Irene C. Pompetti-Szul is a Resource and Training Specialist with the New York State Spanish Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Center at NYU’s Metropolitan Center for Urban Education.

Abstract

This article describes the results of a one-year qualitative study. It highlights the manner in which different modes of using the first language worked with multi-level English language learners in grades four through eight. Differential first language use scaffolded students’ second language literacy development as they completed a story-telling and story-writing activity.

The purpose of this research was to investigate how English language learners could successfully engage in and complete a story-telling and story-writing activity that drew on stories from their heritage. The approach to literacy and literature instruction for second language learners described below is taken from a nested case study, described in detail in *Differential Instructional Scaffolding in the Teaching of Second Language Literacy* (Pompetti-Szul, 1997). The approach is based on ideas of instructional scaffolding (Bruner, 1986), and literary response (Rosenblatt, 1978; Langer, 1995). An instructional scaffold is a support that enables a student to do something that he or she could not do before. Literary response involves a person’s lived experience of literature. Each person’s response to literature may differ. Student participation in literature circles and student-student collaborations were key elements of the instructional approach. In addition, it was hypothesized that a variety of instructional scaffolds would be identified as important in facilitating student engagement and participation. Among these was the use of the first language. Native language support is known to be helpful in facilitating language and literacy learning.

Qualitative research methods were used in this study, which was part of a larger nested case study. A university researcher whose role was that of a participant observer worked with two ESL teachers from October through May. The elementary class consisted of fourth and fifth graders, while the middle school class had students in grades six through eight. Data sources were field notes, audiotapes of student-student and student-teacher collaborations, student and teacher interviews, project meeting notes, and student artifacts. A constant comparison method was used, in that new directions were forged based on examination and discussion of class and student progress. The purpose of the larger study was to explore the role of literature in the literacy learning of linguistically
diverse students. Within the larger study, the use of the first language to scaffold language and literacy development was explored.

In this study, the principal instructional scaffold was that of collaborative conversations between the teacher and individual students or between students and other students as they worked together to tell, respond to and write stories. However, the nature of the collaborative conversations differed. In some instances, the collaborative conversations took place in the first language. In others, such collaborations took place in English. In still other instances, students worked in their first or second language individually. Art was also used as an expressive medium to draw out language and to serve as a starting point for conversations in English or the student’s first language.

All of the students in the study were English language learners in grades four through eight. Students were first shown a model of what they could create. The model was a book of short stories written by middle school Dominican students in New York City. Each story was published in English and the student’s native language. In this way a goal was set forth for the students – to write a bilingual story worthy of publication.

In order to build both literacy and familiarity with literature, students participated in literature circles. In the literature circles, students listened to and discussed stories read aloud. One of the goals was to help students understand that they had questions about the stories. The teachers modeled ways to ask questions about stories. Once students’ questions were identified, students decided which questions they wanted to discuss. In this manner, questions about individual characters, plot or setting were identified and discussed. Teachers also modeled ways in which to discuss literature. All of the literature discussions were conducted in English.

At first, the literature circle featured the stories in the Dominican book. Then students were asked to go home, have someone tell them a story, and bring the story back to tell the class. When students brought in stories from home, they were asked to tell them to the class in the literature circle. The same discussion process was used with the students’ own stories, with one student writing down all of the students’ questions in order to help the authors when they began to write their stories. The authors were free to adopt or discard the questions and suggestions of other students.

What follows are descriptions of three case studies that depict how the process worked with students who were at differing levels of English proficiency to ensure that they all successfully completed the literacy activity. Most significant in the description is the story of how the first language was used to scaffold literacy instruction. The three students are Mietek, María and Hamida. Fifth grader, Mietek, and eighth grader, Hamida, were both newcomers to the United States, whereas, fifth grader María was born in Puerto Rico and had been in ESL for three years in different schools in different cities. Mietek had been schooled in Poland and also had studied English there. In contrast, Hamida’s education had been interrupted by the war in Afghanistan, and she had not studied English before. Students such as Hamida are often categorized as SIFE students (Students with interrupted formal education).
The project began in October and took place two days per week in two ESL classrooms. One classroom was in an elementary school and included fourth and fifth graders. The other classroom was in a middle school. In the middle school, the project involved 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. The teachers spent approximately ninety minutes per week on the project for eight months. I had the role of researcher, and I had the good fortune to work with two dedicated ESL teachers, one in each school.

The first problem that arose was that Mietek and Hamida arrived in late December/early January. The project had already been underway for several months. How could the teachers communicate the assignment to two beginning level ESL students, neither of whom spoke much English? In the elementary school classroom, the teacher wondered aloud about this dilemma. One of the fourth grade girls suggested that the teacher send a note home with Mietek asking that he bring a story to class. The next day, Mietek brought in a long handwritten fairy tale in Polish. His grandmother had written the story. This event brought up a further dilemma. No one in the class knew any Polish. Fortunately, the researcher’s multilingual husband translated the story, and the teacher was able to read the story to the class in the literature circle. This experience helped integrate Mietek into the class, and helped the class see him as a valuable contributor to class activities. Prior to this, Mietek had said almost nothing in class. He was in the silent period of second language acquisition. However, it was important that Mietek’s first story, written in his native language, was both acknowledged and utilized.

Building on Mietek’s understanding of the story in Polish, the teacher directed him to tell his story to the tape recorder several times. This was useful, especially because there were no other Polish-speaking students in the class. Telling the story to the tape recorder in Polish allowed him to practice and elaborate the story in a medium that was most comfortable for him – his first language. Following that practice, the teacher asked him to begin to write the story in his own words in Polish. Again, the first language was used for the initial writing of the story. Only after utilizing the first language orally with the tape recorder, and then in writing, did Mietek sit down with the teacher and begin to tell her the story in English. This was possible because Mietek had studied some English in Poland before arriving in the fifth grade in the United States.

Mietek’s English version began like this:

**The Legend of the Three Sons**

Long time live king. King have three sons. King is very sick. Three sons go the garden and see old man. Old man tell him where is a water of life. First go biggest son. In way look a little men. Little men says, “Where you going?” Son says, “Go on in my way,” and going.
Oldest son go between two rocks. Second go middle son. In way look a little men too.

His story continued on in this manner. This excerpt showcases Mietek’s state of English language knowledge at the time. In addition to this version, we also published a “correct” English version along with the Polish version in the class book of stories. What enabled Mietek to accomplish so much in such a short time (aside from the fact that he had studied some English in Poland), was that his knowledge of the story in his first language was drawn upon for extended oral and written practice. This was done prior to Mietek’s first attempts to tell and then write the story in English.

A second example of story-writing is that of María, a fifth grader who had been born in Puerto Rico and who had been in ESL classes for three years in different cities. María was considered an “advanced” ESL student, whereas both Mietek and Hamida were “beginning” level ESL students.

When she was first given the assignment to bring in a story from home, María came to class with an oral story in Spanish that her mother had told her about her mother’s childhood in Puerto Rico. The teacher encouraged María to write the story in her own words in Spanish first. When María began to write the story in Spanish, she soon realized that many details were missing. The teacher advised María to ask her mother to retell the story several times. Following the retellings at home, María was able to write the entire story in Spanish. Following the initial writing in Spanish, the teacher thought that María was ready to write the story in English. She was able to do that with some effort. At one point she realized that she had written about an apple tree and that there aren’t any apple trees in Puerto Rico. She then changed it to a mango tree.

In the case of María, then, the first language was used for the original telling of the story at home by her mother, and for several retellings at home by her mother, followed by a written version in Spanish by María, and finally a written version in English, which she translated from the Spanish. It is significant that, even though María was both fluent in oral English and at an advanced level of English proficiency, it was helpful to her to use her first language in the initial stages of story-telling and story-writing.

The third example is that of Hamida. In her case, one of the other, more English proficient Afghani girls in her class at the middle school was aware that Hamida didn’t understand the assignment. Her comment, “Hamida doesn’t understand,” prompted the teacher to say that Hamida could tell her story to other students in her native language. Nooria, an eighth grade advanced level student, used her native language, Pushtu, to explain the assignment to Hamida, and to tell her that she could tell the story in her own language. Immediately, Hamida unleashed a torrent of words, telling two other students a story about a scorpion. The bilingual students interpreted the story as follows:

This is about a scorpion in a house. The house was full if it.
It takes place in Afghanistan, in Kandahar.
In the two subsequent class periods, Hamida continued to tell her story to students who understood Pushtu. By the third telling, the story was translated to the teacher as follows:

My cousin Marjana was 8 years old and was playing with us in Afghanistan. We were all sitting outside of the house. There is all holes around the house from scorpion and their eggs.

The following day, Hamida continued her storytelling. Farida, another eighth grade girl from Afghanistan, interpreted the story as it appears below. Notice that by this, the fourth telling, the story had become more elaborated.

My cousin Marjana was eight years old and was playing with us in Afghanistan. It was night time. We were sitting outside the house. There were all holes around the house from scorpions and their eggs. And one of the scorpions came out of the holes and bit my cousin Marjana on her toe. And she started to scream and said something bit her. And my uncle run from the house and said what happened. We told him what happened and my uncle killed the scorpion and took Marjana to the hospital and she was better.

At the researcher’s suggestion, a picture of a scorpion was located, and Hamida immediately began to draw pictures of scorpions. Following that, Hamida began to draw more elaborated depictions of the story. From the elaborated illustrations, we were able to see the flat roofs of the Afghani houses on which Hamida and her family sat at night, talking and looking up at the moon and stars. In her drawings, Hamida was very careful to include the moon and the stars. We gleaned a great deal of information helpful to her story-writing from this visual source.

Exactly two weeks from the day that Hamida first told her story in Pushtu, she referred to one of her drawings and had the following conversation in English with the researcher:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher:</th>
<th>What’s scorpion in Pushtu?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hamida:</td>
<td>Lalam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher:</td>
<td>Lalam (Hamida smiled).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamida:</td>
<td>(referring to drawing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This my uncle wife room, this my uncle wife room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other people is over there. The scorpion is coming, coming. She looks like this. Other people is over there.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This was Hamida’s first attempt to tell her story in English. All of the previous classroom activities together scaffolded Hamida’s ability to tell the story in English. The use of the first language served as a scaffold, as did her drawings. Another scaffolding factor was the collaboration. Several students collaborated with Hamida initially in Pushtu. Further collaborations in English followed between Hamida and the teacher and between Hamida and the researcher.
Hamida’s scorpion story, in its most elaborated form, was published in the student book of stories as it appears below.

**Scorpion**

Everyone was outside sitting and Marjana was inside playing with the kids. Later the whole family wanted to go up on the roof, sit and talk under the black sky. There were millions of stars moving around the sky like Diamonds. Then the kids went by the pool so Marjana was left alone. Her aunt told all the kids to come and eat, but Marjana didn’t come. Marjana told me, “Come and play with me.”

I went there and I told her I am going to go to the Bathroom and be right back. When I was coming back from the bathroom, I heard Marjana scream. I was really scared. But I knew there were a lot of snakes, scorpions, and bugs outside. After I came from the bathroom, my whole family and my uncle were running toward Marjana too. They thought she was faking it at first. My other uncle said that he was going to check her and there was a scorpion running away from her foot with its tail flipping side to side. They caught the scorpion and took the stinger from the tail.

Then they let it go and the scorpion was trying to bite other people. My uncle said to the scorpion, “You bit my niece so now I’m going to kill you.” And he stepped on it and it got smushed.

Meanwhile Marjana fainted. When she woke up, she said, “My foot hurts.” When the others were busy chasing the scorpion, her grandmother held her foot tightly so the poison wouldn’t spread in her body. Then she squeezed her toe and blood and poison came out. She got up and was limping. Her uncle told her to walk straight so her foot would get better. Then everyone went to the mosque to pray and Marjana prayed for her uncles because they had saved her life. She said, “If I didn’t have uncles like you, I would be dead.”
Hamida’s drawings were later used as a vehicle for her to become literate in English. With assistance, Hamida wrote a caption for each drawing, and learned to read each caption.

In the case of Hamida, the first language was used orally to explain the assignment. Then, Hamida told the story repeatedly in her first language. Each time, another student who spoke Pushtu wrote down the story, and each time the story became more elaborated. After many retellings in Pushtu followed by the written interpretations done by other students, the teacher sat with Hamida and two other Pushtu-speaking students to create the final version in English. This would not have been possible without the repeated use of the first language in oral form.

As the three examples above illustrate, the first language can be used in a variety of ways to develop second language literacy. It can be used to explain the assignment, to practice a story orally either with other students or the tape recorder; it can be useful in helping students elaborate their oral or written work, and it can serve as a basis for interpretation or translation into English. Just as another semiotic system, art, was useful as a springboard to language and literacy, the first language served in myriad ways as an instructional scaffold for second language literacy development. These results are important because they illustrate some ways in which students’ native languages can be used as scaffolding resources in the classroom.

References


