

Words Walk Out: Vocabulary Best Practice with Elementary English Learners

In and Out of School

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Abstract

Beginning readers and second language learners follow essentially the same reading process that all students take in order to become competent readers. Thus, it is vital for all students to develop a strong motivation to read and a powerful repertoire of reading skills. This article describes best practice approaches for general education teachers to use in reaching their English language learners in elementary school. These best practices will work effectively with beginning readers who are native speakers of English. Best practice strategies detailed in this article include the teaching of vocabulary in different genres, content areas, and contexts.

Beginning readers and second language learners follow essentially the same reading process that all students take in order to become competent readers. The crucial difference for second language learners is that they must navigate a new culture and new decoding system (Fang, 2005). Second language learners or English Learners (ELLs) need a thorough understanding of the rules of their new culture. Teachers need to assist ELLs in this acculturation process, which is a lifelong process, according to Collier (2006). Additionally, teachers must provide them with training in vocabulary, involving multiple encounters with words in different genres, content areas, and contexts, according to a recent study (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003).

Fortunately, the number of ELLs who are developing competence with English while they seek to master various academic subjects continues to rise (McElroy, 2005). “In 1991, the number of students classified as ELLs was just over two million; today, more than five million ELL students attend schools in the United States” (2005, p. 8). As the number of ELL students

have increased, meeting the needs of ELLs has become a central focus of education (Slavin & Cheung, 2003).

All ELLs learn to adjust to a new culture, many develop resiliency and creativity as they coordinate their culture understand and create their own knowledge structures. According to Zwiers (2004) academic language is the third language acquired by ELLs after they initially acquire their second language in social settings. He notes that teachers need to help students to master specific instructional strategies to adequately navigate the figurative language and intricacies of academic language for success in schools.

Multiple Encounters with Words

When Manthey (2005) compiled a list of effective teaching strategies that benefit ELLs, he noted that most of the strategies involved higher order thinking. ELLs, beginning particularly in the intermediate grades of elementary school, need activities that provide multiple encounters with texts and higher order thinking for vocabulary development and preparation for independent reading and writing. During an interview, Vaughn noted the instructional progress in reading during recent decades, and she described the value of interventions that align with the language of students' core reading instruction and their instructional needs (Anderson, 2006). It is important for teachers to use bilingual materials for ELLs, give students opportunities to read in context, and scaffold learning opportunities that focus on meaningful texts (Collier, 2006; Carlo, et al. 2004).

Some of the most meaningful texts for ELLs are derived from the Language Experience Approach (LEA). This popular reading-writing technique strengthens the language acquisition skills of primary students and ELLs. According to Tompkins, LEA is a teaching technique in which students dictate an account to their teacher, who records it. Then the teacher uses this

newly created text for reading instruction (Tompkins, 2003). Eventually, these children attain the skills necessary to write their own stories after watching the teacher model this skill through LEA. Lenters (2004-2005) notes that LEA permits young learners to “understand the encoding of oral language into written language” in a lesson that is meaningful (p. 333). Au (1998), who has worked with students of Hawaiian ancestry for 32 years, states that writing their own stories provides “children with meaningful contexts for the learning of letter-sound correspondences” (p. 216). LEA, a strategy that primary teachers have used for years with all ability levels, fits easily into a culturally relevant curriculum.

Au (1998) recommends two useful and meaningful strategies to implement with beginning and emergent readers from diverse backgrounds. She noted that children who (1) write their own stories and (2) participate in shared reading activities increase their understanding of written-spoken language relationships. In shared reading, the teacher reads a book aloud while talking students through the book with questions and predictions; it is especially helpful with primary students (Lenters, 2005; Fang, 2005).

Shared reading seems to assist students in building comprehension skills (Lenters, 2005). In her third grade classroom, Beth Donaldson teaches emergent readers to read English as a first and second language. She begins language arts instruction on Mondays by introducing the weekly story through shared reading. This allows her to model and support her ELL students and struggling readers. While reading the story, the class discusses predictions, elements of story structure and sequence, characterization, purpose, and other literary elements. The students relate the story to their own experience.

Donaldson uses the Georgia Performance Standards to guide her in selecting other literary elements to teach according to her students’ needs and readiness. Usually Donaldson

teaches a focus skill, such as phoneme isolation, through this shared reading activity. As students see and hear vocabulary words during shared reading, they build comprehension skills and confidence in their reading ability.

Equally important, these students usually feel connected to the story in some way, having related to the story to their experiences. Thus, the experience of reading and of hearing the story is not a remote academic activity. Through shared reading and discussion, students may begin to find pleasure in reading. Donaldson has discovered that many students who will not read aloud will agree to participate in discussions. These students, according to Donaldson, then begin to “feel more a part of the class.” Donaldson notes that shared reading is the link in helping students become more independent readers. Keep in mind that Au considers shared reading and story-writing to be more important than phonics instruction. She suggests that phonics may be introduced while teaching story-writing and shared reading, but phonics should not be taught in isolation (Au, 1998).

ELLs benefit from multiple encounters with words. While teaching text structure, teachers more effectively meet the needs of all English learners in the room when they conduct read-alouds with trade books and model skillful reading (Fang, 2005). Another recent study reminds educators that an important tool for strengthening reading comprehension for ELLs is to reread a text, a useful strategy for primary classrooms in general and for ELLs at all grade levels (Samuels, 2002). ELLs may want to create their own cards with illustrations of significant words they encounter. They may want to use sites like the Internet Picture Dictionary at <http://www.pdictionary.com/> to create their own cards for review. Additional cards with letters and Dolch words from the *Picture Me Reading* series from the web site of the same name can be used for activities that go well beyond the typical approaches. The *Picture Me Reading* package

contains flash cards with visual cues that prompt language learners. Teachers like Donaldson are finding this approach extremely helpful in teaching ELLs a large, basic vocabulary.

These cards can be used as part of teaching the full range of language arts skills, including exploration of literature and interaction with song and movement. The <http://www.starfall.com/> site provides opportunities that extend from emergent reading activities to generate activities, such as story creation. The teacher who assigns read-alouds and rereading from trade books target vocabulary skills, using programs described here.

Word walls are another regular feature of most elementary teachers' repertoire. Word walls are a popular method of ensuring multiple encounters with words. Word walls that include students' names (Fang, 2005) and words from the language arts lessons being taught (Tompkins, 2003) are particularly effective. As word walls are used creatively, they can meet students' literacy needs across the curriculum and eventually transfer the responsibility for instructional guidance from the teacher to students (Brabham & Villaume, 2001). Kieff (2003/2004) recommended using word walls for games like Bingo and I Spy to facilitate this scaffolding process.

Especially for ELLs and beginning readers, the teacher needs to preview vocabulary words and perform demonstrations of the key concepts from the lesson prior to assigning reading. The teacher may model the demonstration by holding up pictures, drawing the concepts, performing a scientific experiment, acting out ideas, or using puppets to present a relevant scenario. As the school year progresses, the teacher may model and scaffold these prereading activities for the class, asking students to perform these activities in groups. Reiss (2001, pp. 58-59) suggests that teachers assign ELLs to draw pictures of concepts in the sequence that they occur in the text. Teachers may choose to assign ELLs to draw pictures of

concepts in the sequence that they occur in the text. Teachers may choose to assign this drawing task instead of the writing assignment that they give their mainstream students. Students' pictures may depict the steps in a scientific experiment, the stages of a battle, or the elements in a mathematical equation. These drawing may be posted in the room for instructional purposes.

The graphic organizer, or visual map of concepts, is a simple and popular teaching strategy that helps ELLs and mainstream students to visualize new words and concepts. This visual map is a fundamental tool for teaching the core content areas. Hundreds of copyright-free visuals can be printed from web sites, located by typing in the words graphic organizer at any search engine. See, for example, the following excellent web site:

<http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/>.

For ELLs diagrams are especially useful, such as, those that show comparisons (e.g. the Venn diagram), cause and effect relationships, complex relationships (e.g., a web or cluster), and tables or grids for showing qualities of numbers or characteristics of objects in science or math (Reiss, 2001). The Frayer model graphic organizer is especially effective with elementary ELLs at grade level three or higher. It is used for comparisons that clarify conceptual understanding. According to two studies (Lenters, 2005; Anderson & Roit, 1996), graded or leveled readers look as if they assist students to develop vocabulary skills, but Lenters cautions that these graded readers must be "somewhat reflective of natural speech" (p. 331) to be effective. For teachers like Donaldson, leveled readers are an effective means of organizing books in her classroom according to students' instructional level of reading. These levels are labeled for easy reference for teachers and students, using a color or number code that everyone knows. Donaldson has discovered that, without this system, students tend to select books that are too difficult or too easy, becoming frustrated or uninterested, deciding to quit reading. After Donaldson begins

every week with shared reading using a weekly story on grade level, students follow up by performing individual or group reading of books on their reading level.

Typically, Donaldson has three levels of readers in the classroom. She uses multicultural trade books and bilingual books in her classroom, including materials from her students' cultural backgrounds. Adapted texts are effective in meeting ELLs' needs. These texts feature the same story assigned to the mainstream students with the adapted text being a simpler version of the text that may contain study guide elements, too. Typical study guide elements include reading pointers, reading questions, numbered sentences for easy reference in class, and vocabulary skills. Although adapted texts are available commercially, Echevarria (2004) suggest that teachers themselves adapt the text for their ELLs.

Similarly, teachers may audiotape texts for their ELLs to assist them in comprehending texts (Echevarria, 2004; Reiss, 2001). The authors have worked with a third grade teacher who regularly audiotapes texts to facilitate comprehension for the ELLs in her class at Mimosa Elementary School in Fulton County, Georgia. She sends these audiotapes home with her students, who are able to listen repeatedly to these texts as they read them in English. She notes that these tapes make it possible for both parents and children to follow along with the text. Parents of her students have mentioned that this helps them to learn English as they read with their children. This additional practice with English gives these ELLs the extra time they need to reach an intermediate level of language skills. By personally making the tapes for individual students, this teacher sends the message that she believes in their ability to learn. Although any audio-taped story helps a child, this teacher speaks volumes about her confidence in each child by greeting the child on the tape and sharing a word of encouragement. She highlights key vocabulary and other new words and asks the child to make predictions about the text. She uses

the tapes to review current teaching concepts, such as the adjectives an author used to describe a particular noun.

Delving into Different Genres

While fiction is the mainstay of most language arts instruction, nonfiction trade books are being used more often. In many elementary classrooms, they even replace textbooks altogether. The best of these books offers text at the instructional level with illustrations that provide useful visual cues for elementary readers. These nonfiction texts assist the teacher in instructing mainstream and ELLs in the many technical vocabulary words that students must master in order to pass standardized exit tests and proceed to middle grades. According to Fang (2005), elementary students need to understand the complex notions of text structure, e.g., story, plot, cause and effect, sequencing, and the qualities of fine writing, in order to decode, comprehend, and appreciate texts from various genres. Keep in mind that beginning readers and second language learners follow essentially the same reading process that all students follow. These reading and writing skills are necessary for the emergent and ELLs in the elementary classroom.

A crucial method in teaching ELLs is the use of materials that relate to students' lives and cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Echevarria, 1998). ELLs' comprehension appears to improve when they are instructed to read a book from their own culture (Carrell, 1987; Fitzgerald, 1995). Bilingual books are an excellent choice, allowing ELLs to read about their own culture in their first language and giving the mainstream students an opportunity to encounter words in a new language.

Fortunately, educators can now turn to multiple resources to find diverse trade books and films. For P-12 trade books and videotapes that appeal to diverse students, educators should see the book reviews in *Multicultural Perspectives*, a journal published by the National Association for Multicultural Education. To meet the need for nonfiction books, an excellent source is the listing of books on ethnic minorities (elementary through high school) from the Carter G.

Woodson Book Award winners, with full information found at this website:

<http://www.socialstudies.org/awards/woodson> . These texts and films focus on societies throughout the world, including historical accounts. Two other web sites contain books, software programs, games, and vocabulary builders in Spanish, French, and English: <http://superkids.com> and <http://www.CreativeThink.com>. Two web sites list books with large print and Braille text: www.afb.org/ and www.nbp.org. These are just a small sample of the resources that assist teachers as they seek to enhance the curriculum with culturally relevant trade books.

Similarly, culturally relevant books that are routinely acquired by schools are important for allowing students from culturally diverse backgrounds to see images of themselves represented in the school curricula. It is important to note, too, that a culturally relevant curriculum benefits mainstream students from white, middle class backgrounds (Nieto, 2002). Students who only experience a narrow Eurocentric K-12 curricula may never develop respect for other cultural groups (Ayers, 1993; Boutte, 1999). Some of these students may even develop a superior attitude toward other cultures, forming a barrier to communication and cooperation in an increasingly diverse world (Boutte, 1999).

Walking Out: New Contexts

Mainstream and ELL elementary students need to have many experiences with language use inside and outside of school (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). Three simple options are (1) performances with audiences beyond the school, (2) community-based learning projects (service learning) such as planting a garden in the community, and (3) the use of field trips. Projects like developing a garden lend themselves well to interdisciplinary teaching, too, with trade books like *The Tiny Seed* by Eric Carle (1970/2001) when used in elementary classes alongside science trade books. Through performance, students may read a wider audience, possibly putting on a

show about other nations or cultures, singing, acting or miming, creating puppet shows, dancing, or performing a ritual such as parading a dragon through town in celebration of Chinese New Year.

Writing about the best programs for children, Kohn (2000) recommends a project approach or problem-based learning for exciting investigation and authentic learning opportunities in the classroom. Warner defines problem-based learning as an approach to education that is “structured around the use of messy, complex problems encountered in the real world as a context and stimulus for learning. The primary . . . outcome for the learner is to develop lifelong, effective problem-solving and critical thinking skills” (M. Warner, personal communication, March 24, 2006).

Kohn (2000) describes an example of problem-based learning that involves a project approach. In a classroom in Vermont, a second-language learner incited a class to take social action. The ten-year-old Mexican girl told her class about an earthquake in Guatemala. Seeing this as a teachable moment, the teacher encouraged the class to investigate the disaster thoroughly, using news items and studying them in an interdisciplinary manner. The children themselves devised a list of questions that they studied. This news item turned into a two-month project in reading, writing, English, Spanish, science, and social studies. During this project, the children collected money for a Guatemalan boy who suffered in the earthquake (Kohn, 2000). Drawing on real world experience such as this one, delving into the students’ own interests and passions, makes school learning more meaningful and allows children to engage in social justice work, often for the first time. The teacher may show that learning standards met in a project such as this one strengthens students’ literacy and study skills while building social skills.

Activities that add flavor to the words used in and out of school enhance the entire reading process. The ideas in this article can be used as catalysts for a plethora of instructional strategies that inspire students to reach new levels of cultural understanding. ELLs acquire new vocabulary skills while becoming acculturated. Mainstream students experience new vocabulary and cultures while learning about different cultures. Everyone can benefit from these best practice strategies.

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