

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY FOR *ALL* CHILDREN

By Patton O. Tabors

What can researchers recommend to teachers who are working in the early childhood classroom with children from diverse linguistic backgrounds?

EVIDENCE FROM RECENT RESEARCH has turned the spotlight on early childhood as a critical time for developing skills related to reading and writing in English-speaking children (International Reading Association & the National Association for the Education of Young Children 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998; Dickinson & Tabors 2001). At the same time, but in what seems like a parallel universe, research has been studying the language and literacy development of young children learning English as a second language (Tabors 1997; Tabors & Snow 2001). But young children from English-speaking and English-learning¹ backgrounds do not exist in parallel universes. In fact, they often exist in the same universe, and that universe is often an early childhood classroom. So what can researchers recommend to teachers who are working in the universe of the early childhood classroom with children from diverse linguistic backgrounds? How can teachers help *all* children develop language and literacy abilities?

Teaching English Speakers

FIRST, LET'S THINK ABOUT the language and literacy skill areas that research shows are important in early childhood development. Researchers have consistently identified five areas that are related to children's later ability to learn to read and write:

- alphabetic knowledge,
- phonological awareness,
- book and print concepts,
- vocabulary knowledge, and
- discourse skills.

Let's assume—as most researchers do—that the teachers and children in the classroom are operating in the same language, and that is English. Table 1 shows what teachers can do to help English-speaking children develop skills in these areas and what children learn. Let's look at each skill area in more detail.

First, children develop alphabetic knowledge when teachers use activities that target letter recognition. These activities range from singing the alphabet song, to identifying the first letters in children's names, to having children use magnetic letters for their invented spelling. Simultaneously, teachers can help children develop phonological awareness by pointing out the sounds that make up words and how those sounds relate to letters of the alphabet. Concentrating on sounds in words that are highly familiar and important to children—like their own names or names for objects in the room—yields the best results. Using rhyming text in songs and poetry also helps children understand that when one sound in a word changes, the meaning of the word changes as well.

Book and print concepts develop when teachers talk about how books work. Book reading can include information about where the front and back of a book are, what kinds of information can be found on the cover (the title, the names of the author and the illustrator), where the print is on the page, how the print is read (top to bottom and left to right in English), what a sentence looks like, and what different punctuation means at the end of sentences. Including these types of information as part of the book reading process will help children begin to understand the ins and outs of books.

Vocabulary knowledge—words, words, words, words—is key for the development of young children’s literacy skills. The more words children know, the more words they will have to connect to the letters and sounds they meet in print. Teachers help children develop their vocabulary by intentionally presenting new words as part of every activity in the classroom; by using and explaining new words in everyday conversations; and by reading new words and helping children understand their meanings. Children should be learning 6 to 10 new words a day in the early childhood period. In their classrooms, they need to hear and use lots and lots of new words.

Finally, language usage in the classroom should also help children develop more advanced discourse skills. What does this mean? Discourse skills refer to using language in structured ways to go beyond the basics of conversation—for example, to tell a story about a past event, or to explain how something works, or to build a fantasy world with words. Teachers encourage the development of these types of linguistic structures when they ask open-ended questions like “What did you do over the weekend?” or “Why do you think the stone sinks in the water?” or “What did your baby do when you put her in the carriage?” But asking the question should not be the end of the interaction, just the beginning. Teachers need to support children’s efforts to answer these sorts of questions, extending the conversation over a number of turns.

A curriculum that is built around opportunities for children to develop their skills in these five areas will be a curriculum that supports children’s language and literacy development. However, this approach assumes that the teachers and the children in the classroom share English as their common language and that these activities are being carried out in English. What does this mean for children learning English?

Teaching English Learners

IN FACT, MANY OF THESE VERY SAME OPPORTUNITIES are relevant for English learning children. Let’s look at the five areas again while thinking about how teachers can help English learners develop their language and literacy skills.

Learning about the English alphabet is clearly useful for English-learning children. It is something that they can begin quite early in their exposure to English. Furthermore, any activities that help English-speaking children develop phonological awareness will also be helpful for English-learning children. In my research, I found that English-learning children in a preschool classroom watched English speakers to see how the sounds of English were formed (Tabors 1997). At first, they were most comfortable using English when they could sing or respond to predictable or rhyming books. Consequently, teachers who emphasize “tuning in” to the sounds of English will be helping both English speakers and English learners.

What about book and print concepts? Here teachers need to think carefully about what English-learning children can understand in the book reading situation and plan accordingly. One

effective technique is small group book readings where information and conversational exchanges can be tailored to individuals. As English-learning children gain more understanding of English, they can be involved in more extensive discussions of book and print concepts and participate in larger groups.

TABLE 1

WHAT TEACHERS DO	WHAT CHILDREN LEARN
Alphabet Knowledge Activities that target letter recognition	To identify the letters of the alphabet
Phonological Awareness Activities that emphasize the sounds that words	To identify the sounds that make up make up words
Book and Print Concepts Activities that show how books look and how they work	What the contents of a book are, including where the print is and where the book starts and ends
Vocabulary Knowledge Activities that emphasize words	That there are lots and lots of words and their meanings are used for talking, writing, and reading
Discourse Skills Activities that encourage telling stories, explaining how the world works	To use these more sophisticated oral language forms building a fantasy world

Developing a vocabulary in English is, of course, one of the first tasks of English-learning children. In my research, English learners would often pick up objects from around the classroom, bring them over to the teacher, and ask for the English words. By being aware of the vocabulary needs of the children and by explaining, defining, and showing what a word means, teachers provide a supportive language environment for all children.

Finally, we turn to discourse skills. Given that English-speaking children are still developing these higher level skills during early childhood, it is not surprising that they will be the most difficult for English learners. In my research, the English-speaking children used their discourse skills to the greatest extent in the socio-dramatic play area. But it was not until the spring of the year that any of the English learners participated in play in this area. Apparently, they believed that they did not know enough English to be effective participants in socio-dramatic play earlier in the school year. However, teachers who are aware of English learners' proficiencies and their need to develop discourse abilities can make sure they have extended conversations with them, as well as with English speakers, that help build more sophisticated structures in English.

In sum, many of the same activities can be used in early childhood classrooms to help both English-speaking and English-learning children prepare for later literacy development in English. Of course, teachers need to be sensitive to the proficiency level of the English learners

so they can calibrate the activities that include all the children or develop small groups reflecting different proficiency levels.

Teaching ALL Children

BUT ARE THESE LANGUAGE AND LITERACY activities geared toward English the only meaningful ones in a classroom with children from diverse language backgrounds? What about the home languages and literacies of the English-learning children? Couldn't they be incorporated into the classroom as well, in ways that would be socially useful and cognitively challenging for all the children?

The answer is: Absolutely. And not only could activities related to the home languages and literacies of the English-learning children be included, but they should be included. Why? For two very different, but complementary reasons:

This addition to the curriculum will be socially useful. For the English learners, the inclusion of their home languages and literacies in the classroom curriculum allows them to be the “experts” and builds pride in the languages and cultures of their families. For the English speakers, the inclusion of other languages and literacies in the classroom curriculum provides them with insight into the capabilities of their classmates and their classmates’ families. It also clues them into why these children may not use a lot of English in the classroom right away.

This addition to the curriculum is also cognitively challenging: All children will benefit from comparing languages and literacies in ways that will develop metalinguistic awareness, the ability to think about how language works.

So what would teachers need to do to include the languages and literacies of English-learning children in an early childhood classroom? Let’s look at Table 2, which is an expanded version of Table 1 but now includes activities and learning that encompass the languages and literacies of English-learning children.

Although many languages use an alphabet that is the same or similar to the one used in English (such as Spanish and French), many other languages are alphabetic but with different writing systems (Arabic) or are not alphabetic at all (Japanese). Teachers can find out about the different writing systems represented among the children’s languages by asking parents or other community members. They can share that information with the children in interesting and appropriate ways. Labeling objects in the classroom or writing each child’s name (using a different color for each language) helps children see what different written languages look like. Such activities deepen their understanding that different languages look and sound different, but they are all used to talk about the world.

Of course, as soon as different languages are brought into the classroom, children notice that the languages have different sounds. Often children can mimic the sounds of a language before they begin to acquire any facility in the language. I call this “learning the tune” before “learning the words” of the language. In order for children to understand that these sounds represent meaningful messages to the people who use them, speakers of different languages (parents or others) should come to the classroom to read stories, sing songs, or present an activity in their home language. If the visitor and some of the students speak the same language, this will give those children a chance to be the “experts” and help their classmates grasp what is happening.

Introducing books written in different languages raises all children’s awareness of the different forms that books take. Sharing books that are written in different scripts (such as

Bengali or Chinese) or that are read from the back to the front (such as Hebrew), and having speakers of these languages demonstrate how to read them, emphasizes the variety of languages and literacies in the world. If printed books are not available or if there is enthusiasm for a parent involvement activity, books can be written and illustrated by parents in their home languages. These materials can be put into the classroom library.

Regarding vocabulary development, children are more aware of the importance of words if they learn new names for the objects and concepts that they already know in one language. For the English-speaking children, this process teaches them that all languages use words as the building blocks for communication. For the English-learning children, they become the “experts” in providing names in their home language while they are acquiring new names in English.

TABLE 2

WHAT TEACHERS DO	WHAT CHILDREN LEARN
<p>Alphabet Knowledge Activities that target letter recognition in English</p> <p><i>Activities that target comparing alphabets or writing systems in other languages</i></p>	<p>To identify the letters of the English alphabet</p> <p><i>That other languages have different alphabets or writing systems</i></p>
<p>Phonological Awareness Activities that emphasize the sounds that make up English words</p> <p><i>Activities that present the sounds of other languages</i></p>	<p>To identify the sounds that make up English words</p> <p><i>That other languages have different sounds, but all languages use sounds to make words</i></p>
<p>Book and Print Concepts Activities that show how books written in English look and how they work</p> <p><i>Activities that show how books written in other languages look and how they work</i></p>	<p>What the contents of a book written in English are, including where the print is and where the book starts and ends</p> <p><i>That books may look quite different and even be read in a different way if they are written in other languages</i></p>
<p>Vocabulary Knowledge Activities that emphasize English words and their meanings</p> <p><i>Activities that emphasize that there are words in other languages that mean the same thing as words in English</i></p>	<p><i>That there are lots and lots of words in English that are used for talking, writing, and reading</i></p> <p><i>That other languages use different words for the same object or concept</i></p>

<p>Discourse Skills Activities that encourage telling stories, explaining how the world works, building a fantasy world using English</p> <p><i>Activities that demonstrate that other languages have similar forms although they may seem a bit different</i></p>	<p>To use these more sophisticated oral language forms in English</p> <p><i>That these or similar forms exist in other languages as well</i></p>
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Every time a new English word is introduced, an effort should be made to identify that word in at least one other language. And every time an English-learning child wants to know an English word for an object or concept, the trade-off would be to find out that word in his or her home language. In this way, everyone in the classroom (including adults) becomes a language learner.

Story-telling in different languages helps children learn about discourse. This discourse form is nearly universal, although its structure may vary from culture to culture. In order for story-telling to be engaging in a language that some children do not understand, it is useful to include pictures or visuals, or to tell a known plot. Again, the children who already speak the language of the story are the “experts” and can act as the interpreters (but not the translators) of the story for their classmates. If they take active roles in the story-telling, they will feel even more affirmed and involved.

Perhaps, this seems like a lot to ask. But it is possible to start slowly and, over time, develop classroom activities with more and more of these features. Clearly, it is critical to have the help of parents or others who speak a variety of languages. These contacts take time to develop. But once made, they provide invaluable opportunities for meaningful contributions by parents and the wider language community. By developing multi-language activities, the teacher can support the languages and literacies of all children in the early childhood classroom.

A final thought: There are, of course, early childhood classrooms with only English speakers. Does that mean that the second half of this discussion is irrelevant to those classrooms? On the contrary. It is still possible, and valuable, to incorporate a variety of languages and literacies into these classrooms. The children will benefit from the opportunities to develop greater metalinguistic awareness, a skill that will serve them well in learning to read and write in English.

¹The term “English-learning” is used in this paper to refer to the process of learning English by children who are not native speakers of English.

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