

# **SIX EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ACCULTURATION USING POWERFUL READING PRACTICES FOR LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper offers six effective reading strategies to help acculturate linguistically diverse children into American culture and the English language. The first author is a second language speaker and teacher. She came to the U.S. to study and raise her children. Her public school and university level experiences have helped empower teachers and learners to celebrate their funds of knowledge and linguistic and cultural capital. Rather than focusing on a “deficit” model, this article encourages inquiry-based, child-centered learning and engaged family and community literacy practices.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

English learners must contend with understanding the differences between the mainstream American culture and their native family culture. Currently, there are an estimated 38,952 English Learners (ELs) in Missouri public schools (DESE, 2018). Teachers need strategies to educate these diverse populations. This article shares how the first author uses powerful reading practices to help her urban, elementary-aged students be successful on the state-mandated tests and in their English language skills.

The important factors of selective acculturation are fluent bilingualism, identity establishment, high educational aspirations (in spite of perceived discrimination), less conflict between the old and the new generations, parent-child agreement about educational achievement, and family cohesion (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou, 2001). This paper explores a foundational approach to building effective literacy skills that help immigrant children and their families to achieve these goals, by establishing successful interactions between the school and the home.

The first author sees her elementary aged ELs as precious immigrant children whose families came to America just as she did - seeking to achieve the “American Dream” and hoping that their children would have better lives. She offers the following strategies to teachers, particularly those who work with ELs, who can implement these practical tips for effective reading practices which support language teaching and academic success.

## **STRATEGIES**

### **Strategy One: Use Non-fiction Text**

In different cultures, fiction can be shared in written or oral forms (Choi, 2015). Typically, each culture has its own traditions and conventions. American fiction often features figurative language that is unfamiliar to non-English speakers, causing confusion in comprehending the new language. However, concrete items featured in non-fiction texts - objects, places, scientific, physical and mathematical properties, news, nature and everyday life activities (eating, working, sleeping, and playing) - remain recognizable components in non-fiction narratives, regardless of culture. These familiar objects are relevant and provide a

stable, understandable foundation for vocabulary development and comprehension. This allows learners to access unfamiliar text patterns with more confidence.

Students can take away important understandings from non-fiction texts. They understand how they might use such information, and how this knowledge is important to their lives. Dewey (1938) writes that “It...becomes the office of the educator to select those things within the range of existing experience that have the promise...of presenting new problems which, by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment...expand the area of further experience (p. 90).”

Students can be introduced to more rigorous inquiries, interests, and adventures while finding out what is going on in the world with authentic non-fiction texts. They have the power to figure things out for themselves, which is the best and most authentic purpose for reading.

## **Strategy Two: Choice, Interests, Learner/Teacher Autonomy**

The first author starts class by asking for a volunteer to read from *Scholastic News*™ or *Time for Kids*™. The cover pages draw students’ attention and interest. They can choose what they want to explore. As they read, the teacher monitors pronunciation and comprehension. The author ordered 10 copies of a book called *Long way down* (Reynolds, 2017) for her ELs. She had not read it, but she intuited that her students would enjoy reading it. To her surprise, even struggling readers and those children who misbehaved on a regular basis asked to borrow the book so that they could read it at home. She told them the books should stay in the classroom so everybody could have access to them. Nevertheless, she noticed that the books were disappearing for a time, showing up again, then disappearing once more. She was no longer certain how many copies remained in the school!

The book is about struggles facing people in their lives and in their communities. It deals with issues of sadness, loss, poverty, despair and hurt feelings. The book extends a powerful message about how one can overcome those feelings with the power of love. It encourages hope that things can be changed in the future.

Student One found interest in the book because it tells about his stories and his familiar experiences. Shortly after students began reading the book, the author checked the reading scores for those “misbehavers” and struggling readers. She was quite surprised. Student One, a second-grade boy, who was having a very rough year, begged to be allowed to take the book home. The author encouraged him to enjoy reading it, as long as he did not get into trouble. After several weeks, his reading score increased almost two grade levels. His sibling, Student Two, read the book too. He was a fourth grader (and former EL student), and the author observed that he, too, progressed a grade level. Student Three, who was in fifth grade (and served detention regularly) also read the book. The author discovered a short time later that he had advanced nearly seven months in his reading scores.

Student interest in choosing reading materials results in the improvement of reading habits in the classroom. Student Four told his teacher that he “read the entire book overnight” before he took the test.” Reading materials should be related to children’s lived experiences.

### **Strategy Three: Questioning Relevant to Children’s Lives**

Even struggling learners are excited to talk about their family stories and fun activities experienced over a weekend with parents, extended families, and siblings. They must take turns to share their stories with classmates. ELs learn to wait when other classmates or teachers talk. Discussion sessions are dynamic and facilitate the development of students’ higher level

cognitive understandings and interpretation skills. The teacher should make sure that the classroom is safe and welcoming to reduce pressure and lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1981), which could deter comfort levels and the ability to absorb new material. The first author and her 6<sup>th</sup> grade ELs read an article filled with immigration stories and had an opportunity to explore the history of immigration in America. Her ELs actively participated in discussing what it is like to be an immigrant in America, sharing their vivid experiences. Throughout the discussion they were encouraged to critically think about why literacy matters.

### **Strategy Four: Socialization and Information Sharing**

Teachers can use appropriate technologies to listen to pronunciation, intonation, accent, nuances, pauses, and discourse patterns. Technology cannot be separated from daily life, but relying solely on technological tools is not good for young ELs. Children should develop intellectual and social skills through interactions with peers and teachers. Judicious implementation of technology - applications that help children practice language structures and patterns and games that encourage collaboration in vocabulary and comprehension - can be valuable in the classroom and for independent learning. However, face-to-face, team, and large- and small group interactions remain the most effective avenues for supporting English learners as they navigate both the language and the social contexts of American culture. These include the highly valued norms (reiterated and emphasized in the academic environment) of punctuality, work ethic, competition, and individual achievement.

### **Strategy Five: Read Aloud K-6**

Regardless of grade level, all students (even native English speakers) benefit from and enjoy hearing the teacher read aloud. Listeners can hear their voices through the sound of read

alouds and they can engage in understanding the content and nuances of stories. Listening to “read alouds” allows students to relate to narratives. Hearing new words helps them with pronunciation and comprehension.

### **Strategy Six: Family Engagement**

Family literacy practices in the first or second language impact student English language development. When they come to school, ELs bring with them funds of knowledge (Auerbach, 1989; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez., 1992; Taylor, 1993). Their cultural and linguistic capital play an important role in forming classroom learning environments and help link their frames of reference to new knowledge and skill development. The ability to bring the new resources back to the family culture engages a support system that is of benefit to the entire group. (Heath, 1983; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Taylor, 1993).

The first author models “active listening” for her students, and then asks them to think of ways to answer the most important of critical thinking prompts: “Why?” She does this with them in math and reading. Soon, her students have established the habit of prompting themselves to reach for the “why.” Dewey (1990) says that “education means drawing out” instead of “the process of pouring in” (p. 36). She wanted to learn how to teach a math concept in a different way, and asked two other teachers to show her how they did it. Her students observed that she was learning from their other teachers. This reinforced the concept that teaching is learning and learning is teaching. Teaching a new generation of children means that teachers should be open to learning new ways to teach the same content knowledge.

The classroom should be open to parents who are willing to learn English and strategies to help their child(ren) learn. The author allowed one mother who did not know any English to

sit in on her class. The woman spent approximately eight months with the first graders, learning English, math, and science in the morning, two to three times a week, for 50 minutes each session. She developed basic communication skills and found a job at a fast-food restaurant seven months later. In return, the mother's younger daughter often served as a translator when the teacher needed help with other students or families. The trust established between the teacher and the family, through the classroom and home culture, shows the power of engaged family literacy practices at school and home.

Student Five, a fourth grader, needed help with her multiplication facts. Her father observed in the author's classroom and came back the next day with his phone and a notebook. He recorded how the teacher was teaching math so he could work with his daughter at home. Subsequently, her math scores improved so significantly that she no longer requires services.

The author shows parents how to use technology at home to practice English. She showed them how to use dictionaries in book form or online to pronounce words and find definitions in their first language (L1) and English. She communicates with siblings, many of whom are former students, and shows an interest in their progress. When parents, students, siblings, and teachers are all engaged in this type of learning, they are able, together, to facilitate the higher mental functions of ELs to develop literacy skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

America is a nation of immigrants. It is crucial to educate children of immigrants using effective strategies for their well-being and the nation's growth. This essay shows how six effective strategies for acculturation using powerful reading practices for linguistically diverse learners can be used with positive impacts in the literate lives of ELs and their families.

## THE AUTHORS

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