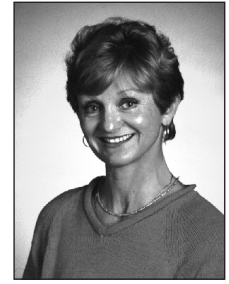


Early Literacy Instruction *for* *English Language Learners*



Lada Kratky

Reading is much more than simply breaking a phonetic code and deciphering the sounds of letters. To understand what we read, we have to understand the meanings of most of the words on the page. This is why language development plays such a crucial role in literacy instruction for children who are English language learners. The best way to get children on the road to reading is to make language memorable, build important foundational skills, and introduce literature that speaks to children's own lives and sparks their imaginations.

Literacy and Language Development

As teachers, we want to teach reading so our students can arrive at the underlying message or meaning of the selection. Imagine reading something in a language you do not speak or understand. If it is an alphabetic language you may be able to sound out most of the words, but the message will have no meaning for you. It will be a senseless string of sounds. The individual words, phrases, and word order will hold no clues for you.

This is the principal challenge for both the teacher and the student when teaching an English language learner to read in English. It is why language development plays such a crucial role in literacy instruction for second language learners. To help children catch up to their peers who are native English speakers, we need to provide comprehensive instruction that includes structured oral language activities, the direct teaching of selection vocabulary and high frequency words, and instruction in English grammar, language structures, and patterns.

Reaching Young Learners

We know that language is acquired through constant repetition. A young child learns words after hearing his or her parents say them over and over again, and he or she in turn repeats them over and over again. In foreign language instruction, learning has traditionally depended on the memorization of dialogues in order for the learner to internalize language structures and vocabulary, followed by drills and more drills. But such methodology is not appropriate for a young child entering school.

The most effective method of second language instruction for a young learner is through:

- poetry
- songs and chants
- stories

These engage children immediately, making them want to listen, speak, and even improvise! With the support of audio models, children can have fun experimenting with the sounds,

rhythms, and patterns of English. Games and role-plays are other ways you can motivate children to use language. That is why *Avenues* uses poetry, songs, and stories to develop language and why the program includes tabletop scenes and colorful manipulatives. Above all, language development activities must be meaning-based and purposeful. Long-term retention of vocabulary only occurs when children are exposed to situations in which real communication takes place.

The effectiveness of this method can be seen in the following example of a Kindergarten song in *Avenues*, which is sung to the melody of “Skip to My Lou”:

Blue, blue, I see blue.
Clap your hands and
Point to blue.
Blue, blue, I see blue.
Show me something blue.

A catchy tune and game-like activity make the language memorable, engage children immediately, and allow them to try out new language in non-threatening, choral singing.

Children begin to use color words in a natural context, begin to name classroom objects, and learn useful phrases such as *I see _____* and *Show me _____*. All the while they are actively engaged, happily joining the community of learners in the classroom.

Understanding Diverse Backgrounds

As English language learners enter our classrooms, each one brings a unique set of experiences and skills. Some students may have strong academic backgrounds and know how to read in their home language. Even if their home language uses a non-Roman alphabet such as Russian, or if it is non-alphabetic such as Cantonese, children will be able to transfer many skills and strategies to reading in English.

Other children, however, may have had years of interrupted schooling and lack even the most basic literacy skills. They may, for example, not understand that print carries a message or know how to turn the pages of a book. All children, regardless of their backgrounds, have strengths that we can build on. As teachers, we need to know precisely what skills each child controls and plan instruction accordingly. The assessment tools in *Avenues* will give you a clear picture of your students’ concepts about print, phonological awareness, knowledge of letter names and letter-sound associations, and basic decoding skills.

Teaching the Foundational Skills

Concepts of Print

As I mentioned, some English language learners may have had few experiences handling books. When you preview and share stories, you can introduce children to concepts such as how to hold a book, where to find the title and author’s name, and how to turn the pages. Because of differences between English and other writing systems even children who are literate in their home language may need to learn:

- the difference between letters and words
- how to recognize word boundaries
- how to track print from left to right
- where to continue reading when they reach the end of a line

In *Avenues* you will find many suggestions for creating a print-rich environment in which children learn and immediately apply concepts of print. These concepts are continually reinforced in shared and independent reading activities.

Phonological Awareness

Researchers have found that children can transfer phonological awareness from one language to another. Your students may be able to sing the Kindergarten song about colors and count the number of words in each line, or tell you that the words *see* and *me* rhyme. The real challenge comes when English learners are faced with sounds that are completely new for them. For example, the /sh/ sound does not exist in Spanish, and there are no *r*-controlled vowel sounds in Hmong. See the “Phonics Transfer Chart” in the *Avenues Teacher’s Edition* for more information about sound and sound/symbol transfer issues across languages.

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Before students can begin to read words with new sounds, they need practice hearing and producing each new sound.

- To make the practice meaningful, show them objects with names that begin with the sound.
- Explain how to use their lips, tongue, and teeth to form the sound.
- Demonstrate the sound several times and have children echo it.
- Ask children to notice how the sound “feels.”

Phonological awareness activities can be fun and interactive. You can engage children’s attention and enhance their recall by prompting them with puppets and using Elkonin boxes. By placing a color chip in each box you can help children distinguish the sounds in a word.

Letter/Sound Associations

All children need basic phonics skills to help them sound out words in print. To become automatic with words, they need to connect letter patterns to sounds, and sounds to meanings. English language learners also benefit from systematic phonics instruction, but there are additional considerations. First, we need to preteach vocabulary to ensure that children understand the meanings of the words they are asked to hear, say, read, and write. That is why every phonics lesson in *Avenues* begins with a preview of language to develop oral vocabulary.

Also, problems may arise because a particular sound does not exist in a child’s home language or a given letter represents a different sound. In *Avenues* children have repeated opportunities to practice blending words with new sounds and reading these words in connected, meaningful text.

High Frequency Words

Being able to automatically recognize the most frequent words in print helps children become fluent readers.

Avenues introduces children to high frequency words in the context of big books, songs, chants, and role-plays. A proven, multimodal method helps them commit the words to memory.

Listening Comprehension

Reading aloud to children is of enormous benefit. They hear the sounds, rhythms, and patterns of English; learn about story structure; and discover new information.

In addition, children develop important comprehension skills that they can then apply to text they read on their own. When literature is relevant and reflects students’ home cultures, they become engaged as active learners and peer teachers.

Interactive Writing

Interactive Writing is an excellent way to bring together all of the literacy skills that young readers need. The teacher first leads a group discussion on a subject of interest. The group then selects a message to write and agrees on the correct phrasing. Children repeat the message, counting the words, writing them in sequence sound by sound, and then reading the words they write. The Interactive Writing activities in *Avenues* allow children to write meaningful text at their level of proficiency, while practicing literacy and language skills.

Conclusion

Early literacy instruction for English language learners must provide a strong foundation for continued learning. The starting point for all literacy instruction is the development of children's listening, speaking, and reading vocabularies. Children also need explicit and systematic instruction in phonological awareness and phonics to help them become successful, independent readers. With culturally appropriate literature we can engage young learners, develop comprehension skills, and motivate them to participate and learn. ■

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During her 18-year teaching career, Lada Kratky has fostered a love of reading in hundreds of English-speaking and Spanish-speaking children. She is an author of Hampton-Brown's Avenues, a K-5 language and literacy program. She is also the author of numerous children's books and classroom resources including both English and Spanish early literacy programs. A featured speaker at national, regional, and local educational conferences, Ms. Kratky has presented strategies and techniques for effective early literacy instruction at institutes and training workshops across the country.