Chapter 4
Using Literacy Response Activities with Early Childhood English Language Learners and Immigrant Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents findings on the importance of engaging early childhood English Language Learners (ELLs) and immigrant students in literacy response activities designed around Reader Response Theory. This practice is supported by research that urges educators to engage ELL and immigrant students in literature response activities for deeper comprehension and language development. Recent brain-based research supports employing stimulating, active literacy activities in a nonthreatening, comfortable environment to foster literacy comprehension, language acquisition, and cognitive development (Lombardi, 2008). The author presents data on the literacy needs of ELL and immigrant students in the United States, issues of learning styles of these populations, brain-based learning concepts, Reader Response theory, and the use of fairy tales with second language learners. Descriptions of specific Reader Response activities for ELLs and immigrant students as well as suggestions for professional development opportunities for educators of this population are presented at the conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

"This is too soft... This is too hard... Oh…This is just right!" Six-year-old Karina*, who has a beginning English proficiency level, moves from pillow to pillow in the drama corner while wearing a felt mask that looks like the character Goldilocks. Three friends crouch nearby wearing the masks of Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear listening to Karina and responding to her words. They quietly wait for their turns in the exciting story drama.

Miguel and Marco are playing chase at recess. As Miguel runs away, he yells out, "Run, run, run as fast as you can! You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man!" Even though Miguel barely speaks English, he is repeating the same language and actions he used previously with flannel board characters in the literacy center.

The two preceding events transpired with my first grade students more than a decade ago when I was an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in a large, urban school district. I recorded both scenarios in my reflection journal as part of the requirements of the district's alternative certification program. I was teaching a classroom of 23 Limited English Proficient students on an emergency teaching permit and possessed limited pedagogical knowledge. Fortunately, I obtained a set of fairytale felt masks and flannel board characters at the start of the year and assumed they would interest students when reading fairytales. Every few weeks, I repeatedly read a new fairytale to students. Students would reenact the stories with the flannel boards and masks with my guidance, and then use them later in the drama or literacy corner at center time.

Because of limited knowledge, I was unaware of the value the masks and flannel board pieces held for reading comprehension and language development in the students. Throughout the year, I recorded observations about my students' language development and observed how often the fairytales and materials appeared in my notes.

I remarked how these props allowed my students to further understand literature and adopt story language into their vocabularies.

Now, as a researcher and educator in teaching children who are learning a second language or have recently immigrated, I recognize the central relationships and connections between theory and methodology found in these early classroom experiences. By examining the important components of this empirical evidence, educators can understand how the different pieces assemble to provide interactive, stimulating methodologies for use with early childhood ELL and immigrant children.

In this chapter, a review of issues of ELL and immigrant children including beliefs about their literacy abilities and needs, brain-based research about learning styles and cognitive growth, information on the appropriateness of using fairytales, and Reader Response Theory and its effectiveness on reading comprehension and oral language development will be examined. The chapter concludes with an overview of informed methodologies and instructional practices that serve the reviewed research. For the purposes of this chapter, the grade level parameters for early childhood education will be 4 year-old pre-kindergarten to third grade.

BACKGROUND

Literacy Needs Nationwide: A Call to Deeper Meaning

Nation-wide there appears to be a problem with the way all student populations are largely instructed in reading comprehension. The results for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Nation's Report Card (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009), found that fourth grade and eighth grade literacy proficiency levels nationwide are not increasing at the desired rate. Some researchers partially link

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