

# Guided Reading and Second-Language Learners

By Betsy Suits



It is April, the time of year when the tulips bloom in Holland, the sun shines after a long, dark winter, and the students are looking forward to summer. It is a time for reflection and planning for the coming year. As I stand up and close the curtains to shield the sun, I glance at the second graders seated around the table. It is guided reading time and they are all reading *Boats Afloat* (Goodale, 1996).

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The students come from Switzerland, Israel, Denmark, Korea, and Spain. We are looking at the non-fiction text together and talking about its features such as captions, bold-faced print, table of contents, and the index. The girls reflect on the year:

"I couldn't speak a word when I came here."

"At the beginning of the year, I couldn't read."

"I could say yes and no, that's all."

"Me too."

"Now it's easy-peasy!"

I teach reading and writing in grades K-6 at an American school in The Netherlands, with 374 elementary students from 45 countries. The students at my school come from a high socioeconomic background and the obstacles they face are very different from those in other countries. They come from literate backgrounds with an emphasis on reading and school achievement at home. They have traveled a lot, and bring rich background experiences to school.

As part of my job, I pull out small groups of students in grades 1-3 who are

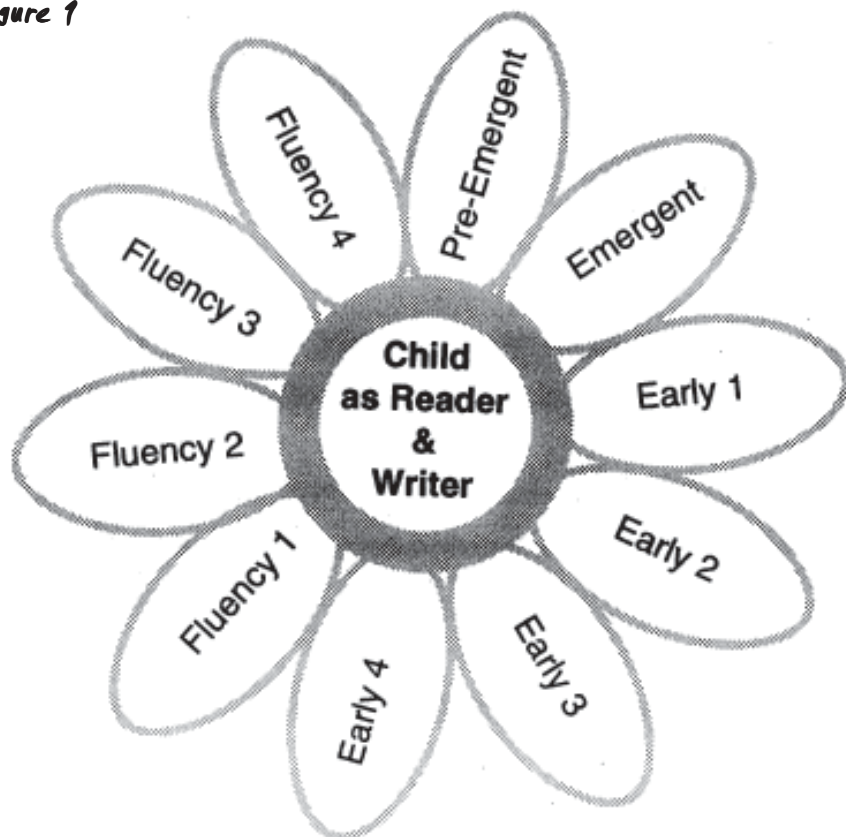
reading below grade level. I work with them several times a week for 20 minute guided reading sessions in addition to their classroom instruction.

Last year our school implemented a leveled reading program. We adopted the Weaver Literacy Levels and accompanying benchmarks (Weaver, 1992). The benchmarks provide an assessment of the level each child is performing at for both reading and writing at a given time.

As part of the benchmarking process, students read leveled books and answer oral comprehension questions each quarter. They are assessed and placed in a reading level using the results of running records, retellings, concepts of print, and appropriate skills. In writing, they are asked to summarize books and respond to texts in various ways. When all the items are completed successfully in a level, students move on to the next level. The books and benchmarks correspond to ten levels ranging from Emergent to Early to Fluent (see Figure 1).

At the beginning of the school year, the classroom teachers were busy implementing the new leveled reading program and weren't sure where the second-language learners would fit in. The English Language Development (ELD) teachers had their own reading and writing program based on children's literature. As a result, many of the

Figure 1



Source: Weaver, B. (1992). *Defining Literacy Level*. New York: Story House Corporation.

Second-Language Learners (SLLs) were not benchmarked or placed in guided reading groups.

I wondered how I could incorporate the second-language learners into the curriculum and what the results would be. My premises were that SLL students could benefit from the opportunity to participate in guided reading groups and that Native Speakers (NS) could be successfully integrated into guided reading groups with the English learners.

### What is Guided Reading?

During guided reading, students meet in small groups with the teacher to read and discuss a text at their level. The rest of the class is involved in language-arts-related work as the teacher calls groups to meet with her.

It is important to remember that guided reading is just one piece of the literacy program. The teacher has the role of guiding the students through the reading and discussion of the text. Teachers provide a purpose for reading the portion of the text, teach strategies for reading unknown words, and comprehension strategies. The short (15-20 minute) lesson has a daily focus and

makes use of every moment as the group reads a selection with the guidance of the teacher.

Teachers often tell me that guided reading is a repeat of the ability reading groups from the "olden days," but this is a common misconception. There are similar aspects, but guided reading groups are unique in that the students learn *strategies* — with the teacher's support — to help them cope with a text so that they can become independent readers.

The teacher can instantly evaluate a book selection by watching individuals in the group read through the text at their own pace (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). By using leveled books, the teacher can detect the areas in which the students need further instruction. The books are leveled from criteria such as number of lines on a page, size of print, repetitive patterns in the text, picture cues, and complexity of the text.

The reading groups of the past were based on a teacher's manual that dictated the skills for each lesson. Students were expected to master the skill whether they were ready for it or not. "Guided reading is dependent on the teacher being aware of each child's competencies, interests, and experiences;

being able to determine the supports and challenges offered by a book; and accepting the role of supporting learning rather than directing teaching." (Mooney, 1990).

### Current Myths

There are many myths about second-language learners. Contrary to these myths, research has shown that:

- younger children do not learn a new language faster than older children.
- SLLs do not learn all the English they need in one year.
- students should not be encouraged to speak and read ONLY English at home.
- the phonics method is not the best way to teach SLL students.
- learning lists of words in isolation is not the best way to teach SLL students.
- tracing and copying isolated letters and words is not beneficial to SLLs.
- accurate spelling should not be an early goal for second-language learners.
- second-language learning occurs at an irregular pace.
- no single teaching strategy will work for all ESL students.
- conversational skills are not an indicator of overall English proficiency.
- beginners in a new language do not need to focus on grammar and verb tenses.
- oral language skills do not always precede written language skills.
- academic instruction should not be postponed until students are proficient in English.
- SLL students should be encouraged to use their native language in writing.

### Current Research

Research has shown that sufficient English proficiency to handle daily life occurs within two years (Meyers, 1993). This refers mainly to oral language skills, not academic skills. Research has also found that it takes five to nine years to develop the language skills necessary for academic subjects (Meyers, 1993).

Educators need to make modifications in curriculum to allow for this adjustment because it is unreasonable to keep students in special ELD classrooms for five to nine years.

The student's age and level of native language fluency are both indicators of new language acquisition. Older students (over age eleven) are able to transfer their native language reading skills to the second language. They have learned to think abstractly and logically in their first language. Younger children must begin by learning basic literacy skills and are often turned off by reading and writing activities in the classroom that they are not ready for.

Therefore, a child who arrives in an English-speaking school at age twelve will acquire more English-speaking academic skills in one year than an eight-year-old sibling. There is considerable evidence that speaking and reading knowledge in the first language predicts and transfers to learning to read a second language (CIERA, 2000).

Often, teachers and parents encourage children to speak and read only English at home. This is contrary to language acquisition research. Students should be encouraged to read and speak in their native language outside of school. When students maintain their first language, they will transfer these skills to their second language. In fact, native language proficiency is a powerful predictor of second language development. Parents should be encouraged to read to their children in their native language. Afterward, children should be asked to retell the story in their own words.

Language develops when children are exposed to many opportunities to express themselves. If children are forced to speak only English at home, they will be deprived of learning to communicate effectively in either language. Children who participate in verbal interactions at home show higher rates of language development before schooling (Simich-Dudgeon-Dudgeon, 1989).

Many SSL teachers use phonics readers in an attempt to teach students the letters, sounds, and rules of the English language. The problem with this approach is that English does not have a very high ratio of symbol-to-sound correspondence. Many symbols represent many sounds, and many sounds are represented by many different symbols (Hamayan & Pflieger, 1987).

In addition, the text in phonics readers is often uninteresting and



meaningless such as: "A cat can nap. A cat can nap in a pan. A man can nap. A man can nap in a pit." This approach focuses on the act of reading rather than on the content of the text.

Also, it doesn't take into account the cultural background of the students. Reading something that makes sense is easier than trying to figure out nonsense words. Reading helps students to gain word recognition skills and world knowledge (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 1999/2000). Therefore, leveled books provide a meaningful context for guided reading instruction with an emphasis on comprehension and word recognition.

### *Goals and Questions*

My goal for the year was to see if second-language learners could be integrated into the guided reading groups in our language arts curriculum. I set up the groups and format so that they could continue reading books at their level in their own classrooms. Through my experiences I will describe a methodology that may be useful to other teachers of second language learner.

My questions included:

*What reading strategies work best with second-language learners?*

*Are guided reading groups beneficial to second-language learners?*

*How could I communicate with the classroom teachers regarding the guided reading groups I was meeting with?*

*Did the SLL students progress through the reading levels?*

I began the year with these questions and ended the year finding out more about second-language learners and guided reading, asking new questions, and redefining my role as a reading teacher.

### *What Reading Strategies Work Best with Second-Language Learners?*

The best reading strategies for working with SLLs include small group instruction, meaningful texts, accessing and building background knowledge, teaching vocabulary in context and guided group discussions. Language needs to be used in meaningful ways for second-language learners. When text is meaningful, students are able to predict what will happen next. If a child learns vocabulary words in an isolated manner, it is a difficult task and contradicts the way that language evolves naturally in children. Unfamiliar words are easier to figure out in context than breaking them up into parts. A meaningful text provides the reader with endless opportunities to build on both comprehension and word recognition.

Second-language learners require more support and more demonstration, and sometimes specialized materials and methods (Routman, 2000). Teachers need to model everything they take for granted, such as procedures in the classroom, reading and writing techniques, and desired outcomes. In addition, effective strategies for teaching literacy to

SLL students should have communication as their primary purpose, build on the child's oral language, and be motivating to children (Hamayan & Pflieger, 1987). Strategies should build on students' strengths. Watts-Taffe & Truscott (2000) suggest three areas in which teachers can use scaffolding to support children in language development:

### **1. Background Knowledge**

It is especially important to find out what an SLL student knows about a topic before reading the text. Students bring a literacy framework from their native language, their cultural background, and knowledge of texts to a reading event. It helps them integrate new information into an existing conceptual framework that facilitates long-term memory and transfer of information to new concepts. When we were reading *The Space Shuttle* (Cutting, 1996), a first-grader exclaimed, "My dad works for the space shuttle!"

Several methods of activating background knowledge with second-language learners that are effective are cooperative learning, graphic organizers, the language experience approach, shared and interactive writing.

### **2. Vocabulary Development**

It is crucial that SLL students learn the meanings of English words in order to interact with the text. It is useful to make vocabulary webs including words from their own language, use drama and pictures, and to revisit the concepts in multiple ways over time. Teachers need to emphasize the definition of a word, use

the word in context, and provide opportunities to actively elaborate on word meanings. It is ten times more efficient to learn vocabulary and spelling through reading (Claire & Haynes, 1994).

### **3. Communication**

Teachers need to create a feeling of community in the classroom where risk-taking is encouraged and all students are recognized as academically able. It is useful for SLL students to have structured classroom routines and clear expectations for success. It helps to post routines in the classroom with accompanying pictures or symbols.

Teachers need to remember to speak clearly and use modeling to explain directions to SLL students. Daily read-alouds are an excellent way to expose SLL students to literature. Teachers can use facial expression, gestures, voice tone, illustrations and modeling to demonstrate literacy concepts.

I found that nonfiction books provided a great deal of support to English-Language readers. Books with photographs extended their vocabulary and understanding through prior knowledge. Out of the 61 books I used for guided reading groups this year, 43 were non-fiction. The children read about birds, boats, water, space, bugs, umbrellas and more. The non-fiction texts provided photographs, vocabulary and access to prior knowledge with familiar labels for students to learn English from. Predictable texts also provide support for beginning readers. The most accessible texts are those with the least complex content (Brown, 1999/2000).

## **Are Guided Reading Groups Beneficial to Second-Language Learners?**

At the beginning of the school year, I met resistance to the idea. Many teachers felt that the SLL students shouldn't be benchmarked because it would be too traumatic for them. Some teachers felt that leveled books were too difficult for the SLL students and that they weren't ready to meet in guided reading groups.

I disagreed on both points. Previously, as a classroom teacher, I benchmarked and placed my SLL students in guided reading groups. Guided reading is only one small part of the balanced language arts curriculum. In meeting with guided reading groups for 15-20 minutes multiple times a week, many literary experiences occur to scaffold learning for second-language learners.

### **Teacher Research Methods**

In August and September, I began the year by benchmarking 46 SLLs in grades 1-3 (see Figure 2). By June, 39 of these students were still enrolled in school for comparison purposes. The classroom teachers benchmark their students in reading and writing every ten weeks over the school year.

In my role as Reading Teacher, I met daily with guided reading groups organized by grade and reading level. The groupings were flexible and changed quarterly. The student population is transient at my school, and the reading groups included both second-language and native-speaker students. I found that including the NS students helped the SLL students grow in vocabulary, fluency, and exposure to the English language.

### **How Could I Communicate with the Classroom Teachers Regarding the Guided Reading Groups I Was Meeting With?**

I wondered if I should meet weekly with teachers, send notes, or try and catch them in the hallway. Due to time constraints, I found that the best means was by giving them weekly copies of my lesson plans for each guided reading group.

I completed a lesson plan on a form created by Brenda Weaver (see Figure 3). The lessons varied according to the



**Figure 2**

Students	Sept. 99	Dec. 99	maart-100	juni-00	Total Levels
<b>FIRST GRADE</b>					
Ana	EmB	E2A	E2B	E3	5
Simon	E2A	E2B	E4	F2	5
Adeolu	E1A	E1B	E2B	E3	4
Sheikha	EmB	E1A	E2B	E3	5
Shayma	EmAsp	EmBsp	EmB	E1B	3
Omar	EmB	E1A	E2A	E3	5
Marte	EmB	E1A	E2A	E2B	4
Vered	EmA	E1A	E2A	E3	6
Kai	EmA	E1B	E2B	E3	6
Lucas	EmAsp	EmBsp	EmB	E1A	2
Abhishek	EmAsp	EmBsp	EmB	EmB	2
Joakim	EmA	E2A	E2A	E3	6
Yiannis	EmA	E2A	E3	E4	7
Anders Br.	EmA	EmA	EmB	E1A	2
<b>SECOND GRADE</b>					
Sofia	E3	E3sp	F1	F2	3
Shira	Unable to benchmark	EmA	E3	E4	7
Adam	E1B	E2B	E3	E3sp	3
Raul	EmA	E2Bsp	E2B	E3	6
Benaya	Unable to benchmark	EmA	E2A	E2B	5
Heeju	E2A	E2B	E2B	E3	2
Dolapo	E2B	E3sp	E3	E4	2
Simone	E2A	E2B	E4	F1	4
Filipe	E2Asp	E2B	E2B	E2Bsp	1
Fredrik	E3	E3sp	E3	F1	2
Mats	Unable to benchmark	EmA	E1B	E2B	5
Maria	E3	E3	F3	F4	6
Hasan	E3	E3sp	F1	F1	2
Mahmoud	E3	E3sp	E4	F2	3
Iris	E2A	E3	E4	F1	4
Sophia	E2B	E3	E4	F1	3
<b>THIRD GRADE</b>					
Jae Won	F2	F3	F4	Beyond F4	3
Umaima	F2sp	F2	F3	F4	2
Kevin	F2	F3	F4	Beyond F4	3
Pedro	E3sp	E3	E4	E4	1
Benedicte	F2	F3	F4	Beyond F4	3
Hashim	No benchmark	F1	F3	F3	2
William	E3	E3	E4	F1	2
Xandra Maria	No benchmark	E4	F3	F4	4
Amir	E2A	F1	F2	F2	5

needs of each group. The focus of each lesson included word recognition strategies, vocabulary in context and comprehension skills.

The follow-up activities ranged from “cloze” activities to rewriting book patterns to writing down what they learned after reading the story (Figure 4). Then I photocopied the weekly lesson plan for each classroom teacher so that they could see the lessons that their students were working on. This was a quick easy way to communicate with teachers weekly. In addition, I met with teachers as necessary to discuss individual students and their progress.

### Materials

I used a variety of leveled guided reading books with the groups, including examples from various genres. The non-fiction books that I chose supported the learners, as demonstrated in research (Cumming, 1994). The books provided photographs of everyday items and events that students could relate to. The text and photographs provided a basis for vocabulary development and reading at the appropriate level.

I always had a small whiteboard and marker beside me at group time to write and explain *tricky words* we came across. I asked the students to identify words that they didn’t know how to pronounce or what they meant for explanations on the white board. In addition, I laminated and colored alphabet charts for each child from the appendix in *Word Matters* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998).

The emergent-level students also used magnetic letters to make new words. They lined up selected letters across the top of their magnetic board and practiced spelling automatically frequently-encountered words as outlined in *Apprenticeship in Literacy* (Dorn, French & Jones, 1998). All students used scrap paper and pencils to write down *tricky words* and answers to questions as they read. I used a notebook to jot down daily reflections on the students and their progress.

### Methods of Instruction

Methods of reading instruction also need to build upon the students’ oral language. An example of this occurred with the third grade group. The SLLs

Figure 3

**Early 4 Guided Reading Plans**

Group: E4 "Boats Afloat" G  
Non-fiction vi p  
 Week: April 3-7 and  
April 10-14

<b>Monday Thursday</b> - Book Intro - genre, predictions, title page. - Book Features - Contents, Index, Captions, Bold Print, Glossary	<b>Tuesday Friday</b> - Guided Reading silently - Write down tricky words and answer to comprehension question. - Word Work on White Board	<b>Wednesday</b> <div style="text-align: center;">X</div>
<b>Thursday</b> - Continue silent Guided Reading - 2 pages at a time - Comprehension Question - Word Work	<b>Friday</b> - Compare boats in book. - Write a description of one of the boats using the text.	<b>Notes</b> <div style="text-align: center;">X</div>

**Instructional Focus Areas**

- ✓ 1. Practice sight vocabulary
  - ✓ 3. Developing vocabulary activity
  - 5. Understanding characters: major/minor
  - 7. Reviewing short, long, r-controlled vowels
  - ✓ 9. Practice oral fluency by integrating context, picture use, and phonics
  - ✓ 11. Responding to interpretative questions
- 2. Introduce vocabulary using DWE
  - 4. Retelling the text using b, m, end
  - 6. Understanding character attributes
  - 8. Developing/practicing double vowels
  - ✓ 10. Responding to detail questions
  - 12. Writing the retelling of text

to look at the strengths of students to guide their next step in the planning process to improve reading.

Classroom teachers were responsible for benchmarking their students at least every ten weeks, and some teachers benchmarked more often, especially in first grade. I helped benchmark students by teacher request. I also required teachers to submit their completed quarterly benchmarks to me for review. This way I insured the uniformity of the results and could give feedback to the teachers.

I used a computer spreadsheet program to create a quarterly report of each grade level by class, and the number of students who had passed each benchmark level. I also produced a quarterly report of the SLL students and the progress they made (see Figure 2). The "sp" next to a level signifies that the student missed only one to three items. If they missed no items, then the level is considered passed and is listed on the

had a lot of background knowledge and interest in lizards. They were all involved in an animated discussion about lizards. I asked them to read a page at a time silently from the legend, *How Lizard Lost His Color* (Steele, 1997) with the purpose: "Read this page to find out how Lizard gets out." Then we discussed the page and any *tricky words* before we continued to the next page. As a follow-up activity, we created a shared writing titled, "Why the Polar Bear is White" (see Figure 5).

The guided reading groups also reread sections of the text under the teacher's guidance. Students would be asked to reread to *find out* or to *figure out* why something happened in the story. Students would skim to find and read aloud the sentence that answers the question. As the teacher guides them through the selection, there are many opportunities to reread and discuss vocabulary words, word attack and comprehension skills.

**Assessment**

Evaluating students and discovering what they can do is very time-consuming. I focused on the next steps necessary for groups when I planned the guided reading lessons. Sometimes, when teachers work with SLLs, they begin to focus on what students cannot do (Neuman & Roskos, 1998). Teachers need

Figure 4

**How Lizard Lost his Colors**

Name William

1. Once lizard was slow, fat and lasy
2. He lay around on a rock looking at his pretty Colors
3. Coyote wanted to eat lizard.
4. Coyote pushed the rocks but it rolled down the lizard.
5. Poor lizard was skucht under the rock.
6. Lizard got out and flat and he was able to krul out from under the rock.
7. Lizard's colors were left behind and he was the same color as the ground
8. Mother Earth said "you will be hard to see".

Figure 5

## WHY THE POLAR BEAR IS WHITE

Third Grade Group  
November 22, 1999

One day there was a polar bear that was brown. Once he went into the forest and there was a hole. He saw his friends in the hole and a tree with snow on it fell on him. He was full of snow that turned him into a white bear. It stuck on him because people put glue on him. Then he went to the North Pole because he wanted to be the color of the ground.

Four endings – choose one.

1. Now if you see a polar bear at the North Pole, he is always white.
2. When you have seen a person put glue on a polar bear that had snow on him, put a sign that says, "This is not a polar bear."
3. If you want to see a polar bear, go to the North Pole in the forest.
4. Some bears that are brown, you can find in the forest. You can put glue on them and put snow on them. They will become polar bears.

chart as the level name (EmA, EmB, etc.). The charts provided a visual form for the progress of the SLL students.

### Return to the Classroom

I shared my insights with classroom teachers, along with copies of my lesson plans and the meaning-focused guided reading approach from Regie Routman (2000). With the benchmark requirement for all students, every second-language learner was placed in a guided reading group starting at the beginning of the school year. The SLL students met in leveled groups both in the classroom and with me.

The lesson plans were helpful to teachers for planning and continuing the guided reading lessons when they returned to the classroom. I also provided support with guided reading groups when I made my morning classroom visits. Teachers often requested me to teach groups while they observed the process. Teachers also learn by modeling,

observing and trying new ideas.

A third-grade Danish girl was exited from the ELD program after December break. She only continued to go to the ELD teacher for extra help in writing. A third-grade boy from Israel, who spoke little English at the beginning of the year, was on level Fluency 2 by March (*a five-level improvement*.) His teacher said:

"He's incredible! He could almost be exited from ELD, except for his writing."

The ELD teacher said that she had never seen an ELD student progress so quickly. I too was pleased to see these students who were silent and lost at the beginning of the year make such progress with the help of their classroom teachers, ELD teachers, and reading teacher.

Did the second-language learners progress through the reading levels? By the end of the school year, there were 39 of the original 46 second-language learners still enrolled in school. At first grade, there were 14 SLLs. They moved

an average of four levels from the beginning to end of the school year. This can be compared with the first grade classrooms that moved an average of 2.2 levels over the school year. At second grade, there were 16 SLLs. They progressed an average of three levels over the school year. The second grade students as a whole progressed an average of 3.9 levels from the beginning of school to the end.

In third grade, there were 9 SLLs who progressed an average of three levels from the first quarter to the fourth quarter. Looking at the third graders as a whole, they progressed 3.4 levels over the school year. For all three grades, the 39 SLL students progressed an average of 3.5 levels from the beginning to the end of the year.

The progress of the second-language learners matched or surpassed the reading levels of the total students per grade level. The SLLs began at lower levels than the native speakers did. Many second-language learners are able to transfer their native language skills to English and make rapid progress in reading.

### Conclusions

As a teacher and researcher, I found that the use of guided reading groups incorporated many of the strategies recommended for second-language learners. Guided reading groups enable children to read books at their level, to work together, to share and clarify ideas with other children, and to develop self-confidence in a non-threatening environment (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994).

For students who are not yet literate, the basic concepts of print can be taught in guided reading groups. They need to learn that letters and sounds combine to make words into meaningful messages, and that these literary skills extend into daily life (Spangenberg-Urbschat & Pritchard, 1994). Working in small groups gives children the chance to use language and learn from each other.

Visual support is especially important to second-language learners (Sunshine, 1996). In guided reading groups, using pictures in books as cues for unknown words can reinforce this. Teachers can also put pictures on charts in the classroom, make picture dictionaries, and illustrate posters for reference in class.

As a teacher investigating a new procedure with second-language learn-

ers, I found that guided reading groups are a beneficial way to teach English. Every SLL student is now part of a guided reading group in the classroom. The English Language Development teachers began using guided reading groups with positive results. The use of a text at the group's instructional level with teacher support is an ideal model for teaching English. The small groups provide scaffolding and reading strategy instruction in a comfortable setting.

### Future Recommendations

I predict that guided reading groups will continue to increase in use with second-language learners. The groups need to include both second-language learners and native speakers at their appropriate reading levels. The groups provide the necessary support, instruction, and safe environment for students to learn a new language. A first-grade teacher commented to me in January that her Swedish student had made remarkable progress.

"I can't believe it. He started at EmA and is now on E3 (a four-level improvement). I give you credit for giving the group extra instruction. All the boys are doing so well and are improving."

As teachers, we are dealt a diverse group of students with a variety of needs. As good teachers, we meet these needs daily with effective strategies, grouping, and instruction. As teachers of second-language learners, we need to take a second look at our classrooms and reflect on the instruction we are using to meet their individual needs. We have second-language learners at many different

points in their five to nine year learning period. We also have students from different countries and cultural experiences. These children need the "best practices" available in second language instruction.

As teachers of a growing multicultural population, we must keep informed and read the recent research on teaching English as a second language. It is only then that these instructional methods will become universal and beneficial to linguistically diverse students.

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