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Nurturing a Love of Language through Children's Literature

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Best practice in ESL instruction touches on many facets and theories of teaching and learning and is shaped by sociocultural and political considerations. Throughout the three monographs in this series, strategies, resources, and professional mindsets towards teaching ESL learners have been shared from a variety of perspectives. Student-centered instruction is recognized as critical to these perspectives to include culturally relevant literature that provides insights into diverse cultures, demonstrations of functional language in everyday life, and specific examples of diverse syntax and semantics. Such literature to which readers can personally connect motivates learners by providing interesting and useful examples of literacy in action. However, often overlooked as a focal point for motivation is that of sharing the pleasures and powers of language itself with young learners. From a study of the delight of words and phrases to a focus on powerful words used to make a difference in a democratic society, students can become active explorers in this frequently taken-for-granted venue of their daily lives and cultures. Barbara Esbensen, an award-winning poet who worked frequently with children reminded adults to encourage children "to play with words, to enjoy words for their sound, their color, and even for the shape of a particular word on the page"

(Esbensen, 1997). Another reason for exploring language itself is, scholars working with adolescents state, that “all students, even those for whom school replicates their home codes, need to learn about the cultural complexities of language and to become critically aware of the role language plays in all our lives. However, for students whose home codes differ markedly from the mainstream power codes, such approaches to language learning are crucial” (Fecho, Davis, & Moore, 2006, pp. 188-189).

In considering the recent statistics that over 5 million English language learners are enrolled in our schools, a restructuring focus on teaching is not surprising. However, as stated by Cowart and Dam (2007), “the purpose for bilingual education and English as a second language programs, which is to facilitate fluency and literacy in English for English language learners (ELLs), continues to be misunderstood and at times seems to be lost in the debate ” (p.260). This leads to several questions as one ponders how to identify best practice: Is the role of language itself as a subject of “delight” and as an empowering vehicle for all learners ever discussed at any of the decision making levels? Have the adults involved in this process, including teachers, been invited to consider the significant role of language in various aspects of their own lives—both its empowering role and those experiences where language excluded them? Since we know that teachers often teach that which they have been taught to value, have teachers ever been invited to immerse themselves in the pleasures of word play, semantics, word origins, dialects, and the phrases in other languages whose semantics cannot be translated from one language to another? Have teachers been approached with the potential to motivate their students to care about words, value language, and, therefore, have an authentic reason to explore, inquire and master language learning? Do teachers invite students to contemplate and

investigate the *powers of language* as they learn the *language of power*—the language or languages that provide a sense of agency in the various aspects of their lives? The answers to each of these questions are complex and extensive, and the answers could provide substantial insight into how ESL practice is or is not implemented. While these answers cannot be fully treated within the confines of this chapter, a thoughtful reflection on the potential answers can provide a rationale for engaging young literacy learners in an investigation of language itself.

In thinking of the basic premises of culturally relevant and learner-centered instruction, learners of all ages bring purpose, delight, motivation, and energy to the topics that they deem to be relevant, interesting, and beneficial as they work towards personal goals. The author proposes that part of the fun in language learning for all learners, not excluding ESL learners, comes from their being invited to enjoy as well as to understand the power of language. While there are many potential ways to do this, children's literature can provide a strategic vehicle for entering such an exploration and making personal connections to language.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on children's literature that serves to motivate young literacy learners to explore the joys of language as well as its power. While many resources exist to support the focus of each of the following sections, recent titles are provided here as examples to enable those already using such books in their curriculum to add to their knowledge base as well as provide those new to the field substantial titles with which to begin their work with language learners. While these books are grouped and described according to the most obvious and unique examples of language use that they offer learners, any one book might easily fit into more than one section since language is a system in which all aspects work together to communicate

effectively. As teachers consider the potential ways to invite readers into this conversation about language, the hope exists that many educators may also discover, with their students, personal insights about the powerful nature of language in their own lives.

Literature to share unique conventions of language and word play

The English language is known for its abundance of idiosyncrasies, idioms, and irregularities. Rather than despair at the many exceptions to the rules, language learners can enjoy these variations with numerous books that through text and illustrations point to the humor and communicative possibilities that abound. One such book is *Slide and Shurp, Scratch and Burp, More about Verbs* (Cleary, 2007) which is a follow-up to the title, *To Root, to Toot, to Parachute, What is a Verb?* (Cleary, 2001). Both action and linking verbs are the focus of this text in rollicking rhyme: “knitting or hitting or roping or biting—verbs can make sentences very exciting” (p. 7). Alliteration and onomatopoeia add to the enjoyment of this text. In another focus on verbs, *Move!* by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page (2006) shows different members of the animal kingdom as they leap, slither, fly, float, and dance in their daily lives. Such authentic use of verbs, in addition to action-packed pictures and information about the animal kingdom, teaches various ways that each can be used in addition to vocabulary building.

Of course, what can be more humorous, as well as useful to an ESL learner, than a study of homophones? *Dear Deer, A Book of Homophones* (Barretta, 2007) shares brightly colored pictures that provide the ridiculous possibilities of such phrases as “The MOOSE loves MOUSSE. He ATE EIGHT bowls” (Baretta, p. 4).

Such text invites original sentences and art as students learn the difference between words with identical sound.

Idioms abound in American English and people often are unaware of just how these sayings began. With rhyme and brightly colored illustrations, sayings such as “bright-eyed and bushy-tailed” or “horse of a different color” represent the numerous idioms shared in *My Grandma Likes to Say* (Brennan – Nelson, 2007). Having so many of these illustrated idioms is in itself beneficial to learners; however, this book provides contemporary meanings and a history of these terms so readers realize how to use these phrases. With additional phrases included at the end, this is a book for all ages—adults included! What phrases might students recognize as ones used in their homes? What phrases in an ESL student’s home language might be included in a class discussion or book that points to these unique language phrases in all languages? Another title that shares idioms categorically, as well as similes, metaphors, and proverbs and attracts language learners with its humor is *THERE’S A FROG IN MY THROAT! 440 animal sayings a little bird told me* (Leedy & Street, 2003). A brief explanation of the contemporary meaning of each saying is provided and the humorous pictures are sure to intrigue readers.

Literature as demonstrations of rich language imagery

Language has the potential of creating artists in speakers and writers. Bold images that appeal to all senses abound in literature of all genres—to be discovered by all readers! *Before John was a Jazz Giant* (Weatherford, 2008) is an early introduction to the young John Coltrane as well as the origins of jazz. Through language depicting the sounds that later fed into his music, young readers are invited to begin considering the nature of jazz.

Before John was a jazz giant,
he heard hambones knocking in Grandma's pots,
Daddy strumming the ukulele,
And Mama cranking the phonograph. (pp. 2-3)

After discussing the many other sensory images and unique words that describe John's life, what delightful sound images might ESL learners create as they share their own experiences.

Wonderful Words (Hopkins, 2006) offers images focused on words, poems, and other uses of words as does *In the World of Words*, poems by Eloise Greenfield (2006) that provide personal insights of this author on words, stories, poems, and other literary formats. One poet whose life work focused on helping children realize the love of words was Barbara Esbensen. Her own realization of the power of words to describe is seen in *Words with Wrinkled Knees* (1997) a poetry book describing animals. A portion of the title poem speaks for itself in the descriptive images words can draw enhanced by the placement on the page:

The word is too heavy
To lift too cumbersome to
Lead through a room filled with relative or small glass
trinkets

E L E P H A N T

He must have invented it himself. This is a lumbering
Gray word the ears of it
Are huge and flap like loose wings a word with
Wrinkled knees and toes
Like boxing gloves. (p. 3)

Literature that shares the beauty of other languages and dialects

As language learners are exposed to written texts that are inclusive of other languages, they can develop an awareness and appreciation of the features of diverse languages. By exploring the stories and structures behind languages, readers can become fascinated with the realization of language as a unique component of culture. Literature provides many of these opportunities to explore. A book might be as simple as *Can You Say Peace?* (Katz, 2006) that shares the bright faces of children around the world saying “peace” in their language. Or it might have a more complex message. *Silent Music, A Story of Baghdad* (Rumsford, 2008), is quite an appropriate book for contemporary times. A young boy living in Baghdad loves calligraphy—even more than soccer and dancing. “I love to make the ink flow—from my pen stopping and starting, gliding and sweeping, leaping, dancing to the silent music in my head” (p. 6). As he writes names and words, he describes the movements for the reader and the illustration includes a large example of the calligraphy he is writing. His mother compares him to Yakut, a great calligrapher who lived in Baghdad at the time of the Mongolian attack in 1258. In this time of horror, Yakut wrote letters of beauty. Likewise, during the bombings of 2003, Ali wrote pages of calligraphy to fill his mind with peace. He reflects in the book’s closing pages on the ease with which the word for *war* is created while the word for *peace* is stubborn and needs much practice until it “flows freely from my pen” (p. 25).

Sequoyah, another book by Rumsford (2004) provides a compelling insight into the history of the written Cherokee language. The story of Sequoyah, beginning with reference to the

Sequoia tree, is told in both English and in Cherokee—translated into Cherokee syllabary by language training coordinator Anna Sixkiller Huckaby. Young readers not only learn of how Sequoyah approached his task of creating written language to strengthen his people, but they also realize the importance of language to them. The Cherokee people were forced from their homes in the 1830s, but took their written language with them as well as established a newspaper that is still published today. The language is intriguing as each symbol represents a syllable—84 in the Cherokee language. “Sequoyah’s genius is rare. Only a handful of people in the last seven thousand years can claim to have invented a writing system” (p. 26).

Bilingual texts are becoming more accessible in English and Spanish. However, others are more slowly making their way into publication. *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow* (Lee-Tai, 2006) tells the story of Mari whose family was sent to Topaz during the Japanese Internment of World War II. The author gently tells the story, based on her own grandmother’s account, of a child for whom art became a way to maintain hope during this harsh experience. The Japanese language is used throughout and offers readers the chance to examine the characters and organization of this written language. Ed Young, in *Voices of the Heart* (1997), provides a closer look into how Chinese words are created as he uses 26 characters describing feeling or emotion—ones that include the symbol of the heart as well, such as joy, despair, contentment. By examining how the various markings are combined into symbols and using each in a sentence, readers can better understand the critical significance of each mark in Chinese text—none to be taken for granted.

Of course, bilingual books in English and Spanish continue to make their mark in the field of children’s literature. While a

chapter in an earlier monograph provided some titles of useful bilingual books, some new ones to mention are *Nana's Big Surprise* (Perez, 2007) and *My Colors, My World* (Gonzalez, 2007). *Nana's big surprise, Nana, ¡qué sorpresa!* is a familiar story of grandchildren who are learning to support their abuela after the death of their grandfather. With this universal theme of family, both comfort and humor describe this story in two languages. In *My colors, my world, Mis colores, mi mundo* (Gonzalez, 2007) a child finds a variety of colors outside the abundant hues of brown in her desert world. The illustrations of both are bold and colorful and provide impetus for talk even without the text. Children of all languages can profit by examining the differences in words and syntax in such books that tell their stories in dual languages—stories that are familiar to children from all cultures.

We know that in building vocabulary, using a word in many different contexts is one way to ensure the word is internalized. Such an approach is supported by literature as well in books that focus on one item of a culture and build a narrative around it. *What Can You Do with a Rebozo?* (Tafolla, 2008) is one such example as it provides insight into a familiar article of clothing in the Mexican community—a rebozo. “Mama spreads it like a butterfly to pretty up her dress for Sunday morning. . . or wraps it into a cozy cradle for baby brother, so her hands are free. . . to weave a braid for me!” (pp. 1-2). By considering the word in many different scenes, English speakers learn about this new word as well as the many uses a rebozo has for those who wear it. ESL learners from a Mexican heritage can take a familiar object, and consider the English words to express the many ways in which it is used (pp. 1-2). The potential for all readers is quite extensive if used with questions, authentic demonstrations from the Mexican-

American community, and perhaps original stories from children who have seen their mothers and grandmothers using rebozos in many different ways. Another similarly structured story is *Mama's Saris* (Makhijani, 2006). This introduction to Indian culture uses a young girl's fascination with her mother's colorful saris to share the celebrations that each sari represents. As the girl tries on various saris and stories are told, readers are made aware of Indian cultural traditions that go far beyond the sari. In *My Dadima Wears a Sari* (Sheth, 2007), Rupa inquires of her grandmother's habit of wearing a sari. Consequently, an intergenerational dialogue results in grandmother sharing all the wonderful ways in which a sari can be used. And yet another story with a similar design is *The Best Eid Ever* (Mobin-Uddin, 2006). Aneesa, whose family is from Pakistan, is living in the United States. The biggest holiday of the Muslim year, Eid, is an opportunity for Aneesa to receive new clothes. The reader learns much about the Muslim culture through this story that also shares the contemporary issues of modern Muslim immigrants. The holiday joy that is shared is universal and provides an event for learners coming from a variety of cultural and language experiences. *New Clothes for New Year's Day* (Bae, 2006) tells of a Korean girl's excitement as she dons each part of her new outfit for the holiday. A follow-up author's note provides insight into the significance of color and design as well as the meaning of new clothes—a wish from the maker that the wearer forgets unhappy aspects of the previous year and resolves for a happier new year! The significance of New Year's Day is also described to include the special soup that one eats prior to becoming a year older. As learners realize that each culture has significant pieces of clothing that represent more than just another item to wear, they can identify clothing or accessories in their own families and communities that are worn both daily or for special

occasions and perhaps represent significant stories and traditions. Both oral and written language is enhanced as these stories are told, and specific words become part of the vocabulary of all who hear these stories.

As ESL and bilingual learners enter classrooms, they may encounter dialects of those from various cultural or regional groups in the United States. While this can be a point of confusion as they work to learn a second language, teachers can talk about varieties of language, including regional accents or dialects. Literature can provide examples of such dialects within the contexts that one might naturally find them. *The Chicken Chasing Queen of Lamar County* (Harrington, 2007) is a delightful story with just enough dialect to create the setting. "Big Mama says, 'Don't you chase those chickens. If you make those girls crazy, they won't lay eggs'" (p. 1). And so begins the story of the tension between a little girl and a chicken and the event that brought them close together. A more involved look at dialect is *Young Cornrows Callin' out the Moon* (Forman, 2007). A South Philadelphia neighborhood in summer is seen through the eyes of its young inhabitants:

we got pretty lips
 we got callous feet healthy thighs n shy knees
 we got fine brothers we r fine sistas
 n we got attitude. (pp.2-3).

Sensory images abound through such dialect which is the language of the text.

Literature that points to language as identity and leads to agency

By studying the unique aspects of words and language use, learners can also understand how this tool can become powerful words. Studies exist that focus on the power of literacy to inform and transform as numerous scholars investigate critical literacy. As educators read and reflect on the possibilities of young literacy learners developing insights into social justice through children's literature, both the need for young learners to see their own literacy possibilities mirrored, as well as how this literacy might be used in socially responsible ways, become significant considerations. A recent content analysis of books that focused on reading, writing, and storytelling (Mathis & Patterson, 2004) examined literature that provided demonstrations of literacy learning, learning about literacy, and learning through literacy. They pointed to the most powerful texts focused on literacy as having demonstrations of inquiry, voice, and action. Subsequent reading, analysis, and reflection reveal that while a text may foreground one of these three components, all three must work together to effect change for social justice or even for personal change. However, this study also pointed to the notion that learning through literacy—described as literacy learning to make the world a better place—can also be focused inwardly as the learner makes his/her own world a better place.

Since critical literacy is not an uncommon theme, especially as it focuses on social justice and empowerment, new texts appear yearly that give a biographical account or fictional account of an individual for whom language is a factor of identity. The story of Sequoyah described above points to the fact that his beginnings were that of a common person and it was his devotion to creating a

written language form that gave him honor with his people and made him highly revered in the larger community.

Many books speak to the civil rights struggle and those individuals for whom language became a way to empower themselves and others. *Yours for Justice, Ida B. Wells, the Daring Life of a Crusading Journalist* (Dray, 2008) tells the story of this well known woman whose love of literacy was evident in her strong young life in the post-Civil War South. As a journalist, Wells made evident the injustice that existed long after slavery ended. A highlight of her life was her crusade against lynching as she realized the power that she held in her pen to evoke change. "The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press" (p. 41).

Phillis's Big Test (Clinton, 2008) tells of the poet, Phillis Wheatley, who was educated by her owner and began writing poetry as a teenager. She became the first African American to publish a book of poetry and was quite famous. However, she had to prove that she was indeed the author of her poems as she lived in a time where very few African Americans were taught, or in most situations, allowed, to read and write. Her determination to claim her works is seen in the following passage, "She must make her voice heard. She was not content to recite her verse in drawing rooms or to read one of her poems from a newspaper. She wanted her own book because books would not last just a lifetime; they would be there for her children and her children's children" (p. 21). Young literacy learners need to realize the importance of literacy and language for those who had to struggle for the right to use language in powerful ways. Another book that acknowledges the significance of writing in providing voice is *Show Way* (Woodson, 2006). This author traces her family's history through many generations, beginning with slaves who used quilting as a

“show way” to freedom. As the generational description reaches Woodson’s own life in contemporary times, she describes her “show way” to be the act/ art of writing.

As children need to realize the power of words for children in contemporary times, *Destiny’s Gift* (Tarpley, 2004) meshes a child’s love of words and eventual awareness of their powerful nature. Destiny’s favorite place is Mrs. Wade’s bookstore—because it was home to so many words and so much information. Told in first person, Destiny says, “When I wasn’t writing words, I was reading them—gobbling them up from the pages of books as if they were candy” (p. 5). With images of a child totally absorbed in the love of books, the story also speaks to the power of words when the bookstore is in danger of closing for financial reasons. While a plan is put into place to increase interest and business, the book closes with a hopeful but unsure ending as to the plight of this small community bookstore. However, it is Destiny’s creation of a journal for Mrs. Wade in which she describes everything she loves about the store and the time she spends helping there and reading with the owner that brings Mrs. Wade’s response, “Words are a powerful gift indeed” (p. 27). Young language learners can take action in their own communities with their words, but often it is how their words are used to make the world a better place for others that is important. What a powerful lesson to learn and to put into place as children write letters to people in their own lives!

Another book that reminds readers of the power of words is *Vote!* (2003) by Eileen Christelow. How delightful to experience the whole process of an election with comic-book style illustrations that tell of a town’s election of their mayor. The characters take the reader through the process while side comments are made by the town’s dogs. As students consider literacy as a way towards having a voice in a democratic society, they need to

be informed about the many terms they may hear on the media or from adults in their lives. Important terms and answers to questions, along with Internet resources, are provided at the end of the book. The book is authentic in describing the election process and while its humor holds a reader's interest, insight into a citizen's responsibility and privilege in having a voice during elections is loud and clear. The vocabulary terms are quite accessible to learners and, of course, important words for them to know.

With a focus on humor and fantasy as we motivate learners to enjoy language, *How to Save Your Tail* (Hanson, 2007), provides a story about a "book-loving, cookie-baking" rat called Bob. After viewing a book on the garden bench, he attempts to get it and is caught by a cat. The following chapters are the stories about his family that he tells to save his tail. With hints of "Scheherazade," the reader might realize the power of words and personal stories to accomplish miraculous things. Another humorous yet important perspective on voice and choice might be found in the book *Wolves!* (Gravett, 2006). A young rabbit goes to the library in search of information on wolves. As he reads various parts of the book he borrows, he wanders around until just as he reads the page on what wolves eat, he realizes he is sitting on top of a wolf's snout. Of course the next page shows a chewed up book and no rabbit as readers gasp a bit over the fate of the fellow reader that they have just begun to like. A following page, however, gives the reader another option for an ending if the reader desires—that of the wolf being a vegetarian that leads to a happier ending. We have choices in our reading and writing and we have the power to create endings as we would like them to be. What a powerful lesson to learn about literacy!

As teachers consider the ideas presented here and the possibilities of learning about the complexities of language, it is quite easy to regard it as a bit of child's play. However, in considering the earlier rhetorical questions regarding whether or not adults have paid attention to the complexity of language in their own lives, the issue becomes more that of creating adults who are in love with words and with the possibilities that language offers in all aspects of our lives—never to be taken for granted. *Side by Side* (Greenberg, 2008) is a rich compilation of poetry from around the world matched with visual art that reflects the themes of the poetry and connects it to specific cultural contexts. When poetry is in a language other than English, the original and translation is provided in the text, giving the reader two languages and the art with which to make personal connections to the topic and to reflect on how both poetic creations find mutual imagery in the art depicted. There are four thematic sections: Stories, Voices, Expressions, and Impressions. Judging from these sections, one can realize that this book well fits into a variety of categories for learning about language as it contains images, stories, rich and diverse languages, and powerful voices. While some of the poetry included here can be used with younger readers, the sophistication of many pieces would make it more meaningful to older readers. The editor of this book says that as she spread out the many creations to plan for organization, "The poems whispered, spoke, and shouted; the art works shimmered, filling the room with the mingling of different languages, subjects, and sensory images" (p. 5). This book, as well as many other books for language learners of all ages, can do the same when readers are invited to explore its contents. The four thematic sections represent the essence of life itself, and if adult readers are seeking more complex examples of the power of words in daily life, novels, biographies, informational

books and historical accounts exist that can continue the interest sparked by these children's books.

If teachers read and reflect on the power of language to create laughter, to share images, to achieve dreams and aspirations, and to give voice to all in a democratic society, they may quite possibly invite young readers to engage in similar explorations. The suggested titles here represent merely a sampling of the possibilities of literature for enjoyment and insight into language for readers through language play, exploring the languages of others, discovering the history of words and phrases, discussions around empowerment through language, and making personal connections that build identity. Creating an interest in language can provide the impetus for learning language—whether it be the learner's native or a second language.

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