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# Oral Participation In Shared Reading and Writing By Limited English Proficient Students in a Multiethnic Class Setting

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Meeting the educational needs of students with limited English proficiency is a challenge that is changing and will continue to change the direction of educational programs. There has been a huge influx of limited English proficient (LEP) students across all geographic regions of the United States (United States Department of Education, 1992). Of the 25 largest school districts in the country, 23 have a majority of minority students (Multicultural Education Review Task Force, 1991). The impact of this increase in LEP students has resulted in individual states and school districts examining their resources, priorities, and curricula to meet their needs.

Five states — California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois — account for 73 percent of the nation's LEP students. Two states, California and Florida, gained over 50 percent of all LEP students who entered the school system in 1992 (United States Department of Education, 1992). The challenges confronting these states may be unique because the demographics of their school populations are changing more

rapidly than those of other states, but efforts made to examine, revise, and adapt curriculum in a meaningful way may become prototypes for other states who will be faced with large-scale changes in the future.

The Multicultural Education Review Task Force in Florida (1991) is examining pedagogical approaches to meet the needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse population within the state. The 38 percent of the school population identified as culturally diverse represents 100 countries of origin outside of the United States and 49 languages of origin. Within certain broad categories or umbrella terms, there is great ethnic and language diversity. For instance, students in the Hispanic group come from 20 different countries. Many countries, particularly Asian countries, are comprised of regional groups who also have their specific dialects and cultures. Therefore, the diversity within groups is sometimes as great as the diversity between groups.

While nearly 40 percent of the student population in Florida (as of 1990) are members of cultural groups other than the white mainstream, less than 20 percent of the instructional staff come from similar backgrounds (Multicultural Education Review Task Force, 1991). There are multiple reasons for these differences. For instance, the number of LEP school-age children immigrating to the United States is growing much faster than is the number of bilingual teachers needed to teach them. There is also a disproportionate number of school drop-outs from minority groups, but at the same time an intense effort is being made by some professions to recruit successful minority students into professions other than teaching. While the number of LEP students increases, there is a limited pool of students from which professional educators originate.

Given the status of minority students in the schools, Florida and other school systems nation-wide recognize the necessity of finding ways to make instruction culturally responsive to the needs of diverse students. A statement on the role of bilingual education by the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) recommends that students from linguistically and culturally diverse communities be placed with teachers who are proficient in both the home and second languages of their students (TESOL Bilingual Education Interest Section Task Force, 1992). Increasing the number of bilingual educators is, therefore, a basic goal. To achieve this goal, all teachers, particularly those from the mainstream culture, must be knowledgeable in ways to make the classroom a place where all children can be successful. Culturally and linguistically diverse students are going to be taught by teachers who do not share their language or cultural background. We designed this study to examine classroom interactions within the context of literacy tasks and describe them for the preservice and inservice teachers with whom we work. The audience for this research project is also the many teachers who have taught classes where children who share their language and mainstream backgrounds are successful, but may be exploring whole language strategies as a way to meet a wide range of learning needs for more diverse classes. This study was designed, therefore, to answer the following questions: 1) What are some patterns of oral participation that LEP students use during shared reading and writing experiences?; and 2) What types of language and cognitive support enable LEP students to participate in group discussions and interactions?

### **Context of the study**

**Students.** For purposes of the study, two groups of students were created from kindergarten, first, and second grade classes in a K-5 elementary school in which the second author

works regularly with intern teachers. Group 1 included seven kindergarten and two first grade students. Students' ethnic backgrounds were Hispanic, Vietnamese, and white mainstream. Group 2 was made up of second graders, including African-American, Hispanic, Arabic, and white mainstream students. The groups were microcosms of classrooms in many areas. This research studied two groups of students who were varied linguistically, and there was not a dominant second language group. The groups created for this study reflected the situation faced by many teachers in the classroom. The teachers did not speak the languages of all the students, and the students could not always communicate with each other, at least not in traditional ways.

During the class sessions, targeted observations and field notes were made of four LEP students. In Group 1, Carlos had immigrated to the United States from Puerto Rico and had been in school for three months. No English was spoken at home. Dao had come from Vietnam 19 months earlier, lived in a home where little English was spoken, and had been in school for eight months. In the second group, Yusef came from Jordan, lived in a family with limited English, and had attended school in the United States for six months. Marisol came from Puerto Rico 26 months earlier and lived in a family where some English was spoken.

**Instruction.** Each group met for a one hour session two mornings a week for four weeks. We planned the lessons jointly, but each of us took the major responsibility for teaching one of the groups. Predictable books, books with language patterns including repetitive wording, rhythm, rhyme, sequence, and familiar plot structure provided meaningful, dependable contextual support for emergent readers. The books were in Big Book format with enlarged text that enabled students to view and follow the text easily. Illustrations

provided visual clues for predictions. Students choral read the stories repeatedly, at first memorizing repetitive refrains but gradually making the transition from memorizing text to reading.

A natural progression was made from choral reading of predictable books to story innovations such as writing parallel stories using a given patterned text. After repeated reading of *Good Night, Owl!* (Hutchins, 1972), students brainstormed and wrote *Good Night, Elephant! The Wheels on the Bus* (Zelinsky, 1991) became *The Tires on the Bike*. *Peanut Butter and Jelly* (Westcott, 1987) evolved into *Chocolate Chip Cookies*.

Shared singing experiences used predictable songs with repetitive rhythm, rhyme, tune, and lyrics. Students enthusiastically sang *Old Macdonald Had a Farm* (Adams, 1990) and *I Went Walking* (Williams, 1989) to the tune of "Row, row, row your boat." *The Three Little Pigs* (Resnick, 1991) and *The Wheels on the Bus* (Zelinsky, 1991) adapted to *The Tires on the Bike*. The melody support appeared to be especially effective for our LEP students. We found, as did Wynn (1993), that students progressed from listening to singing to reading to composing.

The basis of instruction was concrete, motivational, and meaningful experiences for both groups of students (Au, 1993). After reading *Peanut Butter and Jelly* (Westcott, 1987), the younger students developed a list of ingredients and sequential directions for making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They choral read the directions to the teachers and supervised the making of sandwiches that they enthusiastically consumed. Before composing *Chocolate Chip Cookies*, a parallel story to *Peanut Butter and Jelly*, the older group had concrete experiences with chocolate chip cookies. They

examined ingredients, discussed cooking utensils and terms, and made cookie dough.

**Ethnographic procedures.** The study was not experimental research in which treatments were compared. We used a microethnographic approach to collect data and interpret student and teacher behaviors. This approach has been successful in studies with goals of describing lessons and providing detailed behavioral interactions in specific contexts (Mehan, 1979; Au, 1980; Moll, Diaz, Estrada, and Lopes, 1992; Trueba and Wright, 1992). Moll, et al. (1992) recommend microethnography as a principled way to construct the classroom context for analysis. They state that microethnography is particularly well-suited for studying classrooms where teachers and students differ ethnically and where more than one language is spoken. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) recommend descriptive research be used to improve teacher effectiveness by allowing the teacher, using qualitative data gathering techniques, to step away from the classroom situation. Teachers can then reflect on the immediate conflicts and challenges revealed in the data and gain a broader perspective.

In order to make systematic observations of the interactions among the students and the teachers in this study, data was collected by using audiotapes and videotapes of all lessons, making field notes during and after each session, examining original student work and videotapes of student work, and reviewing lesson plans. Field notes made during the lessons were made by the researcher who was not teaching the lesson. The videotapes were made by a member of the university support staff. Interviews of the teachers and assistant principal provided background information and descriptions of classroom performance.

Lesson plans were made jointly and used to guide the implementation of various teaching strategies. They were reviewed to recreate the purposes and structures of the lessons. Audiotapes were reviewed at the end of each day to evaluate the sessions and make adjustments. The audiotapes provided information on the teaching of the lesson and group interactions, but were not used to make transcripts of individual student's participation. We reviewed the videotapes individually and made transcripts. After finishing the notes on the complete set of tapes, we discussed and synthesized the information. Samples of student work were examined. Students dictated and illustrated stories and made books. Videotapes showed student demonstrations of their work.

## Observations

**Focused interactions.** When teaching and initially observing the sessions, it seemed to both of us that the students were very noisy and made many call-outs. At times there was a high noise level with many side conversations during the lessons. In observing the tapes, however, we noticed the talk among students was almost all topic-related. At those times when the class followed procedures of hand raising and waiting to be called on, there was very little connected oral language in the class except for the teacher's talking. Further examination of the students' oral participation in the discussions revealed a pattern of interaction in which the children participated in the discussions on a variety of levels. Some talked to the teacher, some chose to let others answer questions for them, others talked simultaneously, and others carried on parallel but related talk with students nearby. The many levels of conversation were at first difficult to monitor, but the field notes and videotapes documented the types of language actually occurring in the class. We continually adjusted our teaching styles to facilitate more oral language.



Not all students participated in the oral interactions comfortably. Carlos, one of our kindergarten target students, did not volunteer and answered questions only when given a lot of support. When asked a question, he usually shrugged his shoulders and rubbed his eyes with his fists. Even though he was not orally participating on the level of the other students, he remained focused. He watched the teacher and other students intensely. At first he appeared to be easily distracted. He sat on the edge of his chair. He squirmed and twisted and swung his arms and legs. Nevertheless, he continued to watch carefully. After an intense period of concentration, Carlos frequently moved around in some way, such as going to the restroom or water fountain, both of which were located in the room.

Yusef appeared to be less focused during class. Yusef watched the other boys in class. Of the four targeted students, Yusef was the least fluent in English. However, he displayed social behaviors appropriate to the group. He laughed at the other boys' comments and clowning and frequently participated. During one class session Charlie, who is monolingual English, and Yusef were engaged in a pretend conversation. Each student appeared to be easily conversing with the other using all of the facial expressions and other body language that indicated a real conversation was going on. When asked why he did this, Charlie said "because it makes him [Yusef] laugh." Yusef understood and participated in the game of pretend. They both pretended so well the casual observer might mistake them for actual conversationalists, but neither boy could actually speak the other's language.

**Silent and shyness.** Yusef and Carlos were both in the "silent period," but demonstrated their understanding of English. The silent period refers to the time in learning a new

language during which the second language learner is able to understand some of the oral language of the new language but is not yet comfortable enough to speak it (Asher, 1972; Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Urzua, 1980). Both boys clearly demonstrated that although they did not orally participate in activities, especially ones that drew attention to their limited English proficiency, they could understand some of the spoken English in their environment. For instance, they responded to some questions, particularly ones requiring a yes/no answer or questions for which careful scaffolding and cognitive support had been provided. Yusef was also accurate in selecting activities at which he could be successful. He did not volunteer to answer unless he knew he could answer correctly.

Carlos sometimes raised his hand when he could not answer or he may have decided not to answer after he was spotlighted — that is, made the focus of attention. Body language such as shrugging, rubbing eyes, and squirming indicated shyness. When asked a question to which other students had already offered several possible answers, Carlos was able to select an appropriate answer for his own response. He, therefore, understood and accepted the types of cognitive support or scaffolding that were offered by the teacher and other students. Another behavior indicating comprehension revealed by the videotapes was echo reading/singing. Carlos quietly watched the group readings of the Big Books for several days. When the activities switched to choral singing, Carlos was able to sing along, but in an innovative way. His singing was almost always one syllable behind the rest of the group. Once we detected this behavior in Carlos, we were able to observe Dao echo singing also. They evidently echoed the words of the rest of the group and used the music as an aid for participation.

Marisol and Dao were able to select activities, answer questions, and contribute ideas. During certain types of interactions both were quite fluent in English. In whole group interactions, Marisol was very quiet. When working in small groups, she was more talkative. She exhibited what Malcolm (1989) called the "shyness syndrome." In a situation where she would be the focus of attention of the larger group, Marisol acted very shy. In smaller groups and one-to-one, she showed a more outgoing personality.

**Codeswitching.** Marisol did some codeswitching. She talked to herself while drawing pictures for illustrations. She described the pictures to no one in particular and switched from English to Spanish depending on what she was describing. Frequently she needed the Spanish words for everyday objects that were not part of her school-acquired vocabulary. Marisol was comfortable acting as a translator for other students and seemed able to adjust to her audience. Marisol was also willing to translate terms for the first author who had limited Spanish fluency. When working with Carmen, both girls switched back and forth from Spanish to English.

In group work, we observed the Spanish-dominant and Vietnamese students using codeswitching frequently. During the cooking activity, Marisol translated some terms into Spanish for the other students. When drawing, students often only had vocabulary of their home languages for describing pictures. This occurred even with the Spanish-dominant students who seemed fluent in English.

### **Discussion of the questions**

*What are some patterns of oral participation that LEP students use during shared reading and writing experiences?* We observed many behaviors during oral activities that indicated the true level of understanding of English of the four

targeted students. Students' silence and shyness may initially lead to an underestimation of the students' comprehension of English. Behaviors that are better indicators were more difficult to distinguish. For example, Carlos' and Dao's echoing were noticed only during the analysis of the videotapes. Carlos was so quiet and so serious compared to some other students, one could easily miss this wonderful strategy for participation.

We observed students who showed their comprehension by answering yes/no questions, selecting responses from several choices offered by the teacher or other students, and choosing not to volunteer unless they knew they could be successful. The kindergarten students were less able to select opportunities for participation than the older students; however, we have found this to be the case with younger English-dominant students, too.

Marisol was a student who exhibited shyness rather than silence. Her levels of oral participation were much different in large group and small group settings. In small groups, she blossomed. She chatted with us and with other students. She comfortably acted as a translator during book illustration sessions and during concrete experiences used for background for story innovations. Perhaps she was empathetic to the struggles the first author was having with translating some of the terms. She frequently sat with Carmen, a girl who had been in school in the United States longer but spoke English less fluently. Both girls could have conversed entirely in Spanish; however, they always engaged in codeswitching during their conversations. They frequently lacked vocabulary for everyday concepts and used the Spanish equivalents. On the other hand, they had only English vocabulary for concepts learned in school if they were not part of their home experiences. Loc was observed providing the same assistance for Dao.

*What types of language and cognitive support enable LEP students to participate in group discussions and interactions?* Vygotsky (1986) describes scaffolding as aid that leads the learner into levels of task difficulty beyond what can be done independently and provides as much cognitive support as needed for success. Scaffolding is given in various ways — through, for example, concrete experiences, questioning, and various cues. Gradually the support is withdrawn as the learner acquires independence in the task. In our group activities we offered several kinds of scaffolding to enable children to participate orally in discussions and activities.

Before writing story innovations, we reread the selected stories frequently and made concepts of the new story as concrete as possible. The baking experience is an example. A few of the children were unfamiliar with chocolate chip cookies; most were unfamiliar with the ingredients and procedures. Examining the raw ingredients was a lively process. Not surprisingly, the children reacted unfavorably to the offer to taste the dough after smelling, touching and tasting the individual ingredients. Scaffolding was built by the experience and also by the translations provided by peers.

Background for *Goodnight Elephant!* was more challenging. Books with vivid illustrations and photographs were needed. Also we read stories that provided the language for animal names, verbs for the animal sounds, and onomatopoeia. During the composing stage, we frequently referred to the books. Students hunted words, spelled words for prewriting charts, and made their own adaptations of spellings.

Besides building scaffolding for the group, we found a number of ways to offer helpful support for individual

students. In addition to the yes/no questions, which were the easiest for the LEP students to answer, asking several students open-ended questions allowed the LEP students to hear the language for possible answers from other students before they responded. Referring to books previously read with the group modeled literacy behaviors for the students. LEP students were often able to use vocabulary that had been discussed and to find and spell words in the text for collaborative writing efforts. Interactions with books with clear pictures and illustrations were beneficial.

We also observed students who selected opportunities for Yusef to participate in group discussions. They would tell us to ask Yusef a particular question when they believed he could answer it correctly. For instance, when writing *Goodnight, Elephant!* three students told us to have Yusef spell words for the prewriting chart we were developing. He was able to select an appropriate word from a book of animal sounds and even innovated a spelling of one of the animal sounds. Yusef willingly participated in this interaction.

## Summary

This research offered us an opportunity for critical examination of the instructional behaviors and strategies we teach our preservice and inservice teachers for interacting with children and structuring literacy tasks. The two groups of students were a microcosm of the regular classroom. Students included monolingual English speakers, non-English speaking students, as well as other LEP students. Furthermore, the LEP students did not all have the same home language. The teachers were only able to converse fluently in English. This is indeed the situation in many classrooms.



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