

Strategies to Support Literacy Development in Second-Language Learners through Project Work

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide teachers of young second-language learners with strategies to enhance literacy development during project work. Projects provide experiences consistent with research findings on language-minority education. Research examining language-minority student performance in classes taught through collaborative discovery learning (meaningful, cognitively complex, interdisciplinary content) has found that active learning accelerates language-minority students' academic growth (Ovando & Collier, 1998). These second-language learners may be in a variety of instructional settings including both bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Project work can take place in all of these settings.

The ability of a teacher to support literacy development of second-language learners depends on the language knowledge of the teacher. In early childhood education, literacy is most easily developed through the child's primary or home language. In this chapter, I will share examples and teaching strategies that I have used teaching in dual-language kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classrooms, which may be used if the teacher speaks the child's primary language. I will also share practical strategies for literacy development if the teacher does not speak the child's primary language. In either situation, support for literacy development can easily be found in project work.

Don't Just Tell, Show

The more children *see*, the easier they comprehend—especially second-language learners. Many times, experts are good at thinking of demonstrations related to the project topic. Demonstrations provide

children learning a second language with opportunities to practice speaking and listening. During demonstrations, children are introduced to new vocabulary in a natural way with concrete examples. When demonstrations occur as part of project work, children also practice writing through note taking and thank-you cards, in both their first and second languages. Language skills are also encouraged by peer interaction, through follow-up activities to the demonstration such as watching the video of a field site visit or examining artifacts from the demonstration. At the pre-kindergarten level, I have found that children share and listen especially well during follow-up activities when they are in small groups with others who speak the same language. Later, we get together as a large group and share information discussed in the smaller groups. In Figure 1. children are learning about applying drywall cement in the building project.



Figure 1. Children learn about applying drywall cement.

Provide Opportunities for Role-Play

Creating dramatic play environments encourages role-play and the use of language related to the project topic, especially if children are involved in the creation of the play environment or structure. Figure 2 shows the children creating a soda machine as part of the Mexican Restaurant Project. Figure 3 shows the machine with the word labels.



Figure 2. Children creating a soda machine.



Figure 3. The soda machine with word labels.

Providing plenty of time for play during project work is beneficial for second-language learners. In our Fire Station Project, this fall, children chose to create a fire truck in the classroom, complete with hoses. I observed complex play from my students.

One day during center time, several English and Spanish speakers were pretending to put out fires. In order to keep the play sequence going, second-language communication occurred frequently in this role-play.

A native English-speaking child was on the student-made computer and radio, calling out the name of the street with the fire to two children dressed up as firefighters. As they fought the fire with their hoses, also created by students, I heard them communicating to each other, "Bring the hose over here," and "The fire's getting bigger!" As the Spanish-speaking "firefighter" reported in English that the fire was getting bigger, the child on the radio said that it had moved, "All the way up to 15th Street now!" A fourth and fifth child, one native Spanish speaker and one native English speaker, alternated between driving the fire truck and making the fire on a nearby chalkboard "grow" by adding more lines and scribbles. This native Spanish-speaking child demonstrated growth in receptive language as he interpreted the English words "bigger" and "grow" by making more lines on the chalkboard as the firefighters reported the status of the fire. When the fire was at last out, the two firefighters reported it to the two drivers, who then erased it from the chalkboard.

Children's play naturally supports language development. Role-play also offers many opportunities for literacy development in both first and second languages. Having paper and pencil near play structures encourages children to create their own props and to use writing in meaningful ways. For example, during a project on a Mexican restaurant in my kindergarten class, the children created menus. They wanted the menus to be in both languages, so that everyone who came to their restaurant "could read them." This activity involved several children, both Spanish and English speakers, writing the menus, comparing menus, and translating words. Their motivation for such a difficult writing task at the kindergarten level surprised me! A similar experience occurred when the children were doing a service station project. They wanted a form for customers to fill out when they dropped off their vehicles. The children wanted the form in both Spanish and English, and spent about 30 minutes typing up the

form on my computer. I later printed copies of their forms, to encourage children to use the writing during their play.

Start with What Children Already Know

Graphic organizers, frequently used by ESL teachers, take place in almost all project work. These organizers can include planning webs, question lists, and word walls, as well as project books or dictionaries. When teachers use webs in project work, they often record a picture next to the words so that the second-language learners can understand what is being discussed. If the teacher speaks the language of the second-language learner, he or she can accept the child's contribution to the web or question list in either language and record a picture next to the words so that all children in the class understand what is being discussed. For example, during the Fire Station Project, our class was making a web. A Spanish speaker suggested that I write "camión" (fire truck) on the web. A few days later, the children were making a book of things they had seen at the fire station. Drake, a native English speaker who is a second-language learner of Spanish, asked me, "How do you say truck again in Spanish?" I was able to point to our web and say the first letter sound, and he was able to remember that the word was "camión." The web validates everyone's knowledge in the room and gives children a chance to build on the information they already know. All learners in my room refer back to the web often when they are working independently in journals or want to write a particular word.

If the teacher does not speak the language of the child, she or he can still invite second-language learners to contribute to the web by asking them to draw an illustration of their idea on the web. For example, if the children were studying the post office, and the child thought of the mail bag, but didn't know how to say it, he could draw it. Once the child had drawn the mail bag, the teacher could reinforce this by saying, "Yes, that's the mail bag. That was a good idea." A second-language learner could also point to a picture in a book of something he wants to have on the web. Another strategy I often use is cutting photos of words pertaining to the project and writing the word in both languages

onto word cards. These cards are very popular with children and can be of service to a native speaker, as well as a child learning a second language. I usually color code the languages; for example, Spanish is always green and English is always red, so as not to confuse young writers. If the teacher does not speak the language of the child, he or she can show the parents pictures and ask them to write down some key words from the project. This approach facilitates both parent participation and a feeling of inclusion and acceptance to the second-language learner.

Repeat and Practice

Because the Project Approach focuses on a topic in-depth for long periods of time, teachers of second-language learners can easily support repetition and word patterns. During projects, *all* children in the class are talking about new words, asking questions about what words mean, and writing or drawing pictures of words that interest them. Because everyone is engaged in learning new vocabulary, second-language learners are less likely to feel embarrassed or shy. It is important for second-language learners to have the chance to hear words several times and also to have many opportunities to repeat the words in meaningful situations. At times, I look at the specific vocabulary being used by children and am amazed to remember that they are only 4 or 5 years old! Halfway through the Combine Project, we visited a local tractor dealership to answer children's more detailed questions about tractors and combines. We walked into a large room where they were repairing vehicles, and one of my students immediately said, "Look, Mrs. Wilson, there's an auger!" In the Garden Project, children in my class were referring to the "three-tine cultivator." Children are also presented with opportunities to use second language meaningfully through writing thank-you notes and invitations to project events.

Tailor Questions for Language Level

Every project involves the investigation of children's questions. Questions provide children with a chance to use their second language to ask experts. For example, a Spanish speaker was the expert in our Mexican Restaurant Project. Native

English speakers worked to express themselves in Spanish. In addition to speaking, teachers can also use questions to maximize opportunities for writing and reading development. I write the children's questions on index cards with illustrations next to words to remind second-language learners, as well as emergent readers, what the question says. Not only does the question card help the child to be prepared for the expert interview, it also helps the expert. Many times, the expert will read the child's question from his or her clipboard if the child is shy or reluctant to speak in the second language. I also encourage children at *all* levels to ask questions. The examples in Figure 4-6 display a series of kindergarten children's answers to their questions in their second language during the Garden Project ranging from simple yes/no answers to more complex writing.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

If the teacher does not speak the language of the child, he or she might work with the child individually during center time and show some photos of the related topic. The teacher might ask the child to point to what he or she wanted to know more about; for example, the wheel on the tractor. Children are highly motivated to communicate to get their questions answered. For example, in the Garden Project, Estephanie worked hard to learn the English word for hose, so she could ask the visiting gardener if he used a hose. In Figure 7, the children's questions that related to how many of various items were on a machine were put on a tally sheet for children to use. This approach encourages discussion but also does not require reading for participation.



Figure 7. Children's questions were put on a tally sheet.

Engage Parents in the Project

When choosing a topic, consider whether the topic is being mentioned in the everyday play and conversations of second-language learners. It is helpful to have some of the projects during the school year focus on a topic relating to the culture or home life of second-language learners in the class. The more relevant a project topic is, the more likely children are going to be to speak, listen, write, and read about that topic. Another way for teachers to support native language is by inviting experts who speak the minority language and are part of the community. For example, when my children were interested in restaurants, I specifically selected the Mexican restaurant as a

field site visit because I knew many of my students were familiar with the restaurant and their employees were native Spanish speakers. Often in larger businesses, such as a bank, at least one employee speaks another language. It is always worth investigating before the field site visit to see whether there is anyone on hand who may be able to support the second language. Even if there is only one child who speaks a second language in the classroom, the teacher can still support and value that native language by connecting the child with the speaker.

Parents can be a great source of information in providing vocabulary words in their native language for the project, especially if the teacher does not know the language. One way of using the vocabulary words is by creating a print-rich environment in the classroom with signs in both languages. Many times, parents of second-language learners have artifacts relating to the project that have print or writing. For example, during a beauty parlor project, a Chinese family might be able to bring in a shampoo bottle with Chinese print, or during a mail project, a Brazilian family might be able to bring in envelopes from Brazil. Additional artifacts might include cookbooks, food boxes, or supermarket ads. Parents are valuable resources and can also assist with literacy development on field site visits by taking dictation about the sketches of second-language learners.

Conclusion

Over the years, I have found that many literacy goals are met through project work. No matter what the topic is, children are involved in listening and peer discussion, writing for a purpose, forming questions, and research. Because project work is visual, meaningful, and relevant, it is a valuable resource for teachers of second-language learners.

References

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