Serving English Language Minority Children in Reading Recovery

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Students in Oakland, California have been served by Reading Recovery for seven years. Oakland is a large, multi-ethnic city in northern California and has a significant percentage of elementary students who are English language learners (ELL). Mostly, Oakland’s ELL pupils are Hispanic and Asian-American; in addition, the school district has a large African-American population, many of whom speak African-American English at home and in their community. Since these groups make up the majority of Oakland’s first-grade students, they also comprise the majority of students served by Reading Recovery.

To address the special needs of ELL students, our teachers needed to develop understandings in two areas. First, we needed to know the strengths that these children brought to school in terms of their rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Second, we had to know how to help them learn to use the syntax and visual information in English in order to self-monitor, cross-check, search, and self-correct their reading—in other words, to build a self-extending system. As Oakland Reading Recovery teachers worked with ELL children over the years, we developed some principles for improving our instruction of these children in order to achieve these understandings. Here, I share the principles that we developed to better serve our ELL Reading Recovery children. These principles serve to guide our service to ELL children, and they also assure that our practice conforms to the standards and guidelines of RRCNA.

Serve any child who needs the individual early intervention.

A core belief of Reading Recovery is that all children can learn. One of the keys to building a successful program for language minority students is a commitment to this premise in order to enable children to attain a high level of academic achievement. We anticipate that our students, who begin first grade without having achieved the emergent reading and writing behaviors that their classmates have well underway, will accelerate to the level of their peers and become successful first-grade readers and writers.

I am aware that sometimes we are urged not to take a particular student into the program because of such factors as low oral language or no home support or few early experiences. However, our experience with language minority students in Oakland has indicated that these conditions are often not as true as they are believed to be. For instance, we may observe the low oral language child speaking quite fluently in their first language with their family or with other children on the school playground. As Clay (1991) states, “The young child’s ability to communicate is well-developed and has allowed him to construct a good control of the mother tongue by the time he enters school. In particular he has learned how to learn language” (p. 26).

If the child controls home language and enough English to understand the directions to be administered An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993a), then the child can benefit from the intensive, individual instruction of Reading Recovery. (This is the accepted criterion for selecting ELL children into Reading Recovery; see Standards and Guidelines of the Reading Recovery Council of North America.)

Similarly, investigation into a situation of no home support or few early experiences often reveals the facts to be different. Parents of ELL children want very much for their children to succeed in school, but they may be unfamiliar with what is expected of them to support their child’s learning at home. They may need explicit, perhaps repeated, guidance from...
us—and sometimes a translator—to acquire the habit of ensuring that their child reads a familiar book at home and reconstructs the cut-up story from that day's lesson. We may also need to take the extra step of using older siblings, cousins, or cross-age tutors to help with these daily activities.

Children with few early experiences in fact may have rich home and community experiences, but their experiences may be very different from those of mainstream-culture children. As we get to know our language minority students through daily conversations, their experiences can become a wealth of subject matter for daily writing and can be related to the leveled books they are reading.

So in Reading Recovery, we would do well to never be persuaded that a particular child will not benefit from our help because of that child's previous history. From the first Roaming Around the Known session, we must carefully observe the strengths of the ELL child—which includes a unique life history thus far—in order to help in the child's quest to learn how to read and write.

**Foster orality and verbal expressiveness.**

The Reading Recovery lesson is intended to be a conversation between the teacher and the child in which the teacher demonstrates problem-solving strategies and scaffolds the child to use these strategies independently. Before this can be done, however, the teacher must get to know the child as a unique person and establish a caring relationship with the child. This can be accomplished through the daily conversations that occur on the way to, during, and after the lesson. A wide range of topics including family experiences, personal interests, and school events may be the focus of these conversations; sometimes a child's interest or experience is related to a book that has been read. In addition, conversations can be a sharing of experiences so that what occurs in school is related to the child's real world.

A particularly essential time in the lesson for authentic conversation is before story writing; this is a time when the teacher and child can share an experience that leads to the child's composing that day's story. In these daily conversations, the use of oral expression to carry meanings and feelings characterizes the instructional interaction. Reading Recovery teachers can build a knowledge base on which to hold these conversations through discovering the child's interests by observing the child in other settings and by talking to the child's family members and classroom teacher. By fostering children's participation in conversation, Reading Recovery teachers show respect for the ability of ELL children to express themselves orally and as fluently as possible.

For students who are reluctant to express themselves orally, teachers can encourage them to take risks little by little in daily conversations. Teachers sometimes feel discouraged when working with a child who seems reticent to contribute to the conversation. But Clay (1991) 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. (p. 69) Teachers of ELL children may want to become familiar with the natural stages of language development in order to recognize the types of sentence structures that children are producing. Also, administering the Record of Oral Language (Clay, 1983) will help teachers become more aware of various structures and how they differ in complexity.

A final suggestion is that Reading Recovery teachers become as familiar as possible with the history and culture of the language minority children they teach so that such information can be infused into daily conversations as appropriate; also, in this way, teachers come to understand the ELL children they teach as part of larger cultural communities.

**Capitalize on Roaming Around the Known.**

A major goal of Roaming Around the Known at the beginning of a child's program is to firm up what the child knows about reading and writing—to make what the child knows secure through practice in a variety of ways. This is the time when children are encouraged to become active constructors and practitioners of literacy tasks; for ELL children, this time is especially important as we work to give them opportunities to become active with literacy activities in English.

Finding or creating simple texts and co-writing simple stories based on the child's experiences and interests will invite the child to become aware of what is known and how to use this knowledge in different situations. Because we have greater leeway in Roaming Around the Known related to both activities and materials, this is
an ideal time to introduce the child to poems, chants, and other repetitive and rhyming stories. The child can hear and repeat rhyming verses and even add their own rhymes. These recitations may lead to an increased ability to hear and record English sounds in words and to developing an ear for similar word parts in words. Moreover, the use of poems and rhymes will be an enjoyable part of a child’s listening and reading experience.

Of course, the focus of Roaming Around the Known sessions always remains on actively engaging the child in literacy activities—on enabling the child to feel like a reader and writer. By basing our Roaming Around the Known activities on an understanding of the individual child’s background and strengths and encouraging the child to be our partner in carrying out simple reading and writing experiences, “you will probably notice some things emerging that you did not think the child knew. New and useful behaviors appear as he begins to relate things one to another” (Clay, 1993b, p. 13).

**Respect ELL students’ abilities in speaking, reading, and writing.**

In their work with ELL children, Reading Recovery teachers need to respect the language the children bring and not criticize them for using it, since “it is an intimate possession, understood by loved ones. It reflects their membership of a particular speech group and identifies them with that group” (Clay, 1991, p. 71).

Because Reading Recovery teachers teach much of the time through modeling, in our daily conversations with the ELL child we model and respond in standard English to what the child has said. When the child reads from a variety of little books, we teach for gradual control of looking to ensure that the student comes to recognize and use visual cues for word endings and verb forms (since they may not be able to use structure cues for this purpose). We directly teach these word elements and show the child how to look for them when reading texts. However, when a specific student controls these visual text features, we are not overly concerned if a few of these features are omitted in fluent and meaningful reading of the text, as it is the student’s overall literacy processing system that remains the instructional focus.

Daily story writing is another area in which Reading Recovery teachers show respect for the child’s use of language. At the beginning of a child’s program, we accept whatever the child wants to write, even if it is not expressed in standard English. This is because the story expressed in the child’s own words will be more meaningful, and it will be composed and reread more easily. As the child progresses in lessons, we point out that in writing, a phrase is expressed this way in English and support the child in writing the story in standard English. Again, this must be done without making the child feel that their current language use is wrong or incorrect.

Finally, I believe Reading Recovery teachers would do well to learn about the forms and features of English commonly confused by various language groups (the sounds of /e/ and /i/ for Spanish speakers, for example) as they acquire control over oral English. This information is contained in the work of such researchers as Krashen (1981) and
Cummins (1986 & 2000) and will provide a much deeper understanding of the challenges English poses for ELL children.

Find and use books reflective of English language learner themes and values.

To better work with ELL children in Reading Recovery, teachers need to use a variety of leveled books that contain characters, themes, and values reflecting the experiences of these students. Using books that reflect these experiences will encourage more interest in reading, allow greater use of semantic cues, and provide rich topics for writing.

The need for culturally diverse books is becoming more recognized by publishers, but being able to provide an ideal variety of books for ELL children is still very difficult. Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders may want to explore the series that are available currently and look for publishers that are printing appropriate books. In Oakland, we observed that our ELL children enjoyed and benefited from books that showed illustrations and reflected situations that mirrored their own lives.

Also, in early lessons, Reading Recovery teachers would do well to select books based on oral English structures of which the child currently is demonstrating control. Books with natural or oral language structures that are already under control allow the child to use syntactic cues to monitor their reading even though they have not yet attained full mastery of oral English. In later lessons with higher-level texts containing complex or idiomatic expressions unknown to the child, we must explicitly explain and model the use of these expressions.

Many English language learners entered Oakland’s Reading Recovery program with linguistic and cultural experiences very different from our own early experiences. Clearly, we needed to gain as deep an understanding as we could of their lives outside of school. From this understanding, we could see the many strengths they brought to the learning situation in terms of familial and cultural values and a rich primary language. We needed to begin our instruction with a sincere respect for their culture, values, and language.

As children progressed, we needed to constantly observe and analyze their increasing control over oral as well as written English so that we could design each part of the daily lesson with their current strengths and needs in mind. Using the guidelines I have discussed here, we found that our language minority children were able to become successful first-grade readers and writers and to function increasingly competently in their classroom, school, and larger community.

References


