Reviving Oral Reading Practices with English Learners by Integrating Social-Emotional Learning

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Introduction

Thousands of English learners (ELs) around the country participate in a variety of oral reading activities. One of the most popular ones is *Round Robin Reading* (RRR). In this activity children take turns reading a passage aloud. The teacher often selects the student (the reader) and the text. The rest of the class follows the reading silently.

Many teachers use this activity as a classroom management technique (e.g., to keep students attentive) as well as to assess oral language and reading skills. They also use RRR with the intention of increasing students' oral reading fluency and comprehension (Graves, Brandon, Duesbery, McIntosh, & Pyle, 2011). Despite the apparent positive effects of RRR and its many variations, the drawbacks of these practices far outweigh the benefits.

A major problem associated with RRR is the fact that it reinforces the narrow view of reading fluency and reading comprehension that some people have. Reading fluency is not only the ability to orally read quickly and with accurate expression. It includes "vocabulary knowledge, lexical access, semantic skills, syntactic understanding, background knowledge, and literal and inferential comprehension" (Baker, Stoolmiller, Good, & Baker, 2011, p. 332).

It is also important to note that reading comprehension is not a passive act like some might think. It involves the ability of the reader to extract meaning through interaction and involvement with the text (Baker, 2002; Boulware-Gooden, Carreker, Thornhill, & Joshi, 2007; Brown & Palincsar, 1985).

To date there has been no research-based rationale for using RRR (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009). On the contrary, researchers have found RRR to be ineffective, primarily because it can hinder learners' comprehension and delay their fluency development (Ash, Kuhn, &, Walpole, 2009; Monroe, Gali, Swope, & Perreira, 2007; Opitz & Rasinski, 1998).

The following quote exemplifies what happens to many ELs when they have to read aloud without the proper preparation. Phat, a Vietnamese young man, wrote:

> Every day, I sat there in fear, hoping that I would not be called on. To save myself from the embarrassment, I nervously followed the book, word by word with the finger. Reading aloud was inevitable. My name was called and my heart leaped and my mind struck blank for a moment. My voice quivered as I pronounced each word like a novice. I felt ashamed for stumbling and butchering most of the words. I felt ashamed because my teacher corrected every other word. This experience scarred me.

Low self-esteem and fear negatively impact students' ability to learn and can evolve into persistent, lifelong struggles with literacy (Graves, Brandon, Duesbery, McIntosh, & Pyle, 2011). Many ELs like Phat feel caught in an endless cycle. They become frightened when they have to read unfamiliar text aloud. Because they are nervous they do poorly (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003). Because they do poorly they become stressed (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2001).

Students know that if they mispronounce a word or read too slowly their classmates will make fun of them. They also fear that they might not have their teacher's approval. In many cases students will dislike reading and as a result they will fail at school (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Ruddell, 2006; Tompkins, 2010).

Surprising students by asking them to read aloud without the proper preparation is problematic because a few students will succeed but a large number of them will fail. Many of the students who will not do well are those still learning English. Each year the schools in the United States become increasingly more diverse. From the 1998-1999 school year through 2008-2009 year, the number of ELs in the public schools (PK-12) grew by 51.01% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisitions & Language Instruction Programs, 2012). Over 90% of the immigrants entering this country come from non-English speaking countries (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004).

Understanding ELs

English learners come to school at all different levels of English proficiency and speaking many different languages (Banks, 2001; Freeman & Freeman, 2003; & Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). In fact there are more than 400 different languages spoken in our U.S. schools (Goldenberg, 2008).

Some of these children enter school having had a variety of experiences which have given them an extentive exposure to language and knowledge (Banks, 2001; Gándara, 2004; Freeman & Freeman, 2003; Jong & Harper, 2005). Other ELs, however, have had less formal schooling and will need extra time and scaffolding to be able to successfully complete academically challenging tasks (Baker, 2002; Tovani, 2000; Jong & Harper, 2005).

Additional factors are also important to consider. Some students are skillful decoders but may have trouble comprehending complex text (Butler & Hakuta, 2009;

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Freeman & Freeman, 2003). Students who are in the preproduction (or silent) stage, for example, might not be ready to read aloud or to orally respond to questions (Krashen, 1992). It is important not to equate limited oral proficiency with low cognitive or academic ability (Krashen, 1992; Jong & Harper, 2005).

Some of these students might be academically advanced but have not yet developed the necessary oral skills to converse in English. The fact that ELs come to school at different levels of English proficiency, from diverse backgrounds, and possessing a wide range of academic skills makes it impossible for a "one fits all" oral practice such as RRR to be effective for all learners.

Rich Oral Interactions

Highly-structured curricular programs such as RRR leave little time for teachers and students to engage in rich oral interactions. ELs spend less than 10% of their school day involved in quality oral language related activities (August, 2002; Zehr, 2009). During this time they have few opportunities to participate in discussions that deal with academic content or learn higher-order-thinking skills (e.g., evaluation and analysis) (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Hilden & Jones, 2012).

In fact, oral reading is usually an afterthought. In many oral reading activities students are often expected to respond to questions that require a one-word or simple-phrase response (Soto-Hinman & Hetzel, 2009; Soto-Hinman, 2011). Such activities do not always promote active meaning-making (Hilden & Jones, 2012).

Hilden and Jones (2012) found that in RRR students: (a) tend to read slower than if they read silently; (b) are passive listeners; and (c) do not always have the opportunity to hear fluent readers read text accurately and at an appropriate pace and with prosody (appropriate phrasing and expression).

Social-Emotional Learning

So how can we make sense of these findings? Should we just avoid oral reading? Instead of abandoning oral reading altogether it is important to adapt current practices to take into account both the academic as well as the social-emotional aspects of learning. Academic learning refers to language and content knowledge. Combs (2004) describes social-emotional learning (SEL), in the school context, as "the process for integrating thinking, feeling, and behavior to achieve important social tasks; meet personal and social needs; and develop the skills necessary to become a productive, contributing member of society" (p. 27).

Brain research shows that the affective and cognitive aspects of learning work in synergy (Sousa, 1998; Sylwester, 2006). This means that emotions and content learning work together to produce a result that cannot be obtained separately or independently. This is the reason why students who feel good about themselves and who have greater peer acceptance are more likely to attend school and excel academically (Brouillette, 2010; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2001). Conversely, children like Phat who lack confidence and do not feel appreciated or respected tend to become disengaged from school (Elias, 2004; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to provide background on integrating social-emotional learning into classroom oral reading practices. The following section outlines some of the language and academic demands ELs face at school. Another section considers the relationship between academic and social-emotional learning. The article concludes by providing educators with an action plan that applies these theories to practice, showing teachers how to weave SEL into existing pedagogy specifically into the language arts curriculum. The overall goal is to increase students' English proficiency, academic performance, and sense of well-being in a coordinated manner.

Academic Language Demands

Learning academic language is very difficult for both native speakers and English learners alike (August & Hakuta, 1997; Butler & Hakuta, 2009; Cummins, 1989). Students tend to acquire social language or basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) quickly because they learn these language skills mostly in context (Cummins, 1989). In the same way as English-only students, many ELs learn English primarily as they interact with others and also through exposure (e.g., television, radio, street signs) (Cohen & Cowen, 2008; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

They first learn words like *no*, *mine*, and *go*. When they become somewhat proficient they may respond using utterances like "*I go there*." Later they learn to speak in complete sentences. To succeed in school, however, ELs must also acquire academic language or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which typically can take five to seven years to learn (Cummins, 1984). It takes long because it is the language commonly used in academic content areas rather than in daily personal communication. This academic language often deals with abstract concepts such as *independence* and *colonization*. These are not concepts students can see, touch, or do. Further, it is important to note that not all ELs have the opportunity to learn academic language at home. The only place some students learn content and its related terminology is at school.

Another problem ELs encounter is that many times they attend schools that have impoverished reading programs (August & Hakuta, 1997). A large majority of the books found in these programs are fictional (e.g., stories and folktales) (Duke, 2004). This can be problematic because learning in grades fourth and above is often linked to textbooks (Allington, 2002). Everywhere we go (e.g., museums, school, work places, and the Internet) we find text that conveys information.

Narrative text should be a strong component of language arts programs but it cannot be the only type of text students read. It is imperative that children have access to libraries that contain a range of resources, such as magazines, textbooks, biographies, newspapers, and fictional books. They should also have computers and other forms of technology to search the web, create documents, and undertake creative projects (e.g., videos).

This range of material can help children expand their knowledge of concepts addressed in class and explore new ones. It is important that students learn critical thinking skills in order to make connections, synthesize, and summarize readings. These are all skills needed to do well not only in school but also later in life.

Learning vocabulary can be challenging for many students yet it is key to academic success (Boulware-Gooden, Carreker, Thornhill, & Joshi, 2007; McLaughlin, August, Snow, Carlo, Dressler, White, Lively, & Lippman, 2000; Riedel, 2007). Children learn over 4,000 words a year (Green, 2004; Jong & Harper, 2005). This means that an EL entering school in the fourth grade will know approximately 18,000 fewer English words than students who grew up as fluent speakers of English.

Many of the words students have to learn in school carry a special meaning in such curricular areas as social studies, science, or mathematics. Words such as *break* can mean *smash* or *a rest* depending on the context in which this term is used. This places ELs at a huge disadvantage

because they not only have to learn the word but also it's many synonyms. To be at grade level they both need to catch up by learning the vocabulary from previous years while also learning that of their current grade level; this is a very difficult challenge for any child.

Social-Emotional Learning

How students feel about learning and school can impact their academic performance. Children like Phat, who feel embarrassed and frightened every time they read aloud, tend to dislike reading. In contrast, children who experience greater teacher and peer acceptance are more likely to achieve their academic goals (Brouillette, 2010; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2001).

Students with strong social-emotional skills learn to recognize and manage their emotions, develop empathy for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and learn to deal with challenging situations constructively and ethically (Elias et al, 1997; Goleman, 2006; McCombs, 2004).

The current drive for accountability and high-stakes testing, however, often makes teachers apprehensive to take class time to teach skills which "cannot predict clear discernable benefits to students' academic progress as reflected in their test scores" (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004, p. 5). Yet, SEL should not be neglected because emotions can either enhance or interfere with the brain's ability to learn (Ashcroft & Kirk, 2001; Goleman, 2006). Young children who are more socially competent and emotionally perceptive tend to be not only more successful in school but also in their relationships.

SEL should not be an add-on to the existing curriculum nor should it be taught in a fragmented way (e.g., violence prevention). SEL needs to be infused across the curriculum. Children already bring to school linguistic, academic, and social skills they have learned at home (Ada, 1997; Banks, 2001). What is important is that at school they continue maturing so that they can become academically and emotionally successful individuals.

Infusing SEL into Oral Reading Practices

Quality school programs are those programs that build students' SEL along with their academic achievement. These programs should be implemented throughout each year of schooling (Goleman, 2004) and should be learner-centered. According to McCombs (2004), learner-centeredness is not solely a function of specific instructional practices or programs:

> It is a complex interaction of teacher qualities in combination with characteristics of instructional practices—as perceived by individual learners. Learner-centeredness is a function of learner perceptions, which, in turn, are the result of each learner's prior experiences, self beliefs, and attitudes about schools and learning as well as their current interests, values, and goals. Thus, the quality of student-centeredness does not reside in programs or practices in and of themselves. (p. 30)

Teachers in learner-centered programs understand that their own knowledge and dispositions play an important role in students' academic success (Freeman & Freeman, 2003; Nieto, 2005). Thus, they treat every child with respect. They understand that children bring a wealth of knowledge to school, whether they know about gardening or about exotic places. They know that all children have something to offer.

These teachers take into account their students' interests, backgrounds, strengths, and challenges when designing instruction. Oral reading activities can serve as an avenue to create such programs and opportunities. In these programs social-emotional learning is woven into the curriculum in order to (a) increase interest, (b) foster a safe and positive environment, (c) offer rich reading experiences that increase students' social-emotional and academic skills, and (d) promote reflection.

Increasing Reading Interest

Teachers who are avid readers tend to place a great deal of effort into their reading activities. They are enthusiastic about reading, which can increase students' interest for reading. According to Goleman (2006), new research in neuroscience shows that emotional states are contagious, brain-to-brain.

This means that the social brain adjusts itself to the state of the person we are interacting with by adapting our own feelings and actions to get into sync with the other person (Goleman, 2006). Thus, if we enjoy reading and like to engage in discourse with children, there is a greater chance that the children will also like it.

Effective, Safe, and Positive Environment

In student-centered classrooms, teachers use research-based strategies to ensure that all students attain their goals. For example, students have ample time and opportunities to rehearse and study the readings.

It has been found that students who read the same selection several times and know the vocabulary tend to have a higher fluency rate (Ruddell, 2006; Tompkins, 2010). Because students can read the selection fluently and understand what they read, they feel better about themselves.

To promote vocabulary development teachers use practices like Narrow Reading, which involves reading selections from the same author, theme, or genre (Schmitt & Carter, 2000). Researchers have found that when teachers narrowed the sources students gained confidence and interest in reading in English (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005). The fact that students recycled the vocabulary and dealt with the same themes, over an extended period of time, gave students a better chance to learn both content and language.

Other researchers have noticed that Narrow Reading in conjunction with direct teaching had even better results (Bryan, 2011). Students' reading comprehension increased when they studied the semantic, syntactical, and grammatical characteristic of words found in the selections (Schmitt & Carter, 2000).

Another way ELs can learn vocabulary is through cognates (words with a common etymological origin). While there are few cognates between some Asian languages and English, there are over 20,000 Spanish-English cognates, many of which are commonly used words in English (Montelongo, 2002). Some examples of cognates include vision/*visión*, conclusion/*conclusión*, cafeteria/*cafetería,* and television/*televisión*. Written cognates are easier for the learner that oral ones.

As Kelley and Kohnert (2012) succinctly explained it:

> . . . the presence of cognates, as determined by orthographic overlap, scaffolds meaning for the English reader. In the spoken versus written modality, cognate status is based on phonological overlap and is somewhat more difficult to determine. (p. 191)

In a safe environment students' contributions are an important piece of the curriculum. Students who have choices tend to be more actively involved in their own learning process (Dresser, 2003; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004). For this reason, it is important that students work with teachers to select readings and to create oral reading schedules. In doing this, students can learn self-management skills such as

goal setting and organization (Elias, 2004; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003).

For example, students may choose to read simultaneously with other students. Choral reading is an effective practice because proficient readers can model pronunciation (the way language is spoken), intonation (tone used when speaking), and enunciation (speaking clearly). Students thus learn receptive and productive language that helps them understand and be understood (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2009; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Choral reading can also be helpful for less proficient readers because they tend to feel more secure. The focus here is not on how well one child is performing but on the whole group.

Rich Reading Experiences: Julie of the Wolves

Selections with social-emotional content are a strong component of reading activities in learner-centered classrooms. These readings provide students and teachers with the opportunity to address topics such as *fear*, *bullying*, and *substance abuse*. For example, by using *Julie of The Wolves* by Jean Craighead George, one can discuss Miyax's love for her father, the pride of being an Eskimo, and the fear of starving to death in the wilderness. The class may study the term Eskimo and the reason why some people find this term offensive.

At the same time the class could study and discuss self-awareness skills and characteristics (e.g., identify and recognize emotions, develop accurate self-perception and self-efficacy). As part of this, they can investigate why Miyax, a 13-year-old girl, runs away from her husband. Why is her pen pal so important to her? Why was it important for her to learn to think like wolves do? Why was she able to persevere in the Alaskan tundra without shelter or food?

This discourse helps students understand the relationship between goal setting, self-efficacy, and success. The psychologist Albert Bandura (1993) stated,

> Personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves and the firmer is their commitment to them. (p.118)

In these classrooms students learn content and academic and social-emotional language in context. While reading *Julie of the Wolves* the class can study the state of Alaska by reading articles posted in the official Alaska state website's *Alaska A Kids' Corner* and by watching video clips that show the landscape and the animals that inhabit this state. The class can discuss and learn content-related vocabulary such as *artic*, *compactness*, *wriggled*, *frost,* and *protect*. They can also learn social-emotional vocabulary such as *creative*, *fearful*, *offensive*, *respect*, *thrilling,* and *weary*.

Students who learn social-emotional skills and related vocabulary are able to identify problems and set goals and have a better chance of comprehending text (Elias, 2004). According to LaBerge and Samuel's (1974) automaticity theory, reading comprehension is improved when other processes require little conscious effort. Overall, positive environments, where students receive sufficient comprehensible input, result in low learning anxiety and thus facilitate language acquisition (Krashen, 1992).

Reflection and Feedback

Reflection and feedback are essential components of oral reading practices. Students may keep a self-reflection journal that focuses on decision-making skills (e.g., problem identification and analysis, and personal responsibility). In this journal students respond to prompts such as:

> I still do not understand the word *compactness* well.
>
> I felt proud today when I read aloud because . . .
>
> I always collaborate with my group because . . .

During reflection time the class should discuss what went well and what needs to be changed. Students who were listening to the reading can provide positive feedback to the reader. This way the students learn to be active listeners. They also learn interpersonal skills such as giving compliments, sharing ideas, and working cooperatively on activities (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003). This activity will increase their understanding of social awareness skills such as *empathy*, *appreciation for diversity*, and *respect for others*. The goal is to build a sense of comradery and respect among students.

In student-centered classrooms *coaching* replaces *correcting*. Teachers act as coaches who understand that learning is a process. They provide nonjudgmental, timely feedback that focuses on meaning-making. Teachers do not treat students like they are broken and in need of "repair". Instead they help students monitor their own production (Krashen, 1992) without interrupting the dialogue.

For example, if a student says, "Miyax *imitate* [missing ed] the call to come home," the teacher can respond, "yes, she *imitated* the call to come home." The teachers also give students specific and clear feedback. After oral reading, the teacher might say to the reader:

> I like how you changed your tone of voice when Miyax said, *it's all right, Kapu. Amaroq has agreed that I can go on two feet. I am, after all, a person*. The fact that you did this showed us that Miyax is trying to befriend the wolf.

Explicit feedback helps students understand what they did well and what they need to change. Similarly, it is best to focus only on errors that change the meaning of the word and not on those that are accent related (Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). This will minimize the corrective feedback students receive.

Concluding Thoughts

The great diversity of our student population and the fact that a large number of ELs are failing in school gives us no option but to rethink how we teach language and literacy. One area that needs special attention is oral reading. It is important that teachers become aware that many popular practices such as Round Robin Reading and its variations do not always promote reading comprehension and fluency (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009).

On the contrary, the fact that children have to read aloud without the proper preparation can make students anxious, which can actually interfere with their ability to read. This coupled with the fear of sounding less than proficient negatively impacts how students feel about themselves and reading in general.

It is important that we modify these teaching practices to take into account the whole child. In doing this, we must move away from the cognitive-only model of education to a model that blends academic and social-emotional learning. In this new model it matters how students feel, what they think, and what they do.

The teacher and students are both key players in this new model. Teachers understand that their own dispositions and knowledge have a great impact on student learning. They design student-centered classrooms and are constantly making pedagogical changes to ensure student success. In these classrooms stu-

dent participate actively in the learning and assessment process.

In student-centered classrooms teacher and students respect one another. Participants who build "solidarity" have a better chance to engage in authentic meaning-making (Razfar, 2010). They read and address topics that are interesting and relevant to them (e.g., fear and anger). Through these readings students become more aware and more skillful at managing their own emotions.

The students also learn to understand the emotions of others and as a result tend to build better relationships (Elias et al, 1997). Through reflection and assessment teachers and students determine what is working and what needs improvement. The teacher provides specific and timely feedback and support. The teacher coaches students so that they can achieve their goals. Through these rich interactions students develop the necessary background knowledge and linguistic skills to read fluently and comprehend text.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the teaching of social-emotional skills should not end in the language arts class. SEL must be woven into all subjects in the curriculum and throughout all grade levels. The goal is to integrate SEL across the entire curriculum, in all grade levels, until it becomes a school-wide program. This way all students, including English learners, can build the confidence and resiliency they need to achieve high levels of academic and language learning.

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