

Utilizing Readers' Theatre and Role-Play to Engage Young English Language Learners

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Abstract

Students whose primary native language differs from the language taught in their school require specialized instruction and creative teaching strategies. Readers' theatre is an evidence-based practice that builds language skills in English language learners. This technique was used in a diverse kindergarten classroom to increase oral fluency and vocabulary. Social and literacy skills were also targeted. This paper examines the benefits of using role-play and specifically readers' theatre as an approach to teaching English language learners.

Keywords

language learners, readers' theatre, role-play, fluency, vocabulary, social skills, literacy skills

Background and Classroom Context

Readers' theatre was implemented in a public-school kindergarten classroom in Atlanta, Georgia. The purpose was to build language skills for English language learners (ELLs). Learners in this class included 13 students who were ELLs and 11 whose first language was English. Three students in the class had learning accommodations through an individualized education program (IEP). One student with an IEP had limited English proficiency (LEP). The students requiring language support were from Central and South American countries as well as Asian countries. Expressive and receptive language skills varied among all students. For example, a few ELLs in the class had more exposure to spoken and printed English. Most students lived in households where Spanish or Bengali were the primary spoken languages. These students had limited exposure to the English language. The approach of using readers' theatre and role-play was found to have positive benefits for the ELLs.

Rationale

Role-play is appropriate for PK–2 classrooms across the globe. This technique has been utilized in many early learning settings (Banerjee et al., 2015). Students with LEP require effective instruction to allow them to achieve the same learning standards as their peers whose native language is English. High-quality strategies are necessary for these students to access the curriculum (Gonzalez et al., 2011). According to Owens (2020), classrooms in Georgia serve the eighth-highest number of ELLs in the United States, driving home the need for this specialized instruction.

The technique of role-play can be used with many learning activities for primary students. This strategy is not exclusive to solely ELL or primary students. All learners can benefit from role-play. Villafuerte et al. (2018) implied that learners practicing language skills with role-play are

more willing to participate in cooperative learning. The literature suggests that learning through play is an integral part of early learning development. However, in practice, teachers do not allot adequate time for play (Keleş & Kalıpçı-Söyler, 2013). Step into any primary classroom and one will find when students are presented with material that is engaging and fun, they are learning.

Oral fluency is a language goal that should be addressed with students learning a new language. Expressive language is often challenging among young learners making it more difficult with young ELLs. One effective way to ensure student success is to have a clear and posted objective in the classroom. Students need to understand what their learning target is. This is achieved by reading the objective. It is also helpful to have the students repeat or read the objective(s) as well. Upon closing the lesson, the teacher should review the learning target by giving a formative assessment. This can be done by discussing what they learned or asking students to explain what they learned on an exit ticket. Objectives should align with state or local content standards (Himmel, 2012).

Vocabulary development is considered crucial for students who are learning a second language. Hunt and Feng (2016) stated ELL students need direct instruction in vocabulary. The reading strategy of using context clues alone to determine the meaning of a word may be inappropriate for students with LEP. This is due to the high number of new words they are reading. Hunt and Feng also link vocabulary knowledge to an increase in listening and reading comprehension. Before reading occurs, a teacher may pre-teach vocabulary with a picture walk. One new word can be focused on using the Frayer model, which provides a definition, example, non-example, and picture—a method that has been shown to assist with vocabulary growth (İlter, 2015). Students need explicit vocabulary instruction, such as discussing new words as they arise during reading. After this direct instruction, teachers can provide opportunities for using the new words. Students can sing, dance, and reenact scenes to build their fluency. Multimedia is a way to increase vocabulary as well. Audio and visual clips that focus on newly learned vocabulary can be utilized to support retention (Hunt & Feng, 2016).

Social skills can be increased with the use of role-play. Social stories, often used with students with autism (Crozier & Sileo, 2005), can be utilized for students with LEP. Both types of learners have deficits in language, though students with LEP have language deficits caused by lack of exposure. Using a social story that incorporates role-play with an ELL serves to increase language skills during social interactions. This in turn will help build confidence during spontaneous interactions and boost oral fluency. One can also draw the conclusion that students with LEP who may be exhibiting behavioral deficits could benefit from this strategy as well.

Furthermore, literacy skills are targeted during role-play. This domain of learning is considered critical for ELLs as teaching and learning occurs in English. The discrepancy in achievement for students with LEP and native speakers is alarming, and the learning gap widens over time (Banerjee et al., 2015). One strategy is to use curriculum-based readers' theatre. This method can assist with fluency, retention, and comprehension. It is also a cross-curricular approach (Uribe, 2019).

Guidelines for Implementation

There is a plethora of resources for teaching ELLs using the role-play strategy. While it is crucial to investigate evidence-based practice specific to students with LEP, teachers can also consider broader resources. The *Early Childhood Education Journal* includes articles on effective pedagogy for families and teachers of young children ages birth–8 years (e.g., see Banerjee et al., 2015). Resources that emphasize strategies for students with special learning needs can be utilized for

teaching students with LEP. The two groups intersect based on their need for specialized instruction. *Teaching Exceptional Children* is a prominent journal in the field of special education that includes articles with strategies to support ELLs. This publication provides practitioner articles which break down different learning techniques to use in the classroom (e.g., see Crozier & Sileo, 2005). In addition, the [Council for Exceptional Children \(2022\) website](#) contains resources for ELLs and students with disabilities. The [Learning for Justice \(2021\) website](#) offers a specific resource guide to implementing the strategy of readers' theatre in classrooms. YouTube has videos of readers' theatre being implemented in classrooms and learning modules for professional development. Here are three such videos that stood out:

- [First Grade Reader's Theatre: Little Red Riding Hood](#) (Miss Sara's Class Online, 2021)
- [Introduction to Readers' Theatre for EFL Classrooms](#) (American English, 2018)
- [Readers' Theatre Model Lesson](#) (Any Given Child Sarasota, 2017)

The following is a summary of how readers' theatre was implemented in the kindergarten class mentioned at the beginning of this article. The summary below can be utilized as a step-by-step guide to use readers' theatre to increase language acquisition and proficiency among ELLs in the primary grades.

1. On Monday, students were told they would be participating in a performance by bringing a story to life. The teacher read the learning objective: "Students will be able to increase their speaking skills by acting out a story." It was explained there were four acting parts, and students would work together in pairs to practice. The teacher also told the students they would be partaking in a "theatre celebration" at the end of the week to reward their hard work. This would include popcorn, juice, and an animated movie version of the book. (The book chosen for this specific unit was *Where the Wild Things Are* [Sendak, 1963].)
2. Before reading, a picture walk was used to get students familiar with the story and make predictions. One student responded, "the little boy was not happy." Another student said, "it looks like his dream." This time was also utilized to teach unfamiliar vocabulary. The teacher used the Frayer model to dissect the word "mischief." Students came up with a definition, picture, example, and non-example.
3. The story was read aloud to students while the teacher modeled expression and fluency. She also paused to check for understanding.
4. After reading, the class did a story retell by examining the characters, setting, problem and solution. A character map was used to describe Max. Students said Max was "bossy" but had a "good imagination."
5. Students were paired and put into three groups. Each group had eight students, and partners were assigned the roles of Max and Narrators 1, 2, and 3. Students who required more support were double cast with readers who required less support. This included three students with IEPs and eight ELLs. This allowed these students to build confidence with oral fluency throughout the week.

6. The script was read aloud every day at the beginning of the reading block. This served to model pronunciation and expression. The teacher worked with each group during guided reading Monday through Thursday. Groups were provided an enlarged script to practice their speaking parts. The teacher had students highlight their lines and modeled each speaking part. The teacher read the first few words or lines, depending on the level of support, and students repeated them while reading the script. Partners choral-read their lines together. The book was utilized to give visual support and aid in comprehension. Students were asked how Max should look and feel. The teacher used formative assessment during small-group sessions to evaluate student progress. She was able to observe and help when students needed assistance with pronunciation or remembering a line. On Thursday, an oral fluency rubric was utilized to assess mastery of the learning objective. Eighty percent accuracy of the spoken words indicated mastery of the objective. Students who scored below 80% were identified so the teacher could work with them targeting these skills.
7. Students worked in literacy centers throughout the week. One center included making a crown like Max wore in the book. The other centers were comprised of a rhyme sort, character attributes match, and a sequencing activity. The paraprofessional assisted with independent group activities. When students were off task, the teacher reminded them of the theatre celebration they were going to have at the end of the week. A couple of students were allowed to take sensory breaks during work periods. The teacher also provided brain breaks for the whole class during group transitions.
8. On Friday, the room was set up to accommodate a stage-like setting. Tape on the floor marked where the actors would stand during their performance. Each group presented while the other two groups were the audience. Students who were comfortable performed their part solo while some preferred to remain partnered.
9. As an extension, students discussed if the objective was met. The teacher asked students what they did well and what could be improved. Based on their abilities, students wrote and/or drew a picture about their favorite part of the story.

Conclusion

Readers' theatre can be used to increase language proficiency in the domains of oral fluency, vocabulary development, social interactions, and literacy skills. Though developed for a specific audience of PK–2 ELL students, role-play is appropriate for learners of any age or varied abilities. Readers' theatre can also be adapted for all literature genres and content areas. The guidelines shared in this teaching technique article can help young ELLs engage in meaningful learning experiences while also increasing their language skills.

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