



## Supporting English as an Additional Language Learners: A Sea of Talk

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English as an additional language (EAL) learners are increasing in Manitoba. They currently comprise 14% of our grade 1 population (A. Matczuk, personal communication, August 4, 2016), which translates to about three students per classroom. These young learners are “trying to master academic skills, including initial literacy, in a language in which they do not have full proficiency yet” (Rodriguez-Eagle & Torres-Elias, 2009, p. 53). Teachers need strategies to help these students engage in meaningful conversation in a new language, in addition to learning to read and write.

Research on the teaching of young EAL learners is limited (August & Shanahan, 2006; Espinosa, 2010). To learn more about supporting students and teachers, I undertook a study to identify effective teaching practices used in individual lessons by experienced Reading Recovery® Teacher Leaders. Reading Recovery is an early literacy intervention that provides one-on-one teaching to grade one children who are most at risk in literacy learning, but I believe some of the techniques can be applied by the classroom teacher in whole-class, small-group, and individual instruction. My recommendations include what teachers can do to understand each child’s current ability to use language and how best to teach with a focus on assessment.

In Reading Recovery lessons, teachers support language development through the literacy tasks of reading books and writing stories. Engaging in conversation, reading, and writing all contribute to language learning. Rigg and Allen (1989) explained, “Writing, speaking, listening, and reading all nourish one another; we don’t wait for mastery of one before encouraging developments of the other three . . . They need not be fluent English-speakers before they can write and read” (p. xiii). Both Reading Recovery lessons and early years classroom instruction bring together the tasks of speaking, reading, and writing. The question is, what can teachers do to enhance instruction in order to support the needs of the child as a language learner?

### Recommendations for Supporting EAL Learners

Teachers need to see EAL students as capable learners, expecting participation in speaking, reading, and writing tasks. Children enter school “with two self-extending systems in place – making sense of the world and knowing how to learn language” (Neal, 2009, p. 105). EAL children have also learned to make sense of their world through engagement in family and community life. They have learned to speak the language of the home. They are learners.

Studying our teaching and decision making with respect to teaching EAL learners can help us to become more effective teachers. The teacher’s understanding of an individual student’s strengths is important. The following ideas may support classroom teachers in monitoring the development of a child’s language competencies, planning instructional opportunities to extend learning, and reflecting on the effectiveness of instructional decisions.

#### **Monitor the child’s oral language.**

Teachers need to be meticulous observers of the EAL child’s spoken language. Observation of spoken language is challenging, because the act of speaking is heard but not seen. Teachers need to become sensitive to the child’s use of language, because “the better the teacher understands how the child is going about his business of constructing the new language, the more effectively she can support the child’s work – by providing, observing, and responding appropriately” (Lindfors,

1991, p. 469). The following are three ways to monitor a child's use of language, thus making the child's oral language more visible:

### **1. Administer and reflect on assessment tasks.**

Early reading and writing measures administered in English provide a valid means of screening young EAL learners (Chiappe & Siegel, 2006; Geva, 2000). Assessment tasks such as *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2013) can support the teacher's careful observation of a EAL child's oral language and interactions with print.

The assessment task *Record of Oral Language: Observing Changes in the Acquisition of Language Structures* (Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton, & Salmon, 2015) helps "teachers to observe and understand changes in young children's language" by "sharpen[ing] teachers' hearing of what children say, and improv[ing] the accuracy of the records they make" (p. 7). In administering this task, the teacher asks the child to repeat single sentences within a set (or sets) of sentences. For the EAL learner with limited use of English, the teacher begins with the Level 1 sentences. The *Record of Oral Language* provides a test score, which can confirm when a child needs additional language development. For instance, a child scoring below 13 "will need extra time and more conversations, and more enriching activities in oral language delivered concurrently with the reading and writing programmes of the classroom" (Clay et al., 2015, p. 22). The child's correct and incorrect attempts also provide evidence of the language the child can imitate and likely use in speech, and language structures that need to be learned.

Assessment supports the teacher in understanding the language the child is able to use and in making decisions about teaching. For example, the Level 1 sentence "My brother's knees are dirty" (Clay et al., 2015, p. 20) may be repeated by a child as "My brother knee is dirty." The teacher deduces that the meaning of the sentence is intact and that the child can use the possessive pronoun "my." The teacher also notes that the child is not yet using the possessive ending of "s," using an "s" on the end of a plural noun, or making correct subject/verb agreement ("is" for "are"). Such patterns make visible the child's ability to use language.

Select assessment tasks might be re-administered to better understand increasing language competency. In this study, Teacher Leaders re-administered the *Record of Oral Language* task, in order to confirm their daily observations of the child's language development.

### **2. Use video or audio recordings to assess the child's current use of language.**

Teachers become attuned to listening for the meaning of the child's message in order to respond. Concurrently listening for both understanding and for how a child uses language structures is challenging. Recording and transcribing the child's spoken language enables the teacher to listen to the child's use of language, the way in which the child puts words together to convey his/her message.

To make the child's use of language visible, classroom teachers might keep an ongoing record of the transcriptions of oral language samples.

We know something has changed in the child's language when we hear him construct part of a sentence in a new way. If we keep a note of the longest sentence we have heard him use, we can update it when a longer one comes along. Length of utterance is a reliable indicator of growth in early oral language skills. (Clay, 2005, p. 51)

In addition to the length of utterance, teachers might reflect on the clarity of meaning and the change toward more standard English grammar use.

### **3. Observe reading behaviours as a way to monitor oral language development.**

Teachers can administer and evaluate Running Records of continuous text reading (Clay, 2013) in view of the overall emphasis on creating meaning while reading. Each word that the child

reads correctly is marked with a check mark. The check marks make visible for the teacher language (words, phrases, sentences) that the child is able to use.

Given evidence, teachers may put less emphasis on errors due to language not yet within the child's control. In Figure 1, the child is not yet able to use the past tense verb "ran." Knowing that the child is not yet using past tense verbs in his oral language, the teacher needs to evaluate: Is the child's understanding of the story affected by the substitution? Is the repeated error something to note for later instruction? Running Records support the teacher in better understanding the child's current language capabilities, in preparation for instruction.

**Figure 1.** Running Record Sample

Page	Title	RW 98	10	3	E	SC
3	Kitty Cat & Fat Cat	LS				
	not / run ran					
5	cat cat					
7	up / went / tall					
9	looking / looks looked run ran					
11	great skp. run ran					
13	comes / SC I					
15	run ran run ran run ran / house / SC home					
16	went / jump /					

### Monitor your own use of language.

Teachers need to monitor and sometimes modify the language used with the EAL learner, and use what Krashen (1983) called comprehensible input. Krashen suggested that language acquisition takes place when the learner is exposed to language that is comprehensible and contains "i + 1." The "i" represents language that the learner currently controls, and the "1" represents language that is just slightly more complex or the next step. Krashen explained, "We acquire language when we understand messages that contain aspects of language (vocabulary, grammar) we have not yet acquired, but that we are 'ready' to acquire" (p. 3).

Teachers need to be attuned to the EAL learners' ability to understand the language used in instructions, explanations, and conversational exchanges. Teachers need to determine how simple or complex their language should be when engaging with learners. Video and/or audio recordings of teaching interactions can be used to evaluate the teacher's use of language, in order to determine if his/her language is comprehensible to the child.

Prompts or calls for action on the part of the learner are used regularly in teaching. The teacher reminds the child to do something he/she knows how to do, or invites the student to respond after a new strategy has been taught. A prompt might be direct, such as "Put them all together so that it

sounds like talking,” or be open-ended, “Try that again” (Clay, 2005, pp. 205, 206). Video and/or audio recordings can help the teacher to assess whether his/her prompts are understood by the child. A child who does not understand a prompt will emit observable behaviours such as not attempting or completing the task. Carefully monitoring enables a teacher to make adjustments to the language that he/she uses as prompts. For example, a child was observed not to respond to prompts of three or more words in length. When the Teacher Leader used one and two-word prompts, the child responded more appropriately.

Teachers should be cautious of their language when explaining something new to an EAL child. Neal (2009) described four common literacy challenges for EAL learners: unknown concepts, unfamiliar vocabulary, abstract ideas, and restricted access to English structure.

Video and/or audio recorded lessons offer opportunities to check a child’s understanding. The teacher’s meaning can be made more explicit by shortening the length of sentences used in oral speech, by considering vocabulary usage, and by adding meaning through the use of expression, props, and actions. For example, a child who confuses “in” and “on” might benefit from using props in combination with talking through the action in meaningful phrases or sentences, such as “The boy is in the car” or “The boy is sitting on the chair.” Teachers who are aware of the child’s use of language and responses to the teacher’s language are positioned to refine their language of instruction to increase student understanding.

### **Value the child’s first language knowledge.**

A child’s control of English might be best developed through finding ways to build on his/her first language knowledge. The EAL student should be given opportunities to teach his/her first language to a peer, small group, or the whole class. Here are a few examples:

- Invite the child to become the teacher through teaching phrases in his/her first language.
- Create books that use vocabulary from the child’s first language.
- Prompt the child to say phrases and/or name vocabulary words in his/her first language, as a means to link his/her home language and English.
- Use picture dictionaries in the child’s first language, in order to build vocabulary.

Making connections to the child’s first language knowledge supports the child in making more efficient links to accessing language in English. For example, an EAL child read the sentence “Kitty cat ran up the curtains” as “Kitty cat ran up the . . . [pause] . . . cortina, we call them” (the Spanish word for curtains.) The teacher praised the response and supplied the English equivalent, fostering a curiosity in the child to ask questions about new words. These links support the learning of language.

### **Maximize school and home connections.**

In order to maximize EAL learning, teachers and parents need to work together, so the parents become co-educators. “Bridging home-school differences in interaction patterns or styles can enhance students’ engagement, motivation, and participation in classroom instruction” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 7). The following are ways to foster these connections with families:

- Invite parents to the school. When meeting with parents, spend more time listening to the parents and less time talking. Parents might interpret school task expectations in the first language so that the child better understands what to do at school.
- Make connections to home experiences. Sending a camera home can be a means to learn more about the life of the student. Photos can support the child as a storyteller. For example, based on a photo of his Auntie’s cat, one child was able to tell many stories about the cat’s adventures, which were then made into a little book.

- Provide literacy activities for home practice. Consider using dual language books. Send books home for parents to read to the child in the language of the home, and encourage families to talk in their home language about books. Linking the home language to books read in English helps the child to “build the conceptual base for high level functioning . . . Strange as it may seem to teachers who are not bilingual, it is quite possible for a text written in one language to be discussed in another language” (Cazden, 2005, p. 5).

Parents are a valuable support for their children as language learners in both first language development and in providing additional opportunities to practise using the English language.

### **Make more time for student talk.**

Learning to speak, read, and write in a new language requires massive opportunities to practise using the language in meaningful ways. Children learn language not through repetition, but by using language of their own construction. Lindfors (1991) emphasized the need for meaningful language experiences:

Second-language learners who do rehearsal practice drills get better at doing rehearsal practice drills; but it is second-language learners who engage in communicating in the second language who get better at doing that: communicating in the second language. A child develops language – first or second – by engaging in *language*, and that means engaging in communication. (p. 470)

It may be difficult to provide more opportunities for conversation in a busy classroom, but Clay (2015a) reminded teachers, “If the child’s language development seems to be lagging it is misplaced sympathy to do his talking for him. Instead, put your ear closer, concentrate more sharply, smile more rewardingly and spend more time in genuine conversation” (p. 69). More opportunities for student talk are available through engaging in reading and writing tasks.

### ***reading instruction and oral language development***

A challenge for EAL learners is that “they have not developed an ‘ear’ for a range of English language structures to use as a resource in beginning to read” (Neal, 2009, p. 98). Teachers might give attention to oral language by considering the following instructional techniques:

#### **1. Read storybooks aloud.**

Read-aloud experiences expose children to more complex or literary language, which has potential to expand their use of language (Cazden, 2005; Neale, 2009; Rigg & Allen, 1989).

When a story is read to children, the shape of the story is created, the characters emerge, and the style of discourse and literacy turn of phrase are “heard.” As a consequence, prediction and anticipation become easier at a second hearing. When the language of books is read aloud, this introduces new language forms to the ear making them a little easier to listen to the next time. (Clay, 2015a, p. 264)

Furthermore, “Reading books aloud to children is important for later literacy for all children . . . ; the procedures used may need to be adjusted for [EAL] children” (Espinosa, 2010, p. 158).

Adjustments include increasing opportunities to engage in conversation before, during, and after reading stories. Pre-reading activities are recommended to introduce vocabulary and structures, followed by conversation during the reading of the book, and follow-up activities for the child to have an opportunity to use the vocabulary and structures of the book (Espinosa, 2010). The EAL learner benefits from hearing and engaging in conversations about stories that are just slightly more complex than the language he/she is currently using. Educational assistants or classroom volunteers might also be trained to read and discuss storybooks with EAL children.

## **2. Use stories, not patterned texts, to foster comprehension.**

For both read-aloud books and books for reading instruction, use books with stories, because “real stories that hang together [boost] the child’s ability to construct meaning while reading” (Kelly, 2001, p. 8). Similarly, Neal (2009) stated,

Because the structure of the language of instruction, English, is not available to them as a resource, and they have not learned the letters, common words, and sounds of English, meaning becomes the primary resource to draw upon in their early experiences in learning to read in their second language. (p. 89)

Selecting materials for beginning reading instruction is challenging. The teacher needs either to consider stories that are well supported by the child’s experience or prior knowledge, or to support the development of meaning before the child reads the story.

To ensure that materials for early reading instruction will be accessible to the reader, the teacher might first use the child’s dictated stories, which are grounded in meaning and personal language structures. When these stories are made into books, they support learning to read because the child can access the meaning of the story while learning about letters, words, and punctuation. The books can be read and reread until the child notices errors and attempts to problem-solve at his/her difficulty level, thereby increasing the accessibility of published books.

## **3. Talk more about books.**

Encourage the child to talk about books before reading, during reading, and after reading. When the teacher introduces a new book, he/she supports the child in accessing meaning as a resource. The teacher might ask the child to retell the story before reading the book. From this retelling of the story, the teacher can gauge the child’s understanding of concepts and consider the language used by the child. If necessary, ideas can be clarified or confirmed. When a child hears and repeats language structures while previewing a book, it is “much more likely that the [language structures] will be assimilated into the child’s expansion of his invisible, internal, English language system” (Cazden, 2005, p. 5).

In an individual or small-group setting, provide opportunities for talk during the first reading of the story, in order to prompt learner responses. The teacher has the opportunity to work with vocabulary, link the visual representation of a word with an illustration, use actions to explain meanings, and encourage repetition and practice (Espinosa, 2010, p. 157).

After reading the story, provide further opportunities for the child to talk about it, such as by retelling the story in his/her own words. Retelling provides opportunities for the child to use the language of the book, developing oral language and strengthening understanding of the story.

## **4. Provide more practice in rereading familiar books.**

Teachers can increase the quantity of familiar reading for the EAL learner by encouraging him/her to reread the same book for more repetitions than might be typical. When a child rereads the same book multiple times, there is repeated exposure to vocabulary and structures. With each rereading, the child has opportunities to deepen his/her understanding of the story. Children benefit from rereading familiar stories because “they look at them again in the light of new knowledge they have gained” (Clay, 2015b, p. 177) and the language and ideas presented in the story become predictable. These language structures may then be applied to talking or writing, deepening comprehension and accessing more information that is available in print.

## **5. Provide opportunities for the child to use language in flexible ways.**

Consider linking the language used in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. When learning to use a new language structure, the child needs to use the language in a personal way, not just

repeat a word. For example, the phrase “Where, oh, where is teddy bear?” might be played with orally by the child, as “Where, oh, where is my pencil?” or “Where, oh, where is Zachary?” When the teacher suggests ways in which to vary language, and when the child has opportunities to vary the language that he/she uses, oral language is developed.

### ***writing instruction and oral language development***

Teachers can provide opportunities for EAL learners to compose ideas for writing through conversation and telling self-composed stories before writing the story. Clay (2004) suggested, “Create the need to produce language. Tempt children to have something to say” (p. 10). There is motivational value in meaningful messages that the child composes him/herself (Clay, 2015b). Make an effort to learn about the child’s experiences, because talking and writing about the child’s experiences honours the child. Some examples include writing about a drawing/photo of the child in cultural dress, sending home a camera so that the child can share his/her home life, and providing opportunities for the child to talk about difficult subjects, such as war or life in a refugee camp. Once the child has written his/her story, sharing and celebrating the child’s story is a message to the child that his/her ideas and experiences are valued.

### **Value meaning.**

Regard meaning as the most important source of information. Regardless of the task – engaging in conversation, reading books, or writing a story – meaning is critical. Put more emphasis on developing meaning through conversation than on considerations of structures, vocabulary, and solving words. Students acquire language through engaging in meaningful conversation with more competent speakers who “attempt to understand what a child means, what he or she is thinking, and then respond to the child’s utterances in order to sustain the conversation” (Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993, p. 169). Conversation develops joint understanding between child and teacher.

Clay (2015b) described the critical concept of meaning in the tasks of thinking, speaking, listening, reading, and writing:

Comprehending is not just a literacy task . . . It is what a child is doing when holding a conversation with someone, listening to someone reading aloud, or reading on his or her own, at any time or place. It is not an aspect of thinking that emerges only after children have done the reading or pass through the first two years of school. . . . Comprehension lies in what learners say, what is read to them, and what they read and write; learners should know that all literacy acts involve comprehension. (p. 217).

As teachers, we must be cautious that we are not simplifying literacy tasks for the EAL learner and eliminating or undermining the child’s ability to comprehend.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers can work to support children as English language learners by critically reflecting on their teaching. Teachers need to be thoughtful observers of the child’s current control of language and carefully consider how to extend language learning through the tasks of speaking, reading, and writing. Teachers can encourage the child to make links between the language of the home and the language of the school, English. Teachers should honour the child’s experiences and interests, keeping the development of meaning at the forefront of all literacy activities. Through participation in the tasks of reading and writing, the language learner learns to make sense of his/her world in English. Through observations, actions, and conversation, teachers support and provide opportunities for language learning. Given instruction designed for the individual child, built on a foundation of meaningful exchanges, the EAL child learns to add English to his or her repertoire as a conversationalist, a reader, and a writer. Well stated, in the words of Britton (1970), “Talk is the sea upon which all else floats.”

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### About the Presenter

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