Using Language to Promote Literacy in Young English Language Learners

By Lama K. Farran and Mona W. Matthews

All children walk into our schools using ways they have learned to communicate and problem solve within their homes and communities. These "ways of knowing" are important, familiar, and valued because children have learned them at the knee and by the sides of those they care about the most. As educators, we need to value the "ways of knowing" or "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that accompany all students to school. However, for English language learners (ELLs) or children whose first language is not English, if we don't know about their communities and homes, we are teaching blind, so to speak. In this paper, we focus on one foundational area for early literacy development – oral language as a window into ELLs' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and outline ways teachers can become familiar with their ELLs' "ways of knowing." First, we discuss language as a phenomenon that evolves naturally and serves as the basis upon which literacy develops. Then we offer a number of suggestions for ways teachers can enhance language to benefit young children's literacy development in the preschool through 2nd grade period.

What Makes Language Special?

We view language broadly. At a basic level, language is made up of multiple components: semantics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics (MacWhinney, 2011; Paul & Norbury, 2011). These components work in concert and play a role in learning to read. For example, children must learn how to cross-check syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic cues in text to determine if their reading makes sense. In addition to the language components, language comes in many forms, such as, questions, phrases, and sentences, which then we organize to accomplish different functions and purposes, such as asking questions to gather information.

Most importantly, what makes language special is that humans are the only species that enters the world prepared to learn the language spoken around them. The marvel of that preparation is that the human infant learns that language regardless of context, phonological input, grammatical structure, or semantic landscape (Tomasello, 2003). Without instruction, children learn the linguistic elements via day-to-day interactions with others. In a few years, the language the children speak conforms to the social and linguistic contexts in which it was developed. Of significance, absent a biological constraint or extreme deprivation, all children learn to talk and are able to engage with others in their environment.

This ability for children to learn the language spoken around them, along with its meaning and function, is what ties them to their home and community (Gee, 2001). The words, phrases, and sentences spoken come embedded within images, emotions, and children's perceptions of their world (Gee, 2001). Thus, much of children's identities resides in language and connects them with others who share that language (Gee, 2013).

The understanding and knowledge of the world in which children live are intertwined intimately with children's home language, social-emotional experiences, and cultural identity. Therefore, as children enter school, they bring with them a wealth of information about language—how language sounds, how language is organized, what nonverbal cues add to their words, and the names and meanings of objects around them (Orellana & D'warte, 2010). Teachers must thus draw upon these resources children bring to the learning context to provide continuity between children's previous home experiences and their new experiences in school. It is through the use of children's home language that teachers recognize and express their appreciation and the importance of children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2013).

However, all too often, especially for children whose home language differs from that spoken at school, this vast language knowledge is ignored or rendered irrelevant when children enter school. Because that knowledge comes embedded within images, emotions, and perceptions of their home and community (Tomasello, 2003), viewing that knowledge as irrelevant, by implication, renders their home and community irrelevant (Orellana & D'warte, 2010).

As concerning as this is, when this information is ignored, lost is the foundation upon which formal reading instruction should be based. Clay (2001), in her *Theories of Literacy Processes*, describes literacy as a developmental process that begins at birth. During the early years prior to formal literacy instruction, children acquire multiple language-based systems they use to process information from their environment. These informal systems should serve as the foundation upon which to base formal literacy instruction and include:

(a) talking (the sound and organization of language); (b) looking (the visual forms of the objects, events, and pictures); (c) storying (the organization and meaning of stories); and (d) understanding (the routine nature of the activities and events that organize their days) (Clay, 2001).

Why Is Supporting Children's Home Language and Literacy Important?

Although implied previously, we summarize several key characteristics that make the language children bring with them to school invaluable because of its connections to their home and community and to their overall literacy development. Children learn language by interacting with important others in their environment, essentially without formal instruction. Through these interactions, children acquire the patterns that constitute the language they hear and eventually speak as they strive to understand and interact with others around them. Because learning to read is a developmental process that begins at birth, reading instruction should be built on how young children have learned to make sense of their world prior to formal schooling.

Children's home language serves as the foundation that enables children to understand and navigate their physical and social environment (Kohnert, Yim, Nett, Kan, & Duran, 2005) and is associated with positive cognitive outcomes (Bialystok, 2001). From a developmental perspective, children's oral language and literacy are intimately tied in primary (home) and second language. Research shows that a strength in home language (L1) predicts second language (L2) outcomes as well as L1 and L2 literacy outcomes (August & Shanahan 2008; Durgunoglu & Goldenberg, 2012). Importantly, literacy experiences promote the use of decontextualized language, which is positively related to early reading success (Snow et al, 1998) and vocabulary growth (Alvermann, Unrau, & Rudell, 2013).

Thus, the paramount role of oral language lies in being the first building block for literacy learning, with ample evidence suggesting a bidirectional relationship between oral language and literacy. As educators, we must address both language and literacy needs for young ELLs in preschool through 2nd grade. To that end, we offer the following suggestions.

Learn about the community and the family's literacy practices. Teachers in our courses implement a project called, "Whom Do You Teach?" to identify the literacy practices children participate in at home and the print they see in their community and the print available in their homes. The project includes several activities. Implementing one activity a month demonstrates to students and their families the commitment to learn about their "ways of knowing." The types of activities are limitless. To illustrate, we describe three activities we include in the project.

a. Take a walk through your teaching neighborhood. As you walk through the neighborhood, take photographs of the print the children see, for example street signs, billboards, names of stores, and store advertisements. Also, collect samples of print, such as community newsletters, handbills, and posts. Share these with your students. Each student can select one to write about which can be compiled with the others to form a class book of the neighborhood (see Figure 1 as an example a teacher collected.)

b. Interview your students about their lives outside of school. Sample questions include, but not limited to:

- Where does your family buy groceries?
- What does your family do that's fun?
- What music is played in your house?
- How does your family spend time together?
- Where do you do your homework?

c. Invite children to bring in one example of the print they see at home. Before you ask students to do this, share examples of the types of print you have in your home. Include print found in and on objects in addition to typical forms of print, such as newspapers or books. These could include a grocery list, notes to yourself, such as one to reminder you of an appointment. The items children bring to school can be displayed in the class on a bulletin board labeled, "Reading and Writing Found in our Homes." To further demonstrate your recognition of their language, include on the bulletin board a translation of the title in the languages spoken by the students in your class.

Figure 1

Identify information children bring to school from home. Because children learn about their world through the day-to-day interactions with family, we use Clay's list of informal systems (described earlier: talking, looking, understanding, storying) to guide our teachers' collection of this information (see Table 1 for an example). The information can be gathered from anecdotal comments made by the children, interviews with the parents, or home visits. You can gain further knowledge of students' home practices by actively recruiting family and community members to visit and present in your classroom about their cultures and daily literacy practices. This is especially helpful when the classroom teachers are not knowledgeable about children's L1.

Model use of language (all five components mentioned earlier) to enhance your students' language. (a) To teach semantics (meaning), introduce and teach words in storybooks before reading. Only choose key words. Fortunately many of the words children need to know to understand stories are words that represent emotions, for example *happy* and descriptors, for example *big*, for which they likely know a word in their home language (Hiebert & Cervetti, 2011). Ask students to share that word in their home language. Use photographs when available of common objects or words. Use semantic maps to help students identify, understand, and remember the meaning of words embedded within the texts they read. A semantic map provides a means for ELLs to make visual connections between sets of words or phrases, thus maximizing the ability to make meaning from print. To create a semantic map,

Table 1. Information from Children's Out-of-School Lives: An example from the Home of a Child of Spanish Descent

Talking: Sound & Organization of Language	Looking: Visual forms Objects, Events, Pictures	Storying: Organization of Stories	Understanding: Daily Routines	Reading and Writing: Print Forms and Materials
The "h" is silent; the letter "j" is absent in Spanish; The "v" in Spanish is pronounced as a b" in English. Spanish has longer words with more syllables than English. Spanish is a highly inflected language compared to English. Spanish adjectives are post-posed (house big); English ones are pre-posed big house). Spanish and English share cognates; children may bring Spanish words that have English cognates.	Child wears earrings and necklaces Child wears good medallion with Diosito (baby Jesus) and Santa Toribo (a saint) Home print objects include prayer books and a church newsletter	Each family member writes about their daily experiences in personal notepads Child scribbles in her notepad Mother and Father talk about life in Mexico so that the children, "Will not forget their home country." When a Great Aunt who lived in Mexico dies, the family shares stories about her	Family reads newspaper and writes letters to relatives Family plays music and dances Paper, notepads, pencils, crayons used at home to write during regular routines such as when Mom cooks dinner, child often sits in kitchen and writes and draws Family sits in living room after dinner and Dad reads the Bible and then they pray Child helps mother with English – Mother helps child with Spanish	Newspaper Notepads Bible Email Notes Prayer Books Church Newsletter

Source. Adapted from Roseberry-McKibbin (2002). Principles and Strategies in intervention.

select a target word that your ELLs do not know and place it in the middle of the paper (or page if using a digital medium online). Pronounce the target word and ask your students to repeat the word after you. Find words that fit the meaning of the target word and select pictures that depict the meanings of those words. (b) Introduce rare or low frequency words and challenging vocabulary including polysemous words (words with multiple meanings) as children advance in their learning (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). (c) Encourage children's expression of meaning as opposed to "correct" utterances. This is especially appropriate during everyday conversations and the goal is to understand as opposed to those times when emphasizing enunciation. (d) Promote phonology by practicing the sounds of the alphabet in L1 and L2 and increase children's phonological awareness by focusing on the manipulation of word parts through play, such as using rhymes. (e) Promote morphology, by teaching and generating word relatives from a root word (Goodwin & Perkins, 2015). (f) Enhance syntax by modeling use of complex syntactic frames that stretch beyond children's current syntactic abilities (Paul & Norbury, 2011). Finally, (g) teach pragmatics or the use of language for social purposes by modeling greeting classmates or asking for assistance with homework (Paul & Norbury, 2011).

Another approach for promoting language to improve literacy is illustrated by Koizumi (2000), who emphasizes on the importance of responding to the child's current focus on interest. Koizumi introduces the idea of anchor points, which, we believe, adds significance to need to attend to children's attentional focus in order to stimulate their interest. An anchor point comes in many forms: a person, such as a friend; an object, such as the classroom rug; or an instructional routine, such as the teacher greeting each student at the door. Anchor points forge personal and affective connections to an environment and ease children's transition to school, thereby making them more comfortable and prepared for learning. Cobb (2007) in his study of how children transition from Mexican immigrant homes to English-dominant kindergarten classrooms describes how one student's, Victor's anchor points eased his transition to school and oriented his attention to learning. One of Victor's anchor points was the song the class sung each morning. When Victor entered the class on the first day of school, he was visibly upset. However, when the class moved to the front of the room to sing, he displayed his first smile, joined his classmates, moved his mouth to mimic singing, and performed the movements. School appeared to be fun for Victor during this time of day and as the year progressed, it became a primary anchor point from which he learned the words to the songs, participated with his classmates, and mastered the movements to the songs. What are your students' anchor points? Spend a few minutes each day, observing your students. Focus on one child at a time. What does the child attend to? When does the child lose focus?

Move across symbol systems. English learners need a lot of practice in using oral language (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010). The production of L1 and L2 oral language can be accomplished in multiple ways including nursery rhymes, repeated book reading, and singing. Further, engaging in dramatic play and following story reading with drawing has been shown to enhance comprehension (Mages, 2006). Combining symbol systems maximizes opportunities to enhance children's literacy development. For example, Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) describe an activity they call Sketch-to-Stretch (1996) which asks children to draw after hearing a story to illustrate what the book makes them think of. This allows children to make personal connections to the story. Moving across symbol systems, such as reading to art, singing to dramatic play, or reading to physical movement deepens thinking and stimulates imagination. Always when combining symbol systems, make sure at least one provides an opportunity for the children to practice using language.

Create a "Literacy Playlist" of songs. An axiom of reading is that the more students read the better they get at reading (Stanovich, 1986). In this activity, teachers use singing as a way to increase the amount students read and to reinforce critical beginning reading skills and understandings. Iwasaki, Rasinski, Yildirim, and Zimmerman's (2013) recommend using songs to teach reading to young children. Teacher with whom we work, have found including songs and singing can be used successfully with ELLs. Each week the teacher introduces a new song to the students. The teacher displays the words to the song on a chart. Singing while tracking the words to the song enables the teacher to reinforce critical beginning reading skills, such as, phonological and phonemic awareness, sight word recognition, and comprehension (Iwasaki et al, 2013). At the end of the week, the chart is hung on a chart stand and placed in a center for children to read during center time. Singing offers a way for English language learners to experience the sounds, rhythms, and intonation patterns of English. Teachers tell us their students really enjoy this "less stressed" way to read and they enjoy teaching important reading skills and understandings through such a fun way. (Refer to the article for a full description of how one teacher used songs to build her students literacy learning.)

Conclusion

Ample evidence demonstrates the potent role oral language plays in literacy learning. However, the

language children learn in the laps and by the sides of those closest to them comes embedded within experiences, images, and emotions that tie them to their families in communities. Thus, oral language provides a window into ELLs' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We hope the suggestions described in this paper offer teachers a way to peek into that window, thereby enabling them to become more familiar with their ELL students' "ways of knowing."

References

Alvermann, D., Unrau, N., & Ruddell, R. (Eds.) (2013). *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (6th ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

August, D., & Shanahan, T. (Eds.) (2008). *Developing reading and writing in second language learners* (pp. 1-17_. New York: Routledge.

Beck, I., McKeown, M., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction.* New York: Guilford Press.

Bialystok, E. (Ed.) (2001). *Bilingualism in development: Language, literacy, and cognition.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Clay, M. M. (Ed.) (2001). *Change over time in children's literacy development.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cobb, M. B. (2007). *Keep your eyes on Ms. Clark: Two Mexican immigrant children make the transition to kindergarten* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.

Dickinson, D. K., Golinkoff, R. M. & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2010). Speaking Out for Language: Why Language Is Central to Reading Development, *Educational Researcher,* 39(4), 305-310.

Dugunoglu, A. & Goldenberg, C. (Eds.) (2012). *Language and literacy development in bilingual settings.* New York: The Guilford Press.

Gee, J. P. (2001). Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* 44(8), 714-725.

Gee, J. P. (2013). Reading as situated language: A sociocultural perspective. In D. E. Alvermann, N. J. Unrau, & R. B. Ruddell (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading.* (pp. 136- 151). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Goodwin, A., & Perkins, J. (2015). Word detectives: Morphological instruction that supports academic language. *The Reading Teacher,* 68(7), 510-523.

Gonzalez, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (Eds.) (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households and classrooms.* Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Hieber, E. H., & Cervetti, G. N. (2011). What differences in narrative and informational texts mean for the learning and instruction of vocabulary. *Reading Research Report #1101.* San Francisco: TextProject, Inc. Retrieved from http://textproject.org/assets/publications/TextProject_RRR-11.01_Vocabularies-of-Narrative-and-Informational-Texts.pdf

Iwasaki, B., Rasinski, T., Yildirim, K., & Zimmerman, B. S. (2013). Let's bring back the magic of song for teaching reading. *The Reading Teacher,* 67(2) 137-141.

Kohnert, K., Yim, D., Nett, K., Kan, P., & Duran, L. (2005). Intervention with diverse preschool children: A focus on developing home language (s). *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 36,* 251-263.

Koizumi, R. (2000). Anchor points in transitions to a new school environment. *The Journal of Primary Prevention,* 20(3), 175-187.

MacWhinney, B. (2011). Language Development. In M. H. Bornstein & M. E. Lamb (Eds.), *Developmental Science: An advanced textbook* (6th ed., pp. 529-579). East Sussex, Great Britain: Psychology Press.

Mages, W. K. (2006). Drama and imagination: A cognitive theory of drama's effect on narrative comprehension and narrative production. *Research in Drama Education,* 11(3), 329-340.

Orellana, M F., & D'warte, J. (2010). Recognizing different kinds of "head starts," *Educational Researcher,* 39(4) 295-300.

Paul, R. & Norbury, C. (2011). *Language disorders from infancy through adolescence: Listening, speaking, reading, writing, and communicating* (4th ed.). Mosby.

Razfar, A. & Gutierrez, K. D. (2013). Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Literacy: The sociocultural influence and New Directions in Digital & Hybrid-mediation p. 52-79. In J. Larson and J. Marsh (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy* (2nd ed., pp. 52-79). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Roseberry–McKibbin, C. (2002). Principles and strategies in intervention. In A. Brice (Ed.), *The*

Hispanic child: Speech, culture and education (pp. 199–233). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Short, K., Harste, J., & Birke, C. (1996). *Creating classrooms for authors and inquirers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Snow, C. Burns, S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.) (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children.* Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences.

Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Mathew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21, 360-407.

Tomasello, M. (2003). *Constructing a language: A usage-based theory on language acquisition.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Georgia Reading Association

- Empower members of the GRA and local councils to become effective leaders in the field of literacy.
- Provide quality reading education services to all Georgia educators.
- Recognize exemplary individuals, local, and state literacy efforts.
- Achieve maximum involvement of members at the local, state, and international levels to receive maximum benefits.
- Promote the goals and objectives of the International Reading Association of Georgia.

Curl up with a good group

You live to read. You can hardly wait to get cozy in your favorite spot and crack the pages of a good book. You're also an educator. Why not curl up with a good group, too? Membership in the Georgia Reading Association will connect you to others like you who inspire and teach others about reading.

Visit us at
www.georgiareading.org