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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the suitability of Open Court for teaching English language learners (ELLs). Open Court is a scripted curriculum that emphasizes basic skills broken down into discrete parts and subparts. Its teacher's manual specifies amount of time per activity and teacher language required. Teachers are overseen by coaches who ensure they follow directions. Researchers conducted interviews and observations and administered questionnaires to examine student teachers' use of and views on Open Court and teacher educators' beliefs about Open Court. Overall, several teachers mentioned that lessons presupposed background knowledge that ELLs did not have and that Open Court's rapid instructional pace and lack of interaction caused ELLs to tune out. Many teachers considered Open Court's phonics program a strength, but they faulted its focus on average learners with average learning modalities. They also faulted it for containing only whole class instruction and for not including enough critical thinking activities. None of the teachers found the ESL guide for adapting the curriculum useful. Teachers felt that Open Court was good for primary grade students, because they learned to decode faster and more accurately. Teachers considered it less appropriate for older children, because they did not develop vocabulary, background knowledge, or comprehension skills sufficiently. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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# ***Open Court and English Language Learners: Questions and Strategies***

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## Introduction

Urban school districts are increasingly adopting scripted, teacher-proof language arts curricula. *Open Court* is such a curriculum, published by SRA McGraw-Hill, and based in the SRA Reading Mastery Program from the 1960s and 70s. The *Open Court* teacher's manual specifies the amount of time per activity and the teacher language required. Coaches, many of them former teachers, monitor *Open Court* lessons to ensure that teachers follow the timeline and substance of the manual.

Researchers' opinions differ on the efficacy of *Open Court*. In a reading assessment study, McRae (no date), an educational measurement specialist, asserts that children's test scores have risen in *Open Court* schools. In contrast, Moustafa & Land (2002) suggest that low SES schools will do better on standardized tests if they use unscripted curricula. Moustafa (2002) analyzed SAT 9 data and found reasons to question the effectiveness of *Open Court*. Chard (1997) concluded that Massachusetts districts using *Open Court* would benefit from reviewing the program's instructional delivery system to assess weaknesses and identify areas for improvement.

Teachers' opinions of *Open Court* also differ. Experienced teachers may complain that they are stifled, prevented from using their own knowledge, creativity and intuition. New teachers often welcome the structure and direction of the materials. Some teachers state that they cannot meet the needs of English Language Learners with these materials.

### Examining the Effectiveness of *Open Court* with ESL Children

As teacher educators, we instruct pre-service teacher methods courses, and observe lessons by student teachers, most of whom are already teaching on an emergency credential. In our work, we hear puzzling and mixed reports of the efficacy of *Open Court* with ESL children. Some teachers complain that they must spend three hours per day on the curriculum, and have no time to teach social studies, ESL or science. Our colleagues are frustrated as they try to teach areas such as social studies or science methods to new teachers required to teach only math and *Open Court*. When supervising

student teachers, professors have difficulty convincing teacher candidates to carry out lessons in science, social studies, or ESL. As observers of *Open Court* lessons, we have witnessed lessons scripted according to the teacher's manual and with no avenues for children's comments and questions. Yet, many beginning teachers welcome the detailed instructions. In addition, we have heard of lessons in which teachers adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the children.

As teacher educators and former teachers of ESL children, we have wondered how suitable *Open Court* is for second language children. In this paper, through interviews, observations and questionnaires, we explore this question.

### **Background: Scripted Materials**

*Open Court* is one of several scripted curricula critiqued by Linda Darling-Hammond (1997). *Success for All* is a comparable program. In these curricula, basic skills are emphasized, often broken down into discrete and subparts. The curriculum is teacher-proof, in that teachers are asked to use the prescribed materials and follow the script. It is also student-proof, in that it does not accommodate different learning styles or levels of understanding (Darling-Hammond: 51). Scripted curricula are used more in disadvantaged schools – where students have a strong need for responsive teaching.

*Open Court* grew out of the Science Research Associates (SRA) reading mastery program which was widely used in the 60s and 70s. *Open Court* was designed for native speakers of English. It is an intensive, quick-paced and highly structured program. The materials are arranged in three strands. The green strand deals with phonemic awareness. In the red strand, children read and respond to the text. In the blue strand, materials are integrated with the curriculum. Although a balanced approach is suggested by the combined three strands, the red strand (decoding and phonics) seems to be emphasized. Teachers follow detailed manuals, and are overseen by “coaches,” present and former teachers who have received additional training. The coaches visit and critique teachers, making suggestions about their teaching techniques, and ensuring that they are literally on the right page at the right time.

## Methods

We discuss the effectiveness (and ineffectiveness) of *Open Court* mainly from teachers' points of view, through the eyes of approximately 100 new and more experienced teachers, all of whom are credential or master's students at California State University Northridge. We also consider the views of our colleagues, professors who teach credential methods courses and supervise student teachers. The teachers (all of whom were Education students) shared their experiences with *Open Court* through in-class writing, class discussions, and e-mail questionnaires in the Spring and Fall semesters of 2002. . Teacher educators responded to an email prompt, or chatted informally. We questioned the teachers and professors about several features that had been mentioned by teachers in a pilot study and which are also important for second language readers

Background knowledge is not presupposed but is built in the lessons  
(Peregoy & Boyle, 2000)  
Context provides meaning in phonics and skills lessons  
The instructional pace is appropriate for learners  
The readings interest children (Krashen, 1993)  
Activities include appropriate techniques for teaching vocabulary (Law & Eckes, 2000: 90-107).

We consulted 36 sets of notes from supervising 6 student teachers over 36 lessons. We examined the *Open Court* teacher's manuals and decodable books.

Along with posing questions about the effectiveness and suitability of *Open Court*, we will discuss strategies for using this curriculum with English Language Learners (ELLs), all from teachers and teacher educators. For example, we consider ways to cope with the ESL manual and time constraints, ways to build background knowledge, and methods of teaching and reinforcing vocabulary.

## Trends in the Data

If second language readers lack background knowledge, they may have difficulties (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Several teachers stated that lessons presuppose

**background knowledge** which their English language learners did not have. An upper grade teacher wrote,

Units, especially in upper grades, reflect intangible concepts such as competition and cooperation. Children learn abstract words instead of basic word building

A lower grade teacher wrote,

Stories presuppose knowledge of items such as the east coast, boating and fishing, cold northern winds, black lung disease

Many teachers agreed that phonics lessons do not supply the needed context for ELLs.

The lessons do not supply context. Vocabulary in the phonics lessons is contrived, forced to fit the phonemes. Lessons are built around sound-spelling patterns.

Overall, it appears that teachers need to plan their own lessons to build background knowledge. These lessons then take time from the lessons in the curriculum.

In any subject area, the pace of the lesson can stimulate or bore the children.

According to some *Open Court teachers*, the rapid **instructional pace** caused ELLs to tune out.

Rapid pace and lack of interaction makes attention difficult. Kids have a hard time following. Especially a problem because the program relies upon linked skills

It's crazy, it's hectic it's stressful. Half day kindergarten is not taken into account. There is no time for the pre-teaching and re-teaching ESL suggestions.

Teachers gave varying opinions of the appropriateness of the *Open Court* stories. Stories included appropriate literature such as "Big Book stories, which are based on a theme" and written by "well known authors such as Leo Lionni." On the other hand,

some Read-aloud stories have “absurd characters that only advanced EOs [English-only children] can talk about.” Also,

Many stories are excerpts. Excerpts make overall comprehension difficult (i.e., inferences, summarization, etc.) and students can get frustrated with the lack of information

Most [stories] are not at the children’s developmental reading level and often contain complex concepts and difficult, multi-syllabic vocabulary that kids cannot understand due to their reading ability and limited English. Therefore children have limited interest in the story.

In light of our data, *Open Court* lessons provide two of the five teaching strategies and conditions (Law & Eckes, 2000) that facilitate children’s ESL learning:

- a) comprehensible input,
  - b) an environment as stress-free as possible,
  - c) numerous meaningful opportunities for students to hear, speak [listen, and write] the language,
  - d) a network of support,
  - e) clear guidelines and rules.
- (Law & Eckes, 2000)

On the positive side, the network of support for ELLs can be strong and effective, depending on the teacher and coach. The curriculum definitely provides clear guidelines and rules. On the negative side, we heard numerous examples of children who did not understand the teacher’s oral language or the stories they were asked to read. Rather than being asked to accommodate to children’s levels, teachers were asked to follow a script, treating all students the same. Several teachers noted the stressful atmosphere during *Open Court*, especially to finish the red or blue strands. “Teachers take PE time to finish *Open Court*,” noted one. Students had meaningful opportunities to use language if they were able to understand stories and lessons.

Many teachers cited one strength of *Open Court* as a curriculum for ELLs – the phonics program. They described it as effective, comprehensive and repetitive. Several mentioned students of theirs who had learned to decode and had improved academically overall as a result of that learning. For older children, the methods of teaching editing, “sentence lifting,” were praised.

When asked about the weaknesses of *Open Court*, teachers faulted the program’s focus on average learners with average learning modalities.

Program addresses the average learner, assuming that all children are at the same reading level and same English level. Little time for enrichment and re-teaching

Program addresses auditory learners and a few other modalities. ELLs often require kinetic and visual learning aids such as graphic organizers and TPR

Program is passive. Long periods of listening, but not doing

They faulted the program for containing only whole class instruction;

Only whole class or independent instruction, no cooperative grouping. ELLs need discussion and interaction through conversation.

Another weakness was that the program was too low-level and did not include enough critical thinking activities:

Program addresses only basic skills. Does not address higher-level thinking. Not challenging. Only introductory knowledge

Because the pacing is so rushed, teachers do not have time for the research/investigative portion of the program, which might provide an opportunity for grouping and higher-level thinking.

For older children, reading to learn is more important than learning to read. They should be able to decode, and more stress is now put on content teaching. However, when teachers try to teach science or social studies through the *Open Court* blue strand,

they find that content in the OCR units does not reflect CA science or social studies standards.

*Open Court* includes an ESL guide to help teachers adapt the curriculum to the needs of English Language Learners. However, none of the teachers in our sample found the ESL guide useful. Some comments were:

The [ESL] guide implies that ELLS need “dumbed down” curriculum instead of providing ways to teach the actual curriculum in a comprehensible way. ... They do not provide any differentiated instruction.... It does not discuss TPR activities, SDAIE [sheltered instruction] techniques or ways to make the material more comprehensible for ELLs

[The] ESL Visual Glossary is the most useless resource because it offers suggestions to use with the unknown vocabulary but does not provide any materials. For example, “Lawn: Show the students a picture of a lawn.”

[The] ESL supplement is primarily focused on phonics/dictation part of the program, including simpler words. There is some focus on grammar/mechanics, but it is just a repetition of activities in the book..

To teach ELLs, teachers need many strategies for teaching and reinforcing vocabulary. The teachers in our sample mentioned three strategies, and pointed out a problem with two of them:

- 1) teaching students to use word structure  
This strategy was not useful because students have limited language and can't find roots and affixes;
- 2) teaching students to use context clues to figure out meaning  
This strategy was not useful because students find words around the unknown word to be difficult as well;
- 3) teaching students to use apposition, in which they find the definition of the word directly after the unknown word

In general, teachers said very little about the methods of vocabulary teaching used with this curriculum. We will return to this issue later.

**Varying *Open Court* Teaching Strategies:  
A Novice Teacher Attempts to Foster More Student Participation**

In a classroom of ELL students, a young teacher implements a version of the “Handing Off” component of the Open Court series. Although the “Handing Off” activity requires that the class meet in a group to discuss questions posed in the “Discussing the Selection” section of the Open Court teacher’s manual, this teacher begins by allowing students to pose their own questions and story predictions. Her interest is for students to explore more open-ended reading activities. She wants to provide opportunities for self-regulated learning. Specifically, the teacher wants students to ask questions, make connections between the reading selection and their own experiences, and to make predictions.

The teacher introduces the story “Brave as a Mountain Lion” by reading the title and the first page. The story is about a young boy who qualifies for a spelling bee, but is afraid to participate. As the example shows, student questions are concerned with human behavior and these questions set the goal for reading more of the story:

- |   |  |                  |
|---|--|------------------|
| T | ...So in this story, do you have any questions from the beginning of this story? What do you think this story will be about? You can make predictions or you can ask questions. ((Two or three students raise their hands)). | 1<br>2<br>3<br>4 |
|   | Ahh, predictions ((writing on the board)) Predictions are things that are about to happen. You got an introduction of things that are going to happen in the story. Vanessa...   | 5<br>6<br>7      |
| S | I got a question. Why are they waiting for his dad?  | 8                |
| T | Why is Spider waiting for his dad? If we keep reading we'll find out. Any other questions?   | 9<br>10          |
| S | Why doesn't Spider doesn't want his dad to come?   | 11               |
| T | That's a question. ((Writing it on the board))   | 12               |
| S | Why is Spider doesn't want his dad to come?  | 13               |

T	Why is Spider afraid of his dad to come home? Let's wait for a little while, we'll read a few more pages, and then we'll ask more questions.	14 15 16
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Although we may question how open-ended the talk is, students have an opportunity to explore ways to negotiate with the teacher and text and to participate in setting a course for their reading.

As the lesson proceeds, the students read another page and find out that Spider does not want to show a school paper to his father. The teacher asks for students to make some connections between their previous experiences and those of Spider's, but with little information about Spider and his predicament, the sharing of student narratives become difficult to follow, even for the teacher. The teacher promptly re-directs the questions to focus on Spider's dilemma:

T	But, what is something that we are talking about? Something that you all talked about that you have in common?	17 18
S	That we're all kids.	19
T	But you're relating it to the story that you are reading.	20
S	That Spider, he doesn't want to show... he only wants to show one paper to his dad, and the other one ever, never again.	21 22
T	Ok, but what's happening here? What...	23
S	That he's afraid.	24
T	Being afraid! Thank you Luis, being afraid. You're making connections with Spider. The way Spider is feeling. Being afraid, afraid is a feeling ((writing on the board)) OK, a feeling, and you're all making connections with Spider's life. How how Spider was feeling then. Jose...	25 26 27 28 29
S	Maybe Spider is afraid of his dad because he has a card from school. Maybe Spider is afraid of his dad maybe because he has a card from school bad.	30 31 32

The teacher guides students to narrow the focus of their sharing to a specific topic: fear.

The idea of fear leads students to share many possible scenarios (e.g., stealing, using bad

language, receiving an F) as to why Spider doesn't want to show the paper to his father. Throughout the segment students had opportunities to pose questions and share their predictions, but an actual discussion in which ideas grow and develop as students build on each other's ideas and expand into new horizons was not evidenced (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980). In order for more productive discussions to occur in classrooms it would be necessary for students to have more information and insights into Spider's situation. Reading a larger portion of the story or the entire story might facilitate a good discussion and advance students beyond a generated list of predictions.

According to teachers, the "Handing Off" activity, as outlined in the Open Court Teacher's Manual, is a time when students are to participate in their own discussion. Once a week for twenty minutes, the teacher displays questions on a story and a selected student leader reads a question, chooses a respondent and monitors the time spent on each question. During the "Handing Off" activity, the teacher is to take a back seat in the discussion and only interject to prompt or direct student responses. It appears that the "Handing Off" component is designed to provide students with opportunities to actively participate with the reading material. These opportunities, however, may be constrained by the pre-selection of the questions in the teacher's manual or by the teacher guiding the talk, both modes of questioning direct the flow and depth of thinking. These so called discussions occur without inquiring about students' reasoning or understanding and greatly limit opportunities for thinking critically.

### **Varying *Open Court* Teaching Strategies: Reports from Experienced Teachers**

Teachers and teacher educators often mentioned that some experienced teachers were able to "tweak" *Open Court* and use it effectively with ELLs, with the blessing of

their principals and coaches. While we were not able to observe such lessons, we have some hunches about the kinds of modifications that these teachers are making. A few of our students reported taking children's literature to read to their students. Others stated:

There are a few things that can be adapted. It's difficult to do so because you have to do so many other mandatory lessons that time becomes an issue. When I kick off a unit I bring realia and guest speakers to get them in the mood and give them some background knowledge.

I try to make the vocabulary activities that students see or hear in their environment

I adapt OC by having students do more writing activities and I make the writing process go by faster. I also add worksheets for students to do/work on in grammar exercises/listening/practice exercises.

I go at a slower pace. One lesson takes two days. To help with ELLs comprehension when they read

### **Future Research by Teachers and Teacher Educators**

We have begun to pose questions about the effectiveness of *Open Court* for English Language Learners. Some tasks lie ahead for us, and for interested teachers and teacher educators. First, teachers need to keep records of practice as baseline data. These could be audio- and video-tapes, the teacher's own notes or journal, a colleague's notes on a teacher's lesson, or notes by a supervisor or mentor. Teachers can analyze transcripts or other records of lessons to look for many of the features which we have discussed here. When teachers see interesting aspects of or changes in their lessons, they can present the data to an informal teacher's group, at a district workshop or a local conference. Out of these presentations, they may develop research projects. Perhaps teachers can form task groups within a school or district with interested teacher educators

as members. Some useful references on teacher research include (Johnson, 1992, Hudelson & Lindfors, 1993) and from a more political perspective, (Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999). The teachers in our study listed many questions that they would like to research about *Open Court*. Some of them were

What is the origin of OC and its purpose for its target audience?  
Did they keep in mind who their audience was going to be?

How well are ELL children adjusting to OC? Are they understanding all they're learning like other English-speaking children?  
How is this program helping ELLs in fluency and writing?  
Are the students who increased their scores better readers as a result of using OC?

What are the opportunities for new arrivals [to the U.S.] to be successful in the program?  
What do you do with those kids who can't break the code?

How many teachers are actually using the entire guide in the amount of time given?  
What adaptation accommodation have teachers implemented?  
What do you do with those kids who can't break the code?

### **A Revised ESL manual for Open Court**

A revised ESL manual could focus on ways to teach vocabulary, group learners, and build background knowledge. The vocabulary section could include a wide variety of ways to teach vocabulary through oral language, nonverbal means, written language. There is no definitive text on teaching vocabulary to ELD children, but Nation (1990; 2001), and Hatch & Brown (1995) will be a starting point. The manual can also include a wide variety of ways to group ELLs and EOs in *Open Court* activities for mixed pairs and equal level pairs and for heterogeneous and homogeneous groups (Bell, 1988). The last section could cover a wide variety of ways to assess and build children's

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background knowledge, or to build a link between their background knowledge and English words. These would not overlap with the vocabulary section, but will include experiments, simulations, use of real objects, and listings of videos.

### **The Effectiveness of *Open Court* with English Language Learners**

Teachers and teacher educators praised *Open Court*, in many cases, because primary grade children learned to decode faster and more accurately than with other curricula. Many said that the curriculum was ideal for new teachers. However, ELL children sometimes seemed lost in the *Open Court* lessons because they lacked the needed vocabulary and background knowledge to understand lessons, because phonics lessons lacked meaning and context, because the lessons were taught to the whole class in a lockstep pace. Teachers of older children were more critical of *Open Court*. Older children did not develop their vocabulary, background knowledge or comprehension skills sufficiently. They also missed out on state-mandated science and social studies content because of the time spent on *Open Court*. Teachers at all levels noted that *Open Court* requires whole group teaching and does not accommodate enough for individual differences.

### **Abiding Questions**

Having looked at *Open Court* through the eyes of our students and colleagues, many questions remain. Pedagogical Questions deal fundamentally with how we can best serve these children. How can we best education English language learners so that they master language, content, and critical thinking? How can we prepare them so that a larger percentage go on to graduate from college? Political Questions deal with how we

can influence policy in school districts. Olsen & Jaramillo (1999) provide a framework to help teachers work together, gather data, and then present and write.

Socio-political Questions call us to ask why low SES districts use scripted curricula while wealthy districts do not? Professional Questions make us wonder to what degree teachers (and even teacher educators) are seen as professional in the eyes of lobbyists, politicians and textbook publishers. Why don't teachers select curriculum? What must teachers do to be treated as professionals? Research-related Questions include continuing the exploration of the ways in which *Open Court* is helpful. For instance, what is the range of ways in which teachers follow or alter the lessons, with the blessing of their principals and coaches? What portraits can we paint of expert and effective teachers who use "Open Court" (e.g., strategies, techniques, ways to follow and not follow the teacher's guide?) What would be ideal supplementary materials and strategies? Many people – teachers, graduate students, professors and others can work to answer these questions.

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