

# The Critical Role of Guided Oral Reading for English Language Learners

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Philomena Marinaccio-Eckel and Jaclyn Donahue discuss the process and benefits of using this strategy to facilitate students' comprehension through oral retelling. See Judie Haynes's Communities of Practice column, "Growing Better Readers," *Essential Teacher*, October 2009.

Taking an interest in students and changing strategies to adapt to their diverse needs is essential to teaching English language learners (ELLs). When asked to complete retellings of stories, ELLs often concentrate on story details rather than main ideas, thus resulting in a loss of meaning of the story. We (a professor of literacy and a graduate student) collaborated to research, plan, and implement an effective approach to improving meaningful reading for ELLs.

This is the story of Jaclyn's approach to teaching metacognitive strategies to ELLs in hopes of improving their oral reading comprehension. Her second-grade classroom was located in an urban school in southeast Florida, in the United States. The school served a population of culturally and ethnically diverse students. Ethnicity demographics show that this school had double to triple the number of minorities compared to state averages. Because "the instructional needs of ELLs are as diverse as the languages they speak at home, the literacy levels they have attained, and the sociocultural backgrounds they bring to classroom" (Boyd-Batsone, 2006, p. 3), Jaclyn's school provided the perfect setting for investigating effective reading practice for ELLs.

Guided reading experiences provide a powerful context for beginning reading instruction. This small-group reading approach allows teachers to scaffold, model, and discuss independent reading strategies guided by student needs. Reading is a covert process actively controlled by readers to create meaning from text, and the practice of readers thinking about their thinking while engaged in the reading process is known as metacognition (McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007). Strategic readers use metacognition when they read for understanding, recognize when they do not comprehend, and use fix-up strategies. Guided modeling provides the scaffolding that allows students to see and practice monitoring skills (Lapp, Fisher, & Grant, 2008) and metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies include questioning, thinking aloud while performing a task, and making graphic organizers (e.g., story maps) to scaffold understanding (Flavell, 1987).

In her classroom, Jaclyn was required to use basal reading materials. Basal readers are reading textbooks adopted for unified instruction across school districts. Current federal legislation has created a back-to-the-basics climate in many U.S. classrooms, which has resulted in students reading from sequential, skill-oriented textbooks comprising stories based on strict readability levels rather than interest and experience. Utilizing basal readers shows little regard for students' prior experiences and oral language proficiency.

Students truly engage in the reading process when books are at the appropriate reading level and when they are able to make connections between their lives and books. Yet ELLs are often required to read about topics that do not consider their diverse interests and experiences. Embedding guided reading in the context of basal stories recognizes the external demands of administrators and the internal needs of students that influence whether a teaching approach is appropriate.

In guided reading lessons, teachers not only model strategies but transfer the gradual release of responsibility for pre-, during-, and postreading strategy use to students. Jaclyn modeled metacognitive strategies focused on activating prior knowledge to encourage students to make predictions and connections before reading, asking questions to encourage reading for meaning and monitoring active reading during reading, and retelling stories focusing on main ideas to increase comprehension.

In the prereading stage, Jaclyn modeled how to activate prior knowledge and preview a text. Students learned to understand the concept of activating prior knowledge by previewing a story; reading a title; and making text-to-life, text-to-self, and text-to-text connections before reading. The process of sharing reflections about the meanings of the text and applying the thoughts of authors to their own lives helps students develop their abilities to interpret text and make meaningful connections (Boulware & Monroe, 2008). Students became more interested and involved during guided reading lessons because they really enjoyed sharing their personal connections with Jaclyn and their peers. When ELLs activate their prior knowledge, it helps them integrate new information into an existing conceptual framework that facilitates long-term memory and transfer of information to new concepts (Suits, 2003).

The ability to answer literal questions is no longer sufficient evidence of literacy. Instead, students must be able to think critically about texts. In the during-reading phase, Jaclyn modeled literal, inferential, and critical questioning as well as self-questioning to emphasize reading for meaning. Asking "think-aloud" questions before, during, and after reading provided a scaffold for students' reading experiences. Asking questions at key points in the story taught students to monitor their understanding of the story and to be active readers. Postreading questions taught students critical thinking skills about how to apply new knowledge and how to go beyond what they learned from the text in order to create new understandings. Students were encouraged to think of questions after reading to challenge the

teacher and their peers. Jaclyn monitored and assessed students' ability to ask questions during their independent reading time, when they used think-aloud to demonstrate mastery of this strategy. Bookmarks helped students stay engaged by redirecting them back to the text in order to answer questions.

Postreading is the one phase of the reading experience with which teachers have typically been least concerned. This is due to traditional reading approaches that followed an "assign and tell" approach to reading whereby comprehension is judged solely by students' answers to oral questions (Vacca & Vacca, 2008). Jaclyn modeled postreading strategies that deepened students' understanding of texts through retellings. Students' retelling of what they read is an especially useful indicator of comprehension. Observation and analysis of students' renditions of story events reveals their ability to distinguish between details and main ideas. Many ELLs have trouble comprehending because they are so intent on remembering each and every detail that they are not able to see the overall meaning of the text. Jaclyn used story maps to teach internal text structure. At reading tables and students' desks, bookmarks and charts of a story map and think-aloud prompts provided visual aids that helped students scaffold before, during, and after reading and maintain focus and motivation.

This approach to reading was extremely successful in improving the ELLs' reading achievement for several reasons. Small-group instruction was the ideal context for modeling metacognitive strategies, which prepared ELLs to read expository as well as narrative texts. Student grouping and teacher approach and strategy use provided scaffolds that allowed ELLs to read on grade level even when their instructional reading levels were below those of their peers.

One of the most important outcomes was improving ELLs' independence in reading by developing their metacognitive skills. Students took ownership of the reading strategies that were modeled.

Implementing this approach to reading instruction was also especially informative in regard to the importance of activating prior knowledge for ELLs. Sufficient attention to this principle is essential to success for students at risk. Failure to make this connection can become an insurmountable barrier to concept mastery (Rockwell, 2007). Students learned to make connections between the text they read at home and at school and to relate it to their own lives. Activating prior knowledge also assisted students in developing other comprehension skills such as making inferences, drawing conclusions, and making predictions.

Guided reading for ELLs is a useful instructional tool for teachers because student needs (including reading ability and second language development) should inform instruction. Whole-group teaching makes teacher observation of individual student needs almost impossible. Teachers can and should tailor instruction to meet the diverse needs of each student, and guided reading helps teachers do so.

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