

Torch Light and Aliens' Eyes: ESL Students and Engagement

Elizabeth Hook 2009

AATE/ALEA National Conference *Bridging Divides: ensuring access, equity and quality in literacy and English education*. Hobart July 2009.

This is my journey over the last eighteen months as I became reacquainted with the role of ESL teacher. I wish to address three questions:

- What and where are ESL language gaps?
- How can teachers assist to close these gaps?
- What is the role of engagement in ESL learning?

I acknowledge the ESL students who have inspired and surprised me. I noted their comments during and after lessons, taped discussions, conducted interviews and studied work samples. Their voices *shaped* this paper. They caused me to question assumptions and guided me to find ways to align practice with theory. It is recommended, for example, in the *Quality Teaching* model, that teachers incorporate students' personal and cultural knowledge. One of my goals was to find practical ways to achieve this.

What and where are ESL language gaps?

I studied data from fifty primary ESL students, ranging from Kindergarten to grade 6. They were mainly second phase ESL students. Tools used were *time for talk* oral language assessment, and *P.M. Benchmarks* for reading assessment.

I compared oral language information to a *non* ESL student at each grade level. In comparison, many ESL students used little descriptive language, and sentences lacked complexity. They confused tenses and experienced difficulties with auxiliaries, articles and pronouns. Reading data indicated an over reliance on visual cues. Missing a key word impacted on comprehension, and interpretation was often literal and incomplete. Some found it difficult to predict and infer. As with the oral task when reading they confused tenses, changed word endings and substituted or missed auxiliaries, articles and pronouns. Writing reflected similar patterns.

How can teachers assist to close these gaps?

ESL students can take at least five years to master more complex English language structures and technical language, so 'closing' language gaps is an ongoing process which all teachers plan and work towards. In class we supported ESL reading with guided and shared reading, reciprocal reading and plays.

I referred to the *Quality Teaching* model to develop an ESL oral language program using simple science experiments to engage students. Short, practical, shared experiences required using language for different purposes, and allowed for explicit scaffolding. Students worked in small groups. We began with predicting and inferring, which encouraged them to use logical thinking, tenses in context and draw on prior knowledge. I provided scaffolding for oral and written tasks.

I wanted the students to reflect on their experiences, draw personal connections and reveal their facility with English, so I often asked this *open-ended* question, 'What does it remind you of?' This question came to be one of the most important aspects of a lesson, and the inspiration for this paper.

While constructing cone-shaped bubble blowers, we talked about what a cone reminded us of. They thought of so many things, (apart from the obvious party hat and ice-cream cone.) I loved: *crocodile tail; lady's dress; Parliament house; a bird's beak; the sharp end of a pencil; an icicle; torch light and aliens' eyes.*

During lessons they played, explored and commented, making connections with personal experiences and knowledge. When I asked: 'What does it remind you of?' They drew on different senses, weaving a rich and colourful tapestry of images as they shared their stories: It reminds me of: 'The *sound* of my uncle riding his motor bike in Korea,' 'It *smelt* like salt and vinegar chips'. 'I *saw* fighting blue and red snakes'. 'It *felt* like mosquito spray.' One recalled 'The snow in the winter in the Ukraine.'

Different groups conducted an experiment, Amazing Detergent: Drops of food colouring were placed in a saucer of milk, and then detergent was added to change the surface tension. Colours mixed and swirled around in the milk forming beautiful patterns. The students saw: *a dragon; a butterfly; fireworks; a waterfall; a comet and Shrek's head*. They excitedly shared their discoveries. As they recorded observations, an Indigenous student drew and wrote about a *rainbow snake*, and sang a *Rainbow Snake* song.

Eventually the colours merged into a *muddy swamp*. Grade 6 students discussed *climate change* and *global warming*. Grade 5 girls told traditional, *spiritual stories*, from Burma and Pakistan, about the end of the world. Students were sharing their thoughts, experiences and culture. Connections were made to *current events* too. They predicted then tested how many drops of water would stay on a coin. One commented 'It looks like the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing'.

By focusing closely on what students *could* do it was possible to identify and question earlier assumptions and a more complete picture was emerging. While assessment data is essential for determining ESL educational needs, it is not enough to fully inform and guide practice.

How can teachers assist to close ESL language gaps? By giving ESL students *time* to clarify and share ideas, comment on culture, their own and the newer one they encounter at school. Allow them to *play* with language, and experience language through *directed* play so they can reflect and draw on prior knowledge to make connections.

What is the role of engagement in ESL learning?

High levels of engagement with experiments enabled students to reflect, comment, wonder, and pose questions while revealing prior knowledge of English. I noticed with fascination the many and varied connections they were making. When I studied my notes, I realised as well as sharing personal experiences and knowledge, they were using plenty of descriptive language: *colourful flowers, giant's food, a volcano shaking the earth, strawberry ice-cream, a thunder cloud and angry dinosaur*. These images were imaginative and powerful. I wondered: Where did the descriptive language come from?

Earlier this year I read *Literature in Second Language Education* by Dr. Piera Carroli. She uses Italian literature, to support students learning Italian, at the Australian National University. As students participated in shared reading, they drew on prior knowledge to connect personal experiences with the Italian literary themes, and this led to a deeper appreciation of the texts.

Dr Carroli emphasises the importance of repeated *re-reading* to focus closely on text detail. As they read, wrote reflections in Italian, and re-read, her students' language skills improved. She discovered they were internalising new language forms and were later reproducing them. Dr. Carroli suggests a deep level of *engagement* facilitates students' learning of a language. (Couper, S. 2009)

I wondered if my ESL students, while engaged in experiments, had drawn not only on life experiences, but also personal literary experiences. I revisited my notes and realised that many comments were very literary-like: *a giant bird; the deep sea; wobbly jelly; a windy forest; dancing flowers; and aliens in space*. ESL students' drawing on literary sources to enhance observations suggests powerful opportunities exist for teaching English.

The link between emotion and thinking is confirmed by research. David Hornsby comments on it in *A Closer Look at Guided Reading*. As teachers, we *know* how important engagement is for positive student outcomes, but it is not always easy to sustain.

I revisited a number of sources and was reminded of Halliday's observation that "...learning language, learning through language and learning about language" occurs at the *same* time. (Jagger and Smith Bourke 1985, p.3) This is true for *all* students but how *critical* it is for those ESL students who lack first language support at school.

I recalled a girl who knew very little English totally absorbed as the class read *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. I wanted to explore how shared reading could support ESL *language* development. This would require high levels of engagement. I kept coming back to the need to play with, and explore language.

While puzzling over this we had a literacy seminar with David Hornsby. He emphasised the huge importance of *oral* language, and stressed that prior knowledge, while not a reading skill is fundamental to all students' comprehension. He recommended teachers provide practical activities to activate prior knowledge *before* reading. He called these springboards into texts. This approach is ideal for ESL students.

How could one sustain high levels of interest in a single text over many sessions? I revisited references to different kinds of *play* I'd found in the writing of Hornsby, Carroli, Tough, Gibbons and others, and an ESL shared reading plan began to take shape. Dr. Carroli used shared reading successfully with adults, so I was confident it could be adapted for ESL students of any age. I wondered if critical literacy, could be achieved as she had found with her students.

The teacher's engagement is vital. Carroli's love of Italian literature inspired her ANU students. The class teacher was a loud, booming 'troll' during Readers' Theatre with *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. A sense of fun was tangible. So the teacher engages too, ready to take advantage of opportunities as they arise; Carroli describes it as "... 'nudging' students..." (Carroli, 2006, p. 178).

Narratives are most suitable as themes are universal, and print-based texts are recommended for ESL students. The main idea is to match *specific* students with good quality, appealing material, and students must be able to *see* the print.

I worked with K-3 using Big Books or multiple copies of books that supported a class inquiry unit or a specific literacy focus. My colleague, Bronwyn Thomas, worked with older students.

The ESL Shared Reading Program has three distinct sections. Each of these suggests a different kind of play. They are: Playing around language; Words as Toys; and Explore and Imagine.

Stage 1: Playing around language:

Before reading, time is given for talking, reflecting and making connections while playing *around* the language of a text using Hornsby's 'springboard' ideas: practical activities such as drama, technology, drawing, craft or science, allow for playful exploration of a theme.

Explore feelings and background knowledge. Keep in mind responses can vary. Bronwyn shared feelings of peace and calm looking at an illustration of a forest in *Where The Forest Meets The Sea*. Two Grade 6 boys however related it to a forest in Nepal, and feelings of loneliness and fear.

The first reading by the teacher is for pleasure. Students predict outcomes (either orally or by writing), and then the teacher reads on to complete the story.

Stage 2: Words as Toys:

With each re-reading, the focus is on one aspect of the text. Games and activities get students to really notice words and punctuation in *context*. For example: 'Guess the word' games; find or make rhyming words; explore imagery. Be innovative. Choose activities that challenge, puzzle or amuse. Play with the rhythm of language. Get them to see, hear, say and act out words.

Whole body movements engage kinaesthetic learners: A grade one boy was not looking at the text so I got them to put hands on head for every full stop. He focused more on the print and others began to really notice full stops.

Re-reading *small* sections of text encourages students to focus on detail while clarifying meaning. Ask *them* to tell you what *they* notice. I read four lines of text in *The King's Cat* over and over again. Grade 3 students found a silent 'k' word; a word in italics; a new word; then finally one child noticed the rhyming words. Multiple copies of this text were used for readers' theatre. Students had fun experimenting with different voices as they read and re-read while improving fluency and expression.

Stage 3: Explore and Imagine:

Students explore and extend ideas beyond the text: The text is a stimulus or starting point for speaking; writing; research; dramatic or artistic expression.

In brief this is what it looked like in Kindergarten: Children rolled plastic farm animals in mud, and then washed them in a 'tub' while exploring language. We then read *Mrs Wishy Washy* who washes her muddy farm animals. The book was read and re-read many times: Children focused on the text and joined in. They tried different voices for the characters; on one occasion, the word 'mud' was altered to 'chocolate' which totally changed the story. Then the class teacher suggested they construct a new story about children playing in the mud.

I asked three Kindergarten ESL children: 'What does rolling in the mud remind you of?' One said, 'I'll just get a book.' She retrieved *Mouse Paint*, from the bookcase, the story of three white mice that roll in different coloured paint and then mix the colours.

While on paper the sequence of the shared reading plan appeared logical, in practice, we could move from one kind of 'play' to another. I wanted to explore it in more detail. The Big Book, *Monster for Hire*, was chosen to study narrative, and make explicit the reading/writing connection with a group of Grade 3, ESL students. It has a high interest theme, clear narrative structure and good literary language.

It's the story of a monster who hires himself out to a giant then a prince. Both times he does something wrong and is dismissed. He is then hired by a mean witch. When she's out, he finds a spell which he puts in her teapot. The witch drinks tea, turns into a toad and hops away, so the monster makes himself at home.

We discussed the title and talked about the meaning of 'hire' and they gave examples. The students expressed feelings about monsters and some were quite alarming. I asked them to draw their own monster and write what it could do for them.

They talked as they drew: 'Mine's got a jetpack.' '... and then I have elephant ears.' 'It's got 1000 fingers.' 'Mine's a girl, I'll put a dress on for it.' 'It's nearly finished; I just need to orange it.' The jobs for monsters demonstrated the students' power over their monster: 'Clean my room', 'do my homework,' and 'make me warm'.

We read the first two pages and met a giant. I asked: 'What does he remind you of?' Suggestions included three giants in a Ukrainian fairytale, a Chinese story about a giant and a pet monster, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and a giant in a *Goodies* DVD. We continued reading, paused to predict, and then read on.

We discussed, identified and named the parts of a narrative, then re-read the story to place Monster's attributes on a semantic map. Some words suggested, came directly from the text, however many did not, and I pointed this out. We wondered about his 'size' and a girl suggested, 'as tall as a table'. I seized the chance to explain similes. They then added: 'as brave as Superman', 'as nervous as a new kid' and more. They each completed a semantic map for their monster, and similes were everywhere!

They began to write a story. The first drafts showed a range of English abilities and language skills, and many contained at least one simile. A student revealed the ability to play with the word 'handy': 'Faraway in the universe lived a monster, of course it was very handy, but it doesn't mean as helpful, but it is. I mean it has big hands.' She explained that drawing it first, helped achieve this.

We focused on different aspects of the text. I asked what was meant by: "The witch eyed the monster." (Wilson p. 1987, 23.) They immediately acted this out. I hid descriptive words on a page with post-it notes and we read the text together. It still made sense. I revealed the hidden words and we focused on the enhanced meaning. A similar page had a basic word on the post-it note, as we read they made suggestions, and then the descriptive word was revealed. This game was fun and they all contributed.

Unaided, they began to edit. One changed 'very shy' to 'extremely shy'. Another changed 'a monster' to 'a scary monster.' A girl changed: 'They cast a spell and she was gone.' to: 'They cast a *magical* spell and she *just disappeared*.' Four students made improvements to their sentence structure. This evidence suggests the approach *can* support ESL language development. In fact it holds much promise yet to be explored.

Dr. Carroli stresses the critical importance of group dialogue. I asked the students what they thought of the main character in *Monster for Hire*. One commented: 'The best part about this story was the monster, he wanted his happiness.' Another agreed: 'He could sleep, and he could watch TV. That's the best bit about it.' Then five students worked to clarify their understanding using the words: *normal, behaviour, calm* and *naughty*.

- 'He had some normal behaviour, but he was a bit confused with his behaviour.'
- 'His character was sort of calm because he didn't hurt anyone ... he just tried to scare them.'
- 'His behaviour was quite normal and at the end he was, like, being bad.'
- 'I think normal on the first bit but when he was in the witch's witchery he was kinda like naughty.'
- 'I thought about him. He was a bit naughty and a bit calm.'

They had gone beyond the literal meaning of the story and were analysing the monster's character. I asked 'Who does Monster remind you of?' We shared personal stories of mischief: taking money out of Mum's purse, then blaming the brother; bringing the neighbour's kittens into the house; using a phone without permission; looking for Christmas presents in the parents' bedroom. They had connected *personal* experiences with a literary theme. Links were also drawn to Jack taking the harp in *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Then from the students came a Finnish story about a girl who misbehaved at a party; a Punjabi story about two birds making dhal. The big bird expects the little bird to watch over it, but he eats it. And then a Chinese story about a sneaky princess. When the queen isn't looking, she goes into the village to find adventure. And later a boy recalled Scandinavian stories about trolls.

One story had inspired the telling of *many*. Students were revealing a wealth of knowledge about narrative as they shared personal and cultural stories. At an International Reading Association Convention, "Jamake Highwater challenged teachers to give children windows through which to see *many* worlds rather than mirrors of their own cultures." (Jaggar and Smith-Burke, 1985, p 171.) Students in sharing *their* stories can give *us* these windows.

We returned to *Monster for Hire* to identify the 'aha!' moment, when Monster found the chance to turn the witch into a toad. (I was interested to see if they shared *my* view that Monster was an opportunist.) Some of the students however began to voice their growing indignation. They just did not approve of Monster's actions. 'Just because the witch was bossy, he could have gone away and not been mean!' 'He could have made other choices!' 'He should go where people are not so bossy!'

Re-reading the text followed by group discussion and reflection, had directly lead to the students engaging in critical literacy. They had drawn links between their common *school* culture and the text, revealing shared beliefs about acceptable behaviour as they condemned the Monster. Carroli says:

"Literary texts can become cross-cultural bridges since they contain themes that are global and at the same time are representative of local cultural worlds." (Carroli 2008, p. 188)

The students had demonstrated growing literacy skills and revealed their understanding of the role and power of narrative. Some began to create a sequel to *Monster for Hire*.

Shared reading can provide *time* for ESL students to *play* with language: With careful questioning and engaging activities, they can explore meaning and exchange ideas. Shared reading supports ESL English development, promotes critical literacy and provides opportunities for *all* students to share their worlds. It is enriching for teachers too, as we work *with* ESL students to bridge cultural and language gaps.

Bibliography

- Brace, J. Brockhoff, V. Sparkes, N. and Tuckey J. (2006) *First Steps Speaking and Listening Map of Development - Second Edition*. Developed by the Department of Education, Western Australia. Rigby Harcourt Education Port Melbourne, Australia.
- Caroli, P. (2008) *Literature in Second Language Education*. Continuum International Publishing Group, Norfolk, United Kingdom.
- Couper, S (2009) *Literature, language and learning*. ANU Reporter, Autumn 2009, p 30-31.
- Department of Education and Training, (2006) *A classroom practice guide – Quality teaching in ACT schools*. Publishing Services for the ACT Department of Education and Training, Canberra, Australia.
- Gibbons, P. (1991) *Learning to Learn in a Second Language*. Primary English Teaching Association, Newtown, NSW, Australia.
- Gibbons, P. (2002), *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning – Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, USA.
- Hornsby, D. (2000) *A Closer Look at Guided Reading*. Eleanor Curtain Publishing, South Yarra, Victoria, Australia.
- Hornsby, D. *Springboards into Literacy* Oral Presentation, Canberra Saturday 28th February 2009.
- Jaggar A, and Smith-Burke M.T. (editors), (1985) *Observing the Language Learner*. International Reading Association, Newark, Delaware USA.
- Smith, A. and Nelley, E. (2002), P.M. *Benchmark Assessment Resource for Emergent-12 R.A. Kit 2*, Nelson Thomson Learning, China.
- Swan, C. (2009), *Teaching Strategies for Literacy in the Early Years*. Australian Literacy Educators' Association, Norwood, South Australia
- time for "talk"* Resource Pack (1998) Education Department of Western Australia.
- Tough, J. (1976), *Listening to Children Talking*. Ward Lock Educational, Schools Council Communications, Cardiff, United Kingdom.
- Wolf, M. (2008) *Proust and the Squid – The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. Allen @ Unwin Pty. Ltd. Crows Nest, NSW.

Children's Books:

- Baker, J. (1998) *Where The Forest Meets The Sea*. Walker, United Kingdom.
- Cowley, J. (2005) *Mrs Wishy Washy*, Mimosa/McGraw-Hill, Victoria, Australia. (Big Book)
- Smith, J and Parkes, B. *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Nelson, Methuen (Big Book)
- Stoll Walsh, E. (1997) *Mouse Paint* Orchard Books
- Tarlton, J. (1987) *The King's Cat* Ashton Scholastic, Auckland, N.Z. (Big Book)
- Wilson, T. (1987) *Monster for Hire*, Ashton Scholastic, Gosford, N.S.W. (Big Book)