



Building High Quality, Student-Driven Discourse Through The Use Of Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Texts

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Abstract

Through a nationally funded grant, a research collaboration with practicing educators aimed at developing effective educators who skillfully implement high quality instruction for multilingual learners through a job-embedded professional learning approach. Researchers work collaboratively with educators to develop, implement, and refine an instructional model for enhancing student discourse and expressive language development for multilingual learners utilizing culturally and linguistically responsive texts. Researchers share implementation experiences and findings implementing target practices, along with sharing practitioner and student tools. Findings suggest students are more engaged in reading and literature while developing positive academic identities, as well as autonomy for their own learning.

Keywords: *Culturally Responsive Practices, Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Texts, Student Discourse, Multilingual Learners, Student Engagement, Language Development, Literacy*

1. Introduction

Utilizing culturally and linguistically relevant texts is critical in building an assets-based approach to supporting language and literacy development for multilingual learners [15]. Culturally and linguistically relevant texts allow students to make connections grounded in their own cultural knowledge, see themselves reflected in the texts, and draw on their prior knowledge, lived experiences, and diverse perspectives and make meaning of what they have read [4]. Students feel valued and empowered when they can express their thoughts about a text and make meaningful connections to it through high quality discourse [8]. With a focus on key culturally and linguistically responsive practices and strategies, educators can promote meaningful interaction during literacy instruction and advance comprehension and language development for multilingual learners (MLs). Utilizing culturally and linguistically relevant texts can enhance practice and allow students to engage in meaningful ways. Creating spaces for students to engage in purposeful student driven discourse with these texts empowers students, giving them the tools to find their academic identities and feel empowered in their schools and communities.

This U.S. federally funded project geared toward enhancing the quality of instruction in the language and literacy development of multilingual learners through a job-embedded professional learning model in grades prekindergarten through third grade shows promising findings that highlight the power of using culturally and linguistically relevant texts in the classroom. The paper highlights these findings from teacher interviews, classroom observations, learning artifacts, and teacher surveys.

2. Classroom Discourse for MLs

2.1 Gaps in Typical Practice

The quality of classroom talk has been the focus of much research in language teaching and learning since Vygotsky's explorations into the social nature of cognition and the important role that language plays in academic thinking [3]. Research on good language instruction shows the importance of high-quality teacher-student interactions in learner-centered environments [13][17]. Student interaction, when appropriately scaffolded, is needed to advance students' fluency and automaticity in their second language, as well as their acquisition of the academic language necessary to comprehend new concepts and ideas [2][19].

Despite the evidence and the availability of text-based discussion models known to be effective for increasing text comprehension [11] teachers generally struggle to facilitate high-quality, student-centered discourse around text. Overall, meaningful, text-based discussion is rare in U.S. schools, and there remains a particular tendency for educators to excuse MLs from these types of rigorous oral



language opportunities. Even during children's earliest experiences with formal literacy instruction, studies have shown that classroom interaction focuses on recitation and constrained responses, rather than open-ended opportunities to construct meaning from text [1].

In their study of teachers' implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, Powell and colleagues [14] found that teachers lacked the skills to engage students in high-level classroom interaction and raise the quality of instructional discourse, pointing to the entrenched status of low-level, teacher-centered discourse as "the way we do school" in the U.S. Michaels and O'Conner [9] described reasons for teachers' resistance to discussion-rich approaches in their classroom, and among them were fears of losing classroom control, low expectations of students' ability to participate in high-level discussion, and the worry that MLs would be "unduly stressed or pressured". Further, even when teachers engage in extended interactions with students around text, there remains potential for educators to dismiss, misinterpret, or misunderstand the contributions MLs make to discussions because they lack the cultural competence to validate connections made between students' background knowledge and academic content [8].

2.2 Utilizing Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Texts

A culturally and linguistically competent teacher is integral to the success of MLs [5][7][20]. Culturally and linguistically responsive teachers build on students' funds of knowledge [9] and take an assets-based approach and build on students' experiences and prior knowledge to facilitate learning. These teachers understand cultural contexts, make conscious efforts to get to know students, and respect and value what each student brings to the classroom. They also have high expectations for all of their students and believe in each student's potential. A teacher who is culturally and linguistically responsive ensures that they are utilizing relevant curriculum that mirrors the cultures and languages of the students they serve and incorporates student-centered instruction where students engage in active discourse [5][7][12].

The research is clear that utilizing culturally and linguistically relevant texts in classroom instruction has many benefits [5][7][12][19]. Gay [5] stresses that incorporating these texts into everyday curriculum enhances students' academic achievement and student engagement. Students who see their own cultures reflected in the curriculum feel valued and are more motivated to learn. They see themselves as assets in the classroom, and learning is more meaningful and effective [7]. Culturally and linguistically relevant texts validate students' cultural identities and promote a sense of belonging in the classroom [12]. Comprehension is facilitated because teachers build on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, drawing on students' experiences and existing knowledge [10][19].

3. Project Overview, Setting and Context

Project ELEVATE (Ensuring Learning for ELs by Valuing Family Engagement and Teacher Effectiveness) is funded by the Office of English Language Acquisition in the U.S. Department of Education and focuses on enhancing the quality of language and literacy instruction for teachers of multilingual learners through a job-embedded professional learning model. This study focuses on teachers implementing a read aloud routine enhanced with culturally responsive, evidence-based practices that incorporates multiple opportunities for student driven discourse around culturally and linguistically relevant texts.

The project supports its efforts through a job-embedded professional learning model. The core goal of the model is building capacity with district leaders, school leaders, instructional coaches, and teachers by implementing professional learning communities (PLCs) designed for practitioners to reflect on practice collaboratively in order to enhance instruction that better meets the needs of their students. Teachers implement the culturally and linguistically responsive read aloud routine, record their lessons, and reflect on their instruction, following protocols with guiding questions. The PLCs provide a space for teachers to share implementation experiences and successes, problem-solve any challenges they have encountered, share implementation ideas and engage critically in a safe space with their peers and leaders. Teachers also identify additional support needed and set goals for next steps. Each campus has an instructional coach that provides instructional coaching and guidance along the way.

We collaborated with a suburban school district located in Central Texas where the student population of MLs is the fastest growing. This paper reflects Year 2 of the project, which was our first year of full implementation. We implemented the project in two elementary schools and worked with 48 teachers across prekindergarten through 3rd grade and two instructional coaches with to support



teachers in their instruction. One campus had 24% of their students classified as emergent bilinguals (EBs) and our second campus had 41% of students classified as EBs.

4. Overview of the Read Aloud Method

4.1 Language and Literacy Instruction for MLs

The focal practices for high quality language and literacy instruction that were at the core of Project ELEVATE included:

Culturally and linguistically relevant content and reading texts

- ▶ *Teachers integrate instructional content and reading texts that reflect features of MLs' cultural backgrounds, linguistic knowledge, ethnicities, and lived experiences.*

Students' prior knowledge and lived experiences

- ▶ *Teachers understand and activate students' prior knowledge, and facilitate connections between academic content and students' lived experiences when constructing knowledge and meaning from texts.*
- ▶ *Teachers facilitate use of students' full linguistic repertoire (home language and English) during instruction.*

Active and equitable participation and meaningful interaction

- ▶ *Teachers establish "intellectually safe" environments, providing equitable opportunities for all students' active participation, allowing students to feel comfortable practicing the language(s) they are developing.*

Structured language practice

- ▶ *Teachers expose students to high-quality linguistic input, preteach key linguistic features of the languages students are developing and provide opportunities to practice language through meaningful interaction.*

High-quality instructional discourse

- ▶ *Teachers facilitate text-based discussions using discourse practices that have been shown to promote higher-order thinking and reading comprehension.*

Instruction in all four language domains integrated and systematic

- ▶ *Core and supplemental instruction include direct teaching of language and high-quality practice opportunities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.*

These focal practices were incorporated into a read aloud routine making it culturally and linguistically responsive [6]. Researchers created a series of teacher resource flip books, *Read Aloud Routine for Building Comprehension Skills in Early Childhood* and *Read Aloud Routine for Building Vocabulary and Comprehension Skills in the Primary Grades*, illustrated in Figure 1 below, along with job-embedded professional learning to support teacher implementation.



Figure 1: Read Aloud Flip Book Series

The key steps of Read Aloud Routine for Building Vocabulary and Comprehension Skills include: 1) choosing a culturally and linguistically relevant text that is 1-2 grade levels above students current reading level, 2) dividing the book into 3-5 chunks of text, 3) previewing the selection and 3-4 pre-teaching 3-4 key vocabulary words by providing a student friendly definition and incorporating



nonlinguistic representations (visuals and gestures) of each word, 4) activating students' prior knowledge and making predictions, 5) reading the chunk of text without stopping, focusing on prosody, expression and fluency, asking students to provide the gestures when they hear their target vocabulary words, and having all students turn to a partner and retell the story utilizing their vocabulary words in their retell 6) rereading the chunk of text, stopping at the target vocabulary words and asking students to create their own sentences utilizing the words, 7) having students turn and talk about the text in relation to their lived experiences, and 8) writing a gist statement that gives a summary of what was read that day. The routine allows for extending comprehension and deep processing of vocabulary words, and allows students multiple opportunities to practice language, discussing a text that is culturally and linguistically relevant.

Participating educators were provided 3 book selections with lesson plans (see Figure 2) to implement created by the research team, along with a complete set of lesson plans for the year that was adapted from the adopted reading to fit the components of the read aloud routine.

Lesson Plan		Title: <i>In My Family</i>	Author: Carmen Lomas Garza
Vocabulary and Stems	Questions	Example Gist	Lesson Closure
Chunk 1: pages 1-11			
<p>protect: to keep someone or something safe from harm, damage, or illness <i>Something that protects us from the weather is _____</i></p> <p>surface: a flat area on the top of a cupboard, table, desk, etc., that you might use for cooking or working on <i>A surface I use is _____</i></p> <p>comforting: making you feel less worried, unhappy, or upset <i>It is comforting when _____</i></p>	<p>Why do you think her brother wasn't worried about being stung by the fire ant?</p> <p>Do you think family is important to the author? Why?</p>	<p>The author uses her art to remember and describe her experiences with horned toads, cleaning nopaltos, making empanadas, and attending her sister's birthday party.</p>	<p>What are some other things we might learn or you would be interested in learning about the author tomorrow?</p> <p>Turn to your partner and tell him or her about it. Write about it in your reading response journal.</p>
Chunk 2: pages 12-21			
<p>communicate: to express your thoughts and feelings clearly so that other people understand them <i>We communicate by _____</i></p> <p>injury: a wound or damage to part of your body caused by an accident or attack <i>If I have an injury, I can _____</i></p> <p>astounded: to be very surprised about something <i>I was astounded when _____</i></p>	<p>How do you think the author and her family felt when her brothers put flour in the cascarones?</p> <p>How did the healer help the author's sister and mother?</p>	<p>The author shared her memories about Easter eggs, her father's injury, how the healer helped her mother and sister communicate, and a special story her grandmother liked to tell.</p>	<p>What was something new you learned about the author today? Do you have any similar memories?</p> <p>Turn to your partner and tell him or her about it. Write about it in your reading response journal.</p>

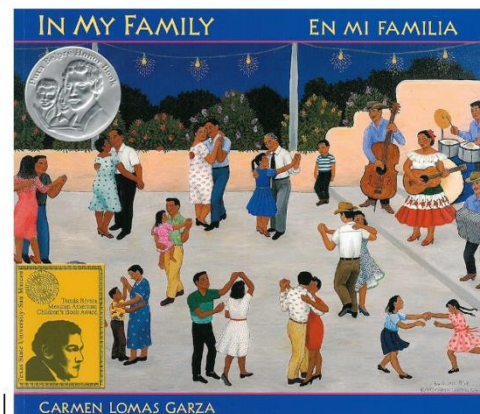


Figure 2: Sample Lesson Plan and Book Selection

4.2 Data Collection

Qualitative and quantitative data sources were collected from teachers to explore teacher experiences with the model and value in the quality of instruction implemented to enhance the language and literacy development of MLs in their classrooms. These sources included: 1) formal classroom observations, 2) focus group interviews, 3) scripted notes from PLCs, 4) teacher learning artifacts, 5) end of year survey. Classroom observations were completed at three time points- the beginning, middle and end of year. Approximately four teachers per grade level across two campuses were randomly selected for the observations. Teacher learning artifacts were collected from the 48 participants during monthly PLCs and consisted of teacher self-reflection on the implementation of evidence-based practices for MLs with teacher written action plans for refining practice.

Teachers received a formal professional learning session before the beginning of the school year and received all necessary educator tools needed for successful implementation. Once the school year began, they engaged in a year-long cycle of job-embedded professional learning (see Figure 3), which consisted of 1) formal learning on culturally and linguistically responsive evidence based practices, 2) peer collaboration for practice refinement during their PLC sessions, 3) coaching, observation and feedback from their instructional coaches, researchers, and district leadership, 4) self-assessment and self-reflection through videotaping lessons and reflecting on instruction using an observation reflection protocol, and 5) teacher-driven action planning informed by their self-reflection videos. This iterative process allowed teachers to refine practice and collaborate with peers on implementation.

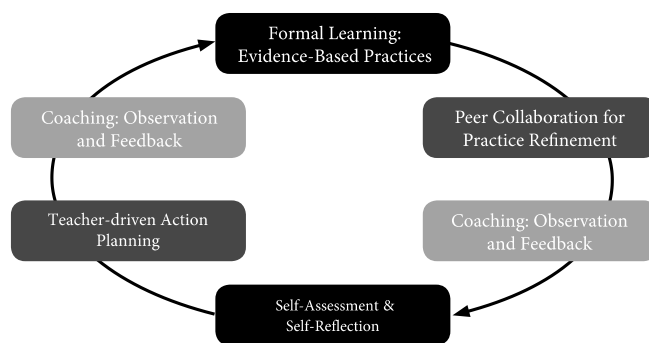


Figure 3: Job-Embedded Professional Learning Model

5. Findings

The themes that emerged from the data showed that the implementation of the read aloud routine utilizing culturally and linguistically relevant texts was of great value to students. The findings showed that students' engagement in reading and literature increased, students developed positive academic identities and students showed autonomy and ownership of their learning. Overall, students showed positive language and literacy experiences through the implementation of the model.

5.1 Increased Student Engagement in Reading and Literature

The culturally and linguistically enhanced read aloud routine of the ELEVATE model was designed to support language and literacy development with MLs and support teachers in enhancing their instruction. The qualitative data analysis showed that increased student engagement in reading and literature emerged strongly. During the PLCs, teachers shared how the read aloud routine supported growth in students' vocabulary and language skills. One, for example, reported; *"My students' vocabulary and language skills have grown because of the many opportunities they have to share with their peers, and the visuals/gestures for vocabulary have helped with remembering the meaning of different words."*

Teachers specifically spoke to connecting gestures with new vocabulary words. Students carried the gestures over to other content areas and other stories when hearing these words. They also commented that students utilized new vocabulary words when speaking and writing. *"This impacts learning because when they hear the words in other content areas they are reminded of the gesture and able to remember the meaning or remember a connection to the story. The kinesthetic learning makes it more memorable."* Students became word conscious, *"Students are listening for the vocabulary words, and this is making the words more meaningful for them"* (Pre-K Teacher).

Students were able to relate to the culturally and linguistically relevant texts that were selected and this aspect of the model supported increased engagement. One teacher noted, *"They [students] were better able to relate to the characters and understand how they are feeling more. I saw students get really excited when they had connections to the story."*

Data from the end-of-year survey supported the qualitative data. When teachers were asked what they have observed students grow the most in, teachers responded with supporting evidence that student engagement was increased.

"My students have grown the most in the vocabulary with the gestures as well as turn and talk. They are using the vocabulary in their everyday life as much as they can or see fit. The turn and talk has really helped."

"Being able to turn and talk and use the sentence stems is the biggest growth I've seen. At the beginning of the year, they were not talking or didn't know what to do. Now they are talking and giving more details too."

"I feel that they've grown the most in their use of the English language. They've gotten so confident in using sentence stems for reflections and predictions, and I hadn't seen this before. They also refer to the picture cards that we use for the read-aloud to remember, almost like an anchor chart. It's very helpful."

5.2 Fostering Positive Academic Identities



During classroom observations, student confidence was evident as they practiced language and engaged with their peers. Students showed confidence and ability to retell the stories they were listening to. Project researchers observed students share stories of their own lived experiences and how they pertained to the characters and the stories they were engaging with. The data we have collected shows that the read aloud routine with culturally and linguistically relevant texts fostered positive academic identities, empowering students to use their voices and tell their stories. For example, during one of the prekindergarten classroom observations, students were listening to *Abuelo and the Three Bears*, a Latinx version of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* in which a grandfather is engaging in oral storytelling with his grandson. Instead of the main character being Goldilocks, we have *Trencitas* (which translates to “braids”), who represents the majority of children in the room. Instead of eating porridge, the bears eat frijoles, a traditional Mexican dish. At the end of the story, *Trencitas* gathers around the table to a large Mexican feast with the bears. The children squealed with excitement and were eager to share with their partners that the dinners in their homes are exactly like the one in the book. Laughter and smiles filled the room and it was evident that the students feel valued and seen.

During our PLCs, teachers shared how much they have seen students grown in their ability to make connections between text to self and text to text, and how the routine has impacted how students see themselves as learners.

“I have seen my students grow in their ability to make connections to other texts from words being used across stories. They are more confident in their ability to choose main details of texts and their engagement in stories has increased.”

“The vocabulary enhancement and gestures truly made a difference with my students that are emergent bilingual. It allowed them an opportunity to feel safe with gesturing and process their thoughts not only orally, but physically.”

“They’re so much more confident because they are such a huge part of the process of the routine itself.”

The end of year survey mirrors the classroom observation and PLC data. Teachers wrote that their students have increased their vocabulary word bank and enjoy using the words in their everyday conversations:

“My students grew the most in background knowledge and using the vocabulary words. They definitely have a bigger word bank to choose from. They enjoy using them in everyday conversations and finding them in other texts.”

“Predictions, vocabulary movements, reading aloud to the class, relating text to previous text, text features, encourage each other in reading (assist when others need help when reading aloud), real word experiences, RACE (short constructed responses).”

5.3 Student Autonomy and Ownership of their Learning

Student autonomy and ownership of their learning is another theme that emerged from the data. As one teacher stated, *“I feel that I’ve shown the most growth in taking a step back and allowing my students to lead their own discussions. The read aloud routine has improved our turn and talks across curriculums and subject areas. While at the beginning I struggled to allow students to do most of the talking, as the year progressed, I was able to facilitate their learning and guide their discussions rather than lead them.”* Teachers were able to move from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom as they began to see that students were successful when they released the responsibility of learning to students and allowed them to practice language in structured ways.

As the year progressed and students became comfortable with the routine, they had the ability to initiate conversations on their own and extend language practice with ease. *“The conversation was able to continue, and they were able to follow through without me needing to initiate the discussion,”* as one teacher expressed during a PLC meeting. Another teacher shared that the strategies and practices they were doing during reading instruction was carrying over to other content areas, *“Students are really connecting to gestures – in science, students are now trying to come up with gestures. They are helping themselves learn.”*

6. Conclusion: Positive Literacy Experiences

This paper shares the benefits of incorporating culturally and linguistically relevant texts in order to increase structured, high quality, student-driven discourse. Our study found that positive learning experiences occur for our MLs when culturally and linguistically relevant texts are partnered with



evidence-based practices designed to meet the needs of multilingual learners and incorporates a routine that fosters students having opportunities to talk about those texts with peers. Finally, autonomy and ownership take an important role as well. Students have autonomy in how to drive their discussions, and ownership and choice in language use among students. As one teacher summed up the value of the model, “[Students gained] autonomy in the way they express themselves and communicate in both L1 and L2.”

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