

Inquiry Report: Identity and Empowerment in Literacy Development for Secondary ELLs

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The word literacy carries great meaning and can determine the level at which a person will succeed in school and after their graduation or premature departure/dropout. If a person is literate it is understood they can read, write and function within society in a productive way, contributing his or her unique identity. However, if a two-letter prefix is added to the word, a person is considered illiterate and not able to read, write and function in society in a way, which allows them to contribute their unique identity. As educators, literacy is one of the primary goals in the profession, whether the content is math literacy, science literacy, historical literacy, or literacy associated with social responsibility. For an English Language Learner (ELL) educator, literacy should be a main goal and major part of what students develop through class lessons and activities. The focus of this inquiry report explores how literacy development can be promoted for secondary ELL instruction within the English language classroom.

There has been a great deal of time and effort placed on researching literacy and ELLs. Among those who have contributed greatly in the area are Cummins, Cumming, Gunderson, Coelho and many more. In an article from the latest volume of *Learn the Magazine of BC Education* statistical data on the number of ELLs in British Columbia (BC) schools was provided. Data gathered presented that 25 percent of BC residences speak a different first language than English or French, and school aged ELL children and youth make up 10 percent of the public and private school populations throughout the province (Sully & Stendahl, 2014). When looking at specific districts however, the percentage of ELLs in a school community can increase greatly. In the city of Vancouver for example nearly half the population speaks a first language other than English (Sully & Stendahl, 2014); it does not take

a great leap to conclude that schools in Vancouver are likely experiencing far more than a 10 percent intake of ELLs. Similar to Vancouver, Richmond also has a larger percentage of ELLs and working for the Richmond School District we are aware of the need for ELL specialist teachers. With this in mind, and our aim to become qualified and knowledgeable ELL specialists, literacy presented its self as a key area to explore in this report.

Literature Review

To provide a more grounded case for the importance of literacy in the secondary English language classroom, let us first explore some of the research and findings from the field. Gunderson (2008) presented that many ELL students dropout of school before completion due to a lack of equitable learning conditions, and experience great gaps in both their learning environment and assessment outcomes compared to non-ELLs. It has been widely presented in many papers, articles and education documents that it can take two years for students to be at a socially competent level in English when compared to their peers, and at least five years for them to gain academic proficiency comparable to their peers (Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni, 2006). Gunderson (2008) points out the importance of not overestimating a student's language level because they have acquired social skill levels, as their academic needs are still in the development stage.

Students in the ELL classroom still acquiring their academic language abilities may not be at a place in their language acquisition to share their intellectual opinions of a topic or clearly present how much they understand (Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni, 2006). This can be a frustrating place for learners and it is what Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni (2006) have discussed as part of a student's identity. Cummings (2013) also discusses identity in relation to the community around ELLs. Therefor within instruction there needs to be a link between the student's language and literacy level and their cultural knowledge and identities to support them in the development of their reading and writing (Cumming, 2013). For students who are able to present themselves clearly,

either through the utilization of their first language in conjunction with English or a high enough literacy level, they will have gained a better sense of identity; ultimately leading to greater motivation (Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni, 2006). In the paper by Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni (2006) the example of a young girl, whose first language is Urdu, named Madiha was used to illustrate this point. In her note book, Madiha answered questions about her learning and expressed that when she was able to share her true knowledge and ideas she was excited, and by using a combination of her Urdu skills and what she was learning in English she was able to present her true understanding, and this in turn supported her identity. Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni (2006) connected the importance of using a student's first language in their learning of English, and to look for ways to promote their identity as key components to a student's literacy development. This not only engages students in the development of literacy, but also their own desires to become active within literacy development beyond what is prescribed in the classroom (Cummins, 2007). In their paper Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni (2006) raised questions for educators to consider with their ELL students. They asked:

Does the language policy construct an image of the student as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented? Does our pedagogy acknowledge and build on the cultural and linguistic capital (prior knowledge) of students and communities? To what extent are we enabling *all* students to engage cognitively and invest their identities in learning? Do our strategies for teaching literacy make students feel "very comfortable, very special, and very important" in the way that Madiha felt when given the opportunity and encouragement to write in Urdu? (Cummins, Giampapa, Cohen, Bismilla & Leoni, 2006, p. 7).

Within the literature there were a couple other articles that presented interesting information, although they did not neatly fit within the section on "resource analysis and suggested practices", but are worth mentioning. First was a study done with ELLs at the university level in Taiwan (Guo, 2012). The study looked at the use of online authentic materials and long periods of time spent

reading. Although the study had weaknesses, such as a small test group, there were still good results found in support of using authentic documents during long periods of reading for the promotion of vocabulary, student engagement and increased levels of content knowledge (Guo, 2012). A second research article by Cheng, Klinger & Zheng (2009), which was more locally conducted, focused on Ontario students who had passed or failed the 2003 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). The paper explored the rate of afterschool reading and the students' literacy results. The OSSLT tested both ELLs and non-ELLs and the study gathered both data on ELLs and non-ELLs. In the findings it was discovered that students who read widely outside of school scored much higher on the literacy test than those who did not (Cheng, Klinger & Zheng, 2009). The authors of the article noted that literacy and its connectedness to students' overall learning has been well established in other studies, and therefore it was not surprising to find that students who engaged in outside school literacy development were more likely to pursue activities that required them to use literacy skills such as; reading, e-mailing or using the internet (Cheng, Klinger & Zheng, 2009).

In the BC government's document *English Language Learning Standards* (2001) the word literacy is only present four times and although it is discussed under the "Principles of Effective Second Language Learning" (p. 13) the discussion does not discuss the foundational importance of literacy to English language learning, only that literacy in the students first language can be used to promote the development of their English acquisition. As well, English as a Second or Additional Language classes are not represented among the BC Integrated Resource Packages (IRPs). The only mention of ELL specific content is in the Literacy Foundations documents, which are intended for adult learners only. Although there are many discussions and resources coming from the field of literacy development for ELLs, the BC government documents do not seem to reflect the current practices. With this in mind our following resource analysis section has been structured to highlight the progress that has been taking place and is not offered in the BC guides.

Resource Analysis and Suggested Practices

In this section of the report effort has been put into compiling useful sources, which can be applied to the ELL secondary classroom for the development of student's literacy. Although these sources are for secondary level ELLs, many of the overall practices can be adapted for lower grade levels. In our early search for resources we looked through Coelho's book *Adding English: A Guide to Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms* and noted the importance she placed on first conducting literacy tests as a way to establish an ELL's level of learning, thus understanding where in the process of language acquisition the student is. After a literacy level is established Coelho (2011) says a plan can be devised to support the student's specific needs in literacy development and guide them during each step of their language learning. We felt this was an important point to remember when developing a teaching plan for ELLs and a good starting point. Similar to Coelho, Richard-Amato (2010) also presents the importance of literacy in ELL instruction throughout her book *Making it Happen From Interactive to Participatory Language Teaching: Evolving Theory and Practice*. Richard-Amato (2010) lists in Chapter 13 titled "Ways to Promote Literacy Development" several ways to specifically target literacy development through the use of literature-based curriculums, writing workshops and academic literacy. Below are a few resources on suggested best practices and in addition to a few resources we felt would support the academic research listed in the literature review of this report.

The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 – 12 English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development

Link: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/esl912currb.pdf

This document is the Ontario's version of a secondary English as a Second Language IRP, which BC does not offer. It is a very comprehensive document and includes prescribed learning outcomes for each level listed in the document, as well as a vast range of strategies, which have been categorized by learning outcome and for overall planning. Media literacy and cultural Canadian content are included as curriculum content for ELLs and their roles within the twenty first century. This

document provides a solid guide for ELL educators, a starting point to begin from and expand their instructional practice.

English Language Learner Walk Through and Program Review Tool by Colorado Department of Education

Link:http://www.cde.state.co.us/cde_english/englishlanguagelearnerswalkthroughprogramreviewtool

This is a comprehensive program review checklist for ELL teachers to use to evaluate their classroom, practice, planning, assessment, monitoring of student progress and engagement with parents. The checklist is presented in the form of a table and can be used as a self-assessment or collaborative team assessment. Based on the checklist walk through a plan can be devised for the areas listed.

Think Literacy Resources for ESL/ELD

Link:<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/studentssuccess/thinkliteracy/files/thinklitesl.pdf>

This document comes from the Ontario Ministry of Education and was created to support ELLs' oral literacy development. The strategies are divided into pair work, small-group discussions and whole-class discussions. Handouts for the class and tips are also provided.

Identity Texts & Authentic Literacy

Link 1: <http://www.thornwoodps.ca/dual/index.htm>

Link 2: <http://www.multiliteracies.ca>

These links offer examples of Cummins' work, which promotes student's literacy development by linking ELLs' first language and their cultural knowledge to their learning of English. Link 2, the Multiliteracy Project, offers work produced by students at various schools in Vancouver, York Region District, Peel District, New Frontiers school boards and non-affiliated schools.

Adapting general literacy practices for ELLs

Link 1: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/studentssuccess/thinkliteracy/>

Link2: http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesLIT/AdolescentLiteracy/AL_Resources/ALG_FacilitatorsGuide.pdf

In the Think Literacy resource pack, you can find detailed explanations of strategies that can be used to support students in areas of reading, writing, and oral skills development. In the Adolescent Literacy Guide, there are a variety of activities to explore about developing key literacy skills of questioning, summarizing, note taking and more. Even though both resource guides are not intended for ELLs, they offer possible strategies and activities which can be adapted for ELLs.

Online Community & Professional Development

Link 1: <http://www.esl-literacy.com/blog/category/online-reading-circle>

Link 2: <http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/ell2/webcasts.html>

These sites provide online webinars for ELL educators' professional development. The link ESL-Literacy provides an opportunity to explore a certain topic through reading and discussing with fellow educators in a reading circle format. The link Edugains includes a wide range of resources from Ontario Ministry of Education including a language level continuum, which can be used to find a student's strengths and needs and appropriate literacy texts.

Research Process

In the early stages of this inquiry we looked through the BC Government's documents for ELL instruction and narrowed our focus to literacy development in the ELL secondary classroom because we saw both, a need for further information and strategies on the topic. Knowing researchers such as Cumming and Cummins are widely published in the field of ELL and ELL literacy we began our inquiry with a general internet search, followed by a search for peer reviewed articles through the Queen's library databases searching for their work. Multiple journal articles by these researchers were found, as well as many other informative articles on the topic of literacy and literacy development in regards to ELLs. To narrow the search

we chose to focus as much as possible on research and sites with a Canadian focus. Another Internet search was done to gather general information on ELL literacy. This search brought back resources including web-based communities, professional development sites and many resources from the province of Ontario. Given the large number of resources provided through the province of Ontario this then led us to look more closely at programs offered there. When it came to compiling the information we chose to divide our research into two parts; first a brief literature review of the academic field and BC government documents was done, and second a more applied resource analysis of suggested practices was compiled and analyzed. The Resource analysis and suggested practices section was purposely designed to act more as a reference guide than an academic dialogue because we wanted to provide easy access to the sources we found. Our conclusion took into account the connections we made between our academic and applied findings.

Conclusion

Although literacy development is a challenging piece to incorporate within ELL instruction, it is possible. Teachers must seek out ways to engage learners in their own literacy development, promote their first language and support them in finding ways to use literacy which will allow them to use their unique identities. Knowing the needs of your class through observation and literacy assessments is the starting point and from there appropriate lesson planning can be created to promote literacy development in the secondary ELL classroom. Just as it is important to include literacy into the ELL classroom, literacy is key to helping learners develop a set of literacy habits and skills (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). In the past it appeared that literacy meant fluency in reading and writing, however a shift has occurred which now presents literacy as more than reading and writing. Identity has become an important component to literacy development in ELLs. The current trend looks for ways to incorporate ELL students into the classroom as whole individuals who are capable of providing their own contributions and that those contributions are valuable. Much of this shift comes from Cummins' work on identity and the use of the student's first language in conjunction with the learning

of English. Literacy learning needs to be promoted to foster self-expression and make learning real for the students, consequently engaging them in the task. As educators, we need to recognize the importance of ELLs' identity in literacy development and reflect on ways to support them with school and post school literacy success.

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