Incorporating several forms of literacies (students’ native languages, drawing, music, and drama) can help to accelerate primary-age children’s acquisition of English literacy. Find out how teachers facilitate the language-learning process.

Teaching English Language Learners: Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

Sarah J. Shin

“If ESL newcomer students already know how to write in their native language, should they continue to write in that language in the classroom?” Teachers working with young immigrant children frequently ask that question.

Some teachers are justifiably concerned that primary-age students who continue to use their native language skills might hamper their acquisition of English literacy. After all, isn’t time spent in writing in the first language time that could have been spent writing in English?

Many other teachers agree conceptually with the notion that supporting immigrant children’s home languages and cultures is good practice (Pattnaik, 2003; 2005). However, with increasing pressure to help English language learners quickly acquire academic English skills—so they can be successful on state-mandated high-stakes tests—many teachers wonder whether they can afford to have the “diversion” of students’ native languages in their already full instructional schedules.

Newcomer English learners are no longer exempt from taking standardized tests under the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), so there are enormous pressures to teach them as much English as possible as soon as possible. Teachers and schools are required to raise the test scores of their English learners and are increasingly focusing their instruction on the content covered by the tests (Crawford, 2004; Meier & Wood, 2004). In fact, many schools are adopting scripted, one-size-fits-all curricular programs that consume large amounts of instructional time, leaving less time for best practices, including ESL and content area instruction that is tailored to the English proficiency and literacy levels of individual students (Wright, 2005).

This article contends that while the testing requirements may push teachers to focus only on English, incorporating other forms of literacies—students’ native languages, drawing, music, and drama—can help to accelerate immigrant children’s acquisition of English literacy.

English Learner Population Growth

In the United States, English learners are a rapidly growing segment of the K-12 student population. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of limited-English proficient students in the country’s schools doubled in the last decade, with more than 5 million English learners currently enrolled in K-12 programs. In pre-kindergarten through grade 3 alone, there are more than 2 million English learners (Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004).

While English learners can be found in every state, some states have particularly high concentrations of immigrant students. In Texas, for example, Latinos accounted for almost half of the P-12 public school population (46.3%) during the 2006-2007 school year, and 16% of the total P-12 population was identified as English language learners (Sheets, 2008).

The English learner student population is a diverse group. Although 80% of this group speaks Spanish, the rest of the group represents speakers of more than 460 languages (Hepburn, 2004). Meeting the needs of this diverse student population is a significant challenge because the majority of classroom teachers have no preparation for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse populations (Daniel & Friedman, 2005; Hawkins, 2004).

Reading and Writing in More Than One Language

Research evidence strongly suggests that literacy skills transfer from a child’s first language to a second language, and learning to read in the first language facilitates the development of literacy skills in English (Cummins, 1996; Lanauze & Snow, 1989). Evaluations of various bilingual education programs show that instructional programs that allow immigrant children to develop their native language to high levels of proficiency while learning English are more effective than English-only programs (Garcia, 2005; Ramirez, 1992; Slavin & Cheung, 2004; Thomas & Collier, 2002). On the whole, reinforcing children’s conceptual base in the native language provides a foundation for long-term growth in English academic skills (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006).

If at all possible, English learners should first be taught to read in the language they know best (i.e., their native language) while learning English. This is because it is difficult for children to read in a language that they don’t already speak. English-speaking children learn to read primarily by applying phonics to arrange sounds to match words in their speaking vocabulary.

Literacy skills transfer from a child’s first language to a second language.

English-speaking children learn to read primarily by applying phonics to arrange sounds to match words in their speaking vocabulary. For example, an English-speaking child who comes across the word crow may initially read it as /kraw/ by assuming that it is similar to other words with the same spelling pattern (e.g., brow, cow, bow, now, wow). However, an English-speaking child knows that the word cannot be pronounced /kraw/ because she sees the accompanying picture of a black bird, which she knows is pronounced /krow/. She then makes the connection that there is another set of words in English with the -ow spelling pattern that is pronounced /ow/ (e.g., low, how, now, throw). By using her knowledge of the oral language, the English-speaking child arrives at the correct pronunciation and meaning of the word.

Children who are literate in Spanish have already grasped two key principles: the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness.

- The alphabetic principle is the knowledge that letters represent sounds. This refers to the knowledge that the “c” in cuervo stands for the sound /k/, the “u” stands for the sound /u/, and so on.

- Phonemic awareness is the knowledge that spoken words are composed of a sequence of separable phonemes. Thus, the word /kwer o/ has four distinct phonemes, /k/, /w/, /e/, and /o/. A Spanish-speaking child who has can apply these principles in Spanish might be better prepared to read English than a child who is puzzling over what word is formed out of the sounds /k/, /r/, /o/, and /w/.

What can early childhood teachers do to help English learners develop native language literacy? The surest way is for teachers to draw on the
expertise of those who are already literate in those languages—parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives. Teachers can encourage families to read to children in the home language and teach their children to read and write in that language (Hepburn, 2004; Shin, 2005). Teachers can also urge families to enroll their children in weekend heritage language programs in the community.

If the school has family/community liaisons who speak students’ native languages, teachers may enlist their help in educating families about the importance of developing first language literacy skills while learning English. In addition, community liaisons may be able to help teachers to secure bilingual children’s books for classroom use.

Furthermore, teachers can foster multilingual sensitivity of all students by integrating diverse language materials in their daily teaching practices. For example, English learners and English speakers can be grouped together to investigate the writing conventions of English language learners’ native languages. Students can find out whether a language is alphabetic (e.g., English, Spanish, Korean), syllabic (e.g., Japanese), or logographic (e.g., Chinese), and whether it is written from left to right, from right to left, or top to bottom (Crystal, 1997).

Children’s books in students’ native languages may also be shared. This activity is a great multilingual lesson for all students, and is especially empowering for English learners who play the role of experts on pronunciation and vocabulary, for example. This technique is very appropriate for students in the early elementary grades whose reading skills are rapidly developing.

In addition, teachers can display classroom signs and messages in various languages, and learn to say and write simple greetings and phrases such as “Hello” and “Thank you” in each language. This sends a strong signal to immigrant students that their languages and cultures are not simply tolerated in school but are actively valued (Shin, 2007). As students realize that their teachers are language learners, too, and make lots of errors in learning how to say simple things, children are likely to have more positive views of their own English language learning efforts.

### Developing Oral Proficiency in English

As teachers encourage immigrant children to develop native language literacy skills through home- and community-based efforts, they can also create a classroom environment in which English learners can best acquire spoken English, which is critical for their acquisition of literacy skills. Mainstream teachers and English-speaking peers play a vital role...
in helping immigrant children develop oral proficiency in English by modeling academically and socially appropriate language use in various school contexts. In general, well-informed teachers provide plenty of opportunities for English learners to hear comprehensible English, and to read, write, and speak English in a meaningful way (Garcia, 2005). Teachers can make their English more comprehensible by

- adjusting their speech (slowing down, paraphrasing, giving examples, and asking questions),
- using somewhat exaggerated gestures and facial expressions,
- pointing to pictures or showing objects when explaining concepts.

To promote social interaction, teachers can use a variety of grouping configurations, including whole class, small groups, and pairs to provide students with frequent opportunities to talk with one another and receive help if necessary (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

For non-English speaking newcomers, teachers may arrange group activities that encourage nonverbal participation. For example, if a group is working on a mural, the newcomer might draw or color a picture while other group members may do the bulk of the writing. This way, the English learner contributes actively to the group project while interacting through context-specific oral English.

Most English learners go through a period of silence in the classroom (Igoa, 1995). The length of silent period varies from child to child—it may range from a few weeks to several months depending on the language proficiency and personality of the child. While there is a great deal of individual variation in how quickly English learners start speaking in English, remember that children are more likely to speak when the talk is meaningful and useful.

Poetry and songs facilitate oral language development.

One way to make classroom talk meaningful is to encourage informal collaboration in activity centers by offering various games, interactive learning tools, and props. Activity centers enable children to perform hands-on tasks in small groups and develop functional language in a low-stress environment, both of which are conducive to language acquisition for learners of all ages (Krashen, 1982).

Poetry and songs are a great way to facilitate oral language development of English learners (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Weed & Ford, 1999). Provide song lyrics and poems accompanied by pictures for students to keep in their personal poetry and song books.

First, read the poem aloud, modeling not only pronunciation but also dramatic stress and intonation. Then students read the poem chorally and act it out in pairs or groups.

A great example of a multilingual variation is including diverse language translations of songs in English that are familiar to children. Teachers can play a recording or have a bilingual assistant or volunteer sing the song while the children sing along with the help of a phonetic transcription. This enables students to appreciate the sounds and rhythm of another language sung to a familiar tune.

Scaffold Reading Instruction for English Learners

Like English-speaking children, English learners benefit from a print-rich environment that provides a large number of different reading experiences—reading aloud, shared reading of predictable big books, as well as guided and independent reading. Expose English learners of all
Ways to Scaffold Reading Instruction for English Learners

- Establish a print-rich environment with many different reading experiences—reading aloud, shared reading of predictable big books, as well as guided and independent reading.

- Provide a wide range of children’s literature including alphabet books, picture books, pattern books, concept books, bilingual books, multicultural books, and fairy tales, as well as teacher- and student-written and illustrated books. Read them more than once.

- When reading aloud to students, facilitate comprehension by stopping at various points in the book to discuss an illustration or to review the plot. Ask comprehension questions. Ask students to predict what might happen next in the story. Tell stories with puppets.

- Pre-teach key vocabulary by selecting words that are critical for understanding the text. Provide a variety of tools such as word walls, personal dictionaries, and mnemonic strategies to help students recognize and use the words.

- Teach vocabulary in thematic sets. For example, if the word aunt appears in a text, teach thematically related words such as uncle, cousin, nephew, niece, brother, and sister.

- Offer repeated exposure to print during regular learning events such as morning message, circle time, journal time, and writing workshop.

- Select books about experiences that are familiar to children. This helps to activate students’ prior knowledge about a given topic before the text is introduced.

- Choose bilingual books and books in English that are translated into other languages to boost reading comprehension.

- Use graphic organizers before and after reading. Webs help readers organize information when the text contains many details.

English learners also acquire basic vocabulary through repeated exposure to print during regular learning events such as morning message, circle time, journal time, and writing workshop (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). These maintain the same predictable structure and provide repetition of familiar language that is conducive to vocabulary learning.

To make reading meaningful, select books about experiences that are familiar to children. This helps to activate students’ prior knowledge about a given topic before the text is introduced. Multicultural literature that is written by and about members of specific ethnic groups can offer stories and feelings that are engaging and directly accessible to immigrant children.

In addition, bilingual books and books in English that are translated into other languages can boost reading comprehension because they help students transfer their understanding of the content from one language into another. For example, Shel Silverstein’s The Giving Tree has been translated into more than 30 different languages. The different translations can be used in group or whole-class reading so children of different language backgrounds can appreciate their peers’ as well as their own language(s) while learning English.

Graphic organizers used before and after reading are useful for introducing specific vocabulary and activating students’ prior knowledge. Creating content webs (see Figure 1) helps readers organize information when the text contains many details. Teachers stimulate students’ interest and teach new vocabulary as they construct the web with students, using key words and connecting ages to a wide range of children’s literature including alphabet books, picture books, pattern books, concept books, bilingual books, multicultural books, and fairy tales, as well as teacher- and student-written and illustrated books.

When reading aloud to students, teachers can facilitate comprehension by stopping at various points in the book to discuss an illustration or to review the plot. Teachers may also ask comprehension questions and ask students to predict what might happen next in the story. Use puppets to encourage children to focus and for dramatic effects.

English learners usually need more time to formulate their responses orally in English, so wait longer before prompting them to answer a question. On occasion, English speakers might offer their answers first as a way to model the language and format of acceptable responses for English learners. In addition, repeated exposure to a text is always helpful to English learners, so multiple readings are encouraged.

There are several ways to scaffold reading instruction for English learners. One way is to pre-teach key vocabulary by selecting words that are critical for understanding the text. Provide a variety of tools such as word walls, personal dictionaries, and mnemonic strategies to help students to recognize and use the words (Echevarria et al., 2004).

English learners particularly benefit from learning vocabulary in thematic sets. For example, if the word aunt appears in a text, teach thematically related words such as uncle, cousin, nephew, niece, brother, and sister because they are often used together.
students' prior experiences to them. After reading the text, students can add information to the web and go back to the text to add or clarify important details. Graphic organizers such as webs, charts, and personal dictionaries can help English language learners at all levels.

Incorporate Multiple Modes of Literacy in Writing

If newcomers already know how to read and write in their native languages, teachers are urged to allow them to write in that language first as a way of getting their ideas recorded on paper (Igoa, 1995; Weed & Ford, 1999). After children have had the opportunity to write down some of their ideas, they can translate the text into English with the help of a bilingual classmate or an instructional assistant.

If a child speaks some English but is not able to write it, suggest that the student dictate the story to an adult or older student. The teacher can share the dictation with the student to help the child make the connection between speech and print. Have the student copy the text (as a way of getting further practice with writing and spelling) and illustrate the story. Then the student can read the story aloud for classmates.

In addition to encouraging children to express their ideas in their native languages as well as in English, enhance the teaching of writing by incorporating non-textual media such as drawing or sculpture, music, and drama to facilitate literacy acquisition. The following steps, suggested by Weed & Ford (1999), enable English learners to respond to literature through multiple modes of literacy including art and oral discussion:

- read and/or hear a story
- think and draw (or craft or sculpt)
- discuss drawing in a group (in the native language and English)
- draft (in the native language and English)
- conference and revise (in English)
- present and publish (in English)

What is useful about this process is that it allows English learners to first respond to text by thinking about representing visually what they understood from it before doing any writing. Children then discuss their drawings, puppets, or other 3-D representations in small groups of classmates who speak the same first language so that discussion in both the children's native language and in English can take place.

Children then write one or two sentences about their representational work based on feedback from the group (in the native language and English). They write a first draft (in the native language and English) based on the sentences generated from their group discussion. Students then conference with a peer or the teacher, revise their drafts, and present the final art and writing in English. They might read their materials by alternating readers, act out their ideas in a short play, or present their writing in a newscast script format, for example. These steps help reduce English learners' anxiety about writing by providing students with ample opportunities to think, create, talk, listen, rewrite, and present.

One of the best ways to help English learners to write in English is an interactive dialogue journal, a written conversation between teacher and student (Peyton & Staton, 1993). A sample dialogue journal is shown in Figure 2.
Usually, a student writes on a topic that is either self-selected or teacher-generated, to which the teacher responds in writing with a comment or question that invites further conversation. In their responses, teachers do not correct language errors explicitly, but model written language conventions by incorporating and expanding on the student’s writing. Done regularly, the dialogue journal encourages English learners to practice writing in English without overly worrying about mistakes, and to learn new vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and idioms that are the basis for further literacy development.

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In this era of high-stakes testing, teachers are under enormous pressures to ensure that English learners’ make adequate yearly progress in English language proficiency and academic content knowledge. Because English learners are tested in English, many teachers believe that teaching mainly in English is the only way to help them learn English quickly.

However, English language learners who are already proficient in another language should not have to leave their language at the door before entering school. Just as art, music, and drama are alternative means of expressing one’s meanings and can contribute to developing literacy skills in English, immigrant children’s native languages are a valuable resource and can facilitate acquisition of English if they are actively validated and used.

References


Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Teaching English Language Learners:
Recommendations for Early Childhood Educators

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English Language Learners...

- transfer skills from their first language to the second language.
- are more comfortable in classrooms that actively celebrate their languages and cultures.
- typically go through a period of silence. They are more likely to speak if conversations are meaningful and useful.

Help English learners develop literacy

- Incorporate diverse language materials: books, signs, messages.
- Read children’s books in students’ native languages.
- Learn to say and write phrases such as “Hello” and “Thank you” in each language.
- Group English learners and English speakers together.
- Encourage English learners to read in their native language.

Scaffold reading instruction for English learners

- Establish a print-rich environment, including morning message, circle time, journal time, and writing workshop.
- Select books about familiar experiences. Include teacher- and student-written and illustrated books.
- Read bilingual books and books in English that are translated into other languages.
- Offer reading aloud, and predictable big books, as well as guided and independent reading.
- Tell stories with puppets. Use poetry and music. Incorporate drama and drawing.
- When reading aloud, stop to discuss an illustration or the plot. Ask comprehension questions. Ask students to predict what might happen next. Give English learners more time to answer.
- Create content webs before and after reading.

What can families do?

- Read to children in their home language.
- Teach children to read and write in their home language.
- Enroll their children in local heritage language programs.

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