

Supporting Oral Second Language Use: A Learning Experience in a First Grade German Immersion Class

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This article describes a learning context in which the first grade classroom teacher creates a learning community where she uses different teaching strategies to encourage children's second language use and learning. The first graders share, discuss, and learn both the second language (German) and content.

KEY WORDS: bilingual education; dual language programs; young children; oral second language use; learner output; L2 reading development; teacher strategies; comprehension strategies; classroom routines; background knowledge; children's books; reading charts; reading aloud; group reading time.

INTRODUCTION

Young children learn language as a medium of communication by using it through purposeful, real, here and now experiences. Language learning cannot occur if children rarely use the language (Enright & McCloskey, 1985). Tedick, Jorgensen, and Geffert (2001) and Genesee (1994) point out that the teachers need to maximize student output and provide students opportunities to talk. Before maximizing student output, teachers emphasize comprehension at the beginning stages of learning and include reading and writing as tools in early stages of language development.

To ensure comprehension, teachers need to make sure that students have adequate background knowledge to understand a reading text. Teachers can assess students' background knowledge with concepts through questioning and discussion (Wood, 1999). According to Wood, one of the ways to enhance comprehension is to use visual aids, such as pictures or diagrams to check for students' understanding. In this way, listening will be more active when students are encouraged to participate.

Another way to ensure comprehension is the use of the K-W-L comprehension strategy. K-W-L is a teaching strategy which is used to raise students' level of comprehension. "The K stands for 'what do I already know?' The W stands for 'what do I want to learn?' and L stands for 'what have I learned?'" (Wood, 1999). Wood thinks that the K-W-L strategy helps students check their background knowledge while learning to read with a goal and also to reflect on the story after reading.

Mountain (1999) suggests that elementary teachers need to immerse students in the oral language since elementary-age children learn through oral language at the beginning. Reading aloud to children is a way to immerse them in the oral language. Reading aloud will promote conversations about books and children will respond by listening and talking about stories. Sears (1998) also states that reading aloud gives children opportunities to hear stories. Children who are learning the target language improve their vocabulary knowledge in reading aloud. Swain (1996) and Swain and Lapkin (1998) add that the most vocabulary teaching occurs during reading activities organized around themes.

This article describes a learning experience, called reading aloud time in a first grade German immersion class in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Frau M. (the teacher) reads aloud on a daily basis. Based on the theme of the week, the teacher picks a

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book and reads it aloud. Frau M. asks questions before, during, and after reading and the children respond and pose questions about the reading. The reading topics are related to the topic of the week. For instance, the books that are chosen for reading aloud time include the stories on Rain Forest, Thanksgiving, Native Americans, and Arctic Animals. Before talking about reading aloud time in the first grade immersion classroom, the following section describes the German immersion elementary school, the first grade classroom (Room 29) and a typical school day in Room 29 in order to provide information about the school and the learning contexts.

MILWAUKEE GERMAN IMMERSION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The German public elementary immersion school is located adjacent to a park in a residential area in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The German immersion school is an early, total immersion program which was founded in 1977. The school is a magnet school in which students both from the city and suburbs can enroll. The goals of the German immersion program are to provide children with the opportunity to become bilingual in both German and English, achieve high levels of success in content areas, and develop a sense of multiculturalism.

The German immersion program started by the initiation of Anthony Gradisnik who was a foreign language specialist in 1977. Gradisnik had heard the successes of French immersion programs in Canada and proposed the immersion model to this mid-western city's magnet program. He received support from the German community in the city and from the German department of a university located in Milwaukee (Curtain, 2000).

In the German immersion school, the grade levels begin from four-year-kindergarten through fifth grade. Students receive instruction in reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science instruction in German. In the German immersion program, students are introduced to 30 minutes per day of English reading instruction in the second grade. The amount of English increases to one hour per day at the third grade, and one and a half hour per day at the fourth and fifth grades.

The admission process is open to any child in K4, K5, and Grade 1 without any background knowledge of German. There are no other special

enrollment requirements for entrance at K4, K5, and Grade 1. Students are randomly selected by computer lottery. Admission at Grades 2–5 is dependent upon the student's prior German experience and space availability within the school.

Frau M. and Her First Grade Class

Frau M. is in her early-forties and a native speaker of German. She has been in the States for 19 years and has been teaching in the German immersion school for 16 years. She has a master's degree in elementary education from a U.S. university. She also has a German teaching license for Grades 1–9.

In Frau M.'s first grade class, there are 24 students (14 girls and 10 boys). Their ages vary from 6 to 7. There are nine six-year-olds and 15 seven-year-olds in the class. Six students are African-American and 18 students are of other ethnicities. All of the students attended the kindergarten in this school so they were taught in German the previous year.

Typical School Day in Room 29, the First Grade Class

It is around 9 a.m., the beginning of the school day. Boys and girls in Room 29 line up in front of the class in two rows to determine the hot/cold lunch count. A student in each row counts his or her own row in German and tells the number of the students to Frau M., the teacher. This is a short math activity in which the students count. The day in Room 29 starts with morning work in which the children fill in a worksheet. With the morning work, the children practice and review sounds, letters, and words that have been learned in previous days. They read, spell, and explain the words and make sentences with the word flash cards.

After the morning work, calendar time starts around 9.30 a.m. During calendar time, the children mark the weather and the temperature charts, read the phrases referring to the day, month, and year, and practice the numbers. Calendar time takes almost an hour. Around 10:15 a.m., the children and the teacher begin to work on the board story. Almost every day there is a story on the board written by the teacher. First, the teacher reads the story from the board, then she focuses on the vocabulary, verbs, nouns, and adjectives in the story. She asks comprehension questions about the story. Then, the children read the board story aloud both individually and as a whole class. A sample board story about the musical instruments is presented in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Board story

While the students are copying the story from the board into their brown reading notebooks, the teacher calls a group of students for small group reading time. The small reading groups are tailored to each group's second language proficiency. The teacher works a great deal on sounds and the alphabet with the students who have a lower second language proficiency before working on a story with them. With the students who are more advanced in their second language skills, the teacher focuses on reading a text fluently, working on the vocabulary, and comprehension of it. Frau M. also offers two morning tutorials that help the students who need extra help in reading and language arts skills on Wednesdays and Thursdays from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. before school. The lunch break starts around noon. After the lunch break, the class proceeds with Math which takes an hour every day. The day ends with science, social studies, or health and a period of physical education or music at 3:25 p.m.

The physical setting of Room 29 includes desk clusters organized in four groups that consist of six or seven students each. Room 29 is stocked with various visual materials in German. There are reference charts for letters and numbers, calendars, pictures, a list of new vocabulary, pictures with the words, bulletin boards displaying student work, storybooks, big books, numerous math manipulatives (i.e., blocks and cubes).

Frau M. speaks German with the students all the time. She places a great deal of emphasis on her students hearing and speaking German. She does not switch between languages unless there is an emergency situation in the class. Frau M. points out the lack of opportunity to speak German outside of the school and limited exposure to German in the community. She says:

In the classroom to get them (the kids) to speak, you have to use the target language all the time. You cannot go back and forth between English and German. This is very difficult because once you introduce English language at second grade, you see a real drop in the kids' willingness to use German because the English is just so much easier for them. I think you have to work really, really hard to keep the kids using the target language by being a good role model.

Frau M. thinks that reading aloud time is one of the learning contexts that facilitates the use of the oral second language by also supporting the children's literacy learning.

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE READING ALOUD TIME

In reading aloud time, the teacher and the children pose questions before, during, and after reading and express their feelings about a story. The main learning objectives in reading aloud time are to improve the children's listening comprehension and enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Reading aloud time helps the children build and activate their background knowledge and get them involved in the discussions about the story read. The teacher uses three main teaching strategies to develop oral second language in reading aloud time. The first one is the building and developing background knowledge. The second teaching strategy is the use of comprehension questions to increase participation in the lesson. Lastly, the third teaching strategy is the use of the small reading groups. Through these teacher strategies, the children express their ideas within the context of the stories, thus developing their understanding toward content material, and improve their vocabulary knowledge.

Developing Background Knowledge

K-W-L reading charts are used in order to develop the children's background knowledge in reading aloud time. By developing background knowledge, the teacher makes the meaning of a

content comprehensible and facilitates the children's oral second language use. Frau M. reads a book, mostly a big children's book, related to the topic of a week. She uses three charts in order to write what the students know (K), what they want to learn (W), and what they learned (L). The K-W-L charts are hung on the chalkboard. The following scene took place when the class was working on the theme, "Thanksgiving" and Frau M. asked the students to think about Thanksgiving before they read on.

The teacher asked the class what the students could tell about Thanksgiving. She also added that if they could not say it in German, they might say it in English, and she would help them say it in German. Andrew raised his hand and said:

Andrew: Ich glaub, zu Haus.

(I think, at home.)

Frau M.: Ja, das tut man zu Hause!

(Yes, this is celebrated at home!)

The teacher wrote "at home" in the title of "what we know" on the chart. Andrew took the floor again.

Andrew: Mhm, meine Mutti and du, deine

Oma kommt, oder deine Freunde...

(Hmm, my mother, you, your grandmother comes or your friends...—but he could not finish his sentence.)

Frau M.: OK. Du feierst Erntedankfest mit deiner Familie oder mit Freunden. Gut An was denkst du noch?

(OK. You celebrate Thanksgiving with family or with friends. Good. What else can you think of?)

Cindy: Essen.

(Food.)

Frau M: (laughed) Ja, Essen. Was für Fleisch haben wir meistens?

(Yes, food. What kind of meat do we have usually?)

Randy: turkey (said in English)

Frau M.: Ja, in Deutsch ist das Truthahn.

OK. Was haben wir noch?

(Yes, in German it is called turkey. OK. What else do we have?)

Rachel: Karotten

(Carrot)

The teacher wrote the food items on the chart and then asked why they celebrate Thanksgiving.

Caroline: Ich weiß nicht.

(I don't know.)

Frau M.: Was denkste? Warum

feiern die Leute Erntedankfest? Carl?

(Why do you think? Why do the people celebrate Thanksgiving?)

Carl?

Carl: Pilgrims

Frau M.: OK. Wir feiern die Pilgrims?

Ist es das?

(OK. We celebrate the Pilgrims? Is that it?)

Rachel: Es ist eine holiday.

(It is a holiday.)

Frau M. summarized what they had talked about by referring to the "what we know" chart. Then she pointed to the "what we want to know" chart and wrote the question under it: "who are the Pilgrims?" Then she started to read the book on Thanksgiving which told about the origin of the Thanksgiving. The children were sitting around her. Then the teacher picked up a globe and showed the children where England was and talked about the "Mayflower."

Frau M. states that:

When you read a book, you wanna know from the kids what they know about the background. For example, you're reading a book on crocodiles...what you wanna know first, what do the kids know about a crocodile and then there may be things they might want to know and so you write down what we would like to know or what we would like to find out and then...you read the story or discuss the topic and then at the end you kind of check back and ask them what did you learn?...they are always willing to share what they know...I just want to see what everybody knows.

Frau M. thinks that having the students explain what the stories are about will help them build and strengthen their vocabulary in German. This will also encourage them to use German in class with more ease by building up their self-confidence.

The teacher asks questions to activate background knowledge; these questions are also used to increase comprehension of the students toward a particular topic. She mainly asks questions when ideas are not clear before, during, and after reading. The following scene is an example of how the teacher develops the children's background knowledge in order to increase their comprehension of a story and to get them involved in the discussion.

Scene "Rain Forest"

The teacher was holding a big book with a picture of a rain forest. The children were sitting around her. Generally, the children raised their hands if they wanted to answer and the teacher called a child's name. In other situations, the teacher might call a child's name even though she or he did not raise his or her hand.

Frau M.: OK. Bei uns gibt es keinen Regenwald.

Wie ist's in einem Regenwald? Cindy!

(OK. We don't have a rain forest. What is it like in

a rain forest? Cindy!)
 Cindy: Grün.
 (Green.)
 Frau M.: Grün. Was noch? Caroline?
 (Green. What else? Caroline?)
 Caroline: Es ist naß.
 (It is wet.)
 Jason: Es gibt Blumen.
 (There are flowers.)
 Mathew: Es ist heiss.
 (It is hot.)

Frau M. told the children that there were very tall trees and tall plants in a rain forest. Then she showed a page with animals. The teacher showed the picture of a jaguar cub on a tree. She explained that a Jaguar was not as big as a lion, but it could climb trees, particularly when it went to sleep in order to take a rest. She explained that a bat only came out night and when it flew, it caught many insects. Bats hang on their legs off the ceiling and sleep during the day and come out at night. Many children talked at once; they were excited about the animals they saw in the book. The following section is about how Frau M. builds children's understanding toward a reading material.

Comprehension Questions to Build Understanding

Frau M. checks the children's understanding of a learning material by asking comprehension questions and getting them involved to the reading material. The following scene took place when the class was working on the theme, "Health: Hygiene and Teeth." The teacher read the story related to the topic and asked the students questions about the content of a text. She also checked the vocabulary knowledge of the students and clarified the meaning of the words.

Scene "Health"

The teacher read a text from the reading book about Robert.

Frau M. (FM): Was ist eine Zahnpasta? John hates Heute morgen im Gesicht gehabt.
 (What is toothpaste? John had it on his face this morning.)
 Sarah: Wenn dein Zahn tut weh
 (When a tooth hurts)
 John: Zum Zähne putzen.
 (To clean your teeth.)
 Frau M. said 'yes' and continued to read.
 FM: "Robert kauft die Zahnmed." Was sollte das tun?
 ("Robert ate the toothpaste." What was it supposed to do?)
 Nick: Sein Bauch tut weh.

(His stomach hurts.)
 Kelly: Es macht seinen Zahn besser.
 (It would make his tooth better.)
 FM: Für was ist Zahnpasta gemacht? Ann!
 (What is toothpaste made for? Ann!)
 Ann: Zähne zu putzen.
 (To clean teeth.)
 FM: Was passiert, wenn das Loch immer Größer wird?
 (What happens when the cavity gets bigger?)
 Ann: Der Zahn wird immer mehr weh tun.
 (The tooth will always hurt more.)

The teacher said in the case of an infection, the cheek would swell up. Mathew added:

Mathew: Mein Schwester hat das gehabt, und die Backe ist sehr dick, und sie soll zum Doktor gehen.
 (My sister had it and the cheek swelled up and she had to go to the doctor.)

After the teacher finished reading the short reading passage and asked her questions on the content of a text, she announced the small group reading time. According to Frau M., small reading groups are useful since she can give individual attention to each child in the group. The main goal in small group reading time is to increase children's reading fluency, enhance their vocabulary knowledge, and encourage their participation to the reading material. During reading in small groups, the children read in groups of four or five and discuss the content of a story.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood educators need to offer learning experiences that surround young learners with meaningful and interactive literacy-based activities in order to support second language development. Frau M. created a learning community where the children shared, discussed, and learned both the second language and content. During reading aloud time, Frau M. used questioning to encourage children's second language use and learning. She frequently used questioning in order to elicit responses, check students' understanding, and maintain their participation in the lesson.

Reading aloud time in the first grade German immersion class is an effective way to support oral second language use. Within the context of this learning experience, the children work on the text by reading it aloud, reviewing the vocabulary, and responding to the teacher's questions. Through reading aloud time, the children build their vocabulary knowledge, improve their comprehension skills, and get involved with discussions on the reading material.

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