

Using Cultural Responsiveness to Promote Early Childhood Literacy

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Abstract: In early childhood education, English language learners face a multitude of challenges that are unique to their educational experience. One challenge is English literacy, a required skill for later academic achievement. Contemporary research efforts have examined various pedagogical approaches that address these issues, such as culturally responsive teaching. This manuscript explores literacy methodologies through the lens of culturally responsive teaching, which include connecting cultural values between school and home through parental involvement, encouraging high self-efficacy in early childhood educators of ELLs, using evidence-based instructional methods, and connecting other languages with English to promote second language acquisition. Such efforts are important because appropriate support for English language learners is necessary to promote educational equity within the United States education system.

Introduction

The United States is one of the world's largest melting pots of culture and diversity. Because of this, there are challenges unique to the United States education system. Initial challenges English language learning children experience include contending with learning to communicate in a new language while instantaneously developing English literacy skills. Academic achievement in the United States requires students to read and write in English. Therefore, English Language Learners (ELLs) begin their academic journey with more obstacles than their native English-speaking counterparts. ELLs must not only overcome linguistic differences, but also cultural differences and incongruencies between values within education and home environments. Moreover, this population is growing. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2020), students of cultural minorities, such as Hispanic, Pacific Islanders, American Indian, Alaskan Native, and others are projected to steadily increase. To provide these individuals with an equitable chance for academic achievement, early childhood education in the United States must be prepared to properly support the distinctive needs of this population.

Teaching ELLs in early childhood is not a new occurrence, however, it has been modified over the past decades. One individual recalls her experience as an ELL in the 1990's with overall dissatisfaction:

Though I was born in the US, I spent my first years of life under the care of my relatives in Mexico. When I was 6, I moved to Chicago to be with my mother, and was placed in bilingual kindergarten to begin my schooling in the United States. I cannot recall much, but I know that I spent most of my time confused and crying. Sometimes, I would have to go to special classes with the other English learners. When I got older, I finally tested into native English lessons. I remember feeling sorry for students that had to remain in bilingual lessons. I really wish they had not separated students based on their language abilities

at my school. We were so afraid of being different (D. Chavez, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

In the past, this may have been a common experience for ELLs. However, with contemporary globalization efforts, multicultural educational research and specialized pedagogical strategies have become more prolific in early childhood education settings. Such research has branched into a plethora of concepts, such as cultural identity development, parental involvement trends of ELLs, integration of culture into developmentally appropriate practices, and the use of culturally responsive teaching. English literacy, being an important component to early childhood education, has also been thoroughly explored within the context of ELL instruction. This paper will examine pedagogical strategies that utilize cultural responsiveness to support ELLs in early childhood literacy and discuss why its use is important.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Effective strategies for teaching ELLs in English literacy require a cultural component. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) encompasses all approaches that connect teaching strategies to a child's native culture. According to Geneva Gay (2001), CRT can be defined by:

Using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly (p. 106).

Because CRT provides teachers with a way to more effectively teach cultural minorities, this approach should be applied to pedagogical strategies when teaching literacy to ELLs.

Culturally responsive teaching is designed to close the education gap that may result from cultural differences between the teacher, American society, and other students. Multiple researchers, such as Garza, Lavigne, and Si (2020) contend that culturally responsive teachers develop stronger relationships with their students because these teachers illustrate greater empathy to cultural values, socioeconomic status, and linguistic backgrounds. As a result, students exhibit higher engagement and a better relationship with their educational experience. One example of successful CRT can be observed in dual language classrooms, where everything is taught in English and Spanish. Students not only learn multiple languages but are never separated and are encouraged to work with one another (Garza et al., 2020). This demonstrates value for all cultures.

Early childhood education encompasses all areas of child development, such as mathematics, language and literacy, social emotional growth, and motor skills. Culture is deeply intertwined within all of these areas and contribute to a child's cultural identity. According to Vygotskian theory, the child's cultural surrounding is paramount because culture propels learning (Crain, 2005). In the United States, it can be easy to forget that the general population has a culture, which is inherently

euro centric. Therefore, children of minority cultures, for instance, Hispanic heritage, must find a balance between the culture that is experienced within the home and within their educational environments.

Since culture is a tool which propels learning, culture that is relevant to ELLs can be utilized for building skills such as literacy. Approaches to teaching literacy using CRT may include involving parents in literacy activities, promoting literacy using evidence-based instructional strategies, connecting children's native languages to English to support language acquisition, and encouraging high self-efficacy for teachers of ELLs in early childhood education.

Parental Involvement in Literacy Activities

Parental involvement in education is essential for student success, especially for ELLs learning literacy in early childhood education. A key reason for this is cultural congruency. Cultural congruency "implies one-to-one correspondence between what happens in school and what happens in the home. It seeks consistency between the child's home-school experience" (Roh, 1996 p. 8). In all cultures, parental involvement in education is imperative for developing early literacy skills. According to the NCES (2003), Hispanic parents of ELLs are more hesitant to participate with English language learning, possibly due to lacking English skills, limited access to resources, or simply because of differing values. However, connecting home and educational values are important for children to become more engaged with learning to read in English. A common issue teachers face while collaborating with ELL parents is prioritizing English over their child's native language development (Choi et al., 2020). However, parents that read to their children at home (in any language) establish value in reading which supports literacy in academic settings (Panferov, 2010). A culturally congruent way to translate these literacy values for other languages could be to provide reading materials in children's native languages as well as English in the classroom (Cabeza & Rouse, 2014).

Teachers can involve parents of ELLs in classroom activities such as asking for their participation in presentations or community events. Communicating with and involving parents in classroom activities also demonstrates value of the ELL child's unique culture and contributes to the child's cultural identity. Children that are in programs that equip CRT, such as dual language programs, have higher confidence and engagement in their academic experience and their roles as individuals in their families (Rodriguez Tamayo & Tenjo-Macías, 2019, p. 100). For hesitant parents, teachers should use multilingual resources or school communication systems to effectively converse with parents and inform them on ways to assist their child with their education at home (Panferov, 2010).

Using Culture in Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

Though evidence-based instruction is already used for general English literacy teaching, it can be adapted using CRT. Evidence-based instruction uses physical representations of concepts being taught to children, such as realia, pictures, and actions (Cabeza & Rouse, 2014. p. 62). Culturally responsive teachers label objects throughout the classroom using multiple language vocabularies, sing songs using

more than one language, provide books in multiple languages, invite parents for presentations, and include cultural artifacts in lessons (Cabeza & Rouse, 2014). In response, children will be eager to participate in relevant classroom activities, discover linguistic connections between their native languages and English, and motivated to read and communicate in any language. Evidence-based instruction appeals to all learning styles and can flexibly cater to multiple cultures while encouraging classroom engagement.

Translanguaging

Another culturally responsive strategy that combines culture and supports language acquisition and literacy is the use of “translanguaging.” Translanguaging combines the child’s native language and English to promote acquisition and code-switching abilities (Sayer, 2013. p. 68). Through translanguaging, students gain a better understanding about the intricacies of language use. In bilingual classrooms, the use of translanguaging has been found to promote better understanding of syntactic use of each language. For instance, a student combining English and Spanish while communicating will have to be aware of his or her use of verbs and nouns. Using this strategy is culturally responsive because it legitimizes the ELL’s vernacular rather than marginalizes their native culture within a dominant culture (Sayer, 2012. p. 69). Since translanguaging is an interpersonal code-switching practice, it can be implemented through group activities that encourage communication among peers. For example, each student could make a page for a class book to be read during circle time. Each child may write using words in any language but should be prepared to explain what they have written to their friends. Such activities foster interest in literacy, promotes code-switching, and supports social emotional development. On behalf of the teacher, translanguaging can be supported within the classroom through modeling or by not limiting the use of students’ native language during discourse.

The Self-Efficacious Teacher

It is ultimately the responsibility of teachers to implement CRT within American classrooms. Teachers that use CRT exhibit high self-efficacy (Garza et al., 2020). This is because these teachers empathize with students from differing cultural backgrounds and actively support their highly individualize needs. Unfortunately, one strategy cannot work for all English language learners. There has been more effort on behalf of the US education system to find supportive methods for ELLs, however, according to one teacher, more support is still needed to adequately accommodate the needs of ELLs in kindergarten:

I teach kindergarten with many English language learners and believe that there are more ways to support ELLs nowadays. We use new platforms that translate and help us communicate with parents. I use standard strategies for helping these children learn to read, such as sentence stemming, TPR, and visual aids, but this is similar to how we teach all kindergarteners. I believe that English speakers are always ahead of the ELLs. I wish that our district would help us teach to the whole child rather than focus entirely on their reading and testing

skills. Our trainings have not discussed culture (I. Wirt, personal communication, March 14, 2022).

Though this is the case for one school in one district in Northern Virginia, it illustrates the reality that teachers who have limited training or theoretical understanding about multicultural instruction must personally research and implement CRT with their students. Many teachers in early childhood education feel uncomfortable or unprepared instructing ELLs due to lack of cultural training (Choi et al., 2019). This can be more challenging in classrooms that have ELLs from multiple cultural backgrounds. Self-efficacious teachers are guided by individual relationships and understanding of student's native cultures. With modern technology, there are numerous resources that can be explored to implement CRT for the purpose of literacy instruction, such as the "Planned Language Approach" program (see <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/planned-language-approach>). For better understanding of the individual child's culture and language, teachers could interact with parents or examine resources online. For example, the teacher of a child that speaks Farsi would greatly benefit from exploring Farsi phrases, discussing interests and household routines with the child's family, and being knowledgeable of Farsi traditions.

Conclusion

Over 10% of the student population in the United States are ELLs, a third of which are Hispanic. (NCES, 2019). When observing academic trends of ELLs, it is important to acknowledge data for Hispanic individuals because they are the majority of the ELL populace and constitute for over 25% of the entire US population. Hispanic children are less likely to visit a library, have poorer reading scores than their white peers, and exhibit the highest dropout rates in the country (NCES, 2019). The main issue being that they are English language learners: "One of the challenges currently facing schools is providing equal educational opportunities to students from various cultural backgrounds, some of whom are not proficient in English" (NCES, 2019 p. 72). For a democracy that promises equitable education opportunities, this is a serious concern.

The world of teaching is rapidly changing, and culture has become a major component to the effective implementation of early pedagogical teaching strategies in American schools. Researchers are providing more data about the importance of integrating culture into early childhood pedagogy, for reasons of engagement, social emotional development, language acquisition needed for literacy, and understanding concepts that are taught in English. English language learners, on average, perform more poorly in academics than their English-speaking counterparts. However, students in programs that implement CRT exhibit high academic achievement in later years (Garza et al., 2020). Culturally responsive teaching is certainly a valuable tool for teaching literacy in American schools because it not only values what is being learned, but values the learner as well.

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About the Author

Rachael graduated from Wright State University with a Bachelor in Fine Arts in 2014. She is an international kindergarten teacher residing in Thailand. She has instructed students from all over the world for six years and is passionate about the influence of culture in early childhood education.