

## **Bringing ESL Students to Literacy and Social Integration: Barriers and Strategies**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the author explores the barriers that students of English as a Second Language (ESL) face in coming fully literate in English and fully integrated into American society. The barriers cited include inadequate training of reading specialists to work with ESL students, turf wars between reading specialists and ESL teachers, inadequate preparation of students for high school and higher education, as well as a lack of academic research on developing reading skills in ESL students. Strategies for overcoming these barriers include improvement in teacher training, understanding of the student population and students' first language (L1), and promoting success in literacy.

This paper asks the question, "What are the barriers and strategies to bringing ESL students to full literacy and social integration?" Before this question can be answered, one must define the term literacy. Literacy is neither a simple nor static concept. Chatel (2002) defines literacy as "a dynamic and ongoing process of perpetual transformation." She describes literacy as "change itself." (p. 45) Chatel characterizes a literate person as having four defining abilities: (a) to know what search strategies to use for research, (b) to be a critical thinker and consumer of information, (c) to be aware of the many meanings inherent in media, and (d) to be a life-long learner, communicator, and user of technology. Wong-Fillmore and Snow (2000) state the following on the subjects of language and literature:

Classroom teachers and other educators should be able to answer a basic set of questions regarding oral and written language. Underlying their knowledge should be an understanding that oral language proficiency developed first in the native language (and often in a second language) serves as the foundation for literacy and as the means for learning in school and out. Teachers need to know how written language contrasts with speech so they can help their students acquire literacy. (p. 1)

Why is this matter worthy of our attention as educators, parents, and citizens? The number of children in the nation's public schools, between the ages of 5 and 17, has more than doubled from 3.8 million in 1979 to 9.9 million in 2004 (Brody, 2006). Students of ESL who are recent immigrants to the United States, or whose parents do not speak English, have the doubly daunting task of becoming literate in not one, but two, languages. Furthermore, while developing literacy in their second language, they must also navigate the socio-cultural aspects of American society. Linda Klippenstein (personal communication, 1991), ESL Instructor in the New Hampshire Public School System, states that her ESL students who are the adopted children of English-speaking parents progress in English at a much quicker rate than the children of new immigrants who speak only the family's first language in the home. In addition to being exposed to English 24/7 by native speakers, the adopted children are being shown the social "ropes" by their parents. The English-speaking parents are already fully integrated into American society and, thus, are able to support and guide their children's social integration as well. The ability of an adopted parent to teach "Ring around the Rosy" or "London Bridge" could save children

months of exclusion and frustration on the playground. In addition to knowing the words to the rhymes, the child must know the actions in order to participate. The playground can be a challenging place for a young ESL student, both linguistically and socially. Duff (2002) affirms this assertion with this quotation, “Children (and adults) who have grown up with the same narratives draw freely on them in their interactions with others as a means of establishing their in-group membership” (p. 482).

Chatel (2002) goes on to clarify the four qualities of literacy by referring to Kasper’s (2002) who classifies literacy into four types: (a) functional, (b) academic, (c) critical, and (d) electronic. Functional literacy is the ability to use the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening comprehension) to gain knowledge and express oneself. Academic literacy is the ability to gain knowledge by reading and responding to scholarly materials. Critical literacy is the ability to judge the validity and reliability of a media source. Finally, electronic literacy is the ability to use non-print media to gain knowledge as well as to understand patterns and changing relationships.

### **Barriers to Socio-linguistic Integration for ESL students**

What are some of the barriers to bringing ESL students to achieving full linguistic and socio-cultural integration? Grant and Wong (2003) feel there are two major obstacles. The first is the inadequacy of teacher colleges to train reading specialists to work with second-language learners. This deficit is a serious one. According to their research, 30-40% of ESL students in K-6 do not reach grade-appropriate reading levels in English by the time they complete elementary school. Students who did not achieve grade-level reading skills by the time they graduated from high school, rarely—if ever—continued to increase their ability to read in English.

I can attest to the research of Grant and Wong (2003) with an anecdote about my father who immigrated to the United States at age 15. He was not an English speaker, did not have English-speaking parents, and missed four years of school because of the events of World War II. No special education programs were available in his new U.S. school system, so he was simply “mainstreamed.” (Assimilation of new immigrants in 1949 was by the sink-or-swim method. Fortunately, my father swam--perhaps because Dutch is so similar to English.) Although he succeeded in graduating from high school and college on time, he does not find reading a pleasure. I have never seen him read a novel, in any language. His reading is limited to the newspaper, which is written at the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade level, or lower. This quotation from Edmondson (2001) addresses my father’s experiences as well as those of many students today:

We want every child to learn to read and to enjoy reading for a variety of purposes. Yet much of the reform and standardization of reading education is aimed toward a select few, at the expense of a great many. It is important to consider who will benefit, and conversely who will be left out, from any given reform. (p. 626)

Murie, Rojas Collins, and Detzner (2004) take the position that many ESL students emerge from the K-12 experience poorly prepared for higher education. They draw attention to the need to design courses and give assignments that acknowledge the strengths of multilingual writers and that build fluency and academic literacy. Murie et al. document the creation of an interdisciplinary life history project where students were called upon to write extensively, gather data (do research), and synthesize personal and historical stories. The project acknowledged their expertise as bilingual, bicultural writers even without full mastery of English. The authors credited their success to the following strengths of the project: the audience and purpose were real; data collection was extensive; research was contextualized; student work was connected to

literature; writing was seen as a creative process; extended drafting and reader response created a safe place to develop fluency; students were able to find themselves in the curriculum, and the project rejected the deficit model of “remediation” (Murie et al., 2004).

The deficits in ESL students’ learning are the direct result of inadequately prepared reading specialists (Grant & Wong, 2003). Unless state certification and re-certification programs require educators to take courses and in-service instruction in ESL and the needs of ESL students, the present situation is unlikely to change.

Turf wars between ESL instructors and Reading Specialists need to be addressed with interdisciplinary training. Reading Specialists need to be educated in the special needs of English language learners, and ESL instructors need to be trained in the development of literacy. Grant and Wong (2003) suggest the development of “Literacy Practitioners” (p. 386): educators who are trained to be reading specialists as well as ESL specialists and who receive special training in diversity. The second obstacle they find is the lack of academic research on the subject of developing English reading skills in ESL students. When preparing their research, Grant and Wong were dismayed at the “paucity” of research available on their subject. They provide a list of suggestions they feel should be research priorities. Researchers should expand the scope of research on English reading to include language-minority students, move the research away from effectiveness studies that merely criticize ESL reading instruction without offering clear alternatives, develop a clear position on the danger of language loss and benefits of maintaining students’ first languages, provide substantive information for mainstream teachers about how to help students after they have left bilingual or ESL programs, investigate the linguistic differences between English and other languages for literacy development, shift attention to students who have other native languages, especially non-European languages, focus on critical literacy and teachers’ attitudes toward race, poverty, language, and power.

### **Strategies for Facilitating Socio-Linguistic Integration for ESL Students**

Educators cannot begin to be effective until they become familiar with the stages of language development *as well as* cultural adaptation (Ernst-Slavitt, Moore, & Maloney, 2002). They break down these stages as follows: (a) preproduction, (b) early production, (c) speech emergence, and (d) intermediate fluency. In the Preproduction phase students listen, watch, and communicate with very short phrases, such as “yes” or “thank you.” This period is virtually silent, but the student is taking in all types of information: linguistic and behavioral. The students may appear withdrawn, distracted, or even confused. Teachers can reduce students’ stress during this period by not putting them on the spot or asking them to do more than they are ready for, especially in front of peers. In the Early Production phase, students begin to assimilate the patterns and rules of English. The students’ level of literacy in their first language greatly affects their success in this phase. Students respond well to specific reading strategies such as pre-reading discussion especially on abstract concepts; pre-viewing key terms; and using techniques such as Venn diagrams, clusters, and other graphic organizers. Culturally, students’ frustration may peak during this phase. Ernst-Slavitt et al (2002) call this frustration “adaptation fatigue” (p. 121).

In the Speech Emergence stage students are at last ready to participate in small-group activities. At this stage, using literature is an effective way to have students relate their personal life experience to their academic assignments. Zigo (2001) even suggests using Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to address the concepts of ambition, betrayal, and idealism. From a cultural standpoint, students often feel relief during this phase. They have established a base and are now refining it. They have more control over their lives and participate more fully in their

environments. In the Intermediate Fluency stage, students engage in conversation. They begin to enjoy reading and writing because they can now use these skills to acquire new knowledge. Culturally, they have made friends, function well in school, and are able to critically examine information. Progressing forward through these stages is a difficult task for many ESL learners. Many become stuck in an early stage; many regress, and many never succeed in making it to the fourth stage. Making ESL educators aware of these phases and of students' needs during these phases is an effective strategy for overcoming barriers to literacy.

Palmer, Chia-l, Change and Leclere (2006) say that it is imperative that ESL instructors have an understanding of their student population, of the linguistic differences between Chinese and English, and strategies for scaffolding language and promoting success in literacy. This article had particular impact on me and made me reflect on the first time I had a Chinese speaker in my ESL class. Although his fluency was excellent, he insisted on speaking only in the present tense. Our conversation went as follows:

Student: Yesterday I go to Costco.

Instructor: (*Gentle correction, rephrasing the statement in question format without interrupting the flow of the conversation*) Oh, really? You went to Costco yesterday?

Student: (*Frustrated*) That's what I say! I say, "Yesterday I go to Costco!"

I did not figure out where I was going wrong until another, more experienced teacher explained to me that there is only one verb tense in Chinese: the present. Time is indicated by markers such as "yesterday" and "tomorrow." When you stop to think about English syntax, it is a bit redundant to say, "I went to Costco yesterday." If it was yesterday, then of course the action took place in the past. Why change the tense of the verb, too? From this experience I learned that the concept of verb tenses would be much easier for a Spanish speaker to learn than for a Chinese speaker.

Another example of understanding differences in languages is teaching the verb "to be". There are two verbs that mean "to be" in Spanish. Learning the English verb will be simple for a Spanish speaker (no choices to make between "ser" and "estar!"). However, there is no verb "to be" in Arabic. Learning the English verb for an Arabic speaker will mean learning a new concept. A good teacher can prevent a deficit learning experience by anticipating the situation and presenting the concept before teaching the verb and its forms. Palmer et al. (2006) call this anticipation by the teacher the prediction of error types and advocate using this skill to teach students about both positive and negative transfers from Chinese to English. They encourage students to use their linguistic knowledge of both their L1 and L2 to assess their development and analyze their own errors. They also find evidence that the following strategies best support the Chinese English language learners in their classroom: (a) recognize educational and cultural difference for Chinese ELL students, (b) learn contrastive analysis (language differences) for the two languages, (c) encourage the development of the student's first language, and directly teach the positive transfers from L1 to L2, (d) develop the Chinese student's reading, writing, listening and speaking strategies for English, (e) utilize cooperative learning groups, and (f) solicit support beyond the classroom.

Researching the topic of barriers and strategies to successful English language learners has been very informative and rewarding. The single most helpful idea I have acquired through my research is the idea of rejecting ESL education as a form of remedial teaching. It is even

more important to be an advocate and spread the word among other educators, administrators and students that ESL is not a remedial or special education class.

When my daughter Betty, a monolingual Spanish speaker at age 5, was a kindergartner in the public school system in New Hampshire, she was routinely pulled from class for ESL instruction. Her teacher did all the things that the scholars--whose work I have presented in my paper--advocate. In addition to vocabulary building and one-on-one practice in the four skills, her teacher made a point of developing her literacy. She familiarized her with the children's literature and thus to the culture of the English-speaking world. It was not enough for her to be able to speak English, she needed to have something to talk *about* with her peers!

Despite the extreme success of my daughter's ESL program, she still had to live with the perception from her peers that being an ESL student meant being a special education student ("sped" case) or remedial learner. Once she was even referred to as "that stupid Spanish girl who can't speak English" by a kindergarten classmate. Eventually, Betty became a fully monolingual English speaker with no limitations on her ability to interact in American society. I owe this to the linguistic and literary skills that her ESL program developed during her K-2 years.

Reading the work of the scholars and researchers in ESL has made me realize that to be a truly effective educator, a teacher must consider the whole student and the whole language (L1 and L2). To be successful, an ESL teacher must not simply teach English but literacy. It is the attainment of literacy that gives an English learner access to the world of English-speaking culture and full social integration. The instruction cannot be contrived or irrelevant or it will be doomed to fail. The New London Group (1996) emphasizes the need for relevancy in the classroom. Students must use "real (technology) tools for real purposes, interaction with multiple forms of communication and text made possible by electronic technologies, and participation in collaborative learning environments" (p. 46). All of these are part of "engagement in meaningful tasks" (p. 46).

After reading the work of the scholars, my conclusion is that the Communicative method (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) of teaching would serve as the best strategy for achieving literacy and social integration in English language and other L2 learners. The Communicative method offers the practicality, relevance, and the immediate ability to use the language that the experts so strongly emphasize. Lightbown and Spada (1999) define the Communicative method as a methodology with its "primary focus on using language for meaningful interaction and for accomplishing tasks, rather than on learning rules...." (p. 40). For example, using the Communicative method students can act out short skits using common greetings like these:

S1: Hello. How are you?

S2: Hi. I'm fine, thank you. And you?

This information is infinitely more useful and immediately applicable to daily life than memorizing lists of vocabulary and verb conjugations. By having students stand up in front of the class and act out the skit, it also employs Total Physical Response (TPR), a learning strategy in which students "simply listen and show their comprehension by their actions" (Lightbown et al., 1999, p. 130). TPR is a learning method that is effective with a great many students.

The private school where I teach Spanish full-time changed to a new textbook this year that uses the Communicative method. The advances that students make are impressive. After just 3 months of formal instruction, the non-native learners of Spanish are able to write full-page autobiographical essays with skill. Researching and writing this paper has validated my

confidence in using the Communicative method as an effective means of achieving literacy and ultimately full social integration of language learners.

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