

Building the Literacy Triangle for English Language Learners: Reading Recovery, the Classroom, and the Home

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A rich orientation before each new book allows the child to focus on meaning as well as hear and repeat difficult language structures in the story. Here, Mary Borba works with one of her students who is an English language learner.

While we have learned a great deal about literacy and instruction over the past decade, the gap in the academic achievement between English speakers and English language learners continues to be a concern for educators, parents, and legislators. The best approaches for instructing these students is a topic of debate among policy makers. Even in 2004, immigrant children are marginalized in some classrooms as their teachers wait until they have enough English for literacy instruction. Other children are more fortunate to be placed with teachers who understand the negative consequences of waiting. These students need megadoses of quality instruction

if the achievement gap between them and their fluent English-speaking peers is to close.

Studies have shown that school success can be increased for English language learners with Reading Recovery instruction (Ashdown & Simic, 2000). Reading Recovery is an early intervention program designed to supplement classroom instruction for struggling first graders learning to read and write. In a recent research study in New York by Ashdown and Simic (2000), 25,601 first-grade students who received Reading Recovery instruction were studied from 1992 to 1998. Forty-six percent of these stu-

dents were English language learners, and 74% of them successfully completed the program compared to 75% of English-only students. Neal and Kelly's study (1999) in California collected data from 1993 to 1996 to determine if there was a difference between the success of English language learners and English-only students in Reading Recovery. They found that 72% of the English language learners successfully completed the program within a mean of 67 lessons. Seventy-five percent of the English-only students successfully completed the program within a mean of 63 lessons. Reading Recovery instruction reduced the gap between these two groups of students in similar timeframes.

The success of students in Reading Recovery is further strengthened when the Reading Recovery teacher, the classroom teacher, and parents work together to assist and support the child with similar approaches and understandings. This article will address the factors that build a literacy triangle—the home, classroom, and Reading Recovery—that leads to even more successful learning for English language learners who receive Reading Recovery instruction. Specific suggestions will be given for each component of the triangle for teachers to consider. Many of these suggestions

are based on my experiences as a teacher in a bilingual program for 14 years and as a Reading Recovery teacher of many English language learners for the past 11 years.

The Home

Parents powerfully influence the literacy development of their children. Most parents take a strong interest in what happens to their children in schools (Au, 2002). Some parents are better equipped than others to demonstrate their interest in the education of their children. Many immigrant parents have difficulty connecting with the school because they do not speak English, and others are often reluctant because of their own negative school experiences. Educators have the responsibility to seek communication and support from parents and families.

In low-income immigrant families, parents may find it difficult to nurture their children fully because the immigrant experience often takes an immense amount of family energy.

Loving, secure relationships with parents are important for children's integration of inner and outer selves. Igoa (1995) discusses this integration and the importance of the school recognizing the home culture and helping family relationships. "What happens when children sense their parents' insecurity, struggle for survival, and inability to find time or if they think the parents' values are inferior to those of the new environment?" (p. 46). Honoring the child's home language and culture contributes to the child's self-image and inner integration.

Igoa (1995) further emphasizes

it is crucial to help the immigrant child cope with pressures to replace rather than supplement his or her native language and culture. The child who responds to the unconscious monocultural attitudes is in danger of overidentifying with the new culture and sabotaging his or her own important roots (p. 131).

If immigrant children are not encouraged to maintain their primary language and culture while learning English, they will come to regret its loss later in life.

It is vital for the school to encourage parents to participate in the school life of the child. The extra step in arranging for translators to send parents letters, reports, and notices in their home language help to build rapport and welcome families to the school (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995). These school actions communicate the message that the home language and culture is important and valued.

An early home visit or parent conference with the Reading Recovery teacher and classroom teacher communicates the importance of the parents' role in the literacy triangle. When meeting with parents, teachers can value what parents have to share about their child and home culture by listening more and talking less. The knowledge gained can be useful in nurturing the child and creating a stronger bond that facilitates teaching and learning. Additionally, information gained in these encounters can guide conversations during Reading Recovery instruction that lead to interesting writing opportunities for the child. When parents have been allowed to share first in a conference, they feel validated and are more willing to listen to the teacher. But when a teacher cannot communicate in the parents' language, a translator is necessary. If one is not available in the school, there are community members who are often willing to volunteer as translators. Often family members are willing to accompany parents to serve as translators, as well.

Regular communication with notes and telephone calls keeps families



Turlock Joint Elementary School has many immigrant families. At each continuing contact session, Reading Recovery teachers spend time learning more about working with English language learners.

involved and informed. Scheduling an appointment for an observation of a Reading Recovery lesson allows parents inside the program so that they have a better understanding of how Reading Recovery teachers provide instruction; it also allows them to view firsthand what a positive experience it is for their child. If this is not possible, sending home a videotape or audiotape of a lesson with the child for the family to view or listen to can also be helpful and very affirming for the child.

Scheduling meetings, conferences, or observations for parents may need to be at the end of the school day or even on a Saturday morning. Many immigrant families cannot take time from their work during the school day for such encounters. Giving up one Saturday morning to have each of the Reading Recovery parents come to school to observe their children in a half-hour lesson with the Reading Recovery teacher will have great payoff.

Even when parents do not speak English, there is much they can do to support their children's academic achievement in English. Parents need to understand that primary language instruction assists children in building a cognitive foundation for subsequent instruction. By providing books in the primary language for parents to share with children at home, the family's role is affirmed in promoting cognitive growth.

Many research studies have found that cognitive and academic development in the first language has an extremely important and positive effect on second language schooling (Collier, 1995). Skills developed in the first language are easily transferred and are

crucial to academic success in the second language, according to Collier. She suggests that "the key to understanding the role of the first language in academic development of second language is to understand the function of uninterrupted cognitive development" (p. 14). When parents and children speak the language they know best, they are working at their level of cognitive maturity. When native language instruction is not available in the classroom, teachers need to find other ways of promoting cognitive development in the first language. Library books sent home for parents to read to their children in their primary language and conversation developed around the story promote cognitive development. Videotaped and audiotaped books are also a source of language input which can stimulate rich talk.

Igoa (1995) sheds insight into possible reasons why poor immigrant parents may not seek to become involved in schools. She reports, "When a child (family) is uprooted from all signs of the familiar and is transported to an unfamiliar foreign land, he or she may experience some degree of shock" (p. 39). Immigrant parents are uncomfortable because their language, culture, and status are different from the school's. These families may be poor financially; however, they have many riches to share with the school. Their riches may come from other sources that are even more important than material goods. Teachers operate from middle-class norms, and our understanding of the immigrant student's language and culture can help lessen the frustration and blame that is sometimes imposed on families who are different from our own.

The Classroom

A stronger sense of shared responsibility needs to be a part of schools so that all children are well served. This will not happen in schools where classroom teachers and Reading Recovery teachers share little knowledge of each other's instructional practices. When two teachers working with the same child know little about how they teach, the child has more difficulty moving between two entirely different instructional environments (Allington, 2001).

Children enter school with many feelings of insecurity in their strange new environment. Add to this the limited knowledge of the classroom language and culture for an English language learner, and a child may become overwhelmed (Krashen, 1992). High levels of stress and anxiety impede second language learning. When students have a positive self-image and are confident, they acquire English easier and excel academically. Clay (1994) advocates for a relaxed and accepting classroom environment that promotes more learning. "Security, self-confidence, acceptance, and a sense of belonging are foundational for attitudes that encourage participation in effective learning experiences. Happy, relaxed, stimulating relationships among children and between child and teacher promote growth and personality which in turn advances achievement" (p. 40). Fears and anxieties hinder learning, and once children feel at home in the classroom, they are more prepared to learn.

Classroom teachers and Reading Recovery teachers need critical understandings about English language learning and second language acquisition. The process of learning any lan-

guage is not a linear one, but more like a zigzag process.

Language instruction is best taught indirectly through use. Students are encouraged to understand messages in English and to use the language for real purposes. Lessons that emphasize specific aspects of language make it more difficult to learn (Collier, 1995). Children need opportunities for social interaction and the necessity to use the new language even if imperfectly. Typically it takes 2 to 5 years for children to develop proficiency in social English—the language typically heard on the school playground. It takes a minimum of 7 to 10 years to acquire the academic language of instruction—the language typically used by the teacher for instruction in content areas and in textbooks. The main reason it takes so long to acquire a second language is that English speakers are also learning and moving ahead and do not stop and wait for English language learners to catch up to them. Language development is gained over many years and can be accelerated by knowledgeable teachers (Collier, 1995).

Reading Recovery teachers can assist classroom teachers in understanding Reading Recovery as an early intervention program designed to assist the lowest-achieving children in first grade. Both the classroom teacher and the Reading Recovery teacher should view themselves as part of a partnership so that communication is facilitated. The goal of the program is for the child to develop effective reading and writing strategies. During this relatively short-term intervention, these children make faster-than-average progress so that they can catch up with their peers and continue to learn within an average group setting in the

regular classroom. It is important that the classroom teacher receive regular reports regarding the child's progress in Reading Recovery and that the classroom teacher share in the child's progress in the classroom.

Many studies have documented differences in how classroom teachers instruct struggling readers differently from high-progress readers. According to Allington (2001), their focus for students in the low-progress reading group tends to be more on letters, sounds, and words and less on meaning, reading whole text, and teaching for strategies. Skillful daily instruction in guided reading and writing groups provides the context for the child to receive a double dose of similar instruction in the classroom and in Reading Recovery. Extra opportunities throughout the day to practice what is learned enable them to accelerate their learning. Choosing reading texts for English language learners should take into account the language structures the children control. Samway and McKeon (1999) suggest that an excellent way of learning a language is to be taught content material in the new language. When teachers select non-fiction texts for shared and guided reading, this practice offers extra language enrichment opportunities.

The Reading Recovery teacher can gain much knowledge from frequent visits to the classroom. When a Reading Recovery student is absent, the Reading Recovery teacher may use the half hour to observe other Reading Recovery students in the classroom to determine if the children are transferring the skills learned in Reading Recovery or to coach them while working in literacy activities in the classroom. Teaching a guided reading or writing group which

includes Reading Recovery students allows the Reading Recovery teacher to view firsthand the children's individual responses to group instruction. It also gives the classroom teacher an opportunity to sit back and observe another teacher instruct struggling readers and writers in a skilled manner.

Arrangements for classroom teachers to observe their students during a Reading Recovery lesson allows them to come to a shared understanding of where the child is instructionally and where the child needs to go next. It is also very enlightening for the teacher to observe how some children are more competent than they had noticed in the classroom.

Observing and collecting reading and writing samples of average first graders gives Reading Recovery teachers a better sense of what average looks like in a particular first-grade classroom. This gives a clear picture of what the Reading Recovery teacher is striving for in the student.

Older students or classroom parent volunteers can be trained to work with Reading Recovery students in the classroom for 10 to 15 minutes each day providing extra time for reading familiar books and reassembling the cut-up sentence from the Reading Recovery lesson. A read-aloud and conversation around the story creates opportunities to expand the child's language. Higher-level Reading Recovery texts can be read to the students in preparation for later use in Reading Recovery lessons. Exposure to the language of the books will scaffold the child's later independent reading of those same texts.

Homework can allow time for rereading familiar books from the Reading

Recovery lessons and reassembly of the cut-up sentence. Extra time reading and writing is what really makes a difference in literacy achievement, insists Allington (2001). The classroom teacher and Reading Recovery teacher need to negotiate and determine what home activities will promote language development and best increase reading and writing practice.

Clay (1994) observes that “to foster children’s language development, create opportunities for them to talk, then talk with them (not at them)” (p. 60). Classroom seating can provide extra language interactions when the English language learner is placed next to verbal children. The teacher tends to interact more with children sitting closest to the front of the classroom. Classroom experiences engaging in cooperative activities with a teacher, instructional aide, tutor, or volunteer provide enriching language experiences. These may include playing with blocks, art activities, molding with clay, completing puzzles, and especially conversations around a story or book.

Reading Recovery is an investment in the professional skills of teachers. Reading Recovery teachers have an enormous contribution to make in helping children succeed; they assist primary teachers by sharing their experiences and knowledge.

It is not possible to meet all the oral language needs of English learners in Reading Recovery in 14, 16, or 20 weeks. When instruction in Reading Recovery ends, the child’s language and literacy need to be monitored. Quality classroom instruction is the most critical strategy for continued success for these children. Fifty hours of instruction in Reading Recovery cannot make up for the hundreds of

hours of continued expert teaching needed in subsequent school years.

Reading Recovery

Educators sometimes question the ability of English language learners to benefit from literacy intervention. It is important to ensure that language proficiency does not result in children’s inappropriate exclusion from the Reading Recovery program. English language learners should enter the program if they can understand enough English to follow the directions for completing the Observation Survey and score in the lowest group of children in the first-grade class. The one-to-one instruction in the Reading Recovery lesson allows for the teacher to engage in a variety of activities that contribute to language development. Denying selection of an English language learner to Reading Recovery until the child acquires more English only delays the child’s opportunity to actively participate in classroom experiences that will promote further oral language proficiency. English language learners selected for Reading Recovery in the first half of first grade are more likely to successfully complete the program and continue to be supported by classroom instruction. English language learners selected in the second half of first grade may not have time to complete the Reading Recovery program and will then have a summer gap of up to 3 months without instruction which may be needed to consolidate what was learned in Reading Recovery.

Gentile (1996) questions whether Reading Recovery teachers are aware of how they communicate with English language learners in the Reading Recovery lesson. He suggests that there are differences in attention to oral language development. Gentile



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strongly suggests that rich language interactions be planned to increase oral language development in the Reading Recovery lesson. Clay (1994) tells teachers to “put your ear closer, concentrate more sharply, smile more rewardingly and spend more time in genuine conversation, difficult though it is” (p. 69).

The Reading Recovery lesson can provide many opportunities to expand and enrich oral language. The first 2 weeks of Reading Recovery instruction is called Roaming Around the Known and is less structured. The teacher limits teaching interactions to what’s known by the child in order to build confidence and fluency; in this way, more is discovered about the child’s competencies and needs. Assessing the child’s oral language structures in an informal manner at this time can be helpful in choosing

more appropriate texts for the child to read. Encouraging conversation around a drawing or description of the sequence of events in a wordless book provides multiple opportunities to capture and record the child's language in a natural and authentic situation for later analysis. Teaching the child to converse will have great payoff not only for language development, but as a springboard to writing. Brief oral interactions and retellings following familiar texts in the lesson are also sources for writing stories.

Book selection is easier and can lead to more successful reading if the teacher is aware of the language structures the child controls (Gentile, 1996). Geisler and Rodriguez (1994) also suggest that Reading Recovery teachers pay attention to the language structures that students generate for writing because they can guide teachers in choosing books that contain language within the student's control. A rich orientation before each new book allows the child to focus on meaning as well as hear and repeat difficult language structures in the story. English language learners may need extra opportunities to hear and repeat tricky structures before the first reading (Clay, 1998). Choosing caption books in early lessons makes learning to read more difficult for English language learners. Geisler and Rodriguez (1994) assert that "students do much better with text that is patterned, supportive, and written in complete sentences" (p. 72).

Students who are very limited English speakers may need even more support. At very early levels, it may be necessary to read the book to the child before having the child complete a first reading. For a short time, some children may need 2 days of prepara-

tion for a new book. Day 1 may include an orientation and an oral reading to the child. Day 2's orientation may be leaner, but it includes the opportunity for the child to again hear and repeat more difficult language structures and encourages the child to contribute to orientation before the first reading. This adaptation of the Reading Recovery lesson for learners with very little English would be short-lived if the intent is that the child read an entire new book in each lesson as soon as possible.

A second reading of the new book is recommended immediately after the first reading for the English language learner so that the child will "get the flow of the words and a real feel for the story" (Clay, 1998, p. 38). Even when there is little reading work, an opportunity to reread the text contributes to language development.

Gentile (1996) also stresses that at each transition between components in the Reading Recovery lesson, the child should be encouraged to tell what he or she is doing in complete sentences. He adds that the teacher should not accept one-word answers, but ask the child to repeat whole sentences throughout the lesson. Early on in the program with a very limited English-speaking child, the teacher may need to model these oral expectations.

Home activities can also contribute to language development in English. Blank paper can be sent home each day for the child to draw a picture in detail and to prepare and rehearse an oral story to share with the Reading Recovery teacher the next day before the writing component. Small tape recorders are available at large discount stores at a very minimal cost and can be sent home so the child can

have repeated story experiences in English. Listening to the same story all week long provides the repetition of language structures needed for the child to make the book language his or her own.

Repeated opportunities to reread stories written in the Reading Recovery writing book and reassemble the cut-up sentence consolidate standard English structures. This can occur in the Reading Recovery lesson, in the classroom, and at home, as Gentile (1996) points out. Typing the students' stories facilitates this rereading and strengthens the reciprocal process of writing and reading. All of these suggestions are not only effective in the Reading Recovery lesson, but also in classroom instruction.

Conclusion

Allington (2001) reminds us that quality classroom instruction is the first strategy in the prevention of learning problems, especially when planned to support all learners. The effect of well-trained teachers on student success is clearly supported by research (Darling-Hammond, 1997). However, some children, even with quality classroom instruction, still need one-to-one tutoring in order to learn to read and write successfully. When well-prepared teachers like those trained in Reading Recovery work with classroom teachers as a team to support literacy learning, the results can be dramatic. The classroom teacher needs to be aware of how the Reading Recovery teacher is able to take the lowest readers from a classroom and teach in such a way as to move them to the middle range of their peers. The Reading Recovery teacher must learn about the classroom environment, activities, and expectations in order to assist the

child's transition from Reading Recovery to the classroom. When teachers work together, success is evident for Reading Recovery students.

Bringing struggling students to high levels of achievement in school is a challenge. This article has discussed research and given suggestions for building the literacy triangle to help English language learners accomplish school success. Involved parents, quality classroom instruction, and skilled Reading Recovery teachers together create the formula for ideal learning opportunities.

P. David Pearson (1996) sums it up best in these words:

Kids are who they are. They know what they know. They bring what they bring. Our job is not to wish that students knew more or knew differently. Our job is to turn each student's knowledge, along with the diversity of knowledge we will encounter in a classroom of learners, into a curricular strength rather than an instructional inconvenience. We can do that only if we hold high expectations for all students, convey great respect for the knowledge and culture they bring to the classroom, and offer lots of support in helping them achieve those expectations (p. 272).

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