



CROSSING BORDERS: ELL LESSONS LEARNED FROM A PRIMARY YEARS PROGRAM IN CHINA

By Kim Pinkerton

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Abstract: The author describes her two-year experience of living in China and how this molded her attitudes about English language learners in Texas. Examples drawn from the Nanjing International School show how one school worked to meet the needs of a diverse group of students, with more than 70% learning English as a second language. The practical foundations behind these examples are supported by research, and readers are encouraged to consider how these examples could be applied with ELLs in our classrooms.

Keywords: ELL, primary literacy, emergent literacy, cultural sensitivity

A few years ago, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to live in China. It was an experience that really opened my eyes to another world outside of Texas. As I grappled with learning enough Mandarin to accomplish daily tasks, I developed a new appreciation for the struggles that my second language learners faced in their coursework at the university level. I better understood the common writing errors my Asian students made as I became familiar with the grammatical structure of Mandarin.

I also had first-hand knowledge of the connection between language proficiency and perceived intelligence. One of my new Chinese friends was completely taken aback the day I revealed to him that I was a college professor in my other life in Texas. I could see the wheels turning as he was trying to discern how a person who communicated in Mandarin with two or three-word phrases (and a lot of hand gestures) could be intelligent enough to teach in higher education.

Most importantly, though, I gained a new appreciation for students who were in my classes at a university yet had only been speaking English for just a few years. After living in China for two years, I spoke Mandarin like a two-year-old; there is no way that I was even close to ready to tackle academic work in China. My experience of being immersed in a new culture and language helped me to truly

feel the struggles that many second language learners, as well as their families, face. It made me a more thoughtful and empathetic teacher. It is something that I believe all teachers should have to experience at some point in their careers.

During my stay in China, I had the opportunity to serve as a volunteer teacher in primary classrooms at the Nanjing International School (NIS). NIS, a school with a population of just under 800 students from grades PK-12, had over 44 nationalities with almost half of the students being Asian and the other portion consisting of students from Europe, Australasia, and North America. While NIS did have one floating English language learner (ELL) teacher in the primary grades, she was reserved for those newest to the English language. Consequently, each primary teacher completely expected to have a class of students comprised of 70-80% who were ELL (NIS, 2013). Teachers were sensitive to the needs of second language learners and structured their curriculum so that each child had a chance to grow in his or her early literacy skills in English, as well as in other academic subjects. The teachers there worked together to provide conscientious instruction for all primary-grade ELL students and were open to new ideas and teaching methods. Most importantly, all of the teachers, and the entire school community in fact, honored the cultures represented by hosting cultural events, programs, and celebrations throughout the school year.

While we cannot turn all public schools into private international schools, we can take a look at how these teachers were able to teach emergent reading and writing in English to primary grade students where English was the second (or third or fourth) language and in classrooms with so many diverse first-language backgrounds. We can then work to apply several key components to our classrooms.

Essential Beginnings for all Teachers

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) reported that 18.9% of students in Texas are identified as English language learners. That may not sound like too many students, but in this state where I teach, it is equal to over one million students. Within that population, almost 90% of those students are Hispanic, and 85% of the ELL population is economically disadvantaged (TEA, 2017). In Texas, as is the case for the rest of the ELLs in the United States, our ELL population is

at greater risk of failure, not just because of a language barrier, but due to the added component of their families' economic challenges (Goldenberg, 2011).

Even if the population of ELL students in your classroom is mostly comprised of ELLs with a similar home language, like it is in Texas, my aim is that teachers can adapt the lessons learned from NIS Hopefully, though, when we have students from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, etc. in our classrooms, we can apply these practices to their needs as well. "[T]he moral imperative to improve achievement and opportunities [for ELLs] grows as their numbers increase" (Goldenberg, 2011, p. 684).

Get to Know Students, Families, and Cultures

While many programs for ELL students focus primarily on teaching discrete skills (like phonics rules), perhaps a better place to begin is not academic in nature at all. When teachers first gather personal information about English language learners, the potential for bolstering instruction is powerful. Teachers at NIS lived in the same community as their students, and because the school was open on the weekends, there was opportunity to gather together to play football (a.k.a. soccer) with the Spanish, take dance or martial arts classes taught by local Chinese, or eat at a German bratwurst cookout. NIS even hosted an international day where families from different countries would share food, dance, clothing, etc. The students' and the teachers' families spent quality time together truly getting to know each other. Teachers knew if a parent had to travel for business back to a home country, if a sibling was sick, or if a family was suddenly displaced because the Chinese government decided to shut down main roads to their homes.

What does all of this have to do with teaching? It has everything to do with it. Many of us live away from our students. Their cultures may be different from ours. Maybe we don't even speak the same language as the parents of our students. But, "[i]n order to ensure successful cultural border crossing for ELLs, it is recommended to consider ELLs' funds of knowledge as useful resources and springboards for their learning" (Song, Higgins, & Harding-DeKam, 2014, p. 55). When we do not get to know our students, their families, and their cultures, we are doing them a disservice.

"ELs benefit just as much from their parents' involvement in their education as other students, and teachers have to find ways to involve parents of ELs in ways that would build on their strengths" (Protacio & Edwards, 2015, p. 414). We have to start to build these relationships so that we can teach with compassion. It's what we want from others; we must give it to our students.

For example, I was working with a first grade ELL from Sweden who, despite an excellent spoken command of English, was struggling to read even the simplest words and texts. I began by talking with his mom. I knew her, and she trusted me. I found out that they left Sweden before English was taught, that Swedish was the only language spoken at home, that she did not read books to him in Swedish or English, and that she felt that he was too rowdy to keep in the house for reading. This information was important because research tells us that ELLs will have more success learning reading skills in English if they already have those skills in their first language (Goldenberg, 2011).

As I began working with him, I asked his mother and several other Swedish moms about sounds in the Swedish language that could cause him confusion in English, as well as simple things about

the culture that I could use to make comprehension connections for him. This information was invaluable for my work with him. It told me that I needed to expose him to literature and read aloud experiences, and it helped me to have home language (L1) connections to both the word and comprehension work we had together. Most importantly, I could be more compassionate in my teaching, knowing that his literacy life at home was sparse in both languages. In addition, I was able to provide resources to help his mom assist him at home.

While the close community structure of NIS might seem utopian, we can do better when it comes to the relationships that we have with our students and their families. Table 1 offers ideas on how teachers can holistically support the student.

Table 1. Ideas for Getting to Know Your Students, Their Families, and Their Cultures

School-Wide Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organize a family soccer day with teams, prizes, etc.• Host a family picnic.• Build and maintain a community garden.• Have a "clean up" day where parents and students join staff to take care of little projects to improve the school.• Remember, community activities are best on weekends. Keep these very simple so that teachers and parents come for the fun rather than it feeling like work. And, don't worry about translators, unless it is necessary. Much can be communicated simply by being together; much can be learned from each other during these exchanges.
Classroom Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invite children and family members cultural artifact share time where they can introduce cultural or family customs (See Protacio & Edwards 2015 for a guide).• Ask parents to attend special read alouds and talks, encouraging short exchanges in L1 languages.• Call parents regularly, putting aside the "get to know you" sheets usually sent home on the first day of school.• Create a calendar that allows for parent volunteers in the classroom daily.

Don't Judge a Student's Abilities Based on English Proficiency

At NIS, many teachers spoke languages in addition to English. The teachers at this school were not at all phased by classrooms of students from different cultures and different home languages. Most had first-hand knowledge of the difficulties of living in a new culture and learning to speak a new language; after all, they were living in China. Simply put, they could relate to the struggles of their students.

In a review of the literature related to teacher dispositions toward ELLs, Jimenez et al. (2015) found that preservice teachers' lowered expectations for students who have English as a second language can be positively altered through supported tutoring of ELL children and immersive language learning experiences. They recommend second language and/or living abroad experiences for all preservice teachers. "By exerting the effort to learn another language, teachers of ELs will understand that it takes considerable time to learn a second language, that it is a challenging task, and that in spite of one's best efforts, mastery is often elusive. All of these understandings will serve teachers well as they provide instructional and moral support to their students" (Jimenez et al., 2015, p. 408).

When I was in China, I felt the frustration of trying to do something as simple as buy vegetables at a market. I felt the embarrassment of

having to order food in a restaurant with just a two-word phrase like “want chicken.” I felt defeated when my language teacher praised my husband for his ability to memorize the words he was learning with lightning speed, yet she scolded me and told me to study harder. There is nothing I could have done to better open my eyes to the struggles of my ELL students.

Most importantly, I rarely felt demeaned for my lack of proficiency in Mandarin. While it was difficult to communicate, the Chinese people were welcoming and happy to hear me try to communicate with my limited speaking vocabulary. They were kind. I quickly saw how much we have to learn about patience with those who do not speak English. My experience changed my teaching life, and my life as a Texan, forever.

Obviously, not all teachers will get the chance to live abroad, but there are some things that we can do here to get close to that experience. Table 2 provides a list with which to start.

Table 2. Initial List of Ideas for Experiencing Language Learning

Learning in the Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shop at a local market where the patrons speak the home language of your ELL students. Don't take a translator. • Watch your favorite TV show or listen to radio programs presented in the home language of your ELL students. Don't use subtitles. • Purchase a language program or practice with free online sources, like Duolingo or Memrise.
Learning in the Classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite students to occasionally speak to you in their home language. • Play age-appropriate music and videos in the home language of your ELL students. • Ask colleagues who speak the home language of your ELL students to spend one day a week talking with you only in that language.

Next Steps in the Classroom Immerse Them in Inquiry

NIS is an International Baccalaureate (IB) school that focuses on inquiry-based instruction for all students. The teachers there see student choice as vital to learning. Student projects and accomplishments are celebrated and showcased regularly. While there, I saw Diploma Program (DP) students sharing work through an art auction, Middle Years Program (MYP) students debating the impact of puberty for girls versus boys, and Primary Years Program (PYP) students sharing multimedia presentations about the lives of important family members. Inquiry was not reserved for the brightest or only those who could read and write in English at a mastery level; inquiry was for all students, including the youngest learners.

Moses, Buseti-Frevert, and Pritchard (2015) studied inquiry-based instruction during ESL time for emerging bilingual students in the second grade. In addition to allowing students to learn based on interest, the researchers found that their students developed deeper levels of thinking, that they were challenged and took pride in their work, and that they acquired research skills and developed creative projects. In terms of language, “[t]he classrooms were full of language-rich texts, anchor charts, and daily discussions using familiar sentence frames. Minilessons were taught based on frequent grammatical miscues, and [the researchers] scaffolded language development by paraphrasing texts, scribing student learning, and reading difficult texts aloud” (p. 445).

Of course, Moses, Buseti-Frevert, and Pritchard (2015) reported struggles in their own teaching and the students’ learning, but they persisted and developed strategies to overcome some of the obstacles that their students faced. Based on their work, Table 3 offers guidelines for successful inquiry-based instruction with ELLs.

Table 3. Ideas for Inquiry Projects With ELL Students

Issue 1: Asking Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model and then repeat until they can ask their own. • Use anchor charts and help them develop ways to organize their questions. • Allow students to work together on research and to engage in discourse about their wonderings. • Guide, but allow students to come to their own conclusions.
Issue 2: Digging Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead small group meetings to provide opportunities for students to discover new, more sophisticated information. • Model that learning and research are ongoing to encourage them to dig deeper.
Issue 3: Reading and Vocabulary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In small groups, use their own questions as a way to teach vocabulary and grammar. • Model the correct language for paraphrasing what is learned in a text (to prevent students from robotically copying words). • Use sentence frames (e.g. I think _____ because _____). • Read aloud difficult texts. • Teach academic vocabulary associated with nonfiction text features (captions, labels, tables, etc.).

Reading to Students

There is much research to support the idea that using texts that have familiar cultural or interest-based significance is impactful when reading to and with ELLs. (Goldenberg, 2011). Moses (2015) even suggests that allowing ELLs choice enhances their feelings of safety in the classroom, which is her first tip for supporting English learners in a reading workshop setting. This is such a simple idea to enhance ELL instruction.

At NIS, choice reading was lauded. The library was bountiful and open before and after school and even during the hour-long break period where kids had the choice of playing on the playground, going to the science lab, reading a book in the library, etc. The library was open to parents as well, and all could check out books for personal reading. Read alouds happened daily both within the library and inside of classrooms. While some of the titles were selected by the teachers, many were selected by the students.

“Read-alouds fill the gap [left by simple, decodable texts used for independent reading] by exposing children to book language, which is rich in unusual words and descriptive language” (Kindle, 2009, p. 202). Another important consideration when reading language-rich books with ELLs is that teachers must plan for discussions before, during, and after reading. These discussions often focus on word meanings because for ELLs even a simple word can be so easily confused.

I am reminded of one morning at NIS when I was reading a book about ladybugs with a first grade Korean student. The title of one section said, “The Way They Look.” Then, it said that ladybugs are red or orange. The student immediately told me that it did not make any sense at all. He said that he did not know what red or orange had to do with their eyes. Ah-ha...he thought that the passage would be about the way the bugs see and not what

they look like. I had not even thought about this meaning and realized the importance of a discussion about the difference between the words *see* and *look*.

Beyond remaining very aware of the vocabulary pitfalls that some read aloud texts contain, teachers should have visual representations of words and act out words to support the discussions (Goldberg, 2015; Song, Higgins, & Harding-DeKam, 2014). On a separate occasion when I was reading a book about Dolphins with a small group of first graders at NIS, we started by “picture walking” the nonfiction text, and because the Table of Contents is structurally a part of most nonfiction texts, I knew that this would need to be a focus on our picture walk. The kids did know that it was a list of what we would find in the book, but they could not read the word contents or talk to me about the meaning of that word in the context of what they already knew. We looked at a jar on a shelf that had balls of clay in it and talked about the clay being the contents of the jar just like the table of contents showed the contents of the book. The kids grasped the concept and word quickly because of the visual connection.

Reading to and with all children is very important, but for some ELLs, the classroom may be the only place where they get to hear a book read to them or where they can have someone support their emergent reading attempts. Many daily experiences with reading, especially interest-based reading, and discussion is crucial. It is the teacher’s job to help parents see the importance and provide them with read aloud resources. Even in their home language, if ELLs are the only English speakers in their homes, it is important to encourage families to read books or tell stories in their home languages. Table 4 provides additional read aloud tips that will foster ELL experiences.

Sing and Play with Language

We know from research that oral language practice in English is essential for reading success (Goldenberg, 2011). Paquette and Rieg (2008) discuss a variety of benefits music has for young ELL students:

- › Because of the playful nature of children’s music, it lowers the affective filter which opens them up to learning;
- › Because of the repetition in the songs, it provides opportunities to develop automaticity;
- › Because the lyrics are often linguistically informal, it prepares children for spoken language;
- › Because the words are so important in songs, it can improve listening skills, abstract thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness;
- › Because many songs have rhyme and rhythm, it can be used to teach language skills, like phonological awareness and phonics and prosody.

Table 4. Read Aloud Tips to Foster ELL Experiences

Picture Walk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce students to the author, illustrator, and title • Make predictions based on the cover • Turn the pages of the book to get a glimpse inside the story, activating schema • Talk about any significant vocabulary: words vitally essential for understanding the text • Help the students to lead the discussion as well
Talk, Talk, Talk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students questions as you read • Model by making your own connections and predictions along the way • Encourage students to ask questions, make connections/predictions, and draw inferences; help them with the language along the way • Look for answers to the questions and check the inferences and predictions together • Encourage students to turn and talk to one another at points before, during, and after the reading; encourage home language dialogue when needed
Just Enjoy the Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the book once for enjoyment before teaching targeted lessons. The first read should be focused on the beauty of the book and comprehension. The next readings can focus on word and vocabulary learning and fluency.

All primary classrooms, and especially those with ELL students, should be filled with talk and music, which could also result in active play.

Oral language development, as well as the acquisition of essential phonological awareness skills, can be infused into learning experiences in playful ways. At NIS, this was very evident when the kindergarten students met with the Mandarin teacher for each lesson. For example, when learning Mandarin names for animals, the children sang songs like “Liang Zhi Lao Hu” (Two Tigers), and there was even a Mandarin version of “Heads, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” for learning body parts. There are many songs in English that teach concepts as well.

Phonological awareness is a skill that is vitally important to emergent readers, and songs can be used to teach the sounds of the English language (International Reading Association (IRA) & National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1998; Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Consider “Head, Shoulders, Knees, & Toes.” In addition to singing the song in its original form and learning sounds from the rhyme, children can have fun with changing beginning sounds to make a new, fun song to sing (e.g. Nead, Noulders, Nees, and Noes...). Table 5 lists songs that are great for phonological awareness learning.

Immerse Them in Words

We can apply what we know about good reading instruction with our ELLs, but they also require some instruction targeted to their specific needs (Goldenberg, 2011). At NIS, students engaged in analytic word study (like *Words Their Way*) specifically targeted to their developmental needs. In addition, words surrounded the rooms, and the children were encouraged to use words from their studies and found in the environment when composing written pieces. The teachers there had a strong understanding that “[w]ord learning is enhanced when the words are taught explicitly, embedded in meaningful contexts, and students are provided with ample opportunities for their repetition and use” (Goldenberg, 2011, p. 696).

Table 5. Songs for Oral Language and Phonological Awareness Development

Content Songs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Autumn Leaves are Falling Down” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKjUPqbt8DU • “Counting 1-10 Song” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR-cfDsHCGA • “Days of the Week Sing-Along Song” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spi77By9-iA • “The Animals of the Farm” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXEQ-QO3xTg
Rhyming Songs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Down By the Bay” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yt1czlnCUCg&t=1s • “Dwight Yoakam-I’ve Got a Dog” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvgvw-4acs0 • “Five Little Penguins” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lies_kknzFk • “The Wheels on the Bus–Nursery Rhymes for Children, Kids and Toddlers” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFHBfFAMcbc
L1 Songs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Songs in children’s home languages” http://songsforteaching.com (Paquette and Rieg, 2008)

As an example, after studying the at word family with one student at NIS, we created his own list of additional at words, and he chose several books from his browsing box for us to read together and “hunt” for other at words. He could read the books well, as he had read them at school before. He found the at words in the books and always went back to our list to show me where it was. We then worked together to write his own book, using the words. He wrote, “There is a cat. He is on a mat. Look at that. He wants a pat.” He was really excited about the book. To my surprise and admitted disappointment, he wanted to know what level the book was. I told him since he wrote it, he could level it. So, he made it a level L.

In addition to connections to reading and writing experiences and application, teachers cannot just assume that ELLs will automatically transfer what they know in an L1 language to the second (L2) language. Even for young children, it is important to build on cognates or connections to home languages. This may seem like a daunting task for teachers who do not speak a second language, but Hernandez, Montelongo, and Herter (2016) can give you a start. They created a website, using the findings from their research, where teachers can search the International Literacy Association’s Children’s Choices award-winning picture books from 2014 and 2015 and find Spanish/English cognates in each book (www.angelfire.com/ill/monte/childrenschoices.html).

For example, a search of Mo Willems’ book *The Pigeon Needs a Bath* reveals 17 Spanish/English cognates. In addition, the website offers teachers tables that include Tier 2 cognates (see the research of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) or <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/choosing-words-teach>) found in award-winning picture books, as well as other tables and lessons to help teachers use picture books to teach cognate connections to ELLs.

Conclusion

Much publication and research for English learners is focused on discrete skills (e.g. phonics and vocabulary). In fact, there is very little published on reading comprehension for ELL students,

even when we know that this is our ultimate reading goal for our students. Likewise, we understand that we should get to know our students and their families, but how often do we do it, even if we understand that it could be vital to our teaching? For me, the experience at NIS and in China was holistic. I saw how difficult language learning could be and just how important it is to meet English language learners where they are. I also learned that the classroom should be a community where language learning is cross-curricular and engaging. We can no longer put all of our eggs in one basket (isolated minute skill instruction) when teaching second language learners. We have to look at examples from outside of our teaching environments and determine how those practices can inform our teaching here. “It is certainly useful to think about specific reading components when planning and carrying out instruction; but educators should always be mindful that the payoff comes, ultimately, when they all come together to constitute skilled, informed, and motivated reading” (Goldenberg, 2011, p. 694).



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