

# Considerations for Literacy Coaches in Classrooms with English Language Learners

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This brief by the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse addresses issues related to literacy coaching in classrooms where there are English Language Learners (ELLs). Briefly defined, an English Language Learner is a child whose native language is other than English and who is learning English as a second language. Moreover, ELLs are defined as students whose knowledge of English is so limited that they are likely to find their classroom experiences incomprehensible (Crawford, 2004).

There are currently about 5 million children in U.S. schools who are considered to be English Language Learners (hereafter referred to as ELLs). This population has grown by 60% over the past decade and is the fastest growing school age population in the nation (National Clearinghouse, 2005). There are about 350 different language groups represented in U.S. schools; however 75% of the English language learners speak Spanish as a first language. ELLs are present in significant numbers in some schools (up to 80-90%) and in very low numbers in other schools (less than 1%). The vast majority of ELLs are U.S. born.

The most effective methods and approaches for educating English Language Learners have been the subject of much contention and debate over the past four decades. Several recent syntheses of research have concluded that there are multiple academic benefits for ELLs who learn to read and write in their first language before or as they are learning to read and write in English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Slavin & Cheung, 2003; Thomas & Collier, 2003). However, nationally about 80% of the students identified as ELLs are in English medium programs with little or no opportunities to learn in their native language (Crawford, 2004). Given that the vast majority of ELLs are in schools where English is the only medium of instruction, it is likely that literacy coaches find themselves in situations where ELLs are learning to read and write in English as a second language and are most likely not learning to read in their native language.

This brief will discuss several of the major issues that literacy coaches may encounter in trying to assist classroom teachers with literacy instruction for ELLs in English medium classrooms. Suggestions for addressing these issues will also be provided.

## **Issue #1 – The sameness platitude or ‘good teaching is just good teaching’**

The first issue has to do with the prevailing conventional wisdom that ‘good teaching is good teaching,’ and therefore literacy instruction for ELLs should mirror literacy instruction for native English speakers. This sameness platitude has two major origins. The first is the historic overgeneralization that first language and second language literacy acquisition are essentially the same. The second origin is the lumping of all ELL learners into the generic category of ELL without considering how distinct first languages may interact differently with English.

Several major studies (Bernhardt, 2003; Grant & Wong, 2003) have concluded that these overgeneralizations are detrimental to improving second language literacy programs for ELLs because schools and teachers has been encouraged to utilize the same instructional strategies for ELLs as they use for native English students. Sameness platitudes have been created because first language reading research is almost exclusively “English-language based” and second language research is conducted likewise. Further, worldwide, the overwhelmingly English speaking North American/British/Australian literacy industry has driven the creation of literacy programs for schools, teacher education policy, and academic publishing in the area of literacy program development and instruction. Added to this, there are very few reading researchers who know a language other than English and thus any models of reading posed by these researchers are based on English. Bernhardt says, “Unsurprisingly this means that these programs are inherently biased toward a particular surface structure (all current reading models are right-branching, for example) and a particular view of literacy” (p. 113). Bernhardt, Grant & Wong, and Hawkins (2004) argue that we need a unique pedagogy for literacy for second-language learners.

It is also critical to note that ELLs are not a homogeneous group and that with regard to literacy instruction and program development, it is likely that Farsi and English interact differently than Spanish and English or other languages. It is important that teachers and coaches, therefore, know something about the first languages of the children they teach, even if these languages are not going to be used as mediums of instruction.

In view of the above, it seems important that we recognize that 'one size fits all' literacy programs are not effective for ELLs and that literacy instruction should be modified for this population in ways that acknowledge what is different about second language literacy instruction and at the same time acknowledges the role that the native language may play in learning to read in a second language.

### **Recommendations:**

Given the above, what recommendations might be made for literacy programs for ELLs? A thorough discussion in response to this question is well beyond the scope of this paper, however the following three suggestions serve as a guide for practice:

\*Much of the literacy instructional approaches for native English speakers are based on process approaches to learning (e.g. reader's workshop and writer's workshop). Recent research by Genesse & Riches (2006) has documented that process approaches for ELLs are less effective than interactive and direct instructional approaches. In fact, for ELLs, interactive approaches were the most effective. As literacy coaches and teachers set up literacy routines and structures, it may be important to put interactive instructional approaches at the center of instruction for ELLs, and place less emphasis on process approaches.

\*Meaning should be at the CENTER of all literacy instruction. It is axiomatic that comprehension and ability to interact with text is the major goal of learning to read. It is also clear that learning how letters and sounds make words, learning to decode and learning to read with fluency are important components of learning to read. Fluency, decoding and phonological awareness are also important for second language learners, however it is very common for ELL students to become excellent in decoding and reading fluently at the same time they are struggling with comprehension. While many reading programs for native speakers at the

beginning level focus on teaching children to decode new words (assuming that if they can decode they can comprehend), it is critical for ELLs that reading instruction be focused on meaning and not simply cracking a code.

\*High frequency words – For native English speakers, high frequency words are those words that occur frequently in texts, and that are frequently not phonetically regular. It is thought that knowledge of these high frequency words increases fluency in reading thereby increasing comprehension. More importantly, high frequency words in English are often abstract (e.g. than, what, if). Learning high frequency words is also important for ELLs, but for ELLs it is important that learning high frequency words begins with words that are concrete and to which meaning can be attached (e.g. dog, boy, want). Therefore, high frequency words for ELLs should start with words that can easily be made comprehensible and for which meaning can be attached.

### **Issue #2: Oral language before literacy?**

During the past three decades, it was thought that ELLs should not learn to read in English until they had attained some level of oral proficiency in English. In many schools and districts, ELLs were placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs where there was little or no literacy instruction for one to two years. It was thought that oral language acquisition was a prerequisite for learning to read and write in a second language. Current thinking encourages teachers to teach ELLs to learn to comprehend, speak, read, and write English simultaneously, and that it is not necessary to delay literacy instruction in English while children are learning to understand and speak English. The advent of high-stakes testing has further pressured schools and teachers to include literacy instruction for ELLs, even beginning ELLs. Two complex and interrelated issues present themselves here. The first is that coaches and teachers of ELLs should not delay literacy instruction while students are learning to speak English. However, conversely, teachers and coaches should not focus on teaching reading and writing skills at the expense of oral language skills. All are important. Unfortunately, current practices do not focus on oral language development, even for native English speakers, and this development is critical for ELLs.

**Recommendations:**

Components of any literacy program for ELLs MUST include specific oral language development. As stated above, literacy instruction should not be delayed while ELLs acquire oral English. However, as also stated above, literacy instruction for ELLs should not be the same as for native English speakers. It is suggested that coaches and teachers work together to insure that weekly and daily lesson plans include oral language as well as literacy objectives. Similarly, it is important that oral language objectives move beyond vocabulary and include language structures, and opportunities to use and practice these language structures. An example of a language structure is a transformation exercise that is best done in the context of what students are learning to read and write. Examples of transformation exercises that are beneficial for ELLs and that can be done in the context of learning to read and write include turning statements into questions, turning present tense into past tense, and turning simple sentences into compound sentences.

For beginning level ELLs, Language Experience Approaches (LEA) to teaching reading have been demonstrated to be beneficial (Peregoy & Boyle, 2004). Language Experience Approaches utilize students' oral languages as the basis for creating written text. This approach is advantageous for ELLs as it provides students the opportunity to practice oral English structures and to read something that has meaning for them and that they understand. Comprehension is built into what is read as it is the students own language that becomes the basis of what is read. To maximize the use of LEA for ELLs, several revisions need to be made to the original LEA method. First, planned oral language activities are essential so that ELLs get opportunities to use English to express their thoughts and experiences. Second, since ELLs are just learning English and need to see Standard English in print and modeled in oral language, it is suggested that teachers edit student oral language so that written products are representative of Standard English.

**Issue #3: The native language: A scaffold or a barrier?**

A very common misconception about ELLs held by monolingual English teachers is that the native language is a barrier to learning the second language. In order to help children negotiate the 'language barrier,' many teachers believe that best practice dictates that children

not be allowed to use their first language when they are learning to read and write in English as a second language. Teachers generally have good intentions about this practice and do not mean to devalue or degrade children's native languages. They simply believe that discouraging children from using their native languages will speed the acquisition of literacy in the second language and will reduce negative transfer from the first to the second language. This belief system sees the native language as a source of interference to learning to read in a second language. For these reasons, teachers may discourage or prohibit children from using their native language during literacy instruction.

Contrary to the above belief, there is compelling research that indicates that a child's first language serves as an important scaffold into second language literacy learning even when the child is not learning to read and write in their first language. Research by Moll & Diaz (1985) illustrates this issue well. Moll & Diaz divided groups of ELLs (all Spanish speakers) into two groups. Both groups read the same stories and had to answer the same comprehension questions in English. One group of students read these stories in English, and was allowed to discuss with each other the major events in the stories in Spanish. They then responded to comprehension questions in English. The other group read the same stories in English. However, they were only allowed to discuss the stories in their small groups in English and then complete the comprehension questions in English. Study findings indicated that the group that had the opportunity to discuss the stories in Spanish had higher comprehension (in English) than the group that had been allowed to discuss the stories only in English. Moll & Diaz posited that the higher comprehension was a result of giving the students the opportunity to process information that they had read in English in their native language. The researchers concluded that discussion groups in Spanish served as a scaffold to comprehending English text. They suggested that rather than restricting the use of a child's native language, that teachers would be better served to learn how to use the child's native language strategically in literacy instruction.

**Recommendations:**

Traditionally, reading programs for native English speakers have considered comprehension in reading to include both comprehension and production. That is, if

students understand what has been read, they can express this understanding orally. For second language learners, however, students' comprehension frequently exceeds their productive skills. They may well understand what they have read but have difficulty talking about it. The opportunity to talk about what has been read in their first language enables them to reflect on and better understand what they have read in a second language. Coaches need to understand that reading comprehension for second language learners may mean that students understand more in English reading than they are able to discuss.

Teachers often fear that if they allow children to use their native languages during English literacy instruction that the first language will delay or retard second language acquisition. They fear that children will never learn to think in English. Rather than see the first language as a barrier, it is suggested that teachers and coaches learn to see the native language as a scaffold. Grouping children with a common language into discussion groups to discuss what they have read in their first language may, in fact, enhance rather than retard learning to read and write in a second language. Rather than demanding "English only," teachers and coaches need to explore strategic ways of incorporating a student's first language into literacy instruction. Allowing children time and opportunities to process what they are learning in their first language serves two purposes – that of enhancing learning and the validation that a child's native language is welcome in a classroom.

#### **Issue #4: Beginning ELLs needs are different than for more advanced ELLs**

All too frequently, articles about helping ELLs to learn to read and write are rather generic and discuss ELLs as if they were a homogeneous group. Literacy coaches and teachers need to be aware that literacy instruction for beginning students needs to be different than for intermediate or advanced students. Beginning students obviously need basic language structures and they need to learn the structures in English that will help them use English to learn. These structures need to be basic, and they need to focus on concrete language and meaning. Further, beginning level ELLs need time to process information that they are learning in English and this processing may include time to process in the first language. The following vignette illustrates this issue:

A teacher asks David (a beginning ELL), "What is your favorite color?"

David hears the question in English. However, in order to process the information, he must first think about what the question means in Spanish. He thus processes, "¿Cuál es tú color favorito?" After he understands the question, he must formulate a response, which he does in Spanish. His answer is "rojo" ("red"). He then must decide how to say rojo in English (red). He then answers the teacher's question with the response "red."

From the above, the reader should note that David is using his first language (Spanish) as a scaffold and as a way to process the new language (English). Instead of three steps (listen, formulate response, respond), David needs five (listen in English, process in Spanish, formulate response in Spanish, turn Spanish response into English, respond in English). Simply stated, the beginning ELLs need extra time to process English and teachers and coaches should be aware of this. The good news in this area is that most beginning and intermediate ELLs receive structured ESL programs. This is not true for advanced ELLs.

Perhaps the most neglected and underserved populations of ELLs are the advanced second language learners. Because they are progressing well in English and have most likely passed some sort of assessment that deems them to be "proficient" in English, it is often thought that they need no additional support in learning English and that they should be able to compete with native English speakers. It is critical for teachers and coaches to know that advanced ELLs frequently fossilize in their English development because of the assumption that their English skills mirror those of native speakers. Escamilla (1993) compared ESL programs with language assessment tests and with English language texts and found that neither ESL programs nor assessments provided opportunities to learn many of the language structures that are critical to comprehension of English texts. These structures include idioms, tag verbs, modals, and the words that create coherent and connected discourse. It is important that we understand that development of English needs to continue even for advanced ELLs who are labeled 'proficient' in English.

#### **Recommendations:**

Several recommendations are offered related to the above issue. First, planning literacy instruction for ELLs

needs to differentiate between beginning, intermediate and advanced students. Beginning ELLs need to have structured, daily explicit ESL that complements, expands and is integrated with literacy instruction. Moreover, they need to have time to process information in English and teachers need to provide meaningful input and appropriate wait time in order for these students to meaningfully engage in literacy instruction.

Contrary to current practice, intermediate and advanced ELL students also need to have daily, explicit, and structured ESL that complements and expands their literacy instruction. Oral ESL for advanced ELLs needs to be qualitatively and quantitatively different for advanced ELLs than for beginners. ESL can and should be integrated into literacy instruction for advanced learners.

Just as 'one size fits all' literacy programs are not likely to serve the needs of students learning to read and write, 'one size fits all' ESL programs are unlikely to serve the needs of ELL students.

#### **Issue #5: Cultural Schema**

Literacy teachers and coaches are well aware of the role that background knowledge plays in enabling students to successfully comprehend and interact with text. However, in the case of ELL students, many teachers confuse background knowledge with cultural schema. The majority of the teaching force is White, female, native English speaking and middle class, and literacy programs and approaches were developed for this population. The teachers are cultural insiders and their cultural schema matches text well. For this reason, it is often difficult for teachers to recognize the cultural messages inherent in many texts that may cause confusion for ELLs. The following vignette illustrates this issue:

In a second grade class, children read about a child who has to sit in the corner because he got his new clothes dirty. The teacher is aware that she has ELL children in the class and demonstrates (literally) by putting a chair facing a corner in the room and sitting in it. She assumes that this demonstration provides the comprehensible input to help the ELLs understand the story. However, she does not explain that sitting in the corner is a form of punishment. How children are punished or rewarded varies across cultures and it is this cultural schema that is likely to interfere with comprehension for ELL students.

The above hopefully illustrates the difference between background knowledge and cultural schema. The teacher provides the background knowledge about the words, "sitting in the corner." Children are helped to understand the words but not the deeper cultural meaning. Children often times understand the words but still do not understand the text. Barrera (1992) posited that for all of us, "culture is what we use to see, but seldom what we see" (p. 230). The more familiar we are with our own culture, the more we take for granted with regard to the need to explain it to others. Teachers need to understand the difference between background knowledge and cultural schema (Escamilla, 1993).

#### **Recommendations:**

Two recommendations are offered here. First, as students are attempting to learn an unfamiliar language, it is important to know that they are concurrently learning about a new culture. Literacy instruction for ELLs can be enhanced if they are provided opportunities to read culturally familiar text in English. If the text is culturally familiar, the students will be able to focus on the structure and vocabulary of English. The content load has been reduced because the students are reading something that they are familiar with. Having culturally familiar literature and other texts available in the classroom serves the additional purpose of validating the cultures of all of the students in the class. This recommendation is NOT suggesting that ELLs only read culturally relevant or culturally familiar text, just that such texts enhance the literacy program for all students in a classroom, especially ELLs.

It is important that ELLs also read and interact with texts that are culturally unfamiliar to them. In order to do this effectively, it is important that teachers learn to analyze the books and stories that students are reading for cultural schema as well as background knowledge. This may require specific professional development sessions for teachers to learn to examine text. Analyzing text for cultural schema can enable teachers to explicitly and directly include cross-cultural teaching into their literacy programs.

#### **Summary**

The population of English Language Learners in the U.S. is large and continues to grow at a fast rate. Most ELLs are in classrooms where English is the only medium of instruction and where they are expected to learn to

read and write in English while they are learning to understand and speak it. For a variety of reasons, many classroom teachers have not had formal preparation in teaching ELLs and have been told that, 'good teaching is good teaching,' and that approaches and methods that are effective for native English speakers will be equally effective for ELLs. The purpose of this brief has been to point out some significant ways that learning to read in a second language differs from learning to read in one's native language. Further, the brief has proposed some recommendations for coaches and teachers to consider as they develop and implement literacy programs for second language learners. An underlying assumption of this brief is that literacy teachers and coaches want to be effective with all of their students and that they are actively seeking ideas for how to improve instruction for ELLs and to insure that students who are culturally and linguistically diverse are made to feel welcome in schools, that their cultures and languages are valued, and that they are as capable of learning and achieving.

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