

MARCH 2017



# Secondary Accents

The Newsletter of the Secondary Schools Interest Section

## ARTICLES

### TEACHING LITERACY TO NEWCOMER BINATE LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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#### Introduction

English as a second language (ESL) students come from diverse paths of life and bring unique personal and educational experiences that make them whom they are. ESL learners in secondary education who arrive to the United States with little to no experience in the English language and who received the lowest possible level on the WIDA placement test are called newcomers. The purpose of all the classes in the newcomer program is to help students transition—as quickly as possible—into mainstream programs. During their first year, newcomer students generally take developmental classes that focus on vocabulary-driven instruction with the purpose of preparing them for content classes that they will take during the following years.



The majority of the current newcomer population in the United States is composed of students from Spanish-speaking countries, specifically from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Statistics show that there has been an increasing number of immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in recent years, and much of that population has settled in the states of California, Texas, Florida, and Maryland (Zong & Batalova, 2015). A recent article by Pentón Herrera and Duany (2016) explains that many of the students within this population arrive to the United States with interrupted education or no education background from their native countries, which makes learning English a very challenging process. Furthermore, Pentón Herrera and Duany (2016) introduce the term *binate language learners* to describe adolescent students who are newcomer English language learners (ELs) and are also illiterate, or have underdeveloped proficiency, in their native language.

Unlike ELs with strong academic backgrounds, binate language learners arrive to the United States with no content knowledge of any sort and lack English language skills. This reality becomes an academic challenge for these students because they have to learn both the content and the new language simultaneously in a limited number of years. The academic system in the United States is largely based on students' ownership of their learning process. As they retrieve prior knowledge, they learn new ideas and take control of their academic environment. Prior knowledge and academic background are, thus, two essential elements that play an instrumental role in the development of students' base of knowledge. Newcomers who arrive to our schools

without prior formal knowledge and academic background are at great risk and find it very difficult to adapt to a system that relies heavily on those two important factors.

The following section provides four teaching techniques to use when teaching literacy to binate language learners; it also shares suggestions that reflect the importance of active learning for ESL newcomers and advocates for the inclusion of teaching techniques that promote learning in a manageable and realistic classroom environment. The four strategies have proven to be successful in theory and practice, and they focus specifically on promoting literacy skills to this specific population. Furthermore, these strategies have proven effective for me and my high school ESL students throughout the years.

### **Teaching Literacy to Newcomer Binate Language Learners**

#### *1. Avoid Handouts in Literacy Courses*

The main purpose of literacy classes is to teach writing and reading. Handouts usually simplify tasks and present information in an easy-to-manage approach. Many of these handouts are likely to provide more assistance and sheltering than a student really needs. At-risk students and students who have yet to develop their set of basic literacy skills must be allowed to work within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1980) if they are to grow as independent learners. When students receive handouts, they usually do not read the information. Instead, they scan for the questions and answers to finish the exercises as quickly as possible. Critical thinking is hindered and mechanical problem-solving processes are developed. One-size-fits-all techniques for problem solving and question answering are sought while deep and critical thinking skills disappear.

Do not be afraid to make students write! Students with little or no academic background need all the writing and reading practice they can use. Some of them, like most teenagers, avoid writing and prefer handouts because they require less work. Even though handouts are more convenient for educators, they take away the opportunity for students to practice penmanship, spelling, and writing. Instead of using handouts, have students write down the questions and their answers. Stopping the handout culture helps students improve their literacy by practicing writing and encouraging them to read the entire assignment.

#### *2. Use Collaborative Activities Only When Students Are Ready*

Collaborative work/activities in the classroom are commonly used today as part of effective teaching practices. However, using group activities for binate learners can be challenging for educators and students alike. When students do not have knowledge of specific norms, structures, and tasks, they can easily lose focus of the activity's objective (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Collaboration requires understanding, guidance, and meaningful learning. It requires all group members to know what they are doing and to be able to work independently in groups. Otherwise, it is likely that students will not be on task and that the activity will become a chat between friends.

The educational background of this population of students might make it difficult for them to process and comprehend academic guidelines and the purpose of collaborative activities in the classroom setting. Thus, it is best to keep students working independently while slowly introducing rules and procedures for collaboration and group work. During the first months of school, most of the activities should focus on building literacy through self-analysis and self-discipline. The purpose of approaching learning individually is that it enables students to interiorize guidelines and regulations while focusing on their individual knowledge. At this stage, students are not only learning English, they are also getting used to this new culture, and some of them are learning how to interact in a school environment for the first time.

### 3. Read-Alouds and Guided Reading Work

Reading books for pleasure is a new concept for the majority of binate language learners (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016). They approach reading with excitement because it is something new, and for this reason it is important to keep them excited while reading in English regardless of the challenges. Reading is a receptive skill that is likely to engage students only when it captures their attention and when it can be understood. If students cannot understand the content and/or vocabulary, then they are unlikely to engage in purposeful reading.

Read-alouds and guided reading are tools that can be used to support newcomers when reading. They also give students the opportunity to practice word recognition and pronunciation. When reading with students, make sure to give them enough opportunities to answer their own questions. At this level, it is best to use small books with relevant topics that will keep them engaged and wondering. The [Heinle Reading Library](#) has excellent materials for newcomer ESL students. Their mini-readers' collections are only eight pages long and are very easy to follow. At the end of each book, there is a short reading comprehension assessment that serves as an excellent formative, summative, or metacognitive evaluation.

### 4. Include Dictates in Your Daily Activities

Dictation is an activity that can be easily integrated into any lesson plan and can have different purposes. For one, dictates give students the opportunity to listen to sounds, associate sounds with letters, and practice writing. This activity may seem basic, but it works wonders with ESL newcomer students. Dictates can be used to practice vocabulary, reinforce word sounds, and to evaluate oral comprehension. Dictation is an excellent technique for language learners, and it has proven to promote student literacy when it is used systematically and purposefully (Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, & Ruíz, 1996).

Dictates are very flexible and can be used as warm-up activities, regular classroom exercises, and even integrated into quizzes and exams. Something different you can do to make this activity more interactive is to dictate a question, have students write the question, and ask them to either write down their answers or have them answer orally. Dictation has the possibility of engaging binate students in the four language domains and it gives them the opportunity to self-assess their own comprehension (Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, & Ruíz, 1996).

### Final Thoughts

The purpose of this article is to serve as a guide for ESL educators teaching binate language learners. The vision of this article is to raise awareness about how ESL educators can empower newcomer binate language learners as they continue to become a growing population of our ESL students.

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