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LITERARY BOOKS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE IN TEACHING THE ESL STUDENT

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Eager, bright eyed children gather close around the teacher's chair, where she holds several enticing books. In this multiethnic class she makes very sure that Juanita, Pablo, and Kim, who know little English, are seated close to her where they can point to pictures and hear her words clearly. The teacher begins with The Very Hungry Caterpillar, the children giggling as he eats his way through "One red apple", "Two yellow pears", etc. While the story is reread the children join in chorus as different pupils point to the pictures. The teacher continues with Teddy Bears One to Ten, Ape in a Cape, Numbers of Things, Green Says Go, or other books that teach colors, numbers, ABCs, and concepts of shape and size. Juanita, Pablo, and Kim beam as they point correctly to pictures and join in repeating the stories with the group, learning through pictures, listening and speaking.

Ninety to ninety-five percent of children are taught to read through basal reading programs (Austin and Morrison, p. 54). Basal readers are carefully prepared series of books designed to teach reading skills sequentially from kindergarten or first grade readiness through sixth or eighth grade levels. They use a carefully controlled limited vocabulary and planned repetition of words, which often results in unnatural language patterns and stories of mediocre quality and interest. Generally, though, the newer basal readers have broadened their portrayal of ethnic minorities and women, "For children not from middle-class American culture, basal readers have failed to present life realistically. They have not motivated children who are culturally different." (Zintz, p. 103) Frequently the different life style portrayed in basal readers seem alien to the perception of culturally or racially different children. (Dallmann et al., pp. 475-481)

As Burns, Roe, and Ross suggest, a balanced reading (and language development) program should include basal, functional or content reading, and recreational literature reading. We suggest emphasizing the latter which can develop language, reading with appreciation, and lifetime reading

interests.

"Children's literature will be broadly defined as any creative literary work that has been especially written and designed for children's use... It is meant to delight, to inform and to affect the values and understandings of its young readers." (Chambers, p. 1)

"We use the term children's literature to refer to those materials, both fiction and nonfiction, which were written primarily for the reader's enjoyment rather than for direct instruction." (Hall et al., p. 230) The writers of this article, however, advocate using such literary books for instruction to develop language.

Books of children's literature are called trade books, defined in the Standard College Dictionary as "an edition of a book designed for ordinary sale to the general public, as distinguished from a textbook," and fortunately these trade books are available in great variety and fine quality in libraries and book stores. Among the many values of literature listed by Norton are pleasure, literary heritage, knowledge, self concept, imagination, and developing positive attitudes toward other cultures and ethnic groups. Norton states, "Due to the fact that literature provides both a model for language and stimulation for oral and written activities, it excels in developing language." (Norton, 1983, pp. 4, 5-7)

Preferably, teachers should select books that are attractive, interesting, and--most important--books that have repeated patterns or those that are predictable enough so that the children will be able to join in as the teacher reads the story. Such participation stories are invaluable aids to learning English.

The use of literature with a variety of interesting content also presents numerous concepts which children need to understand. Pronunciation and meaning are both vital. For the child learning English, meaning is most important because without meaning the student will just have learned to mimic the pronunciation of a teacher, a tape, or another student.

Students who are also in need of self concept development can find literary books to be most helpful. See What I Am, Are You My Mother?, Gilberto and the Wind, I Know a Lot

of Things, I Know What I Like and Mr. Rabbit and Lovely Present are only a few of these books that help with the development of self concept.

Books where students can participate with the teacher-reader are abundant. Students can focus on linguistic commonalities and differences through literary books. Some of these are: I Can't, Said the Ant, Have You Seen My Cat?, Millions of Cats, Horton Hatches the Egg, Ask Mr. Bear, and Who Took the Farmer's Hat?

Students whose first language is one other than English can learn English skills most readily by listening to the new sounds and by producing those new sounds. Therefore, listening skills need to be mastered first. Children need to experience the new language by listening to it as frequently as possible. Teachers can read books to children, noting and stressing patterns. Tapes can also be made so that the student can follow the story independently. Books can, and do, open new worlds to the non-English speaker. By listening to stories, a child not only familiarizes himself with the new sounds but also learns a new vocabulary and starts experiencing a new language by listening to it.

The non-English speaker also needs to master speaking the new language, English. Books are assets for teaching this skill. As the student is read to or listens to taped stories, he is deciphering the new language. Although the process is very intricate, the student will eventually be able to express the language orally. Initially, opportunities like joining in while the teacher reads, repeating certain phrases with or without other children, and eventually retelling the story are activities that help the child practice his English skills. He will make many mistakes at first, but in a group such errors are not noticeable. Ridicule of the pronunciation is taboo for if the child feels a sense of rejection, then his verbal skills will be stifled. Children do need the opportunity to verbalize the experiences of the main character, the setting, the feelings expressed, or anything else about the story which the child wants to share. Pictures in books can bring experiences closer to home. Having speaking opportunities gives the child further practice in the new language. Books open the doors to speaking opportunities.

After the child has had ample opportunities to listen to the new language and has had many experiences in trying out the new language himself, the child is then ready to at-

tempt the third skill - reading. Reading cannot develop until the child has had wide exposure to a rich vocabulary, experiences, concepts, pronunciation and meaning. Many essential listening and speaking episodes must have preceded this reading skill, for if these preliminary skills have been by-passed, the student is doomed to failure. No reading for meaning is possible if the child has not had sufficient meaningful background in English.

Although instruction should move from the known to the unknown according to sound learning principles, learning the new language in a comfortable classroom setting without the stress of having to finish a basal reader within a specific period of time can create success rather than failure.

By having many listening opportunities through books, the non-English speakers can feel and absorb the new language. Then can also reiterate the new language, and speak it independently. Additionally, children can be challenged to explore new avenues when they are offered opportunities to speak the new language by retelling the story, by repeating patterns, and by doing oral activities in a group. And, finally, books can challenge the children to open doors for themselves by reading.

There is no doubt that our students need the very best language and literacy skills in order to meet today's world. However, the instructional program for a person who is learning English initially and/or expanding English language skills needs to place English competence at the top of the list. With the kind of literature based program we have described, culturally relevant material which focuses on some of the linguistic differences between the students' language and English is imperative.

Books are merely tools for teaching, but a creative, innovative, and enthusiastic teacher can make the difference with literary books at the tools for teaching the ESL student. Once a teacher discovers how to utilize the treasure of books in the library with all students, the ESL student will benefit immeasurably.

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