the minority culture to widen students' perspective? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I show interest in and respect for diverse cultures? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Am I aware of prerequisite concepts needed for learning? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I present concepts in different ways? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I use oral reading? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do students have chances to discuss and elaborate new word meanings? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes | Do I avoid idioms and other figurative language during teaching? |