

Storybook Reading for Young Dual Language Learners

Cristina Gillanders and
Dina C. Castro



In a community of practice meeting, teachers discuss their experiences reading aloud to dual language learners.

Susan: When I am reading a story, the Latino children in my class just sit there. They look at me, but you can tell that they are not engaged in the story.

Lisa: That happens in my class too. The little girls play with their hair, and the boys play with their shoes.

Beverly: And when you ask questions about the story, children who speak English take over and you can't get an answer from the Latino children.

Facilitator: What do you think is happening here?

Lisa: I think they just don't understand what the story is about.

Facilitator: How can we help them understand the story so they can participate?

RESEARCHERS WIDELY RECOMMEND storybook reading for promoting the early language and literacy of young children. By listening to stories, children learn about written syntax and vocabulary and develop phonological awareness and concepts of print, all of which are closely linked to learning to read and write (National Early Literacy Panel 2008). Teachers usually know a read-aloud experience has been effective because they see the children maintain their interest in the story, relate different aspects of the story to their own experiences, describe the illustrations, and ask questions about the characters and plot.

However, listening to a story read aloud can be a very different experience for children who speak a language other than English. What

happens when the children are read to in a language they are just beginning to learn? What happens when an English-speaking teacher reads a story to a group of children who are learning English as a second language?

As illustrated in the vignette at the beginning of this article, teachers often describe young dual language learners in their class as distracted and unengaged during read-aloud sessions in English. In this article, we describe teaching strategies that English-speaking teachers can use when reading aloud to young dual language learners. These strategies are part of the Nuestros Niños Early Language and Literacy Program, a professional development intervention designed to improve the quality of teaching practices in prekindergarten classrooms to support Spanish-speaking dual language learners (Castro et al. 2006). The intervention was developed and evaluated in a study funded by the US Department of Education. Teachers from the North Carolina More at Four Pre-Kindergarten

Cristina Gillanders, PhD, is a researcher at the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. She was an investigator in the Nuestros Niños study, and has worked with dual language learners as a bilingual preschool teacher, teacher educator, and researcher. cristina.gillanders@unc.edu

Dina C. Castro, PhD, is a senior scientist at the FPG Child Development Institute. She was the principal investigator for the Nuestros Niños study. Her research focuses on improving the quality of early education for children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. dina.castro@unc.edu

Photos courtesy of the authors.

A study guide for this article will be available in mid-January online at www.naeyc.org/yc.

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Program (a state-funded program targeting 4-year-olds from economically disadvantaged families) participated in the intervention. The Nuestros Niños program responds to the immediate need to improve the practices that monolingual English-speaking early childhood teachers use when teaching young Latino dual language learners. Over the course of a full school year, the program included a three-day institute, twice-a-month classroom consultations, and community of practice (COP) meetings.

The community of practice approach to professional development

A community of practice allows teachers to meet over an extended period of time to reflect on their teaching with the goal of improving practice (Wesley & Buysse 2001). Some COPs use the lesson study model that originated in Japan (Lewis 2002). To implement the lesson study process, teachers collectively plan, observe, analyze, and refine actual classroom lessons.

In the Nuestros Niños program, during the initial COP meetings, the teachers defined their goals for the dual language learners in their classes and determined the theme (for example, insects, plants, and/or food) they would address with the storybook reading. Then they chose a picture book that had a Spanish version. They planned the storybook reading using the recommended strategies described later in this article. During this process, the authors of this article and Nuestros Niños facilitators worked with teachers to incorporate strategies that have been shown to be

effective when teaching dual language learners.

The COP group work produced a sample lesson plan. When the group had completed the lesson plan, one volunteer implemented it in her classroom while the other teachers observed the lesson or watched it on video. The COP then revised the lesson plan to incorporate feedback from the observers. After the final revision, the other members of the group used the lesson plan in their classrooms. This process helped the teachers reflect on their own teaching practices and resulted in a carefully planned approach to using storybook reading to support dual language learners.

Reading storybooks to dual language learners

One reason storybook reading is important for dual language learners is that it promotes vocabulary development. For most English-speaking children, vocabulary development in English occurs incidentally, that is, as a result of being exposed to new words when talking to family members, teachers, or friends, or when watching TV. For dual language learners, vocabulary development in English requires both incidental learning and direct teaching of words. Teachers can use storybook reading to combine direct teaching of new words with the use of the same words while reading aloud an engaging story.

Children who listen to stories in their own language can learn new words through active participation, such as answering questions related to the story. Dual language learners who have limited second language

proficiency are not able to actively participate when books are read to them in English. So reading aloud to young dual language learners needs to be done in a way that allows the children to join in even if they are in the early stages of learning English.

When reading stories aloud, teachers need to use strategies that maximize the opportunities for the children to understand the text, which will help them develop their vocabulary and listening comprehension. Storybook reading also promotes the development of other aspects of the language, such as the pronunciation of sounds of words (phonology), the correct construction of sentences (syntax), and the appropriate use of common phrases or expressions in English.

Recommended strategies for storybook reading to young dual language learners

English-speaking teachers need to adjust their approach to storybook reading when reading aloud to young dual language learners. By implementing the following strategies, early childhood educators can effectively reach these children. The sample lesson plan (see “An Example of a Storybook-Reading Lesson Plan,” p. 94) uses the storybook *La Cucaracha Martina*, a Caribbean folktale, and implements the strategies outlined here.

Reading aloud to young dual language learners needs to be done in a way that allows the children to join in even if they are in the early stages of learning English.

Choose a limited set of core words (three to five) and a repetitive phrase that are essential to understanding the story. Provide explicit instruction for learning the core words prior to and during the storybook-reading session. Ask questions (“Where is ____?” “What is he/she doing?”), point to illustrations, show objects, use gestures, include opportunities for children to repeat the words aloud, and define the words in terms the children can understand (Collins 2005, 2010).

Before reading the story aloud, introduce the core words using a picture walk. A picture walk is when the teacher takes the children through the story, pointing to the illustrations without reading the text. Use the repetitive phrase throughout the day during different classroom activities.

Use manipulatives, illustrations, gestures, and facial expressions to help children understand vocabulary (Gersten & Geva 2003). Invite children to be actively engaged in the storybook reading by asking them to show objects or pictures to the group at the appropriate time in the story.

Use the children’s home language to facilitate story comprehension and English vocabulary acquisition.

If you are bilingual or have some knowledge of the children’s home language, read the story first in the home language, and then on a subsequent occasion, read it in English (Lugo-Neris, Wood Jackson, & Goldstein 2010).

If you are not fluent in the home language, ask a parent or volunteer to read the story to the children in their home language. At the same time, ask your program to purchase several copies of this version of the book so you can send them home with children who are dual language learners, and their parents can read the story to them.

In addition, as described above, provide definitions of the core vocabulary words in Spanish (Lugo-Neris, Wood Jackson, & Goldstein 2010). This facilitates children’s learning of new words in English. Teachers who are not fluent in the home language can find Spanish definitions of words in a dictionary or ask for help from Spanish-speaking parents or members of the community.

Read the story several times during the week. Listening to the story several times allows children to consolidate their learning and deepen their understanding of the words.

Incorporate culturally relevant thematic units and books. Children can use new vocabulary during familiar experiences as they play and learn in the classroom centers.

Be aware that dual language learners participate in storybook reading in different ways, depending on their phase of second language acquisition. If the children communicate only in their home language, expect that they might answer English-language questions in their home language. Teachers should learn some key words related to the story in the children’s home language so that they can acknowledge children’s efforts to communicate.

If the children who are dual language learners are not yet using oral language, it may mean that they are still in the phase of second language acquisition called the nonverbal period. During this period, dual language learners often participate by using gestures, pointing to illustrations, or showing objects.

Finally, if the children are beginning to use phrases in English, teachers can provide opportunities for them to complete a sentence or phrase and answer questions with a repetitive phrase.

Encourage children to retell and/or to dramatize the story once they have heard it several times. This helps children to practice using the vocabulary words and helps them gain a better understanding of the story.

Expand the ideas in the book to other classroom centers. Using the core vocabulary words in other classroom learning centers provides opportunities for the children to use these words in various contexts.



Example of a Storybook-Reading Lesson Plan

Brooke Hackman, Janis Hart, Sheila Hamilton, Rhonda Privette,
Patrice Ramsey, Tammy Smith, and Cristina Gillanders

La Cucaracha Martina, by Daniel Moretón

Story synopsis: While searching for the source of one beautiful sound, a pretty cockroach rejects marriage proposals from a collection of city animals who try to charm her with their noises.

Teacher Preparation

Gather materials

Props: Noisemaker, cockroach, lipstick, dog, pig, rooster, bird, snake, frog, duck, cat, mouse, bull, fish, ring, bee, cricket, banjo

Picture cards for retelling: Cockroach, lipstick, dog, pig, rooster, bird, snake, frog, duck, cat, mouse, bull, fish, ring, bee, cricket, banjo

Listening center: English and Spanish recordings of the story

Dramatic play area: Veils, ties, and pictures of weddings

Science center: Books with realistic pictures of the animals in the story and a variety of plastic insects to sort

Sand and water table: Plastic insects and animals

Music center: A CD with loud noises and one with beautiful music, such as a piano solo

Reading center: Copies of *La Cucaracha Martina* in English and Spanish and animal puppets

Art center: A variety of art materials, including crayons, colored paper for collages, and markers

Identify core vocabulary

(**Bold** indicates words selected as the focus for the lesson.)

Cockroach / *cucaracha*, **noise** / *ruido*, **beautiful** / *hermoso*, dog / *perro*, pig / *puerco* / *cochinolmarranolchancho*, rooster / *gallo*, bird / *pájaro*, mouse / *ratón*, fish / *pescadolpez*, bull / *toro*, bee / *abeja*, **cricket** / *grillo*, flea / *pulga*, cat / *gato*, duck / *pato*, snake / *culebralvíbora*, frog / *sapo*, spider / *araña*

Chose a repetitive phrase

Will you marry me? / ¿Te quieres casar conmigo?

Plan ways to teach core vocabulary and the repetitive phrase before reading aloud

Cockroach/Cucaracha: Show realistic pictures or a real cockroach for *cucaracha*. Sing the song, “La cucaracha.” Define the word. For example, a cockroach is an insect that is brown and flat.

Noise/Ruido: Play a recording of different noises, especially insect sounds. Use puppets or toys that make sounds. Define the word. For example, a noise is a sound that is unpleasant.

Beautiful/Hermoso: Describe the colors used in a child’s painting and listen to music, such as a violin solo, versus random noises. Define the word. For example, something beautiful is very pretty.

Cricket/Grillo: Show realistic pictures of a cricket or observe crickets outside in the yard and describe them while repeating the word several times. Show toy or puppet crickets. Define the word. For example, a cricket is an insect that hops and chirps.

Repetitive phrase: Will you marry me? / ¿Te quieres casar conmigo? Show a wedding picture or album, reenact a wedding, do a wedding puppet show, watch a DVD of a wedding, or invite a parent to come and talk with the children about his/her wedding.

Conclusion

Storybook reading can promote language and literacy development in young children, but teachers may need to adjust their practice when working with dual language learners. Teachers can use various strategies to support the children’s comprehension of the text, which will in turn increase their participation in the lesson. This can help young dual language learners develop their vocabulary.

One important strategy is to introduce the text in the children’s home language. Monolingual English-

speaking teachers may find the use of the home language challenging. They can seek help from other program staff, the families of the children who are dual language learners, or other community members.

Effective use of these strategies requires careful planning, especially when teachers are learning to address the needs of young dual language learners. Working with fellow teachers in communities of practice can provide support for the planning process as well as an opportunity for teachers to reflect on teaching, its challenges, and its opportunities for professional growth.

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Daily Learning Experiences

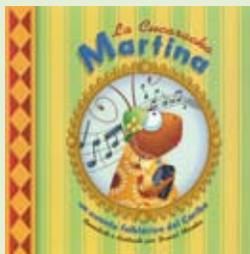
Day 1: Picture walk

Introduce the book, saying, “We are going to read a new book this week. The title is *La Cucaracha Martina*. Before we talk about it, let’s look at some important words.”

Present core words in print and provide a brief explanation of their meaning by showing the following props: a toy that makes an annoying sound, a cockroach, a cricket, and a beautiful ring.

Ask leading questions during the picture walk, such as, “What kind of noises do you think she hears?” “What is the cucaracha doing in this picture?” “What animal did the cucaracha meet?”

Send home a copy of the Spanish version of the book for families to read with their children. You can also send home the English version of the book for families who speak English.



Day 2: Reading in Spanish

Invite a Spanish-speaking adult to read the book in Spanish to the whole group. Ask the reader to show the props while reading the story. Next, have the reader ask the children to name the animals that appear in the story and ask questions such as, “How do you think the cucaracha is feeling in this picture?” “What is the cucaracha doing in this picture?” Allow for answers in English and Spanish. If there are children in the class who do not speak Spanish, read aloud from the English version of the book.

Day 3: Reading in English

Introduce the book in English: “Today we are going to read the story *La Cucaracha Martina* again. This time I will need your help. I will give everybody a prop. Listen very carefully, and when we are reading the part that mentions the prop you have, put it in the middle of the circle.”

Pass out the props, and then read the story. While you are reading, invite the children to put the props in the middle of the circle at the appropriate times. During the reading, encourage the children to recite the phrase “Will you marry me?” which is repeated throughout the story. At the end of the reading, ask, “What animals asked the cucaracha to marry them?” “Why doesn’t she want to marry all these animals?” “Which animal did she want to marry?” “Why is the flea holding a ring?”

Day 4: Retelling

Encourage the children to use cards and a flannel board to retell the story, saying, “What is the name of the book we have read this week? Today we’ll see what we remember and tell the story using picture cards on the flannel board.” Pass out the cards with pictures of all the props used the previous day. Support the children as they retell the story and put the cards on the flannel board at the appropriate times.

Day 5: Dramatization

Encourage children to act out the story over several days. Invite families and guests to attend a presentation of the play.

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