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PROMOTING LANGUAGE AND READING DEVELOPMENT FOR TWO VIETNAMESE CHILDREN

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Over the last several years, Asian refugees have appeared in school districts all over the country. Of course, many have settled in urban areas where schools have a history of bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in operation. There, the personnel and resources exist to accommodate this group. However, many Asian refugees, through church and civic organization sponsorships, have found their way into suburban and rural communities. In these settings, school personnel often have no prior experience in providing for the education of non-English speakers. Typically, there are no special resources available to meet the unusual needs of these students. Existing personnel are mobilized, in one fashion or another, to devise an educational program. A concern for promoting competence with spoken and written English often prompts the identification of reading personnel to formulate appropriate instructional programs. Such was the case in one small rural school district in central New York State. The remainder of this paper is a case report of how the reading specialist in this district organized available information on ESL and the normal progress of language development in order to identify instructional goals, assess linguistic and cultural awareness, structure a program based on this information, and to evaluate pupil growth toward attainment of the instructional goals.

Background. Little Falls, New York, is a community of 6,000 people. Farming and small manufacturing are the principal industries. The centralized school district serves 1300 pupils housed in two K-6 buildings and one 7-12 building. A reading coordinator, three reading teachers and four aides are available to deliver supportive reading services to this population. These services are provided through consultation with classroom teachers and through individual or small group instruction. In September, 1980, a Vietnamese refugee family entered the district. One child, "Tina", was a pre-schooler, aged four; "Ben", aged eight, was enrolled in the first grade class. Neither spoke any English. The parents had been educated in Vietnam, and Ben had also attended school before leaving Vietnam. He had some reading facility in Vietnamese. Ben's father spoke some English and was employed as a mechanic trainee in a local factory. Ben's mother and aunt spoke no English

(after two years, fluency in English among adult family members has changed little). Vietnamese was spoken exclusively in the home initially and continues to be the primary language in the home.

First Experiences Ben entered school in September, 1980. He was placed in a first grade class because it was expected that he might benefit from beginning reading instruction as it is typically provided in first grade groups. Ben was physically small and did not "stand out" from the age group. During that semester, Ben's educational program consisted of a typical first grade curriculum; readiness skills, language development, and beginning basal reader instruction. After about a month's time, Ben began having difficulty with the basal reader instruction in the areas of idioms, inferences, and drawing conclusions. The reading coordinator was asked by the classroom teacher to assess and develop a plan of instruction to increase Ben's comprehension of the English language and to promote academic performance commensurate with his intellect.

Staff Development Within a few weeks it became clear that teachers were interested and willing to put forth extra effort to help Ben learn English and to adjust to the school setting, but they simply did not know what to do. They were depending on intuition about what it must be like to be learning English for the first time. Unfortunately, their intuitions were rooted in their observations and understandings of how infants learn English as a first language. Their expectations of what Ben "ought to be capable of" did not always mesh with his performance. For example, since Ben was able to understand a story selection on the literal level, it was assumed that he could easily make inferences about the text because he appeared above average in intelligence. However, making such inferences often demanded more complex understanding of the language than Ben possessed. He and his teachers were often frustrated.

In an attempt to heighten teacher awareness of the special considerations to be made when teaching ESL students, the reading coordinator proposed an inservice program for the staff who were, or would be, working with Ben and his sister the following fall. The proposal was funded by the New York State Education Department under the terms of the Refugee Education Assistance Act of 1980. The targeted objectives focused on developing the following:

1. An awareness of the cultural problems experienced by ESL students.
2. Familiarity with methods and strategies which can be utilized by the classroom teachers in their instruction of ESL students. These methods and strategies emphasized oral communication skills.
3. An understanding of the difficulties involved in learning a second language and how it influences progress in other subject areas.

Two workshop sessions of 2½ hours each were conducted by a leader within the Literacy Volunteers of America organization. Five classroom teachers presently working with the children, or anticipating working with them in the fall, attended. The topics included in the sessions were: difficulties in learning a new culture; Liter-

acy Volunteer strategies and drills for learning English; and, materials and tips for tutoring in ESL. Several activities for teacher participation were included. These activities involved "learning" an African language, and practicing the ESL drills. Teachers commented at the end of the sessions that they had not been aware of the difficulty of learning another language. They felt more confident of their abilities to help Ben and Tina, using the approaches and materials presented.

In preparing for her own work with Ben, the reading coordinator consulted with university personnel, reference texts on second language learning and with teachers of ESL classes in a near-by city. These experiences led to the development of a program that considered the role of language and language differences in effecting "the transition of refugee children into American Society". This is the stated goal of the Refugee Act of 1980.

Designing the Reading Program. The program ultimately developed was based upon the decision to focus on the language base for reading. It specifically addressed the need to understand a basic English vocabulary; to understand basic grammatical features such as tenses, plurals and possession; to understand basic sentence structures; and to use oral English communication experiences to stimulate growth in the comprehension of written English. This program was predicated on the assumption that comprehension of spoken English is a pre-requisite foundation for learning to comprehend what is read.

In September, 1981, similar but different programs were implemented for both Tina and Ben. An assessment of each child included competence in auditory comprehension of English words, word forms and phrases being the first priority. Items from the various tests given were specifically analyzed to identify the degree of agreement between reading errors and difficulties with vocabulary, syntax or morphemic elements demonstrated on the language test.

Reading, or pre-reading, instruction for each child was provided by a team composed of the classroom teacher and reading coordinator. Results of the initial assessment were interpreted, and from this the focus of the daily sessions with the reading coordinator was established. Classroom instruction followed a normal developmental sequence for each child; teachers used materials recommended by the reading coordinator. Regular opportunities for conferences with the reading coordinator were scheduled to discuss specific problems regarding vocabulary, concept development and pacing.

Specifics of Evaluation and Instruction

Tina had attended a community nursery school before entering kindergarten in September of 1981. Tina demonstrated some ability to communicate in English. Her performance on the Test for Auditory Comprehension of Language (TACL), a test that requires the student to point to a picture relating to the words or sentence spoken, indicated below age level comprehension of verb tenses, prepositions, suffixes, noun-verb agreement, and adjectives of quality and quantity.

Tina's responses to the Test of Basic Concepts (TOBC) which involves marking an "X" on the picture corresponding to a descriptive statement by the examiner, showed below age level performance in words denoting concepts considered basic to readiness including: spatial relationships (below, next, to); quantity (half, few); and order (third, middle).

Tina's reading room and classroom activities were developed to focus on the language comprehension areas above. Following is a description of the specific materials used to promote each area (complete bibliography will be found in REFERENCES section). To build her speaking vocabulary and sentence formation, the booklets People and What They Do and Places and Things as well as The Transcultural Picture Word List were used. The Media Materials booklets provided pictures with vocabulary words beneath as well as suggestion for the teacher on how to develop the concepts related to the words. The Transcultural Picture Word List provided additional picture word combinations. Recognition of spatial relationships signaled by words was promoted through Positional Boxes. Oral reading of specific library books dealing with readiness concepts such as Berenstain's Inside Outside Upside Down and He Bear, She Bear were used for additional concept development. Listening to the library books being read also served as a model in sentence structure, flow of the language, and grammatical development. Instructional games such as DIM's Building Match-Ups and Scholastic's It Belongs Here were used to promote oral discussion and use of newly acquired vocabulary while teaching a readiness skill. Classroom activities included the Getting Ready to Read book, pre-writing exercises (letter formation, etc.) and eye-hand coordination tasks (painting, paper cutting, etc.). Some language experience stories were also developed and recorded to promote awareness of the link between the spoken and written language.

Since Ben was both older and had developed quite adequate decoding skills the previous year, the testing and instruction planned for him were different in some respects. The tests given included, in addition to TOBC and TACL, English As a Second Language Oral Assessment (ESLOA), Grammatic Closure Subtest of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA), and the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test Green Level. The ESLOA, dealing with speaking and understanding critical vocabulary of our culture, indicated weaknesses in calendar terms, monetary notation, and labeling of clothing, service buildings (i.e., post office, hospital) and body parts. Difficulties in the understanding of verb tenses, noun-verb agreement, suffixes, adverbs, adjectives, irregular plurals and superlatives, as well as vocabulary (i.e., whole, equal) were indicated by the TACL, TOBC and the Grammatic Closure subtest. The Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test showed that his understanding of orally presented vocabulary was below age level. Difficulty in inferential and interpretive reading were also noted.

Instructionally, weaknesses in these vocabulary and comprehension areas were addressed through various materials in the reading room. In addition to the materials used with Tina for vocabulary development, Ben's instructional materials included

the Picto-Vocabulary Series - Basic Word Sets and Vocabulary Cards that utilize a picture-word format and also have written exercises requiring use of the vocabulary. Educational Password with its high frequency basic elementary vocabulary was used to help distinguish among the labels for relationships being taught. Sentence structure awareness was developed in both the oral and written settings using Developmental Learning Materials' Bike Hike Game, Concepts for Communication (Unit 3), and Backpack Game. The two games develop sentence sense by asking the players to add or delete words from a kernel sentence or to combine sentences while the concepts for the Communication Kit requires oral exchanges with the opponent. The kit focuses on use of descriptive language and following directions. The Peabody Language Development Kit served to structure the objectives for oral language development as did The Magic of English series. These two materials are comprehensive oral language development programs, the latter was specifically designed for ESL students while the former has various visuals (pictures and posters) to stimulate oral expression. Another area of concern, inferential or interpretive comprehension, was addressed using the Croft Reading Comprehension Skillpacks, a traditional skill development program with practice exercises. To reinforce the skills presented in the Croft Program, Increasing Comprehension and Reading for Understanding (Junior) were used.

Classroom reading instruction for Ben involved the Laidlaw Basal Reading Series. This series was chosen over another series used in the district because it had a manageable (for Ben) vocabulary load per story as well as emphasis on comprehension. The classroom teachers informed the reading coordinator of any concepts or vocabulary which required further development for each of the basal stories as Ben proceeded through them. Homonyms and multiple meanings are examples of words that required further instruction to promote comprehension of some stories. In March of his second school year in the district Ben was moved into a third grade classroom. The move was made at the request of the family's sponsor who was concerned about the gap between Ben's age interests and his grade placement. Ben's school progress to date suggested that he could succeed in the third grade math program with moderate supplementary work in essential concepts. His reading program remained essentially unchanged.

At the end of the school year post testing, using several of the instruments administered in the fall, was conducted. In addition, each child took the school administered California Achievement Test with his/her class. Table I shows both the pre and post test scores earned on the assessment instruments as well as May performance on the California Achievement Test. It is clear that both children grew in their comprehension of the English language. Both demonstrated reading achievement that is at least on a par with average and above achievers in their classes. However, comprehension of spoken English still lags behind that of most of their classmates. Support in their continuing growth toward proficiency in English will be necessary.

Table I
Fall and Spring Test Results

		Pretest. (Sept. 1981)	Post. Test. (June, 1982)
Tina	<u>Test of Basic Concepts</u> (Boehm, 1969)	<u>Correct/Possible</u> 16 / 50	<u>Correct/Possible</u> 31 / 50
		(Beginning K Norms Mid SES Group)	(Midyear K Norms Mid SES Group)
Ben	<u>Test of Basic Concepts</u>	<u>Correct/Possible</u> 40 / 50	<u>Correct/Possible</u> 46 / 50
		3rd. %ile	35th %ile
		(Beginning Grade 2 Norms Mid SES Group)	(Midyear Grade 2 Norms Mid SES Gr.)
Ben	<u>English As a Second Language Oral Assess- ment</u>	<u>Correct/Possible</u>	<u>Correct/Possible</u>
	(Literacy Vol.) Level 11	14 / 29	25 / 29
Ben	<u>Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test</u>	<u>Gr. Equiv./%ile</u> (3rd Grade Norms)	<u>Gr. Fq./%ile</u> (3rd. Grade Norms)
	(Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976)		
	Auditory Vocabulary	2.8 14%	3.1 24%
	Literal Comprehension	2.1 29%	3.2 52%
	Inferential Comprehension	1.6 21%	4.5 73%
	Comprehension Total	3.0 26%	4.0 64%
School District Testing			
(California Achievement Test) 1977, Form C - May, 1982			
Tina	(End of K norms)	<u>Reading</u> 85%ile	<u>Math</u> 10%ile
Ben	(End of 3rd grade norms)	56%ile	96%ile

The foregoing description of the language-reading program implemented for Tina and Ben illustrates a direct approach to both assessment and instruction that focuses on the critical aspects of the bridge between oral language and reading. Published tests used to establish the readiness of native English speakers were found to be useful in providing insights into the readiness of these foreign language speakers as well. Opportunities to learn common vocabulary terms and grammatical structures were consistently provided, directly and incidentally. Apparent difficulties in

reading achievement were routinely considered as a possible reflection of difficulties in comprehending English. Teachers who had not previously worked with foreign students joined together to understand the complexity of learning a second language and then established a cooperative relationship with each other to deliver instruction. Their jointly planned and systematically coordinated teaching was not viewed as burdensome by any member of the staff. This coordinated program of instruction was effective—the students did progress. Finally Tina and Ben, like most other children, were eager to become "one of the group". This language-reading program build upon the view of oral language competence as a bridge to reading competence. In so doing, the program supported Ben and Tina in their efforts to be assimilated into their peer groups. Thus they liked school, felt comfortable there and participated willingly in their instructional experiences.

Throughout the year described in this paper, Tina and Ben were highly motivated to succeed academically. They eagerly came to the Reading Room for their special sessions with the Reading teacher. It seemed that each actually looked for opportunities to apply new learning as soon as possible. However, Ben was more sensitive to "not knowing". It became apparent that when he found his English vocabulary deficient or inadequate to communicate effectively in a given situation, Ben would simply smile and say "I don't understand." This served to conceal his specific lack. Ben would not engage others to help in extending his knowledge base. This suggested to us a pervasive timidity and insecurity in the oral communication setting. But Ben's insecurity was even more all-enveloping than we had realized. Toward the end of the year Ben refused to speak Vietnamese in public. He viewed his different language background as a barrier to acceptance by the peer group and tried to eliminate that difference when he was at school. Tina, to the contrary, found that her ability to speak a "strange" language was a social plus. She was the envy of her peer group and happily shared her linguistic talents with others.

The two children responded well to the language based reading program that had been developed for them but they were different personalities, coping with the pressures of academic achievement and social acceptance at different times in their respective lives. Each was responding somewhat differently to their achievements and to the pressures. A newly trained and sensitized staff of teachers will be available to support Ben and Tina through the maturing process they will experience over the remainder of their elementary school years.

We hope that this shared experience involving two Vietnamese children in an otherwise English speaking school will provide some inspiration and possible guidance to others who find themselves in similar situations.

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