

A Look into an Early Childhood English Language Learners' Classroom in the U.S.*

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Abstract

An overview of a public school English language acquisition program in the southeast United States is described, including detailed descriptions of English language class sessions designed for Spanish speaking kindergarten, first, and second grade English learners. Strategies for teaching and learning letter-sound relationships, sight words, vocabulary, beginning sentence writing, story prediction, story elements, graphic organizers, word walls, and individual inquiry are described with some examples of student work. The creation of a positive, active, and engaged learning community is emphasized. Limited theoretical background information is provided.

Se presenta en este escrito una descripción general de un programa para la adquisición del idioma inglés en una escuela pública en los Estados Unidos, incluyendo descripciones detalladas de sesiones de clases diseñadas para niños de primer y segundo grado cuyo idioma es el español. Se describen estrategias para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de la relación entre letras y sonidos, las palabras visuales, el vocabulario, los enunciados para empezar una historia, la predicción de historias, los elementos de una historia, los esquemas de organización, murales de palabras, y la investigación individual como ejemplos del trabajo de los niños. Se enfatiza la creación de una comunidad positiva, activa, y comprometida con el aprendizaje. Se presenta una breve información sobre el marco teórico.

Introduction and Background

It is 2:00 p.m. as the Kindergarten English language learners sit on the carpet waiting for their last lesson of the day. They are tired but ready for anything that might be fun. Their teacher, Ms. Crowe, realizes that play is an essential process through which children develop and learn about the world around them. "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). The ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher keeps this fact in mind as she puts a colorful poster on an easel in front of the students, and asks them to tell the numbers and pictures they already know. All of the students are five or six years old and are from Honduras, Mexico, or were born in the United States with families from those two countries. Most of the students are at the beginner or high beginner proficiency level in English; the beginners speak a few English words and phrases while the high beginners' communications consist of one to two short sentences on a topic.

The preceding vignette is typical of many English as a Second Language classes in the southeast United States where Spanish primary language speakers make

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up the majority of students in English Language Acquisition Programs (ELAP). And the trend appears to be growing. Recently the *USA Today*, a U.S. national daily newspaper, described a significant demographic shift in the U.S. which is expected to result in Spanish speaking students becoming the majority demographic in U.S. schools by the year 2023 (Yen, 2009). At present, one-fourth of the kindergarten students in the United States are Spanish speaking. Although the trend is more evident in the western states such as Arizona, Nevada, and California, the shift is impacting public schools across the U.S., including the one described above in the southeast region. One aspect of the trend which is not widely recognized is that the majority of the Spanish speaking English language learners are not themselves immigrants. In fact, in the year 2007 according to the *USA Today* report, more Spanish speaking kindergarteners were U.S. born than foreign born. And because they were born on U.S. soil, these kindergarteners are U.S. citizens who will be eligible to vote at age 18. This demographic and political shift is posed to impact not only the U.S. educational system, but also its political realities. A report for the Pew Hispanic Center (Lopez, 2009), a non-partisan research center in Washington, D.C., states that in the most recent presidential election, November, 2008, Hispanics accounted for 7.4% of the voters, an increase of 2.7 percentage points over the Hispanic turnout in the presidential election of 2004. As Spanish speakers become an increasingly more populous and politically powerful aggregate in the U.S., it becomes apparent that success in English for Spanish speaking students will be an increasingly important issue.

Multiple Modalities for Learning English in Kindergarten

During their 30 minute lesson, Ms. Crowe asks the students to look at a large, colorful poster that contains numbers and pictures for a children's song. One by one, the teacher points to each graphic and asks students if they know the word in English, repeats the correct answers, and gives positive reinforcement to the students. After pre-teaching the vocabulary in the song, Ms. Crowe demonstrates to the students an action to perform with each picture. After some practice, the teacher turns on a CD player and plays the song that corresponds with the poster. The students listen to the children's song and concentrate on the new tune. Ms. Crowe has time to play the song three times before the school day ends. The first time, the students concentrate on listening to the music. The second time they listen and mimic their ESL teacher as she performs motions for which they will soon learn the verbs. The third time, the students move with her and join in the chorus. The students like the song because it is upbeat, repetitive, and predictable. The teacher sings aloud:

When I was one, I swallowed a bun, going over the sea.

I jumped aboard a sailor ship and the sailor said to me:

Going over, going under, stand at attention,

Like a soldier with a one! Two! Three! (Singlish Enterprises, Inc., 2007) It is the second afternoon. As she reintroduces the song, Ms. Crowe holds a red star pointer in her hand and points to each number on the poster as the students count to ten. Then, she takes the pointer and touches each picture, asking the students to recall the vocabulary words. Next, the teacher asks a student to stand next to the poster and use the pointer as students call out the words. Stu-

dents get excited and wait expectantly hoping to take a turn with the pointer. Some students use the pointer as it is intended, touching the individual words, while others more simplistically move the pointer in the general direction, left to right, demonstrating their understanding of directionality. Next, their English teacher sings the song and observes whether or not the students remember the words. The students join to sing the words they remember, especially the repetitive chorus. When Ms. Crowe asks the students if they remember the song's hand and body motions from yesterday, the students shout, "Yes!" in response and begin to sing while they move together like the small navy described in the song. By the end of the school year, students will learn concepts of "word", or where a word stops and starts, and will be able to read words on the poster.

In ELAP classes like Ms. Crowe's kindergarten class, literacy learning is a whole body, whole brain activity. Gardner's (1999) foundational work on multiple intelligences provides the theoretical background for such learning strategies. According to Gardner, many different intellectual capacities exist and are drawn upon as we learn and express what we have learned: linguistic intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and naturalist intelligence. In the learning activity described above, musical intelligence plays a prominent role in the learning experience. Learning with music uses the right temporal lobe of the brain, while language is centered in the left temporal and frontal lobes (Armstrong, 2003). Using multiple intelligences to learn English allows the child to make neural connections between the new language, English, and previous knowledge and experiences by using musical intelligences and abilities. In the particular learning strategy described in the vignette, other intelligences including linguistic (looking at song poster), bodily-kinesthetic (motions that accompany the music), interpersonal (working in group), and naturalist (background knowledge of the ocean) are incorporated as well. The repetition, the melody, and the accompanying movements help the child learn English using several of the intelligences. Activities which incorporate several of the intelligences build upon each other to reinforce learning and take advantage of the individual's unique capacities for making connections and remembering.

On the next day, Ms. Crowe brings in a large card with the letter *S*. Her objective is for the students to learn that words are made up of letters. Also the kindergarteners will recognize the letter, say its name, and make the sound for the letters that make up the initial sounds of the words. They have memorized the song and can understand because they can make the appropriate motions. In this class session, Javier searches for the letter *S* on the song poster and proudly isolates the letter in the center of the red star pointer as his friends nod their heads in approval, yearning to hold the star pointer themselves. As the ESL teacher plays the CD today, she notices that every kindergartener now sings along with her and that each one makes the motions confidently and with great gusto. Before the end of the class, the students are able to share in the "reading." Ms. Crowe sings the first line of the song, but pauses just before the last word and watches the class; eyebrows raised expectantly. Several students smile and sing the word, "Sea!" aloud. She smiles and applauds their answer.

As Ms. Crowe reflects after teaching the lesson, she thinks about how her students enjoyed the activity, music, and physical motion. She realizes that her young kindergarteners enjoyed themselves so much that they probably do not realize that they just participated in a sophisticated English lesson. Although "Going Over the Sea" is a children's song, the number of language and grammar structures used within it is significant. The students learned the names in English for the numbers one to ten, 12 past tense verbs, 13 nouns, two prepositions, two phrasal verbs, and a phrase expressing age in the past that is structurally different in Spanish and English: "When I was one" versus "Cuando tenía un año." Ms. Crowe is satisfied that many learning objectives were pleasantly accomplished with the song. Later that day, she is even more surprised when the students quietly begin to sing the song by themselves as they await the bus that will take them home.

When we further analyze the theoretical background for this teacher's use of multiple learning options in instruction, we know that the teacher intends for the students to connect the more concrete kinetic, visual, or auditory images to the abstract words they must remember. According to Paivio (1986), the human brain uses two types of memory: (1) sensory images including kinetic, visual, and auditory (touch and taste may also be incorporated), and (2) words or speech. When students experience an additional visual, auditory, or kinetic experience of the same abstract information such as the letter names and sounds, it causes the student to record a concrete mental image that is related to the more abstract letters, words, or sounds he has stored in the memory. These two types of memories, words and images, are connected in the brain, so that with both concrete images and abstract letters and words, the ability to remember the learning is twice as strong as it would be if only one type of representation was recorded in the memory. This is called the dual coding theory. A teacher who is knowledgeable of dual coding will use learning activities based on kinetic, visual, and auditory images so that her students are more likely to learn and put down memories that can be easily retrieved at a later date.

Some researchers think that there is a direct kinetic link between human movement and the development of language and letters themselves. This connection was investigated in linguistic research by Allott (1994) on the evolution of letter and word forms. Allott endeavors to link human motions and natural human gestures to the concrete printed form of letters and words. This connection is capitalized on in several alphabet-teaching programs which make kinetic intelligence, or movement, part of learning letters and sounds.

Zoophonics (<http://www.zoophonics.com>) is a teaching system used in the English language acquisition program in the southeast United States which is described in the vignettes. In this program, each letter of the alphabet is represented by a gestural equivalent which symbolizes an animal. This program links alphabet letters to animals by connecting each letter to an animal shape and alliterative properties of each animals' name (Allie Alligator says /a/.) The program engages students through their natural interest in animals and love of movement. It has been successful in the ELAP program to quickly teach letters and sounds to kindergarten students whose primary language is not English. In Spanish most of the consonant sounds are similar to those in English, but the

vowels need more emphasis with Ms. Crowe's students because most of the vowel sounds in English are new to them.

It is mid-September. The students have learned several complete texts of songs, and they are beginning to focus on individual letters. Ms. Crowe begins to teach the students to crack the alphabetic code using Zoophonics. Basic instruction starts with all short vowel sounds and consonant sounds come next. To begin, she shows her students a large card with Allie the Alligator in the shape of a capital A. Students giggle as they hold their arms like alligator jaws snapping as they repeat the short /a/ sound for Allie Alligator. Next, Ms. Crowe reveals the other side of the card to the students. On the reverse, the animal takes the shape of the alphabet letter to help students remember the abstract letter and sound by association with its animal shape. With daily practice her dual language kindergarteners master the alphabet letters and sounds in one week. When they perform their animal letter motions and sounds for the parent program on Monday night, both parents and teachers beam with pride, and the kindergarteners' shyness starts to melt away.

Ms. Crowe knows that students must review the alphabet frequently to retain new knowledge. Since new English language learners arrive frequently throughout the year and need to be introduced to the alphabet, repeated lessons on the letters and sounds serve as a beneficial review for the students. The English language learners enjoy language games, so Ms. Crowe brings a new game in the afternoon session--a new way to practice letters and sounds. To play the game, Ms. Crowe shows a small letter card to the students, repeats the sound, and places the animal letter card on the carpet, repeating the sequence until six cards are placed on the floor in a circle. Then, using a CD player and a hand-held remote device, Ms. Crowe starts the music and slowly walks around the circle of letter cards. After the third revolution, she stops the music and then points to the card nearest her. She loudly says the alphabet sound. She asks the students if they understand the game; they smile and reply, "Yes!" excitedly anticipating the fun. This process continues until eventually 15 alphabet cards are placed on the floor, and all 15 students in the ELAP class are playing the game. The letter sound version of musical chairs continues for seven minutes, and soon the lesson is over. Although the students are reluctant to stop the fun, it is time to go home.

When all of the letters have been taught to the new members of the class, the teacher will change the alphabet cards to word cards and review the sight words which have been learned so far this year. Many of these frequently used words such as *have*, *do*, and *you* don't follow the phonics rules for pronunciation. The students also have a list of these words displayed on a poster with the title *Popcorn Words* printed above. Ms. Crowe explains to the students, "These are basic words that constantly pop up to our attention." All kindergarten students, including the English language learners, are expected to recognize thirty-three of the high frequency words automatically before they move on to first grade, and they must read the words just as fluently as they identify the letters-sound relationships. It is assumed that once students know many frequently used words, they will be on their way to reading and writing well.

The Reading-Writing Connection in First Grade

Writing is the expressive aspect of English language learning. Language learners who have no words with which to express themselves in their new language can draw to demonstrate their understanding; that is their first form of writing. According to Tompkins (2006), emergent writers should learn to write at the same time as they learn about books and reading. Students may write about experiences that they have had or have shared with the class; this is called the language experience approach. At first, children's scribbles may represent only the first sound of the word, but most of the time children at the emergent literacy stage will be able to read what they have written by themselves whether their teachers can interpret it or not. Soon the children add ending sounds. Finally, vowels and correct spelling are seen in their spelling as children learn more about writing as they listen, speak, read, and write together about the topics that they study. These principles about beginning writing can be detected in the following vignette from Ms. Lafollette's first grade class in the same school's ELAP program.

Ms. Lafollette, the first grade teacher, prepares for her English language learners before they arrive in her class on a September morning. The previous day the students had been introduced to dinosaurs by species name as they dug in the sand and discovered miniature dinosaur models. They also had listened to the story, *Digging up Dinosaurs* (Aiki, 1988). Today Ms. Lafollette constructs a vocabulary board by placing six picture and word cards in the plastic pockets on the board. She writes a sentence on a long strip of heavy paper and underlines the vocabulary word, and finally she adds the correct picture for each word. There are six dinosaur vocabulary words: *tyrannosaurus*, *triceratops*, *stegosaurus*, *brontosaurus*, *pterodactyl*, and *mammoth*. With this unit, the teacher intends to use comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) to teach subject matter and English language at the same time.

Ms. Lafollette is prepared, and now it is time for a writing center activity time. Four students sit with the teacher at a small table. The vocabulary board with dinosaur words is to her left and the high frequency popcorn word chart is placed to the right of the teacher. Ms. Lafollette reviews both sets of words with the students. Next, she asks the children to think about the previous lesson and to think of a sentence that they would like to write about dinosaurs. With her prompting, students study the word chart and picture vocabulary. Then, they dictate a sentence in English to Ms. Lafollette. She repeats each sentence, showing the students the number of words in each sentence by lightly tapping her hand as she repeated each word. "How many words in the sentence?" she asks, and then highlights with her pen an equal number of lines on the student's blank paper as a guide. This memory aid assists the student to learn where the words stop and start, or concept of word, and it supports their knowledge of concept of sentence as well.

In the next step of the writing activity, each student uses the vocabulary and word charts on the table in front of them to copy the words needed to write the sentence that has just been dictated. Most students use capital letters and periods, one aspect of concepts about sentences. After each student writes a sen-

tence, he/she draws a picture to illustrate the sentence in a box at the top of the paper. If the sentence and picture match, this demonstrates that students understand that sentences have meaning, another important concept about sentences. As students work on the writing task, Ms. Lafollette edits the work by writing the correct spelling, if needed, under the word on the highlighted line. Examples of student work (below) show progress in oral and written English language proficiency, and the English language learners learn by experience that reading and writing are two related aspects of literacy that go hand in hand.

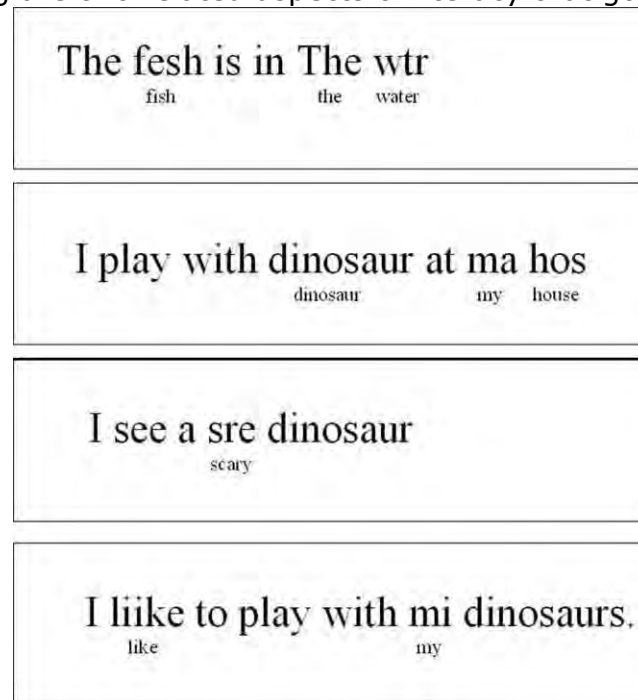


Figure 2: Examples of Student Work

Responding to Literature in Second Grade

English language learners have much to learn: letter sound relationships, what a word is, what a sentence is, and how to write one; but it is experience with books, stories, and songs themselves that cement the fact in their minds that books and stories have meaning and are enjoyable to read, reread, talk about, and write about. These are the ultimate goals of primary school education for both English language learners as well as primary speakers of English. Whole stories carry rich meaning: story structure and plot, humor and life messages, predictability and surprise, repetition and lyric language, colorful pictures, meaningful dialogue, and vocabulary, both known and new. Stories provide rich, complex, meaningful input that allows students to reference their own prior knowledge and background experiences in order to build meaning for themselves. When students understand the meaning and message of a story that they are engaged in hearing or are ready to read, they receive comprehensible input, or meaningful language experiences. This, according to Krashen (1982), is when real language acquisition occurs. As we look into a second grade classroom in the ELAP program, we will see how whole texts are used in the classroom. Students must understand most of the words before they can read and understand stories,

so vocabulary is an integral part of the lesson. Then, with lots of questioning and discussion, students and teacher develop their understandings of the folk tale as they share and learn together as a community of learners.

Ms. Derrick asks the second grade English language learners, "Have you read the famous children's story, *The Three Bears* (DePaola, 2004)?" Several students raise their hands indicating that they have read it before. As part of the process of learning about the parts of the book and how they work, students locate the book title, author, and illustrator by pointing out and naming them. Together they discuss the illustrations by taking a book walk. In this preview process, Ms. Derrick turns each page, and the students comment about what they see. This helps the students get the big idea of the book and engages their curiosity before they actually read the story.

Finally, Ms. Derrick reads the book to the students, stopping at crucial points in the story to show them the pages and to ask their predictions about what will happen next. In what is called a "grand conversation" after reading the tale, students are asked to retell their favorite parts of the story. Each student takes a turn, relishing the chance to regale classmates with their favorite parts of the story. Many of the children agree that the part when Goldilocks jumps out of the window and runs away is their favorite. Ms. Derrick understands that a personal response helps students understand and make connections with what they have read (Rosenblatt, 1991).

Next the students consider the elements that make up a story. On the table in front of them, the teacher places three sheets of paper with the words: characters, setting, and plot (see below). For the remainder of the class, Ms. Derrick and the students discuss these three aspects of the story, recording details on the appropriate sheets as the students discuss them.

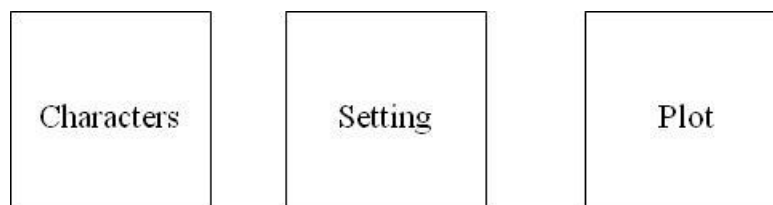


Figure 3: Three Aspects of the Story

The next day, Ms. Derrick prepares for vocabulary study and creates a graphic organizer to help the students record and remember details from their own reading about bears. For the individual inquiry about bears, Ms. Derrick has already visited the library and has checked out six books about bears; she has chosen each book at a different reading level in order to meet the needs of each of her six students. Each book has many pictures that illustrate black bears and their habitats. In preparation for the lesson, the teacher draws the outline of a bear on a table-sized piece of white paper to create a "word wall" upon which to list important words from the library books. On the bear-shaped word wall poster, the teacher writes categories in different places of the paper bear's body:

- Bears eat
- Bears drink
- Bears can

- Bears have
- Bears are

She plans for her students to complete the graphic organizer as they discuss the story and elaborate on the details.

That day, Ms. Derrick begins the class by asking the students to retell the story from yesterday's lesson, *The Three Bears*. Students excitedly recall the bears' adventures, the repetitive text features, and the frequency of the number three in the story. Next, Ms. Derrick asks, "The story we read was a folk tale. Bears talked and slept in beds in our story. Real bears don't do those things. What do you know about real, actual bears?" The students live in the Great Smoky Mountains, so several students have seen wild black bears and are excited to describe these experiences to their classmates and to their teacher.

After the discussion, the students consider what they know about real bears and what they would like to learn. As the teacher shows the bear themed word wall to the students and then tapes it to the wall, she asks them if they already know some answers to the written categories. When students answer, they receive a marker to record their answers on the bear word wall. Each student is eager to record an answer on the word wall with the special colored markers. But there are some facts that the students do not know. At this point, it is time for the students to find out more by conducting research together on bears. In order to obtain factual information, the students scan the teacher-selected library books for information that would complete the categories on the word wall. Upon finding an answer, each student writes the fact on paper and then walks up to the word wall to copy the information and contribute to the class assignment. By the end of the period, each student has found answers and has written them on the word wall. Each one raises a hand to volunteer to read aloud one of the six categories to the class.

On day three, the thematic unit (Meinbach, Rothlein, & Fredericks, 1995) on bears culminates in a writing assignment. Students excitedly enter the classroom and review the word wall, again taking turns to read the categories aloud to classmates. With a Venn diagram, Ms. Derrick asks the class to recall the story of *Three Bears*; then they recall the facts about real bears. She directs the class discussion to identify some similarities and differences between bears in the fantasy and the natural worlds. As students relate their ideas, Ms. Derrick asks if the item was real or fantasy and writes their statements in the appropriate circle of the Venn diagram. When ideas are exhausted, students utilize the posted information to write 3 -5 sentences comparing real versus fantasy bears. Students work with partners to write the paragraphs based on their responses. Volunteers read their sentences aloud: "Storybook bears eat porridge. Real bears eat fish."

At the end of the class, Ms. Derrick congratulates the students on their ideas and good work. She files their papers as writing samples to be examined as documents for the state assessment of academic progress in March. Ms. Derrick reflects about the well-integrated experience which her students had experienced as a learning community reading, discussing, and writing about literature and academic content about the theme, *The Three Bears*. As an English teacher, Ms. Derrick knows that a thematic unit of study on bears interests students while

addressing content and language objectives. Further, the teacher is pleased that the bear word wall significantly contributed to the success of the lesson, providing scaffolding (Richard-Amato & Snow, 2005) for the early writers.

Reflecting about the English Language Acquisition Program

The English language acquisition program works because a number of principles are woven throughout. By utilizing all modalities and incorporating music and movement, English learners are receptive to language and learn English more easily. Secondly, reading English holds more meaning for English language learners when they are engaged in writing English at the same time. And finally, the teachers in the ELAP recognize that young English language learners enjoy learning language and learn it quickly when multiple methods and strategies that appeal to their multiple intelligences, involve fun activities, and build classroom community are used. The lessons may seem elementary in their scope and subjects, but the lessons of kindergarten, first, and second grades are very important in building a broad literacy foundation for the young Spanish speaking students. And it is these literacy skills: reading, writing, and communicating with others in a learning community that the dual language students will continue to use to inform themselves for life as socially responsible adults. In English language acquisition programs such as the one featured, a larger goal is being addressed: Educators are meeting the English learning needs of a growing U.S. Spanish speaking populace who will soon have a voice in the democratic process. In just ten to thirteen years many of the ELAP students will be able to inform themselves, to vote for the candidates of their choice, and to make an impact on the political and economic policies of the United States.

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