

Building Bridges to Literacy

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Introduction

For two years, I have worked with a group of students who have had interrupted or little schooling or literacy in their native language. My classes have included students from Somalia, Sudan, El Salvador, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. Because I had not taught this level before and was not sure about the best approaches, I searched for some guidelines. I was reminded by Ovando and Collier's book *Bilingual and ESL Classrooms* that literacy in one language, especially one's native language, is very important in the development of literacy in another language. (Ovando & Collier, 1998, p. 94). As I searched further, I also learned that without the support of first language literacy, efforts to learn English can be very discouraging (ERIC Digest 405158, March 1997). This was not very encouraging information but it increased my resolve to learn how to help my students gain literacy skills in English as quickly as they could.

In order to facilitate my students' learning, I decided that I needed to learn more about the literacy experiences of my students. One day as we were looking at books about their countries I discovered something about the literacy experiences of the Somali students. As we looked at the pictures in the book, the students began to tell me about their lives. Most of them had spent anywhere from several months to eight years in Kenya, after their families fled the violence in Mogadishu. In Kenya, they were not able to go to school because they were not Kenyan citizens and did not have money to pay for expensive private schools. Because some English is spoken in Kenya, however, these students did learn some basic oral English vocabulary there. Also several of them knew some Arabic, which they had learned from "Duksi," the Islamic religious school they attended. There they memorized parts of the Koran and most of them had learned to write some prayers from the Koran on pieces of tree bark. (There was a picture of students writing on tree bark in the book.) It was interesting to note that some of the Somali students and some of the Sudanese students could communicate with each other in Arabic, much more so than in English.

Most of the Salvadoran students had been to school for a few years. With the help of translators I learned that their school day was often very short. In order to get the most out of school buildings, one group of students might go to school from 8 to 12 and another group of students would come in from 1 to 5. Several students also reported that there were 40 students in a class. One student said that he often had to miss school because of other responsibilities. In spite of these limitations, most of the students could read and write some in Spanish.

Questions

The range of abilities in English, even in this small literacy class, amazed me. How was I going to meet all their needs? Where should I begin? How could I assess their skills with the language barrier between us? I was fortunate to have one student in the class whose spoken English was fairly good and who could help me communicate with the other Somali students. I spoke a little Spanish, the boy from Sudan knew some English words, and the Albanian student from Kosovo, who was shy and knew very little English, smiled at my attempts to pantomime and draw new words when a picture or object was not available. I knew that in order for these students to learn to read and write in English, we needed to build oral vocabulary that they could then recognize in writing. But how long should we just work on oral language? Or should we immediately begin including reading and writing as well?

Method of Inquiry

How could I begin to find answers to some of my questions? In previous years, in addition to my observations and reflections log, I had asked my students directly through surveys and informal questions to give me information about their learning. With these classes, I conducted several interviews, with the aid of translators, asking them about their educational experiences in their country and what they thought about school here. I also noted comments students made in class and examined the students' written and oral work.

The first year, I began teaching the class important school vocabulary words. On several days, I could be seen going through the school like a Pied Piper as we found the clinic, the guidance office, and made sure that everyone had a locker and could open it. When we returned to the class we learned *pens* and *pencils*, *glue* and *scissors*. As we began writing the words as well as saying them, I wondered about their understanding of sound-symbol relationships. How many of them really understood that a "p" had a "puh" sound? (And how much did it matter?) This turned out to be harder to figure out than I had expected. For example, as long as one of my Somali girls saw a picture of a pencil next to the word "pencil," she could "read" it. I would assume that the relationship between the sound and letter was clear, but when I showed her the word without the picture, she couldn't read the word at all, not even the initial consonant sound. So I had made an important discovery that helped me in my assessment of what the students knew or didn't know: that having the picture next to the word could mislead me into thinking that 'real' reading was going on.

Next, I brought in books to read to the students. It was hard finding appropriate materials. I looked for books that weren't too childish, that perhaps had photographs instead of pictures of small children and cute animals. However, I did discover that within the confines of my classroom, the students did not mind reading books intended for younger students. I tried to choose books that were beautiful to look at and that used language in an interesting way. To my surprise, one of their favorites was *Green Eggs and Ham*. At their request, I read it to the class several times and we saw the film. One day I was standing next to one of my students, a seventeen year old girl from Somalia who

had never been to school before, pointing out the words on her copy while reading it to the class. I was surprised to hear her voice softly “reading” right along with me, perfect intonation and all! Yet she was not able to read any of it when I pointed to a particular line. So just being able to say the words wasn’t really reading either. Like many of the other students in the class, she had a wonderful capacity to remember the text and say it orally, without actually “reading” the words at all. But what a marvelous skill! I wondered how I could help the students use this ability to gain literacy in English.

As I began to go over my observations and reflections, I saw my question becoming more refined. *What happens when I use my students’ knowledge and strengths to expand their literacy?*

During the time I was trying to figure out just how to help the students use this strength in oral language to help them read and write, I was in a guidance counselor’s office and noticed a bright sunflower on her desk. I commented on it and she said, “Wait until you see this.” She pushed a button and the plant began to move and to sing “You are My Sunshine.” I immediately thought of my literacy students. They would love to sing this song, and I thought I could use it to help them learn to read.

In class, we listened to the song and talked about the words. They had been studying weather in one of their other ESL classes so I knew they understood *sunshine* and *gray skies*, and we had already had several opportunities to talk about *happy* and *love* when we had made birthday cards. I put the words to the song on the overhead and each time we sang, my pencil became the bouncing ball following the words.

Some of the students quickly made the connection between the words and the sounds; for others this took longer. Sometimes, just to check their reading of the words, I would point to the words in random order to see if they could read them without the music. Also I would ask them to tell me what the word meant or give an example of how to use the word. Many, but not all, could.

I began to use more songs, chants, and poems. The students enjoyed them and the combination of the rhythm and the music helped increase their oral and reading vocabulary. More importantly, as one of my students said, “We’re reading, Miss.” When I found several copies of “I see the Moon and the Moon Sees Me,” I knew many of them would be able to read that too, with just a little help. Again, the rhythm, rhyme, predictability of the words, and the beautiful illustrations provided the support for many of them to really read the book.

However, soon it was back to the real world. By this time my class membership had grown to 16. When their Concepts Science teacher gave them the assignment of doing an animal report and poster, the students rushed to class ready to toss aside “body parts bingo” for what they considered the real stuff of education. For the next class, I brought in several books about each of their assigned animals from the public library to add to the collection we had borrowed from our school library. They had to answer questions about the size and color of their animal, what it ate, where it lived, etc. We spent a long time talking about inches and feet, ounces and pounds, the colors of the rainbow, and

deserts and mountains. At times it seemed altogether overwhelming, and it took days to build up this necessary vocabulary.

I was surprised (and somewhat disappointed) when I discovered that they still couldn't read the children's library books well enough to find the answers to their questions. My student intern and I took the books home and wrote a page on each of their animals, giving all the needed information in a very repetitive and structured way. We were taking advantage of their ability to recognize simple structures and the vocabulary we had taught them to help them access information they needed. Most, but not all, could finally write something about their animal and write a few words under the pictures they had found for their poster. Soon, all of them could say at least a few sentences about their animals. They practiced their oral reports in front of the class and clapped joyfully for each other. They knew they were moving along the road to greater literacy.

Working on the next Concepts Science project led me to an even better understanding of how to help the students build literacy skills. This time each of them had to do a poster and report on a plant. I spoke with the Science teacher and he let me help choose their plants. I was able to pick common ones that they were probably familiar with in their native countries, allowing them to access their prior knowledge to help them understand. As with the animal project, we began the process of building vocabulary about plants. We took walks outside to look at trees, dandelions, and the few flowers popping up in March. We looked at roots, stems, trunks, pinecones, leaves, and bark. We planted bean seeds and flowers. They were also writing the names of all the plant words under pictures I had given them and under their own drawings.

Then it was back to the public library for lots of books about their plants. As with the animal books, it was still difficult for them to get the information they needed directly from the books, but the pictures definitely increased their understanding of their plant. My new, and much appreciated, assistant and I took the books home and wrote a page about each plant including, in a very structured format, the information they needed for their Science report. This time, however, we didn't put the information in the exact order in which the questions were asked. Some of them could still find key words and answer the questions they needed for their report.

As we were working through the plant unit, I came across *The Oxford Picture Dictionary's Content Chants* by Carolyn Graham. One called "Plant Chant" was perfectly timed for us. Its simple vocabulary and strong rhythm made it a favorite reading activity. Almost all of the students could soon read the chant by themselves and all of them could chant along orally and answer simple comprehension questions about the plants in the chant.

Before my second year of working with these students, I met with an elementary school teacher researcher who taught me some strategies she used to teach native speakers literacy skills. I wasn't surprised to discover that many of these seemed appropriate for my second language learners. One of the most useful strategies was a form of group writing, which I called "Afternoon Messages." (Payne and Schulman have a wonderful book on Morning Messages.) At the beginning of the year, I began each class with a message on

newsprint, which I had prepared for each class. First, I read the message to the class. Then the students read it chorally after me, and finally, students volunteered to read sections of the message individually. I also had students come to the front of the class to show everyone important things such as capital letters, periods, indenting, or a word that began with a particular sound. Later in the year each student contributed a sentence to the “Afternoon Message” instead of my writing it. Often we would go back to previous “Afternoon Messages” for reading practice. This strategy proved invaluable in providing appropriate reading material for the class.

Findings and Implications for Teaching

One of the most important things I learned is that all learners, even high school students who have never been to school before, bring specific strengths to the task of literacy. The rich oral tradition in the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of most of my students can be used as a bridge to literacy in English. Their ability to accurately remember information presented orally helps them to learn sound-symbol relationships and even to learn to read sight words. Songs, chants, rhymes, and repetitive structures can help the literacy student learn to read and write.

Another finding is that one of the main differences between learning to read in one’s native language and learning to read in a second language is that in the latter, students must learn to recognize and understand vocabulary and language structures both before and during the process of gaining literacy. Being able to pronounce (“say aloud”) the word *ball* is of no use if the student doesn’t know what the word *ball* means. Once the meaning is understood, however, practice in reading and writing the word can help the student to keep the word in long-term memory. This means that the teacher must spend a great deal of time building vocabulary and providing learning experiences which will enable the students to recognize meaning in text and then provide lots of opportunities for practice. This scaffolding, though very time consuming, is absolutely necessary for real learning to occur.

Finally, assessment of the literacy student’s progress is challenging. I found my self more than once misunderstanding what my students knew and didn’t know. Because often they cannot explain their level of understanding or answer my questions about their understanding, teacher observation is very important. In order to really grasp what the student knows, it is necessary to assess the students individually. This, of course, is hard to do. A small teacher-student ratio is important in classes for students who have not developed literacy skills in their first language.

Next Steps

In the future, I am looking forward to continuing my study of what helps students who have limited literacy in their first language gain proficiency in English, their second language. I think I can learn much by using reading and writing rubrics, checklists, and running records that elementary school teachers use. These may help me to get a more precise assessment of what the students

know. I also want to learn more about the Reading Recovery program to see if some of its strategies could benefit my students.

Finally, I would like to learn more about the lives of my students both here in the United States and before they came here. Since one of my most important findings is that new knowledge is built onto prior knowledge, it will help me to know more about the students' backgrounds and the reality of their lives now.

I am very fortunate to work with a group of students who are so eager to learn. They and their families have such hope for the potential of education to improve their lives. It is a privilege and an awesome challenge to help them acquire the tools to be more successful in their new country.

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