

Methods for Teaching Literacy to Early Elementary English Learners

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the need for current and pre-service educators to learn how to effectively use instructional strategies to teach literacy to English learners. Research centers on methods that target the emergent literacy skills of English learners enrolled in kindergarten through grade three. Currently, data demonstrates that English learners are entering American public schools at an increasing rate. Early elementary educators are the first teachers that will encounter the new influx of these students. The following information examines two methods that early elementary educators can use to instruct English learners effectively and improve their language and literacy capabilities. English learners require strong emergent literacy skills to find academic success as they ascend grade levels and encounter more advanced texts.

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Joshua is a kindergarten English language learner with a complicated language acquisition history. Joshua's parents are native Chinese, but he was born and raised in the United States until the age of approximately 18 months. Joshua's family visited China in December 2019 to see Joshua's grandparents for the Christmas holidays. This trip was intended to last one month. However, the COVID-19 outbreak occurred during their stay. Due to Chinese regulations, they could not return to the United States until March 2022. Joshua's parents had every intention of Joshua being fluent in English and learning Chinese as a second language at home. Although Joshua's first words were likely in English, he lost all English language acquisition when forced to spend crucial developmental years in China. Joshua's parents expressed concern for his academic future in the United States and do not want him to fall behind his classmates in literacy skills due to being an English learner. Joshua's teacher, Ms. White, is aware of this concern and knows that kindergarten is a critical year for developing emergent literacy skills for children K-3. Ms. White seeks to find teaching methods proven to be useful in fostering emergent literacy skills for children who are simultaneously acquiring the English language.

This account is one of millions like it in the United States today. Joshua is an English learner (EL). ELs are students who have limited knowledge of English as it is not their native language. Data suggests that ELs are becoming increasingly common in the American public education system. Current estimates demonstrate that as of 2019, 5.1 million, or 10.4%, of public education students were ELs (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This is an increase from 2010, in which only 9.2% of students were ELs (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The data confirms that the presence of students like Joshua is increasing

in the classroom. As this rate increases, the first educators that will encounter new ELs are early childhood educators (K-3). These educators are responsible for instilling the primary skills needed for ELs to achieve and feel confident in their academic abilities beyond early childhood. One of the key skills for ELs to have, and arguably the most important, is the ability to interact with the English language through literacy. Foundational literacy instruction must be provided immediately and intentionally to encourage future academic success for ELs. Without it, ELs like Joshua will struggle as they ascend grade levels and encounter increasingly advanced texts. How can educators give ELs the head start they need? Elementary English language learners require differentiated instruction methods during the K-3 emergent literacy level to gain success in reading, comprehending, and using the English language. ELs are unique in their limited understanding of English and will not thrive when given the same instruction as their native-speaking peers.

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model

Sheltered instruction is a differentiated and integrated teaching approach that allows ELs to learn content in multiple subject areas (math, science, social studies) while also instructing them in the English language literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening). This method gives students tools to learn new content while simultaneously developing their English language skills. It involves making content more accessible to ELs by ensuring it is taught intentionally and comprehensibly. In 2012, researchers studied the effects of sheltered instruction on EL's achievement in English proficiency, using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model. The researchers found that the SIOP model significantly improved scores on English proficiency assessments (Short et al., 2012). The more proficient in English ELs become, the better their performance in emergent literacy skills will be. Teachers can implement the SIOP model in their early childhood classrooms to ensure all content areas are being taught, while also developing English proficiency.

The SIOP model was originally developed for researchers to observe teacher performance of sheltered instruction methods. It has since evolved into an accessible lesson-planning approach for early childhood educators to utilize with ELs (Short, 2013). The overarching goal of the SIOP model is to make content comprehensible to ELs. Instruction that is not differentiated risks ELs becoming overwhelmed by the content and becoming too discouraged to actively participate. By utilizing the SIOP model educators can address and quell EL's frustrations by verbally slowing down instruction, thoroughly explaining each step in the lesson process, and encouraging students to orally express their reasonings. ELs will likely struggle when speech moves too rapidly and when steps are simplified and/or combined. When ELs do not feel pressured to perform on the same level as their native-speaking peers they will be more comfortable in developing their linguistic and literacy skills. The SIOP model is outlined in eight sections (Short, 2013). Below, each section will be defined and the objectives and intended outcomes summarized.

Lesson Preparation

Lesson preparation suggests that educators have content and language objectives that are clearly defined and displayed. They will review these objectives with students. Educators ensure the lesson content is developmentally appropriate and prepare to adapt the lesson to meet the varying levels of language proficiency. Educators provide supplemental materials in the lesson, like models and visuals, and create meaningful activities in the content area that provide the opportunity to practice English language and literacy skills. Hands-on activities would be especially helpful in early childhood to encourage active participation (Short, 2013).

Building Background

Educators should remain aware of the context of ELs home and community lives and utilize this background knowledge to craft comprehensible and relevant lessons. Where are they from originally? What is their family and community like? What does their culture value and celebrate? The genuine interest of the educator creates a supportive classroom environment. The educator can then explicitly intertwine their future lessons with students' backgrounds and prior learning, strengthening the student-teacher relationship further. Additionally, the educator needs to build EL student background content knowledge to enable them to productively engage with texts. An example would be introducing new vocabulary as part of background building. Educators are to emphasize new words by providing a thorough introduction and redefining them often (Short, 2013).

Comprehensible Input

Comprehensible input first focuses on ensuring the instructor's speech is slower than normal, enunciated, and simplified. This will be especially key for ELs K-3, as even their native language skills are still developing. Students need direct, clear explanations of their tasks. All K-3 students need explicit instructions; however, it is even more important for K-3 ELs to receive clear explanations to ensure comprehension. A variety of techniques are used to assist ELs in understanding the lesson. Therefore, students are more likely to grasp the content through one technique or another. In early childhood settings, techniques like visuals, demonstrations, modeling, and hands-on approaches will assist in receiving active participation from students (Short, 2013).

Strategies

Educators use scaffolding techniques frequently to support student comprehension and challenge them to problem-solve and think critically on their own. Students are given ample opportunity to develop learning strategies. Encourage ELs to discuss and develop their thoughts with classmates through collaborative activities. Young ELs can use art to summarize and express what they have learned from the content. Encourage engagement by performing lessons that allow interaction with tangible objects, listening to and reading stories, and utilizing family/community participation (Short, 2013).

Interaction

Educators remain aware of how their interactions with ELs affect the learning environment. The educator provides many opportunities for students to interact with them through questioning and discussion. As mentioned in Strategies, educators should also encourage interaction with peers through partner and/or group collaboration. This encourages ELs to use the English language to elaborate on their thoughts regarding the content. Students are given ample time to respond to educator questions and are consistently given the opportunity to do so. All students K-3 may need extra time to vocalize their thoughts, and again, this is going to be especially true for K-3 ELs due to their limited linguistic knowledge of English (Short, 2013).

Practice and Application

As stated previously, educators will provide hands-on, manipulative materials for ELs to use while learning and applying their knowledge in the content area and linguistically. Learning activities integrate subject areas with English literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) so the students improve their language development no matter the subject at hand. For example, in an early childhood setting, an educator could teach about community values (social studies), and then have the students write a short song in English about what their native community is like. Encourage students to perform the song for family and friends, not just their educator. This activity would integrate the subject area with background knowledge and English language development in an engaging format (Short, 2013).

Lesson Delivery

The objectives of lesson delivery are for the educator to meet the standards they set out to teach, and to follow the protocols listed in the previous six sections. Educators will ensure content and language objectives are clarified, discussed, and supported in the lesson. The lesson will be relevant to the students and remain developmentally appropriate. It will be comprehensible, engaging, and interactive. The lesson will support multiple learning strategies and is adapted and adjusted based on student understanding and English proficiency level (Short, 2013).

Review and Assessment

Assessment of student learning is a foundational pillar in education and the final section of the SIOP model. Educators will assess students throughout the lesson and provide feedback that encourages students to think critically and question concepts. Educators will assess the overall learning of the lesson through student work and responses. Educators will use the assessment information to determine what needs to be improved, elaborated, and/or continued in subsequent lessons (Short, 2013).

A Culturally Responsive Approach to Literacy

ELs are aware of their differences in comparison to their native-speaking peers. Additionally, they likely recognize that their linguistic and literacy skills are less advanced relative to their peers. This realization can distress EL students and breed feelings of inadequacy. Researchers have deduced that a feeling of belonging in the classroom and school environment leads to greater academic success (McMahon et al., 2009). When EL students feel their cultural identity is included and respected in the classroom, they will be more likely to actively participate in English literacy learning.

An educator who is culturally responsive and inclusive is one who that recognizes that ELs have a unique perspective. It is key that an educator does not claim that all students are the same. Instead, they should emphasize the importance of differences, culturally and linguistically, and celebrate them. According to Lopez and Iribarren (2014), effective culturally responsive instruction, “addresses the needs of all students, affirms each student’s cultural identity, and draws upon students’ backgrounds as an asset” (p. 109). This instruction validates students’ individual life experiences. Educators must remain aware of the cultural and linguistic differences of EL students and plan intentional, differentiated instructional adaptations to ensure academic success; specifically, in literacy. Educators can achieve this by respecting and celebrating the student’s culture via stories.

Reading

Educators may notice that EL students are able to converse with adults and peers sufficiently. However, this observation does not imply that the student’s linguistic skills are so advanced as to not require intervention in reading (Islam & Park, 2015). Reading requires more language development than speaking does. To read successfully at the emergent level students must understand that letters and words convey meaning to communicate, recognize English letters and correlate them to sounds, and comprehend the segmentation and blending of phonemes to create words. These are only the main components of emergent literacy skills and educators should expect to encounter other difficulties. For example, Joshua initially struggled to read and write left-to-right, due to his upbringing in China.

There are a variety of instructional supports that educators can implement to foster emergent literacy skills in their EL students. One-on-one time with a teacher gives the student the opportunity to express any confusion they have regarding the text. This time also gives the educator the ability to closely assess the student’s progress and make note of what the student finds the most challenging. Small group reading instruction is helpful too, as it does not further isolate the student from their native-speaking peers and still gives the educator an opportunity to work closely with and monitor the EL’s progress (Islam & Park, 2015). Before reading stories or informational texts, educators can introduce the text and provide context, giving ELs a frame of reference. Encourage ELs to visualize the text throughout reading, by pointing to illustrations and explaining how it relates to the text. Additionally, repeated readings can give ELs confidence in their abilities and a sense of achievement once they have mastered it. Familiarity with a repeated text can also assist in

fostering early reading comprehension skills. ELs can answer questions about setting, characters, and plot in narrative texts, and main ideas in informational texts.

When providing the previously listed reading supports, using materials that are multicultural and incorporate the EL's background is beneficial (Lopez & Iribarren, 2014). When available texts are relevant to EL's experiences and cultural values, they will feel validated in the classroom environment. Asking questions regarding the relevant cultural text will give ELs a chance to answer confidently. For example, "Is this holiday one that you celebrate? How does your family like to celebrate it?" and "Is that a type of food you and your family enjoy?" This gives ELs a chance to share anecdotes whilst elaborating on the text they have read. Culturally responsive reading instruction provides educators with an opportunity to make ELs feel comfortable and supported in the classroom. Likewise, it provides motivation for ELs to further their English language development.

Speaking, Listening, and Writing

The remaining aspects of emergent literacy development are speaking, listening, and writing. All three can be improved through culturally responsive, differentiated instruction. ELs are encouraged to practice speaking through discussion of cultural aspects with their teacher and peers. Students may present on their culture if they feel comfortable. Listening skills are improved as educators assess EL student understanding of teacher and peer-led readings of multicultural texts, and scaffold when necessary to increase difficulty. Writing can be encouraged through a culturally responsive lens by having the EL student author texts about components of their culture and community experiences (Lopez & Iribarren, 2014). What would the student like their peers to know? What differences and similarities have they noticed between their home and school cultures? Through these modes, ELs learn to interact with the world using the English language, without diminishing their connection to their native culture, language, and traditions.

Conclusion

The presence of ELs in early education will not disappear. In fact, data suggests it will continue to increase. As diverse K-3 ELs enter the classroom, educators have multiple methods they can utilize to foster English language development in the emergent literacy stage. The SIOP model gives educators the framework needed to provide differentiated, sheltered instruction in all content areas while simultaneously developing English proficiency. Differentiating instruction while creating a culturally responsive classroom environment will encourage active participation from ELs. The methods will increase the motivation for ELs like Joshua to use the English language to communicate and learn through reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

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About the Author

Brianna Gilbert received a bachelor's degree in political science from Bowling Green State University in 2017. Years later she discovered a passion for teaching. Brianna enrolled in the University of Toledo in 2021 to pursue a master's degree in early childhood education. She hopes to begin teaching professionally following graduation.