

A Theory of Instruction for Teaching ELs: Explanation for Communication, Pattern, & Variability

Adapted from

A Second Language Literacy Framework for Mainstream Teachers

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When teachers promote literacy development, they are actually and ultimately promoting students' academic development. While all teachers are not literacy teachers per se, all teachers do play a central role in supporting literacy development within their particular disciplines. In fact any time a teacher puts a text in front of students to read or to produce, the teacher is responsible for supporting students' comprehension and performance as needed. Although more complex, the same teacher responsibility extends to second language (SL) learners who are mainstreamed into regular, often English-only, classrooms. One of the greatest challenges for ESOL professionals is to provide elementary and secondary educators with the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to promote literacy development among their SL learners.

This article provides mainstream educators with a framework for attending to SL literacy development in the regular classroom. This framework has two parts. First it asks teachers to consider three SL literacy concepts: Communication, Pattern, and Variability. Each concept is defined by two accompanying principles, which in turn are defined and described in terms of examples of student work and teacher work. Second the framework delineates five curriculum guidelines that help mainstream educators create a sound SL literacy focus in their classes. This two-part framework, taken as a whole, summarized what every content-area teacher needs to know and do to use SL literacy development to support content learning.

PART A: Communication, Pattern, and Variability

Concept 1: Communication

Listening, speaking, and reading, and writing are important literacy skills, but communication is the *raison d'être* of their existence. Beyond a threshold level of basic skill-building, literacy is about being able to comprehend, think and communicate about information, ideas, and feelings. For SL students, learning to communicate in a new language required access to rich input (listening/reading) and multiple and varied opportunities for interaction (speaking/writing). The principle of Input and Interaction define the concept of Communication.

Principle 1: Input. When teachers attend to input in their instruction, they focus on the oral and written texts that students are exposed to in the process of instruction. For such input to be of use to a SL learner, it must be only slightly beyond the learner's current language abilities (Krashen, 1982) or within the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

For the principle input, students work is to read a lot -- for aesthetics, pleasure, exploration, as well as for information, learning, and reasoning-- and to write a lot -- for entertaining, sharing, explaining, as well as for arguing, persuading, and

reporting. As students develop their general language skills and academic vocabulary, their ability to process input become more efficient, automatic, and fluent.

Correspondingly, the most important teacher work is to help learners to read, analyze, discuss, and write a lot. This is done by identifying and using appropriate expository and narrative texts, by motivating learners to want to read and write, and by scaffolding their reading (e.g., previewing texts, using headings, pictures) of accessible texts with grade-appropriate content.

Principle 2: Interaction. In addition to input, learners must also have multiple and varied opportunities for interaction. When SL learners work to make themselves comprehensible to another person in the process of communicating (i.e., produce pushed output) language acquisition is fostered (Swain, 1995). Authentic interaction for formal and informal purposes gets SL learners to use literacy skills to communicate and connects texts to themselves, to others, and to the world. Such student work develops students' cognitive flexibility.

Teacher work, therefore, is creating daily opportunities for authentic communication. When teachers establish a literate environment when reading, writing, collaborating, and discussing are a valued part of everyday learning, then SL learners develop important literacy skills, including attending to audience, purpose, voice, organization, idea development, fluency, word choice, and mechanics.

In summary the concept of communication asks teachers to analyze the types of input their SL learners are exposed to, what opportunities for interaction are available to students, and how they can scaffold student engagement with such input and interaction. What the teacher does to attend to input and interaction are pedagogical decisions fully in the teacher's immediate control and are based in teacher assessment of students' developmental needs.

Concept 2: Pattern

Much of the actual process of oral language acquisition occurs intuitively and below the learner's level of conscious control. Conversational English develops rather rapidly in SL learners and largely as a result of direct and multiple interaction with peers and teachers in rich social contexts (Cummins, 2000). On the other hand, awareness of language as a code is at the very core of literacy development. Few people learn to read and write without explicit instruction in the nature of the code. Fluent reading and writing required simultaneous use of phonemic awareness, knowledge of sound-symbol relationships, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, cultural understanding, and relevant world knowledge. These sub-skills as well as the ability to organize, coordinate, and understand audience and purpose develop over time with explicit instruction.

The concept of pattern asks mainstream teachers across all grade levels to understand the general path to literacy and how that path may vary for SL learners. Pattern is defined by two principles: 1) Stages of Development and 2) Errors and Feedback.

Principle 1: Stages of development. In practical terms for the content-area teacher, there are two major stages of reading development: learning to read and reading to learn. For SL learners, the learning-to-read stage begins when the student starts developing skills and notions of print in a second language. The shift to the reading-to-learn stage occurs when pre-reading efforts in schema building and vocabulary development position learners to comprehend the particular text chosen for them. The ultimate developmental goal is to support SL readers and writers in becoming active, flexible, selective, cognitively complex, and self-monitoring as well as capable of making critical judgment about what they read and write.

For SL learners, their work varies greatly depending on the native language and SL skills they already possess. Generally they will need to develop phonemic awareness in the new language, increase vocabulary size, comprehend and produce increasingly complex texts in multiple genres, and transfer whatever native language literacy skills they have to the task of becoming a strategic and critical reader and writer of the new language. Students will accomplish these tasks if teachers have explicitly planned for and expected students to participate in a variety of language and literacy tasks.

Teacher work in promoting literacy development is to attend more carefully to selection of texts and to provide strategic support for text comprehension. To do this effectively, teachers must assess the cognitive, social, affective, and linguistic factors that may influence students' paths of development. For example bilingual students may be fully literate, orally fluent, and only receptively fluent in their native language; nevertheless they approach English literacy with two language systems in their minds. Both language systems are activated each time they read or write. Students may have unpredictable gaps in their knowledge of vocabulary, culture, or the world across those languages. Second a bilingual student may begin the stage of learning to read English as a preschooler, as a seventh-grader, or as an adult, which is not typical of our monolingual students. So the bilingual's timetable for English literacy development may be different when compared to what a teacher expects a monolingual to know and do at particular ages or grades.

Whether the assessment of SL learners is done by the teacher or a literacy specialist, mainstream teachers need access to the following types of information: 1) level of native language literacy; 2) formal educational background; 3) student understanding of text structures; 4) student interests and motivations; 5) level of phonemic awareness in SL; 6) reading level in the SL; and 7) reading level of content-area texts. This assessment information allows teachers to individualize learning goals and instruction and advocate for appropriate support.

Principle 2: Errors and Feedback. Literacy development is patterned but not a linear process. As students learn more vocabulary, comprehend more, become more fluent, automatic, and efficient in their reading and writing, they are constantly restructuring their knowledge of English. Their progress is revealed in right word and grammar choices as well as wrong word and grammar choices. For the student, correcting low-level grammatical errors is not simply a matter of knowing the grammar rule underlying the error; instead, it is a matter of incorporating the correct grammatical pattern into the learner's language system. Students as well as teachers need to recognize and monitor which aspects of language are currently within the learner's potential to learn, correct, or master and which language aspects are currently impervious to direct instruction.

To make progress in literacy development, student work is to accept challenging assignments and seek assistance when needed. Learning strategies for monitoring and repairing misunderstandings and accepting and responding to feedback are essential for improving the quality of their assignments. Taking individual responsibility for setting learning goals and assessing progress is also key.

Teacher work is to respond to errors with appropriate feedback, learning opportunities, or services. If a second language learner lacks phonemic awareness and notions of print, a teacher should make certain that the student is placed in a developmental reading program. However if students are simply reading below grade level, teachers should be prepared to provide other materials in addition to the grade-level text to support content learning. For example simplified texts with grade-level support content, supportive texts in the native language and visual representations (such as video, photography, and picture books) could all be useful supplements. Feedback should also be timely, meaningful, encouraging, focused on meaning first, and specific so that students can improve the quality of their products and performances.

A powerful strategy for supporting SL learners' fluency and accuracy with written language is the use of the writing process: prewrite, compose, rewrite, edit. Even when learners are unable to write error-free drafts during the composing process, editing the text allows them to access everything they know about grammar, vocabulary, and usage without also attending to composing text. The writing process also allows SL learners to develop social skills in getting and using feedback from peers. Even though this process takes longer, it enables students to produce better final drafts.

In summary when teachers can appropriately interpret the individual learner against the typical pattern of literacy development, they are better positioned to provide appropriate feedback and make individ-



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