



Effective instruction for second language learners: what tutors must know.

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This article focuses on the necessary elements that must be considered when preparing tutors of second language learners. Research has shown that this population in particular can greatly benefit from individualized instruction that is appropriate to the students' level of language competencies. In teaching reading and writing to students who are new to the English language, there are several additional factors that need to be considered. Among these factors are the need to guide the tutors to become aware of the students' cultural and linguistic background and to provide them with the skills to help many students first acquire adequate levels of oral language proficiency first. This paper intends to guide practitioners on the information that is critical to support tutors so they can be more effective with immigrant children.

"When I began tutoring Abdul I felt very inadequate about my skills for teaching reading and writing. For some reason, the strategies I had learned for teaching English to native speakers were not working ... were not good enough, I discovered that to help ESL kids you must know about many other things such as how you learn in a second language and about cultural issues as well ... I was in shock when I realized that my student had just learned how to hold a pencil four months earlier ... and now I was supposed to teach him how to read ... We did many activities to develop a richer oral vocabulary first ... and I did a lot of easy book reading for him ... He was in fifth grade with less than preschool English but was so enthusiastic and eager to learn!"

(Eileen, a teacher candidate who was required to complete 20 hours of one-on-one tutoring with a second language learner).

This article is intended to guide teachers and other professionals in their work preparing tutors so they can be more effective when teaching oral, reading, and writing in English to second language learners like Abdul.

Research has shown that one-on-one tutoring has proven to be one of the most effective forms of instruction for teaching reading and writing to all children (Slavin & Yampolsky, 1992, America Reads). For instance, a volunteer tutor can provide the encouragement and personal support needed to help children take part in successful reading experiences (Mandel-Morrow & Walker, 1997). For second language learners, additional and individualized instructional time is necessary and invaluable, (Law & Eckes, 2000) because they have to "catch up" with language at an accelerated rate. Only when they reach an adequate threshold level of competency in speaking, listening, reading and writing will they have greater opportunities to succeed academically at their grade level in English.

Tutors and teachers who want to be effective at teaching English as a second language (ESL) to students, must acquire knowledge and skills that go beyond the preparation required to help students acquire literacy in their first language. This article provides suggestions about the information that should be considered in the preparation of tutors who will be working with second language students in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Factors that Affect Literacy Acquisition in a Second Language

For some time now, researchers and educators have recognized that reading and writing for second language learners pose additional challenges (Thonis, 1988; Peregoy, 2000; Freeman and Freeman, Gibbons, 1993). Tutors must be aware of the following elements that affect the oral, reading and writing processes for second language learners:

* By the time a native English speaker enters kindergarten, he has acquired between 5,000 to 7,000 vocabulary words and is quite sophisticated in using English that is syntactically, morphologically, phonologically, and pragmatically correct. Many second language learners arrive in the U.S. at a below pre-school level in oral proficiency, which may hinder their ability to rely on this linguistic knowledge to make sense of written text. Moreover, efforts to teach children to read and write will stall if children do not have a strong base in the language they are reading (Caserta -Henry, et al., 1997). Considering that there is little effective reading if this consists on decoding only (with no comprehension), tutors and teachers should delay formal reading instruction such as phonics and decoding until students have acquired an adequate level of oral proficiency. Students need sufficient English vocabulary to make meaningful speech-print connections (Thonis, 1988), although it is not necessary to wait until students become fully proficient in listening and speaking (National Research Council, 1999). In the case of Abdul, Eileen needed to build basic oral vocabulary before teaching onsets and rhymes, high frequency words, and spelling.

* ESL children will be at a variety of stages in their acquisition of English in speaking, listening, reading and writing that will require assessment and planning accordingly. In order to be effective, teachers and tutors must be clear about what students can do and what they have yet to learn (this is addressed below under assessment).

* While Abdul's profile is not uncommon, many ESL students have had previous experiences with schooling or English. A great number of ESL students enter school knowing how to read and write in their primary language, and some were at or above grade level in their native countries. Thus, factors such as literacy in the students' native language, previous exposure to English in their native countries, and how close their language is to English will impact the child's rate of acquisition in English. Tutors and teachers must avoid comparing the progress or abilities among ESL students and plan instruction that addresses the specific individual needs of each student. They also must hold different expectations for different children. For instance, students who have had formal literacy instruction in their native language will be able to transfer their knowledge on reading comprehension strategies or about the different literary genres. These previous forms of literacy will facilitate progress in reading and writing.

* Many second language students come from cultures and societies that are radically different from the North American or Western cultures. Their notions about concepts such as family, health, or community are often significantly different from the North American or Western cultures. Students encounter words such as "snow", "cowboy," or "birthday" on a daily basis in school and through

the literature for which they may have not yet acquired a mental schema. Tutors need to help students build new "linguistic and cultural schemata". These children need to be exposed to basic background knowledge through books, pictures, videos, and interaction with real contexts, objects, and people. Moreover, by learning as much detail about their students' culture and language, tutors will be better equipped to scaffold the information their tutees need to comprehend new ideas that are presented to them.

Incorporating Individual Culture and Language in Tutoring

As a tutor, Eileen had to become familiar with Abdul's story--his personal and cultural story. She learned how he had to flee Sudan due to a civil war caused by religious struggles and had to leave his parents behind. She began to understand Abdul's living conditions in the United States and why he felt so depressed at times. Although it may not be as critical when tutoring children from Euro American descent, getting to know the tutees in terms of socio-economic, political, educational, linguistic and culturally-related issues is crucial when teaching ESL students. As a result, tutors must acquire:

1. An awareness that a multiplicity of factors, rather than one single source, may hinder or promote an individual's success or failure in school (Cortes, 1986). For instance, students may not have a quiet place or the materials to do school related work. They may not have an adequate or sufficient diet. They may not have available assistance to help them with English related school work. In addition, students may be influenced by the attitudes of teachers and administrators who may have little understanding of the process of second language acquisition and acculturation or have negative attitudes toward ESL students (e.g. holding low expectations based on ethnic background). Cultural information tutors should seek may include group beliefs, customs and values (e.g. some cultures do not allow children to look at adults directly at their eyes), views on education, traditions, and family roles. These factors will affect the students' self perception, self esteem and general attitudes toward schooling (group and individualized), including their speaking reading and writing in English as a second language.
2. An awareness of the distinctive features of their tutee's first language such as the phonological and morphological aspects of a the language, tutors will be better prepared to understand why their tutees have a tendency to make certain type of errors when speaking, reading and writing. This will enable them to plan instruction that addresses these errors more appropriately (e.g. There are eight key syntactic differences between Tagalog or Philipino and English, for example, word order in Tagalog is the reverse to word order in English).
3. An understanding that there will be common traits or characteristics and issues for a particular group but these may be considered only "tendencies" (e.g. In Vietnam, only the elderly can touch the head of young children). It is important to stress the concept of individuality among members of a particular ethnic group to prevent stereotyping by the tutors.
4. An understanding that the aforementioned 1-3 are key in building trust and rapport with the tutee which should be a priority at the beginning of the tutoring experience. For instance, Eileen and Abdul developed a story map about their own lives, and shared it. Stories may include aspects of their country of origin, their family, or their experiences in the U.S. Tutors can use these drawings as a springboard to write a story dictated by the child and later read it like how it is done with the "Language Experience Approach (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). These student-centered activities can

not only serve to unveil background information about the child but also can be utilized to begin teaching many aspects of reading such as phonemic awareness or language syntax.

5. Learning strategies on how to validate the tutees' languages and cultures. For instance, tutors may ask their tutees to teach them vocabulary words in their native language. In the case of Abdul, speaking in his language was the only way he could teach Eileen his language, Neur. The child had no formal schooling and he did not know how to read and write. For those students who are at the beginning stages of oral proficiency, they should be explained in their own language why, how, what, when and by whom they will be helped to learn English. This translation can be done by a professional translator, a more proficient student, a parent volunteer, or a paraprofessional. This is an important step in lowering students' anxiety levels so they are more open to the tutoring experience, particularly if the tutors will be in charge of doing formal assessments in English.

Instructional Planning Based on Language Assessment

Ongoing assessment of the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing proficiency is key to effective individualized instruction for second language learners. Tutors must be provided information on their tutees' proficiency levels in the second language, or ways to assess their students' skills in these four areas and must plan lessons based on the obtained information. The following are important aspects to consider for ESL students' effective literacy instruction:

1. A critical step in learning about the students' ability to read and write is to begin assessing their oral language-listening and speaking skills (Claire, 1988, Gibbons, 1993; Perego & Boyle, 2000). As mentioned earlier, one of the factors that often distinguishes teaching literacy to second language students is their level of oral proficiency in English. For assessing listening and speaking, tutors may want to begin with questions that center on the tutee's life such as his/her likes and dislikes, and follow with questions about specific knowledge of vocabulary and concepts in English that may or may not be content/academic related (Claire, 1988; O'Malley, 1996; Walter, 1996). Tutors may be provided with pre-made lists of questions that require responses at different levels of difficulty in terms of language proficiency in areas such as vocabulary, syntax, etc. Examples are "Is this a chair?" (silent stage/yes-no answer) "What is your name?" (early production/one-two word answer stage), "What are the people in this picture doing (speech emergence/short phrases/basic descriptions). Tutors may also be provided with pictures of scenes (e.g. at the park, at school, at home), and questions pertaining to the pictures to help the students describe or retell. These pictures can be extremely helpful when there is a limited amount of time to develop assessment and the tutors have little experience in the area of second language methodology. There are also widely used tests such as the Student language Observation Matrix, SOLOM (Perego & Boyle, 2000) that utilizes rubrics categorized by comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. For instance, students who are identified as beginner listeners and speakers can be taught by using a variety of approaches. Among useful approaches are the Total Physical (TPR) which focuses on kinesthetic activities and the Natural approach which focuses on providing comprehensible input through the use of visuals and hands on activities among other strategies (Claire, 1988; Krashen, 1988; Terrell, 1988; Walter, 1996).

2. Second language students' reading competencies need to be assessed. Among the areas to be assessed for reading are the tutees' concept of print, attitudes toward reading, ability to decode, comprehend, and work with texts, and reading strategies they use (Johnson, et, al.). Authentic assessment strategies like running records or informal reading inventories are a good starting point.

Tutors should also have books in a variety of genres at different readability and grade levels. If possible, they should use books that represent the individual cultures of the students such as folk tales from their countries of origin. In teaching reading to ESL students, it is crucial that tutors understand the basic challenges that may arise when learners attempt to read. For example, having limited oral vocabulary or background knowledge on a topic piece (e.g. reading a story about eskimos having never before heard about them or about snow) may interfere with a reader's ability to comprehend text. In this situation, tutors must be provided with strategies to build their tutee's background knowledge before they read. Another common problem ESL students have is in using some reading strategies that are usually taught to English native speakers. For instance, when they misread or pronounce a word, many students may have difficulty answering the questions "Does it sound right?", "Does that word make sense?" or "What is a similar word that begins with an A". Beginning second language readers struggle with phonemic awareness, may lack knowledge of the context to guess if a word makes sense, and tend not to have an ample repertoire of synonyms. Tutors may also find that there are a great number of children who have not been exposed to books and have very little interest in or dislike reading. Instruction for them should begin at promoting love for reading. Furthermore, tutors must be aware that many students will have pronunciation problems that will not always interfere with reading comprehension. Tutors must allow for silent reading when assessing comprehension, providing the students with the opportunity to focus on meaning rather than form.

3. Tutors need to assess their tutees' writing proficiency levels or strategies for writing assessment. For instance, if Abdul could have written in English at any level, Eileen could have asked him to add captions or a story to his drawings. In assessing writing, it is critical to ask students to write about a familiar topic so that they are not also necessarily being assessed on their knowledge about a new topic. Themes may include life back in their country, going to school, their favorite activities, and stories about their family and friends. In aiding their tutees with writing, tutors may be shown how to use writing prompts, graphic organizers, any kind of creative prompts to trigger different types of writing, or worksheets for development of writing skills. They may also help with mechanics such as punctuation or on how to build paragraphs. Tutors must be with preparation on the different aspects of language as well as with resources to support writing development. There are many commercial publications available that they can use to guide their instruction (Bassano & Christison, 1995; Jacobson & Raymer, 1999; Wingate, 1996; McCarthy, 199; Fiderer, 1997; Bromley et al., 1996).

4. Tutors need to learn that assessment is an ongoing process and that activities can be utilized for both assessing and teaching purposes. For example, tutors may use the same pictures, books and questions they used for assessment, to teach the language the tutee did not know in the first place. The tutors should be provided or guided in finding ideas for literacy development that are appropriate for different stages of language proficiency in oral, reading and writing. (e.g. Claire, 1987; Law, B., 2000)

5. Based on initial assessment, a tentative instructional plan for individual students must be designed. Ideally, this plan should include: a) the tutee's areas of strength (what he/she is able to do); b) areas of need (what they have to work on); c) objectives (specific skills, language, attitudes); and, d) an action plan (specific activities that will lead to measurable outcomes). For instance, Abdul could hold a pencil, write his name and had some concepts of print. In addition, he had some basic survival vocabulary in English and was extremely motivated and enthusiastic. With Abdul, tutors and teachers needed to begin literacy at the preschool level. This meant to assess if he

knew classroom vocabulary, colors or numbers among other topics. Tutors must have also assessed if he could maintain basic conversations and do descriptions by using verbs and adjectives in the present tense. As a result, Eileen focused on developing oral language that incorporated more complex syntactic, semantic and socio-linguistic features (such as more tenses), more abstract vocabulary and the use of different contexts in which language is used. Once Abdul acquired sufficient vocabulary to begin phonemic awareness, Eileen used picture books, patterned books, and books which contained high frequency words to help Abdul to read.

In summary, second language learners need appropriate individualized instruction that addresses their particular literacy needs. The preparation of competent tutors who have a basic understanding and skills in the areas of culture, language, assessment and instruction is key to ultimately help the students succeed in U.S. schools.

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