

# Refining the Craft of Teaching English Language Learners

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Jorge was an English language learner (ELL) in Reading Recovery during the fall of 2008. His classroom teacher and Reading Recovery teacher had many conversations about him. Although he seemed to be communicating fairly well in oral conversations with classmates, the teachers worried about his level of comprehension when reading and writing. Their concern led them to question and research the most-effective ways to help him accelerate in literacy while continuing to foster his growing knowledge of speaking English. As a result, Jorge successfully completed his Reading Recovery lessons at the average reading and writing levels as his first-grade peers. His teacher proudly shared his final composition with her colleagues.

Jorge wrote her a short note that simply said, "Thank you for helping me. Now I can read the books my friends read. I love all the books!"

Stories such as that one are the inspiration we need to continue our work with Reading Recovery students. We know the power of the individualized instruction and, most importantly, the long-lasting impact it has on leading students on the path to literacy success.

However, we always have students who puzzle us more than others. Students who are English language learners often fall into that category. Who are these students? How can we identify and address their levels

of language development? How do we specially design our instruction to most quickly and effectively address their needs? In this article, we will discuss these questions as well as explore specific ways to analyze and reflect on lesson records to help teachers begin to more deeply understand ELLs in Reading Recovery.

## Foundational Background

English language learner is the term currently used to describe students who are speakers of other languages and whose second language is English. This group of students represents a large and growing number of the U.S. student population at the elementary school level. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are over 5 million English

language learners in the United States; a number that has risen 57% over the past 10 years. The proportion of ELLs in grades PK–third, or the early elementary years, is much higher than in other grade levels (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2007).

It is important to consider that ELLs are not only learning English but are also learning in a second language; that is, ELLs are trying to master academic skills, including initial literacy, in a language in which they do not have full proficiency yet. Many ELLs may acquire basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) or basic social English language proficiency, the level of proficiency needed for social communication, in a couple of years. The cognitive academic lan-



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guage proficiency (CALP) level of English language proficiency needed in order to be successful in school, however, takes 5 to 7 years to develop (Cummins, 1987).

In addition to the challenges that learning in a second language may present, ELLs often have additional challenges to face. Nearly 6 in 10 ELLs qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Eighth-grade ELL scores are less than half than those of their English-speaking peers in tests of reading and mathematics. Students from households which speak a language other than English at home lag 20 points behind in high school completion rates.

Research shows that students who struggle with early literacy are very likely to continue to have difficulty in school. Students reading below grade level are likely to be retained one or more times during their school years. These retention patterns may have negative consequences for their academic achievement and may even result in school failure (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1993). The majority of high school dropouts can be predicted by their early literacy problems (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Therefore, it is critical for ELLs who are struggling with early literacy to receive intervention as soon as possible because without additional support, their chances to graduate from high school are uncertain.

Considering the alarming dropout rates of ELLs, it is imperative that educators identify and implement successful practices to support this group of students early in their development. There are a number of studies indicating that academic achievement gaps found in the lit-

eracy progress of ELLs may be prevented or diminished when students have the opportunity to participate in effective supplemental early literacy intervention (Escamilla et al., 1998; Cheung & Slavin, 2005).

Supplemental early literacy intervention is an effective instructional response for students who struggle with reading and writing. Reading Recovery is an early literacy intervention that offers one-to-one supplemental tutoring support to students struggling with initial reading and writing. While there is evidence that demonstrates that Reading Recovery is effective with English language learners (Kelly et al., 2008; Ashdown & Simic, 2000), Reading Recovery professionals are always seeking ways to better-serve their students by deepening their understandings and refining their craft.

Reading Recovery teachers understand that literacy is a complex and constructive activity. They also understand that reading and writing are reciprocal, and that oral language is critical to literacy. Reading Recovery teachers scaffold their interactions with students in a way that provides the individualized support that ELLs need in order to learn how to read and write.

Decades of research indicate that students who are learning to read and write benefit from early literacy instruction in their native language (Kroll, 1990). A child with a strong literacy foundation in the native language will be able to transfer many skills to the second language (Clay, 1993). If knowledge is effectively and strongly developed in the native language, then it can be efficiently transferred to a second language (Saville-Troike, 1977). Literacy and

academic proficiency in the first language foster conceptual and academic growth. This, in turn, facilitates literacy acquisition and academic achievement in the second language (Cummins, 1987, 2004; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2001).

Descubriendo la Lectura® (DLL) is the Spanish reconstruction of Reading Recovery. It is a supplemental early literacy intervention in Spanish for students who struggle with beginning reading and who are receiving instruction in their native language. DLL takes into account the unique characteristics of the Spanish language. It is a response that is currently provided by a number of school districts in the United States to Spanish-speaking first graders in bilingual education programs. Achievement gaps found in the literacy progress of minority students, particularly ELLs, may be prevented or diminished when students have the opportunity to participate in effective supplemental early literacy intervention in their native language (Escamilla et al., 1998).

Initial reading instruction in the native language, however, is not always possible due to limitations in terms of human resources. If native-language instruction is not available, it becomes critical that teachers understand second-language acquisition theory and take into consideration best practices related to ELLs as they work with this group of students.

## Language Development

One of the most important principles to keep in mind is that language acquisition is developmental. ELLs go through predictable and sequential stages of language development

(Krashen, 1996). These stages have been identified from the body of second-language acquisition research and are described in Figure 1.

Typically, it takes 5 to 7 years to reach the advanced language proficiency level of language acquisition. The first step in preparing Reading Recovery instruction with ELLs is to learn at which stage the student is currently operating.

## Language Proficiency Measures

School districts often provide standardized tests that assess a student's language competency, but in absence of this data the NDEC (now IDEC, International Data Evaluation Center) Rubric for Oral English Language Fluency provides Reading

Recovery teachers with a convenient and easy way to gather information during natural and informal conversation; information that will assist them in identifying the current stage of language development of their students. Teachers would simply jot down examples of the students' utterances and analyze them according to the descriptors and examples provided in the rubric. A conversation with the student's classroom teacher will be helpful in confirming the results.

The Record of Oral Language (Clay et al., 1983, 2007) is another helpful tool to observe and assess a child's control over oral language. It allows teachers to think about children on three levels of complexity in terms of their construction of spoken sentences: (a) children who operate on simple structures, (b) children

who can work on average-for-age structures, and (c) children who can compose complex literary structures. This information is extremely useful in planning writing and reading interactions.

While language acquisition is developmental, it can be fostered through mediated interactions with expert tutors. Reading Recovery teachers who understand language acquisition are able to recognize the learner's current language acquisition stage and, at the same time, are able to support and scaffold instruction so that students can reach the next stage.

Another important principle of second-language instruction is Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 1981). This premise suggests that students acquire language

**Figure 1. Predictable and Sequential Stages of Language Development**

Language Acquisition Stage	Characteristics of Students in This Stage
Silent/Receptive/Preproduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand very little English or may have a very limited receptive vocabulary</li> <li>• are not comfortable speaking and may use strategies such as pointing, or use actions and body gestures to make themselves understood</li> <li>• should not be forced to speak</li> </ul>
Early Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• usually have developed a limited vocabulary that they are able to understand and use to meet basic needs</li> <li>• are able to use isolated words and expressions with one or two words</li> <li>• able to understand oral language in varying degrees but unable to use English for effective communication</li> </ul>
Speech Emergence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are able to use short phrases and fragmented or very simple sentences to communicate</li> <li>• may be able to ask simple questions and begin to use dialogue, but their sentences will often include grammatical errors and words in their native language</li> </ul>
Intermediate Language Proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are able to develop longer and more-complex and coherent sentences</li> <li>• control more-sophisticated syntactic structures</li> </ul>
Advanced Language Proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are fluent speakers who can use language with comparable competency to that of native speakers of the same age</li> <li>• have developed some academic language related to the content areas such as social studies, mathematics, and science</li> <li>• may still benefit from additional support</li> </ul>



by receiving input that is just a little beyond their current competency. This principle goes hand-in-hand with the scaffolding needed for effective Reading Recovery interactions. Children construct their understandings about the world through the use of language. The connection between language, cognition, and code awareness is critical to the learning of reading and writing. ELLs acquire language when they are able to understand it. Language instruction should be founded on providing learners with messages they understand (Krashen, 2000; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1992).

### Planning Instruction

Drawing on this principle, Reading Recovery teachers can design lessons that increase comprehensibility by including demonstrations, visuals, nonverbal cues or gestures, even include hands-on activities and concrete objects or realia during the conversations prior to the writing portion of the lesson. The conversations before, during, and after reading and writing in lessons provide additional opportunities for these interactions. Book introductions are excellent opportunities to scaffold academic vocabulary by introducing and rehearsing words that may become tricky during the reading of a story.

Writing interactions during Reading Recovery lessons are similar to the language experience approach strategy that is so effective with ELLs. In the language experience approach, students and teachers engage in an experience or conversation that is meaningful and authentic. Then the student dictates or writes the story with the support of the teacher, and it becomes a message that the student can read.

If we harness the established power of children's oral language to literacy learning from the beginning, so that literacy knowledge and oral language processing power move forward together, linked and patterned from the start, that will surely be more powerful. (Clay, 2001, p. 95)

The theoretical foundation and format of Reading Recovery lessons allow teachers to analyze the child's competencies by gathering anecdotal notes during lessons, reflecting upon that information, and carefully designing the next interaction to scaffold and support the child's current repertoire and at the same time foster growth and acceleration in both language and literacy.

### Reading

As discussed previously, the Record of Oral Language can be used as a starting point for understanding the child's competencies with regards to what language structures the child controls, or partially controls. Taking time to use that assessment as we begin to work with the student will guide how we interact with the child, both in conversation and when selecting texts.

Choosing books that offer appropriate challenge while still being manageable for the child is an important step to making the most out of the reading portions of the Reading Recovery lesson. The following questions adapted from Anderson (2004) and Clay (2005) help guide book selection:

Does the book

- use language structures that match the child's level of oral proficiency, becoming more complex over time?

- have a story based on the child's personal knowledge or experience?
- use language structures that the child has had the opportunity to write?
- support strategic literacy development?
- have sufficient text on which the child can engage in problem solving?
- have sufficient text on which the child can practice fluent reading?
- represent ethnic, cultural, and language diversity in a way that values all persons?

Will the book

- help establish new competencies?
- be interesting/enjoyable to the child?
- ensure a successful experience for the child?

Consider the following examples. What elements might make them easier or harder for language learners?

Example 1

*All by Myself*

(Mercer Mayer, Level 8)

Text:

I can look after  
my little sister.

A child might predict 'I can look *at*' rather than being prepared for the more unusual structure of 'I can look *after*.' The meaning of the phrase *look after* would require discussion during the book introduction.





*Reading Recovery teacher Yvette Arellano introduces Elias to a new book during a lesson in Rio Rancho, New Mexico. Book introductions are excellent opportunities to scaffold academic vocabulary by introducing and rehearsing words that may become tricky during the reading of a story.*

## Example 2

*Whose Mouse Are You?*

(Robert Kraus, Level 13)

Text:

Wish for a brother as I have none.

Students would be towards the end of the lesson series before they would encounter this Level 13 book.

However, it would still be important that they are adequately prepared for the unusual literary structure of the book.

Additionally, at each of the text levels, there are books that contain idiomatic expressions that English language learners might have difficulty translating.

Think about these phrases found in some of the little books:

He was fed up.

Mom dressed the turkey  
on Thanksgiving.

A picture is worth a thousand  
words.

Carefully reviewing the books and considering what parts might require more explanation during the book introduction leads to a more successful first reading for the ELL student. While this might require more time initially, teachers become more proficient at careful analysis the more it is practiced.

While it is important that students have the opportunity to read texts for enjoyment, we can also look at this part of the lesson as a time to engage in genuine conversations with

the ELL student around the books. These are books that they have had multiple opportunities to practice, so we are able to discuss the meaning with more depth. It is also a time for the teacher to work on phrasing, expression, and fluency. Demonstration is an excellent way for ELLs to hear how the reading should sound.

It is critical that we do not dwell on item knowledge that focuses on making sure each word was read correctly. Rather, we want to engage in conversation that will further develop oral language, support comprehension, and work on strategic learning that will have more generative power.

Even the teaching points following the running record should be a time that we are considering how to interact with the ELL student. We do not want to overwhelm the student with too many things to work on at once. We have to remember they are working to understand the language we are speaking while also learning about how to read and write. Clay asks to have “echoes across the lesson” — that is, to identify our teaching focus for the complete lesson and let that be our emphasis throughout the 30-minute time. Consider the child’s strengths and weaknesses. Where are the one or two places that need to be addressed to help the child take the next step to being a successful reader and writer? Perhaps the child is focusing only on visual information, trying to phonetically work through words and neglecting meaning. Prompting should address the strength as well as encourage the new strategy to emerge, “I like how you are thinking about how that word looks to help you at tricky spots. Make sure you also think about what would make sense with the story.” The first few times you

use prompts such as that one, make sure to provide some examples from the book to clarify what you mean. We cannot assume they'll understand what will 'make sense.'

Simply engaging in conversation around the running record book, allowing more time for developing language, will aid in building comprehension. Again, demonstrating how the reading should sound is also appropriate. The teaching focus you have set for the lesson should be the guide for this interaction.

Book introductions must be carefully planned to make the book accessible for the ELL student. The amount of support you provide before the reading should shift throughout the lesson series. That does not mean that you will give less of an introduction later in the lesson series. Both the type of text being introduced and the child's prior experience with the genre or the story's concepts need to be considered when planning how supportive we will need to be when orienting the child to the new book. Questions that are helpful to the planning of book introductions include the following:

1. What is the child's prior knowledge and/or experience with the plot of this story?
2. How can I concisely describe the overall plot of this story?
3. How many books has s/he read from this genre?
4. What structures are new or partially known?
5. Are there some structures I will ask him/her to repeat?
6. What are the new vocabulary words I need to explicitly address?

7. Are there sufficient known words in this text that will support his/her success during the initial reading?

8. Are there any idioms the are new/different language I want to explicitly address?

Examine the following transcript of a book introduction to *The Photo Book*. Note the conversational manner in which the teacher accesses prior knowledge and includes information about the meaning, structure, and new vocabulary words. This is not a one-sided conversation. Each statement or question the teacher shares with the child is intentionally used to help the child be successful during the first reading of the new book. The teacher's intent of each state-

ment is shown in italics through the transcript.

Teacher: Do you have photos of your family at home? *Schema*

Child: Like pictures?

Teacher: Yes, pictures. In this book they are called photos. You say that. *Vocabulary*

Child: photos

Teacher: Do you have those photos in a book? *Schema*

Child: Some of them.

Teacher: Well, in this story we are looking at a family's photo book. The whole family is in the photo book. Look. Mom is in the book. You say that. *Meaning, Structure*



*We do not want to lower our expectations for ELL students. Rather, we want to make sure that the level of complexity in their writing matches well with their oral language abilities and the level of texts they are successfully reading.*

Child: Mom is in the book.

Teacher: Write 'here' (a known word in the child's writing vocabulary). *Connecting known word in writing to help him in reading*

Child: writes 'here'

Teacher: Show me that word on this page, and this page. Good job! Look, even Teddy Bear is in the book. Where does it say Teddy Bear? *Structure, Visual*

Child: points to 'Teddy Bear'

Teacher: That's funny—Teddy Bear is in the book, too! *Planting structure*

Occasionally recording our own book introductions and reflecting on the balance between the teacher and child contribution is a good way to monitor ourselves. We need to make sure we are providing adequate opportunities for the child to engage in oral language development through genuine conversations that are being expertly led by the teacher.

## Writing

Often, teachers discuss the difficulty they encounter when trying to generate conversations with their students who are reluctant to speak. Clay reminds us:

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, difficult though it is.  
(Clay, 1991, p. 69)

Yes, it is difficult. But we must not deny our ELL students this critical

opportunity to develop oral language. This is a key part of the lesson that has big payoffs in reading, writing, and language development.

Earlier we discussed the possibility of including demonstrations, visuals, nonverbal cues or gestures, hands-on activities, and concrete objects or realia during this time to help with generating conversations. While this isn't something you would do with every Reading Recovery student, it would certainly be understandable to try it with those who are just learning English. Working within the child's known structures and discussing a topic that has meaning for him is another way to encourage his participation. Focus on a shared experience between yourself and the student. What book has been recently read? What was his favorite part? Which character did he like the most? Why? Discuss something that is happening in the classroom, a project or a field trip you know he enjoyed. This is time for a back-and-forth exchange, not a time to play '20 Questions.' As early as lesson one in *Roaming Around the Known*, you are establishing trust with the student and helping him feel comfortable to share with you, even if his language is not structurally accurate. We must continue building on that trust and work to accept students' attempts and honor their approximations.

Our efforts should never make him reluctant to offer up his ungrammatical but expressive attempts to construct sentences. As we talk with a child he revises and refines his language, experimenting making funny errors but gaining all the while in control over the expressiveness and the complexity of the language. (Clay, 1991, p. 69)

This is a reminder to us to allow the grammatical mistakes to happen and to instead focus on the message the child is trying to convey. Those errors will become fewer the more opportunity the child has to engage in genuine conversations and to interact with increasingly more-difficult text.

As you are reflecting on the conversation think about these questions:

- How much talk are you doing and how much talk is the child doing?
- How many questions do you ask that you already know the answer?
- How much time do you give for the student to respond?
- How do you show the child you are listening through verbal and nonverbal messages?
- Is the child asking any questions?
- How do you elicit, extend, and elaborate the child's language while validating the construction of meaning?

Look at the following conversation transcript. Think about how the teacher is working to involve the child in a genuine exchange. When do you see a shift in the child's level of contribution? What do you think might have led to that shift?

Teacher: So, you really like that book called *My Dog Willy* don't you?

Child: Yea.

Teacher: Why do you like it? Do you have a dog?

Child: No.

Teacher: Willy sure is silly, isn't he?



Child: Yea.

Teacher: I have to show this picture I have of my dog, Boss. My little baby just jumps all over him. It is so funny!

Child: He's cute.

Teacher: I know! Look at that long tail.

Child: My cousin's dog fur has brown like that.

Teacher: Really?

Child: His name is Gordo and I always can't wait to see him when I go to Houston.

Teacher: Wow! I love hearing about Gordo! Let's write that!

As we discussed with the book introductions, sometimes it is helpful to record and reflect on your conversations prior to writing. It is hard work to pinpoint a topic that will get the child involved, but we must keep trying. By reading the beginning of the conversation above, we never could have predicted the story that the child ultimately produced.

We are always working to negotiate accurate structures that increase in difficulty and complexity as we progress in the lesson series. We do not want to lower our expectations for ELLs. Rather, we want to make sure that the level of complexity in their writing matches well with their oral language abilities and the level of texts they are successfully reading. If you studied your students latest books being read and compared them to the stories being produced, is there a match? In other words, are they producing similar structures, addressing different audiences, writing for a variety of purposes?

**Figure 2. Shifting Roles During the Lesson Series**

Time in Lessons	Teacher	Child
Early	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shares</li><li>• Creates opportunities</li><li>• Scaffolds</li><li>• Anticipates</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attempts</li><li>• Predicts</li><li>• Articulates</li><li>• Initiates</li></ul>
Mid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reminds</li><li>• Prompts</li><li>• Facilitates</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gradual takeover</li></ul>
Late	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Monitors</li><li>• Anticipates</li><li>• Prompts</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Independence</li><li>• Control</li><li>• Solves</li><li>• Strategies</li></ul>

## Change Across Time

You have probably heard the interactions between the teacher and child in a Reading Recovery lesson be described as a 'dance.' Sometimes the teacher is leading and sometimes the child is leading. As the lesson series progresses, we expect that the child is more in the lead and the teacher is expertly facilitating while serving more in the observer role.

Look at Figure 2 and think more about our shifting role throughout the 12- to 20-week lesson series.

ELL students might not follow through these roles smoothly. It can be expected that as they are moving into higher text levels with more-complex structures and stories, we will need to provide more support and be more in control. Monitoring and reflecting on our teaching will help us to make sure we are providing just the appropriate balance between more and less support.

## Conclusion

*The pedagogical clocks for students who are behind in reading and literacy development continue to tick mercilessly, and the opportunities for these students to advance or catch up diminish over time.*

— Kameenui & Simmons (1998), p. 27

There are many aspects to consider when planning and implementing lessons for English language learners. The challenge is sometimes daunting. However, Reading Recovery teachers are prepared for the challenge. We recognize the urgency in addressing our students' needs early in their academic careers. It is only through our intensive intervention that we can make significant progress and help lead all of our students to successful literate futures.

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