Literature-Based Instruction in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

While children’s literature was a central feature of elementary classrooms during the 1980s and early 1990s, in the last decade commercial basal readers and decodable texts have replaced literary-based instruction in the classroom. Even in English as a second language (ESL) instruction, state-adopted basal readers have become the primary source of literacy education, despite research that suggests such prescriptive curricula can negatively impact student comprehension. In this paper I explore the use of literature-based, interdisciplinary thematic units in the elementary ESL classroom. Studies dating back to the 1980s suggest that the use of “real” books in the elementary classroom is positively correlated with improved literacy development in all students, particularly in English language learners. This paper considers the basics of literature-based instruction, its relevance to English as a second language education, and specific strategies through which children’s literature can be productively utilized in the elementary ESL classroom.
Literature-Based Instruction in the ESL Classroom

During the 1980s and 1990s, literature-based instruction was the primary form of literacy education in the United States, offering students the opportunity to read and to explore literary texts in ways that supplemented learning, not just in language arts, but across disciplines (Arya et al., 2005). In the last decade, however, commercial basal readers and decodable texts, as well as scripted discussions of these materials, have replaced literary studies in the classroom, a change promoted by No Child Left Behind legislation and the publication of research studies sponsored by the publishers of commercial reading programs (Arya et al., 2005). Even in English as a second language (ESL) instruction, state-adopted basal readers have become the primary source of literacy education (Bello, Fajet, Shaver, Toombs, & Schumm, 2003). While some mainstreamed ESL students are learning to read using basal readers for native English speakers (Bello et al., 2003), others are exposed to basal readers and curriculums created and designed specifically for English language learners (ELLs). In the Fort Worth Independent School District, for example, elementary ESL instructors currently use the Avenues curriculum by the Hampton-Brown Company (“Bilingual/ESL,” n.d.).

While basal series produced specifically or modified for ELLs may be helpful in assisting general teachers with ESL instruction (Bello et al., 2003), research suggests that basal readers may actually interfere with student comprehension due to the artificial, prescriptive nature of the text (Hare, Rabinowitz, & Schieble, 1989). Literature-based instruction in the elementary classroom, on the other hand, is positively correlated with improved literacy development in all students, particularly in English language learners (Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). In this paper I explore the use of literature-based, interdisciplinary thematic units in the elementary ESL classroom and consider the basics of literature-based instruction, its relevance to English as a
second language education, and specific strategies through which children’s literature can be productively utilized in the elementary ESL classroom.

**Literature-Based Instruction**

**Definition**

In their study comparing literature-based and basal-based reading programs, Arya et al. (2005) describe the literature-based classroom as one in which instructors use authentic fiction and nonfiction trade books as a central feature of reading instruction. At the most basic level, instructors may implement literature-based instruction through the simple incorporation of class libraries and shared book experiences, but they can also use literature of all genres in content subject areas in order to supplement, or even substitute for, textbooks (Harris, 1993). Teachers who use literature in all content areas create and write lessons based on these reading materials, taking into account children’s interests and literacy needs (Arya et al., 2005).

While skills and phonics are taught to students in literature-based classrooms, teachers ultimately encourage students to focus on constructing meaning as they read and support students in the use of syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic cuing systems to help accomplish this (Arya et al., 2005). After exploring the texts both individually and through group discussions, students in literature-based classrooms are encouraged to connect their readings to their lives and to other texts in meaningful ways. In contrast, phonics-based programs like those used in commercially constructed curricula are scripted to include explicit phonics instruction rather than guidance in literary comprehension and often result in less meaningful literacy development (Arya et al., 2005).

Classrooms in which literature serves a central role are distinguished by specific pedagogic strategies that promote literacy development and reading comprehension. Arya et al.
(2005) note that literature-based instruction frequently includes experiences such as shared, guided, and independent reading, as well as interactive, guided, and independent writing activities as aids to students’ literacy development. More specifically, Huck (quoted in Scharer, 1992) defines five features of the literature-based classroom that promote student literacy success: a significant read-aloud program; the opportunity for reading self-selected books; discussion groups; interdisciplinary literature units; and the opportunity to respond creatively, whether through visual or written arts. In her literature review of literature-based instruction in the elementary classroom, Violet J. Harris (1993) describes other standard pedagogical features of literature-based reading programs, including the following: student-centered pedagogy; a large, diverse collections of books; collaborative groups; the minimal use of worksheets; and the use of alternative forms of assessment, including student portfolios.

**Language Theory, Literacy Development, and Literature-Based Instruction**

**Language Acquisition Theory**

In order to understand the significant contributions literature-based instruction can make to students’ linguistic development, one must first have a basic understanding of language theory and child language development. In his chapter “Linguistic Foundations for Teaching English as a Second Language,” A. L. Carrasquillo (1994) describes two approaches to the study of language: behaviorist and cognitive. Based on the work of B. F. Skinner, the behaviorist approach to language suggests that language learning is primarily influenced by environmental circumstance and is, therefore, a learned behavior (Carrasquillo, 1994). The behaviorist approach, which emphasizes rote memorization as a means of learning language, was the primary foundation for early first and second language acquisition theory, but cognitive models have since garnered more theoretical attention (Carrasquillo, 1994). Theorized by Chomsky,
cognitive theory of language suggests that language acquisition is a cognitive activity resulting from an innate propensity for language acquisition. This model emphasizes that children acquire language by internalizing the linguistic messages that surround them (Carrasquillo, 1994).

Using a cognitive approach to language acquisition theory, Carrasquillo (1994) states that, given linguistic stimulation, children will acquire language and, without formal instruction, are able to learn the structure of a language and communicate using that language. As children are exposed to new linguistic concepts, they must see to understand what they hear so that they can have a reference for the messages being transmitted (Carrasquillo, 1994). Ultimately, children do not just listen and imitate the adults that surround them but construct language themselves, primarily for a functional purpose (Carrasquillo, 1994). Chomsky and other language theorists hypothesize that primary language is generally acquired in the same way.

Carrasquillo (1994) defines the four stages of language acquisition as 1) preproduction, in which infants gain the ability to understand the language that surrounds them; 2) early production, in which children develop the ability to speak using single words or simple phrases; 3) speech emergence, in which students gain the ability to speak in elaborate phrases; and, finally, 5) intermediate fluency, in which children can speak in full sentences. Children in the elementary classroom are working towards intermediate fluency in both written and verbal English. By exposing students to literature regularly and in relation to a variety of disciplines, instructors are supporting the brain’s natural ability to process and to formulate language.

**Second Language Acquisition Theory**

Creating a literature-based classroom for ESL education is also a technique supported by theories of second language acquisition, particularly that discussed by S. D. Krashen (1985) in his book *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. Krashen (1985) considers a component
of second language acquisition theory called the Input Hypothesis. The Input Hypothesis is the central feature of a linguistic theory made up of five distinct hypotheses. The acquisition/learning hypothesis suggests that language acquisition occurs in two separate ways: acquisition, the subconscious process of developing language, and learning, the conscious and formal study of language (Krashen, 1989). According to the natural order hypothesis, the acquisition of linguistic rules occurs naturally in a predictable order (Krashen, 1989), but our ability to edit or monitor these rules, described by the monitor hypothesis, comes later as we develop a conscious regard for a language’s formal requirements.

The two hypotheses most relevant to our discussion are the input and affective filter hypotheses. The input hypothesis, the focus of Krashen’s discussion, suggests that we learn language in only one way, through our exposure to linguistic messages or “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985). Working in conjunction with this hypothesis is the affective filter hypothesis, which states that language learners can be blocked from developing linguistically if their affective filter is up due to lack of self-confidence or motivation (Krashen, 1985). Ultimately, Krashen (1985) states that these hypotheses can be summarized with one claim: “[P]eople acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to let the input ‘in’ (p. 4)” For effective ESL instruction in the elementary classroom, then, teachers must be sure to provide considerable comprehensible input in a way that is supportive and motivating to English language learners.

**Promoting ESL Literacy Using Literature-Based Instruction**

In support of Krashen’s theory of the input hypothesis, an instructional method for ESL classrooms called the “Natural Approach” has been devised, stating that instructors should offer understandable input through authentic materials and a variety of contextualized media
Carrasquillo (1994) further suggests that an effective ESL classroom does four things: emphasizes communication and meaning; integrates understanding, speaking, reading, and writing into the curriculum; recognizes students’ prior linguistic and educational backgrounds; respects students’ cultural heritage; and offers a continuation of linguistic development for functional concepts of communication. Because literature-based instruction emphasizes the use of authentic materials to integrate reading, writing, speaking, and understanding, it is an excellent way to increase comprehensible input in the ESL classroom and lower ELLs’ affective filters through the promotion of informal, independent reading.

Instructors of ESL students must consciously construct a learning environment that will promote students’ language development, as well as an increase in content knowledge. Therefore, literacy becomes a focal point in this instructional environment. In fact, S. Watts-Taffe and D. M. Truscott (2000) state that, “[g]iven the interconnectedness of language development and cognitive development, research in the area of ESL education suggests that for ESL students, just as for native English speaking students, English-language learning should take place in conjunction with the learning of academic content” (p. 260). In their article “Storybook Reading: Improving Vocabulary and Comprehension for English-Language Learners,” Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, and Vaughn (2004) state that ESL teachers can use these same strategies of literature-based instruction to promote second language literacy, particularly with regards to vocabulary and comprehension. These authors emphasize that contextualized vocabulary instruction using content-related material is one of the greatest benefits of book-based instruction for English language learners. Teacher read-alouds and guided class discussion are a particularly useful way to accomplish these literacy goals (Hickman et al., 2004). Hadaway et al. (2002) suggest that collaborative work like shared reading and guided reading are significant strategies
for promoting literacy development in the ESL classroom. Sustained silent reading, too, is a useful technique in the ESL classroom because it promotes reading for enjoyment, w.

**Stages of Literacy Development in the Literature-Based ESL Classroom**

*Oral Language Literacy*

As the brief exploration of language acquisition illustrates, oral language development, which includes listening and speaking, is one of the first steps in language development in children and is the foundation for reading and writing (Hadaway et al., 2002). Children who have come from homes in which they have been encouraged to talk and to listen have a great advantage when they enter school because they have a general understanding of sentence structure and the different contexts of language that will be useful during reading instruction (Hadaway et al., 2002).

Like children learning a first language, ESL students who have not been exposed to English at home go through stages of oral literacy development in the classroom. Initially, beginning English language learners go through a silent period in which they are listening and making sense of the language around them. At this stage, the instructor should foster this productive silence and focus on enhancing students’ listening comprehension (Hadaway et al., 2002). As students become more comfortable, they will begin to experiment with the language, a situation that can be fostered through instructors’ creation of a comfortable, low-risk environment that will keep students’ affective filters low (Hadaway et al., 2002). Intermediate ELLs use language more purposefully, but they still need support through interdisciplinary instruction that encourages comprehension and retention, as well as vocabulary development (Hadaway et al., 2002). Finally, advanced ELLs can use language creatively and can understand and respond to their teachers’ questions and conversations (Hadaway et al., 2002). Throughout
these stages of development, instructors can use strategies like show and tell, choral reading, collaborative learning activities, creative dramatics, cumulative-text picture books, and literature circles to help promote ESL students’ oral literacy development (Hadaway et al., 2002).

Hough, Nurss, & Scott (1986) state that reading aloud is a long-established natural device for promoting oral language development and is an important strategy in the ESL classroom. Certain reading aloud techniques are useful in the English language classroom and should be considered in the development literature-based instruction. First, instructors should read stories to students with high frequency (at least once a day) (Hough, et al., 1986). While reading the stories, instructors should use verbal and nonverbal cueing strategies – including pauses and gestures – and ask appropriate questions to improve students’ comprehension. Instructors should also use well illustrated books so that the pictures help maximize students’ understanding. Finally, instructors should reread favorite books and encourage students to listen to audio books and follow along with the text (Hough et al., 1986).

Reading Literacy

Like those in oral literacy development, ESL students also go through specific stages of reading development, which can be supported through literature-based instruction. With many English language learners, reading is often defined specifically as the ability to decode written texts, which has led many ESL instructors to look for commercially-produced products like Avenues for use in the ESL classroom (Hadaway et al., 2002). However, despite the emphasis placed on decoding, research suggests that the different processes of reading are similar in all languages. The difficulties facing English language learners, then, are related more to language 1 (L1) literacy levels and general English proficiency (Hadaway et al., 2002).
As beginning English language learners, beginning ESL students first listen and internalize oral language, which teachers should then link to written symbols (Hadaway et al., 2002). Though phonics instruction is important to beginning readers, it should not be the focus of any reading instruction for ESL students. As Arya et al. (2005) indicates, the use of authentic literature or trade books is a significant way to teach phonics while still emphasizing comprehension. Such strategies as using big books, sharing predictable texts, using real-world print sources, and reading aloud can help beginning readers tackle both phonetics and literary comprehension (Hadaway et al., 2002). Having been exposed to so much comprehensible input, intermediate language learners are able to read short paragraphs, have a larger vocabulary, and are able to recognize different textual genres (Hadaway et al., 2002). Instructors can begin to use content-based trade books and novels that incorporate students’ ever-expanding academic vocabulary. They can also use attention-focusing techniques, such as graphic organizers and lesson frameworks, to help students who are still struggling with the increasingly advanced content (Hadaway et al., 2002). Finally, the advanced ELL is most likely to be capable of fully functioning in a mainstream classroom and can read and understand more complicated material. However, these students may still struggle with academic language in certain content areas, and can benefit from an instructor-assisted reading process, which includes a variety pre-reading, during-reading, and postreading activities (Hadaway et al., 2002). Reading development is most explicitly linked to literature-based instruction and is promoted through all forms of reading, particularly read alouds, shared reading, and independent reading.

**Writing Literacy**

Research suggests that, like reading, writing proficiency in second language acquisition is similar to that of first-language acquisition. As Hardaway et al. (2002) explain, emergent writers
use scribbling, moving eventually into the prephonemic stage in which readers use single letters to represent words. During the third stage, the early phonemic stage, students use letters to represent entire words and then move onto the letter-naming stage, which illustrates students emerging phonemic awareness. Finally, writers move to the transitional stage in which writing begins to look more conventional. While English language learners follow this same pattern, they often struggle with mixing different languages in their writing and often make more syntactical or vocabulary errors than native speakers (Hadaway et al., 2002).

English language learners in the beginning stages of writing displaying limited writing skills because they are unfamiliar with both the writing process and the language being used (Hadaway et al., 2002). Instructors should introduce emergent writers with the English alphabet and language by using trade books, creating word walls, and posting labels around the classroom to expose students to site words and vocabulary. Because of the link between oral literacy development and emergent writing, instructors should continue to emphasize listening skills to promote greater comprehension (Hadaway et al., 2002). Intermediate writers have a greater proficiency with the rules of the English language, but this causes them second-guess their work and, at times, get stuck. Instructors can help reassure and motivate students through reading authentic, quality literature aloud and discuss the difference between written and oral language (Hadaway et al., 2002). Finally, readers at the advanced level of proficiency can write in a variety of contexts and should have practice in note-taking strategies like summarizing and paraphrasing. Teachers should continue to expose students to quality literature and promote the creation of original writing (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002).

Watts-Taffe and Truscott (2000) suggest that all students can participate in the writing process, even when their English fluency is limited. In fact, instructors can encourage on writing
and supplemental illustrations during the ELLs’ silent period. The best strategy for promoting the development of writing literacy in English language learners is to emphasize the writing process (Hadaway et al., 2002), which has become a pedagogical standard in composition courses. The first step, prewriting, can be conducted through brainstorming, clustering, and free-writing (Hadaway et al., 2002). The second stage, drafting, enables students to write full pieces of writing without the fear of lacking perfection. The final polishing stages – revising, editing, and publishing – are the most time-consuming strategy, but it is also the one in which collaborative work with peers can be most productive (Hadaway et al., 2002). This multi-step writing process is significant in the ESL classroom because ELLs need adequate time to compose the content of their writing before worrying about grammatical conventions and the structure of language (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). Allowing students to make errors helps the teacher monitor the students’ literacy development, and encouraging the use of L1 words during writing activities can help students focus on meaning and build their confidence (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000).

**Literature-Based Thematic Units**

**Planning and Implementing**

While instructors can institute specific instructional strategies according to ELLs’ stage of oral language, reading, or writing development, English language learners benefit from learning in context, and therefore the use of interdisciplinary, literature-based thematic units is a great way of expanding ELLs’ general literacy. Thematic units are lessons that use a unifying topic to connect learning activities across disciplines. Hadaway et al. (2002) suggest that planning collaboratively is the best way to brainstorm and develop literature-based units that are relevant to ELLs. But working with fellow instructors is not enough: as Carrasquillo suggests in
his discussion of effective ESL classrooms, instructors must consider their students’ cultural backgrounds so that the curriculum can build on their prior knowledge in constructive ways (Hadaway et al., 2002). It is important that instructors spend time introducing the unit to the class before it begins so that students can anticipate the instructors’ expectations for the entire unit and can familiarize themselves with important concepts and vocabulary that may be unfamiliar (Hadaway et al., 2002).

**Selecting Literature**

The selection of appropriate reading materials is also an important part of creating a literature-based classroom. When one thinks of a literature-based classroom, one immediately imagines fictional picture books, novels, and short stories, which can be used to teach, among other content information, the narrative structure to students. However, other books can be incorporated into the ESL classroom, including nonfiction, poetry, and multicultural literature.

When choosing nonfiction trade books for the literature-based ESL classroom, instructors should be sure to find texts that link language and content development. Hadaway et al. (2002) suggests that the following books are useful in literacy development: concept books, photo essays, life-cycle books, activity books, journals and diaries, and biographies. In choosing books of this genre, instructors must be sure to consider a book’s accuracy, accessibility, and complexity (Hadaway et al., 2002).

Despite the fact that it is an underutilized resource in many classrooms, poetry is an ideal medium for literacy development in an ESL literature-based classroom. Poetry has repetition, rhythm, and rhyme, which makes it very accessible to English language learners, and can be used as a bridge to a variety of disciplines (Hadaway et al., 2002). Instructors can easily incorporate poetry into all three areas of literacy – listening, reading, and writing. The instructor can plan
read-alouds, choral readings, or even dramatic interpretations of poetry, and can also encourage students to write their own creative works (Hadaway, 2002).

Multicultural literature, both fiction and nonfiction, is an important inclusion in the mainstream classroom as it allows ESL students to relate to literary texts in a personal way and introduces native English speakers to unfamiliar cultures (Hadaway et al., 2002). Instructors should take great pains to introduce multicultural literature that is authentic, well-written, and accurate so that students can get a positive, productive experience with the literature (Hadaway et al., 2002). Multicultural literature can be found across all genres and could therefore be incorporated into any unit, no matter the objective or the discipline.

**Conclusion**

While literature-based literacy instruction was a highly promoted pedagogical strategy in reading programs during the 80s and 90s, schools have moved away from this highly effective, research-based technique in favor of basal readers and explicit phonics instruction. However, studies have shown that prescribed reading curricula are not beneficial for native English speakers, and they are particularly harmful to English language learners who need additional guidance with language comprehension. Literature-based classrooms, which use authentic literature as the central feature of instruction, utilize a variety of techniques that both increase the comprehensible input and lower the affective filters of English language learners, thus creating an optimum environment for English language acquisition. Literature-based instruction can be used to promote specific developmental stages of oral language, reading, and writing in the ESL classroom, but it is also very well suited to interdisciplinary thematic instruction, which uses literature from all genres to bridge content with literacy development.
Although I anticipated the benefits of literature-based instruction in the ESL classroom, I was particularly struck by the similarities between the positive aspects of this instructional strategy and the suggested methodology for creating an effective ESL classroom, the primary similarities being the emphasis on contextualized learning that integrates literacy and content knowledge. Though literature can be used very productively in second language acquisition, very few contemporary critical articles engage explicitly with literature-based classrooms for ELLs. This could be due to the extreme turn towards phonics-based curricula in reading programs, even in the ESL classroom. Despite this, however, many of my sources emphasized that basal readers and the related prescriptive curriculum are not effective for native speakers or English language learners. Unfortunately, I think No Child Left Behind legislation has forced many programs to use these state-adopted curricula because it is so rigidly outlined and emphasizes reading as a decoding process rather than a skill of comprehension. I can only hope that more instructors can incorporate literature into the classroom, if only to supplement the basal readers. All students can benefit from the student-centered nature of the literature-based learning environment, so using authentic literature in mainstreamed ESL classrooms is an excellent means of meeting the literacy needs of all learners.
References


