

Developing Literacy Skills for ESOL Students

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Abstract

This study examines the literacy development of ESOL students who have had limited or interrupted schooling in their native language. The teacher evaluated many books and materials designed especially for elementary native speakers and developed criteria for assessing their effectiveness with pre-literate ESOL students. At the end of that process, the researcher began writing materials for her students to read and respond to. Through this process of writing materials and then using them in class, the researcher gained new insights about her students' literacy development.

Introduction and Literature Review

For the past several years, I have been working with ESOL students who have had limited or interrupted schooling. This year most of my students are Spanish speakers from Central America, but I also have students from Pakistan, Ethiopia, and Korea. From my past teacher research projects and a review of the literature, I have learned some strategies that help these students learn to read in English even though they don't have strong literacy skills in their first language. Some of the things I have learned are:

*It is important to build oral vocabulary in a content area so that the students can begin to read and write in their new language. Use of visuals, realia, and building on prior knowledge is necessary. (Freeman Freeman, 1992, pp. 24-26).

*There needs to be a lot of repetition and predictable structures used in order for students to comprehend texts. It is still challenging to find texts that these students can access. (Gibbons, 2002, pp. 99-100).

*These students often have an ability to remember things that they hear. Using chants and songs is a very effective way to help them learn English structures and to help them remember content.

One of the courses I am teaching to these students this year is based on U.S. Geography, with an emphasis on map study, regions, states, and major cities. In addition, we study famous Americans and important holidays. I had a very hard time finding appropriate books and materials that the students could actually read for themselves. So I found myself in a situation familiar for many

ESOL teachers—I needed to become a writer of curriculum. What follows is the story of my attempts to create effective readings for my students.

Data Collection

Most of my data comes from observations and reflections in my journal, noting what part of my new curriculum was accessible by most of my students and more importantly, what was not accessible, and why not. I also looked at classwork, homework, questions and answer exercises, and other activities such as crossword puzzles or cloze passages to determine what the students were or were not understanding. I also noted when students showed, through comments in class, that they remembered something from before that helped them understand something similar but new.

The Project

I began by asking the students what they would like to learn about the United States. Some of the most common responses were Washington, D.C; Virginia, California, Chicago, Miami, Florida, Texas, the White House, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln. I noticed that the students did not really know where most of the states were and could not distinguish between many cities and states. We spent a lot of time looking at maps of the United States and discussing what they already knew about the country. We did lots of jigsaw puzzles of the United States which helped them to put places they had heard of in the context of the entire country.

I began looking for books that the students could read. I found some beautiful books in our school library and at various book stores. The best things about most of these books I selected were the beautiful illustrations. These books helped the students get a sense of what the Southwest looks like, for example. The text in the books, however, was usually far beyond the students' reading level. In fact, it took me a while to recognize the most important characteristics of materials that my students could read.

I also looked at materials designed for lower elementary students, thinking that perhaps, these would be appropriate and could save me the time of creating everything from scratch. Some of the problems that I encountered were:

- *pictures that showed only young children, visiting Disneyland in California, for example

- *characters that were appropriate for young children such as cute animals, like a bunny, explaining President's Day

- *themes that would appeal to young children such as going to a crayon factory in Pennsylvania

*language that on the surface seemed simple, but in reality was filled with idioms or complex structures.

Books with these characteristics might work fine with young native speakers, but not so well for high school ESOL students. For example, one lesson on "Our Capital" began with

Our great capital city
Long may it stand
As the seat of government
For all our land.

When I showed this to my students, they did not understand the use of "stand" and "seat." They could not understand the inverted word order structure of "Long may it stand."

So how could I predict what my students would be able to understand and what would probably be too hard for them? As I taught my classes, I began to pay careful attention to what seemed to help them understand text. The first thing I did to get them ready for any text was to make sure that they had plenty of oral practice with the vocabulary in an upcoming reading and that I provided plenty of visual clues whenever possible. For example, as I began to develop reading materials about the states, I always began with a simple map of the state in a handout for the students and on an overhead. First we would look at where the state was in the United States. (The first sentence in each reading was " _____(name of state) is in the _____(name of region) region of the United States." We would then look at the map of the state and talk about any mountains (which we would color green); any important rivers, lakes, or oceans nearby (which we would color blue); and any important cities (which we would underline in red.) I would also include pictures which showed some things that were important about the state. For example, for the state of Washington, I included a picture of apples, the Space Needle, and an erupting Mount St. Helens. We talked about the pictures before we began our reading. As we talked, I would ask lots of questions to make sure that the students understood the map and the pictures. With all of these pre-reading activities, they could usually understand most or at least some of the text.

As I developed the readings and began to use them, I began to recognize structures that were easy for my students to understand. One example that helped me to see the differences in semantic structures was from Barbara Peterson's book *Literary Pathways*. She gives two examples of text about Johnny Appleseed (the first one from a book that I had used with my students.)

Example 1:

Who was Johnny Appleseed?
Was he just in stories?
No.
Johnny was a real person.
His name was John Chapman.

He planted apple trees-----
Lots and lots of them. So people called him
Johnny Appleseed.

Example 2:

John Chapman, who later became known as Johnny Appleseed, was born on September 26, 1774, when the apples on the trees surrounding his home in Leonminister, Massachusetts, were as red as the autumn leaves.

The first example, with its simple, predictable word order and short sentences is much easier for a beginning reader to understand. The second example, which packs in a lot of information, is much more structurally complex, with several dependent clauses and a simile thrown in as well. As I wrote the curriculum for the class, I needed to be very careful to keep it simple. Usually two ideas required two separate sentences. I discovered that sometimes I would inadvertently use a complex structure and noted where I need to change the curriculum for next year. One example of this came up when I wrote the following passage about Chicago:

"Chicago has one of the tallest buildings in the world. It is called the Sears Tower." At the beginning of the year several of my students didn't understand the structure "it is called." First I tried to replace the "it is called" with "The building is called" but they were still confused. It was much clearer when I wrote, "The Sears Tower in Chicago is one of the tallest buildings in the world." As time went by, however, I purposely included a more complex structure, especially a commonly used one, so that the students would learn its meaning over time. By the time we got to Texas, for example, they were ready to understand, "Utah is called the Beehive State."

I learned to use similar patterns in all the passages I wrote about the states. In that way, students began to acquire certain language structures through frequent repetition. Because I used the same patterns over and over, students were able to predict what kinds of information they would learn about the states. They knew that we would read about the region, the rivers and lakes, the kinds of land, the important cities, and the famous people, places, and things in the state.

The last thing that I tried to incorporate into the lessons was some form of choral reading, chants, or songs. Often we would read the passages together or I would read first and have them read a portion again after me. I also tried to find songs about the states or songs that were associated with the states. We sang "This Land is Your Land," Cowboy songs from Texas such as "Home on the Range," and a variety of famous songs that were about states such as "Nothing Could Be Finer than to be in Carolina." These songs reinforced important information about the states or cities that the students had read about in the reading passages.

Implications

I have learned a lot about the kinds of text that my students can understand and how I can help them understand texts that are increasingly complex. I need to help my students use a variety of reading strategies to get information from texts that are somewhat above their reading level. I have learned how important it is to listen to what my students have to say and to pay careful attention to anything that confuses them. My ultimate goal, of course, is to help them access texts that they will find in the real world (in classrooms, bookstores, and libraries.) In my attempts to create texts within my students' grasp, I also need to keep slowly raising the complexity of the materials so that their reading will improve. Bringing in books with beautiful photographs and illustrations is also important because it is these books that are most likely to make my students want to read. This is the challenge ahead!

References

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