REFEREED ARTICLE

Supporting English Language Learners with Reading Recovery

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Abstract

English language learners (ELLs) need to build competency with the English language quickly, in order to benefit from classroom instruction. Reading Recovery offers theoretical underpinnings which support accelerated language acquisition with valuable applications in a classroom setting. Teachers need to develop language as a meaningful whole, making connections between speaking, reading, and writing. By carefully observing a child's use of language, teachers can design instruction to build on the child's current language strengths. Learning a new language is complex and teachers must support ELLs by providing explicit teaching and massive opportunities to practise speaking, reading, and writing.

Learning to speak, read, and write are complex tasks. In the school setting, language develops through reading, writing, and speaking. During Reading Recovery lessons, most English Language Learners (ELLs) make excellent progress in speaking, reading, and writing (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2007). Understanding the value of the speaking, reading, and writing connection in instruction would better support ELLs in early years classrooms. Reading Recovery procedures develop language as a whole, with explicit connections between reading, writing, and speaking. The theories of emergent literacy, working with whole texts, teaching from the known, and developing language through speaking, reading, and writing would assist ELLs in a classroom setting. ELLs need to be supported in learning and practicing complex literacy tasks.

Emergent Literacy

Language learning does not begin when students enter school. Children learn language from the time they are born and begin noticing the world around them. Whether children enter school with English as a first or an additional language, they have experiences on which to construct new learning (Clay, 2005a). Children have learned that language is a social tool for receiving and sending messages (Halliday, 1994). ELLs have learned spoken language in their mother tongue and have an innate understanding that language is used to communicate.

ELLs come from cultural backgrounds that are likely different from that of the teacher. The more a teacher understands about the home culture and the social groups important to the child, the easier it is to build on language experiences (Wilson, 2001). When teachers make connections between home and school, ELLs are better supported (Chen et al., 2008). In fact, the function of language at both home and school is "to communicate, to understand, and be understood" (Cazden, 1988, p. 76). When teachers make an effort to understand students' home cultures and prior experiences with language, students are better supported in the classroom setting.

Working with Whole Texts

Speaking, reading, and writing are means of delivering or receiving an informative message (Halliday, 1994). When working with ELLs, it might be tempting to teach small components of information in isolation, but the concepts of purpose and message will be lost. Without drawing on prior understandings of language as a means of communication, students lose "motivation to

use such forms in personally meaningful situations" (Jones, 2011, p. 12). As a result, language development slows and students will be reluctant to speak, read, and write.

The Reading Recovery lesson is supported by a framework of work, with whole texts intertwining speaking, reading, and writing. Lessons are built on a framework of whole stories or messages. In every lesson, children read four or five whole books, talk about books, tell their own stories, and write a story. The teacher supports children's use of what they know in reading to help with writing, and what they know in writing to help with reading. Talking, reading, and writing improve when teachers "strengthen children's control over the structures of the language they use" (Clay, 2004, p. 1). A foundation of using whole texts in speaking, reading, and writing promotes understanding of language.

Determining a Child's Control of Language

Teachers need to understand the ELLs' ability to use language in speaking, reading, and writing before they can begin teaching (Manitoba Education, 2011). Reading Recovery teachers use tools and procedures to observe students control of language in reading, writing, and speaking (Kelly, 2009). Classroom teachers might consider gathering evidence of what students can do in one or more of the following ways: the Record of Oral Language task (Clay et al., 2007), the Biks and Gutches task (Clay, 2007), running records of text reading, writing samples, and recording longest utterances. Teachers need to know what each ELL controls, and this knowledge supports further instruction (Alberta Education, 2009).

The Record of Oral Language task is delivered in a one-on-one setting with the child repeating sentences after the teacher. The sentences are graded for difficulty according to language structures. Students requiring additional language experiences can be identified (Clay et al., 2007). The task also indicates which language structures the child uses correctly, or in other words "controls," in speech (Rodriguez-Eagle & Torres-Elias, 2009, p. 56).

The Biks and Gutches task prompts the child to answer to fill in the blanks by predicting what word comes next in the story. The responses are analyzed to see which inflections or word endings the child controls (Clay, 2007). Understanding the inflections a child controls can help the teacher to understand how to support a child to hear, speak, read, and write words with complex endings.

Running records of text reading provide evidence of language that the child controls. The teacher notices vocabulary and structures that are difficult and uses this information to support the learner in continued book reading (Clay, 2002). The running record also indicates whether the book is easy, instructional, or hard. Each child needs practice in reading books that are easy and can be read successfully (Clay, 2005b).

Writing samples collected on a regular basis provide evidence of language learning (Clay, 2005b). Writing is speech recorded in written form. For ELLs, teachers can note changes in sentence construction, tense usage, and clarity of message.

The classroom teacher might keep records of longest utterances produced by ELLs in the regular classroom setting (Clay, 2005a). This record provides evidence of the language structures children control and if noted by the teacher on a regular basis, evidence of growth over time.

Reading Recovery teachers are careful observers of student behaviours; classroom teachers also need to be keen observers of ELLs, in order to provide instruction built on students' language capabilities. Tools can be used to support observation of students' language competencies. The classroom teacher must have a way of observing and recording what ELLs can do, in order to determine what needs to be taught.

Explicit Instruction is Critical

Explicit instruction and high expectations are important for ELLs. Without quality instruction, the risk of ELLs dropping out of school is high (Fien et al., 2011). Teachers can not instruct ELLs as they would instruct children whose first language is English. Teaching ELLs requires specific consideration of "vocabulary and comprehension instruction, academic language instruction, increased practice opportunities through small-group instruction, and peer-assisted learning" (Fien et al., 2011, p. 149). ELLs have literacy needs that must be addressed.

Massive Opportunities for Speaking, Reading, and Writing

Improving language competency requires practice. ELLs require massive amounts of practice with speaking, reading, and writing (Manitoba Education, 2011). It is important to remember that English is a complex language, children make grammatical mistakes, and teachers need to work at understanding the child's message, not correcting speech errors (Rodriguez-Eagle & Torres-Elias, 2009). ELLs may also speak with "the phonology and intonation patterns of their primary language" (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 441). Teachers must work to understand their message and not attempt to correct these differences. ELLs must engage in conversations (Rodriguez-Eagle, 2009), and teachers must plan to provide opportunities for talking. Through continued practice using language, children will learn the rules of how English sounds and how words are put together to make sense (Jones, 2011).

Language Learning in the Classroom

To support ELLs in the classroom, teachers need to consider the language structures that the students currently control. Teachers need to get ELLs to practise new language structures in ways which link speaking, reading, and writing. Teachers need to "get the new phrase or sentence: to the ear (listening), to the mouth (saying), to the eye (reading), and to the written product (creating text)" (Clay, 2004, p. 5). Using one or more of the assessment tools previously mentioned, teachers are ready to make effective teaching decisions.

Speaking Opportunities in the Classroom

ELLs need opportunities to speak in the classroom. Engaging in conversation is oral language instruction that extends vocabulary and grammatical skills (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008). Students need opportunities to participate in meaningful conversations with more "expert" others: teachers, children with English as a first language, volunteers, or anyone whose English language proficiency is stronger than their own. Speaking and hearing language aids language development.

Genuine conversation needs to be guided by an expert. In Reading Recovery, the teacher engages the child in conversations about personal experiences and supports language development by re-phrasing incorrect structures in an acceptable manner for the child to hear (Van Dyke, 2006). Appropriation describes a child's ability to use language that he or she had not previously been able control. Re-structuring the child's words puts the "teacher's language . . . out there for the child's subsequent appropriation if it is the 'just-in-time' language the child needs to be understood" (Van Dyke, 2006). The teacher's language creates a scaffold, which is similar to the mother responding to a young child by continuing the conversation with more expert language structures (McNaughton, 1995).

The classroom needs to be structured so that ELLs have many opportunities to talk with more expert others. For children learning a new language, these opportunities are supported one on one or in small groups. Children might talk about books and share stories that they have written in a partner setting (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Children can be encouraged to work

together to solve problems. Most young children are eager story tellers and, out of necessity, teachers often minimize the length of stories told because time is limited. ELLs must be invited and encouraged to tell stories (Rodriguez-Eagle, 2009). Teachers need to observe conversations carefully and "develop activities that encourage real dialogue between child-child and adult-child" (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 13). ELLs require more opportunities to talk and use language.

Reading Instruction in the Classroom

Reading instruction in the early years classroom typically takes place in a guided reading setting, wherein the teacher works with a small group of students. ELLs can be supported in this setting, but thought needs to be given to book selection, introduction of new vocabulary, and language structures (Rodriguez-Eagle, 2009). Before the child reads a new book, the teacher must provide a supportive introduction by discussing the meaning of the story as a whole, and by considering the problem and solution in addition to new language structures. Although the interaction is social in nature, it is teaching (Clay, 1998). The social aspect of the guided reading setting facilitates language development in ELLs (Iddings et al., 2009).

Careful book selection for ELLs ensures that the text is readable and understandable. By considering children's control of oral language structures, through the Record of Oral Language or notes of the children's longest utterance, the teacher can make a good match between the text and the readers. Teachers must anticipate what will be difficult (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). The closer the grammatical structure of the text is to that of the children's spoken language, the more the children's language structures can help in reading a new book (Kelly, 2009). At the same time, the text needs to "enrich their English vocabularies, help them learn about English language syntax, and understand how texts are structured" (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 437), promoting new language learning. Thoughtful book selection by the teacher ensures children's ability to read and understand the selected story.

The classroom teacher provides a critical link between reading and speaking by providing a thoughtful book introduction. The introduction engages children in conversation before reading a new text, and "helps ELLs become familiar with new concepts, text meaning, and English structures, and fosters their ability to problem-solve as they read new texts" (Kelly, 2009, p. 75). For ELLs, the introduction will likely include hearing and repeating language structures and unusual vocabulary used in the text of the new book, so that the structure can be used in reading (Cazden, 2005). Talking about a new book before reading gives students opportunities to practise speaking the language before reading the language.

Writing Instruction in the Classroom

Writing begins with the children's spoken language; writing is speech recorded in print form. Writing is a complex social activity which is strongly linked to speaking and reading (Harste et al., 1994). Teachers need to encourage complexity, not simplicity, when children record their stories, as complexity fosters language growth. In the classroom, ELLs could orally share their stories with a peer who might confirm, praise, and ask questions, further supporting language development. If ELLs orally rehearse before writing, they will have a way to say what they want to write.

Teachers need to be observant and monitor students' writing to ensure that equivalent complexity is seen when comparing the children's writing to their oral language and reading texts (Rodriguez-Eagle & Torres-Elias, 2009). Retaining the complexity of language is essential if children are to learn the nuances of language (Harste et al., 1994). Given teacher support, ELLs can be successful using advanced language, building a strong foundation for continued language development (Cazden, 1988). The writing of ELLs should match the language of their speech and the language they control in book reading.

In Reading Recovery lessons, teacher and child engage in a conversation that is developed into a story to be written down. Conversation would also support ELLs in the classroom to compose their own stories for writing. The value in the child recording a story that he or she has developed through conversation with the teacher is that "the child can draw upon established speaking competencies" (Clay, 2001, p. 33). "Oral and written language grow and develop in parallel" (Harste et al., 1994, p. 60), increasing the efficiency of language development.

Children's stories in written form provide familiar reading material. Children learn by reading and re-reading their own written messages, which contain language structures and vocabulary that are controlled in speech. ELLs could also share their stories with others (Wilson, 2001), bridging writing with reading and speaking.

Conclusion

ELLs have language learning needs that must be considered when teaching them as readers, writers, and speakers. Reading Recovery teachers need to observe carefully and build on children's current understandings, by keeping texts meaningful: telling whole stories, reading complete books, and writing entire stories. Teaching must be explicit and must consider what children can do and what they need to do next. Reading Recovery teachers are required to provide massive opportunities for speaking, reading, and writing if ELLs are to become confident users of the English language.

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