Engaging linguistically diverse families in classroom programs using their home language

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Throughout my teaching career, I have been privileged to work with multi-cultural and multi-lingual families. This has been an enriching and rewarding experience, but at the time I felt unprepared and uninformed. I’ve gathered some of what I learnt along the way in the hope of supporting others engaged in this challenging work.

Teachers have a keen awareness of the vital role of families in children’s literacy development. Families support children’s learning through exposure to a range of literacy activities that revolve around the real life application of literate skills and behaviours. Children’s learning at school can be heavily influenced by these home based literacy activities and, for children who are linguistically diverse, the link between home and school based literacy can be problematic. The problems arise when the demands of the school vocabulary, language patterns and activities used in the classroom are unfamiliar to the child and the family.

Because culture and learning are so closely linked, any mismatch between home and school culture can mean that linguistically diverse students who are still mastering the language of schooling are put at risk of failing (Gay, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2000). A crucial step in supporting students who may be put at risk involves an understanding of, and respect for, the literacy activities of the family and communities in which the child lives. Respecting and valuing the home language of children and celebrating the diversity of language enriches the classroom experience for all children. While one goal is to support children toward a proficient use of Standard Australian English, it is important for children to also retain their home language, with each language being recognised as valuable in the appropriate social context. In a position statement issued by ALEA’s international affiliate, the International Reading Association (2001), research was shown to support a range of approaches that begin with the child’s home language and work toward gradually incorporating the language of schooling, whatever it may be.

One of the greatest sources of support for teachers striving to engage young literacy learners, is the child’s family. Nieto (2002) encourages teachers to recognise and value parents’ home based literacy practices and to use this as the basis for developing a culturally relevant and sensitive literacy program. The challenge for teachers is working from a language base that can be vastly different to their own.

Fostering strong parent-teacher partnerships, parent communication and involvement in classroom activity can go a long way toward sharing and valuing children’s home language. This article addresses a number of practical suggestions for engaging linguistically diverse families in classroom activities using the family’s home language.

A key ingredient in this challenging work is to demonstrate a sincere interest in learning about children’s home language and culture. Working with parents from diverse linguistic backgrounds can be supported by:

- communicating with parents in different languages (where and when appropriate) and initiating discussions through a variety of communication strategies and technologies (Denessen, Baker, & Gierveld, 2007). These include translators, other parents/staff in the school who may be bilingual, web resources for translation and community organisations that may offer free translator services.

- taking active steps to listen and respond to particular needs and circumstances (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012)

- becoming familiar with the barriers for parents and inviting parents to discuss with teachers any barriers to the family’s involvement (Kendall, Straw, Jones, Springate, & Grayson, 2008)

- understanding and acknowledging that different cultures hold different perspectives on the role of the parents in education (Kendall et al., 2008)

- developing an awareness of family and cultural issues in an attempt to work with linguistically diverse parents in meaningful and effective ways. Establishing sustained relationships that value a genuine interest and ongoing parental partnership...
in schools and classrooms is important. Once this trust and open relationship has been developed with families, it is more likely that they will want to become involved in classroom activities. It is also helpful to acknowledge the two-way benefit of such relationships for the parents, teachers and all of the children in the classroom, in developing deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity.

When involving linguistically diverse parents in the classroom program, it is important to consider the most productive organisational strategies. Most often, small group work and partner work is effective for supporting informal conversations and interaction with peers. Teacher led and supported work is also effective.

**Involving linguistically diverse parents in the literacy classroom**

- Read and share dual language books. These could be read in small groups or whole class with the classroom teacher reading the English sections and a willing parent reading the provided text in the home language. If parents aren’t comfortable sharing in front of a group, they could be encouraged to record sections in their home language to be played back in the classroom.
- Sing and celebrate songs in dual languages. These can be written on class charts to share in both the written and oral modes. Parents can be invited to stay and sing the morning song in their home language, or again, record this if they are uncomfortable in front of a group.
- Classroom routines or timetables can be sent home to be translated into a child’s home language. In this way, the parents are aware of the classroom routine and the child has a copy in their home language to follow during the day. If parents have limited English as well, consider using web based resources to translate the routine/timetable for both parents and children.
- Parents can support teachers to ‘label’ room resources in dual language. The classroom teacher writes the label in English, the parent writes on the same label in their home language and the labels are displayed around the room for all children in the classroom. Pictures can be added for extra support. This encourages all children to engage with linguistic diversity.
- Children can be encouraged to bring labelled artefacts from their own cultures. Labels are prepared by parents (in the home language) and teachers (in English). Labelled artefacts are used to make cultural awareness displays.
- Teachers and parents together make a growing vocabulary box. A small open topped box holds vocabulary cards that the child is mastering. One side of the card has the English word and an image. Parents write in the home language on the opposite side of each card. In this way parents, teachers and the child are regularly celebrating the success of a growing English vocabulary whilst retaining and valuing the home language.
- As above (vocabulary box) but slightly more sophisticated – a growing phrase box. Teachers can use clip art from the internet to add an image to phrases such as *My name is ……., I am happy, I feel hungry, Good morning Ms Taylor*. As with the growing vocabulary box, invite parents to write the phrases in their home language on the other side of each card.
- At drop off time, have parents read to their child in their home language. It is surprising how many mainstream English speaking children will happily sit by and listen to a book read in another language, especially if it is a familiar book.
- Make use of computer programs and software that presents in dual languages. Encourage linguistically diverse parents to ‘play’ these programs with children in the classroom setting.
- Have a parent and a small group of children read ‘wordless’ picture books together. This can be done using a combination of the child’s home language and English with the support of some carefully chosen peers or buddies. Some great text choices for this work include Jeanie Baker’s books titled *Window* and *Home*.
- Create family journals. Children write about what’s happening at school (using a combination of their home language and English where appropriate). The journal goes home regularly where parents contribute by sharing some of what is going on at home (again, in any combination of their home language and English).

When teachers and schools acknowledge the pivotal role that families play in a child’s learning and development everyone benefits. The most effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement from many parents and this in turn supports children’s learning, attendance and outcomes. Rich and rewarding relationships are built on these key ideas and they often extend well beyond the classroom.

**References**


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success of this learning experience and what can be learnt:

1. Creating an authentic context for writing – The importance of creating an authentic context for writing cannot be underestimated. The students’ excitement to take Mr Monkey home and write about their weekend was a joy to see. Each facet of literacy – reading, writing, speaking and listening – was encompassed in this learning context. The learning experience not only provided an authentic context for writing but also invited parents to be involved in their child’s literacy learning.

2. Using an ‘animal’ – Children appear to have an innate interest in animals and develop strong emotional ties to their pets (including inanimate pets!). This was demonstrated by the children personifying Mr Monkey and waiting in eager anticipation for their chance to take him home.

3. Establishing class ownership – Mr Monkey was not just a student toy or pet, he was our class’s pet. This sense of class ownership added to student interest in hearing about their classmates’ adventures with Mr Monkey.

4. Facilitating an open-ended, experience-based learning environment – The students were free to create, and subsequently write, about their unique experiences with Mr Monkey. The open-ended nature of the task fostered creativity, imagination and humour in student writing as they learnt through their own experiences, without the fear of getting it wrong.

Given the success of Mr Monkey with my Year One class, I will certainly be introducing a ‘furry friend’ to my next class of students!

References

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Resources
For dual language texts see http://www.brightbooks.co.uk/UserFiles/Docs/Cats/DualPDF.pdf
For ideas for dual language classroom charts and songs see http://www.pinterest.com/callmetrivi/dual-language/
For article on sharing wordless picture books see http://www.readingrockets.org/article/sharing-wordless-picture-books
For list of top ten wordless picture books see http://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/top-ten-wordless-picture-books-by-kristen-remenar/

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