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## Untying Teachers' Hands: Affirming Language and Literacy in Diverse Learners

- In response to the current climate of accountability, many districts have turned to scripted reading programs as the solution to literacy instruction in schools with populations of students with high needs. While scripted programs may be beneficial for some students, they often limit a teacher's ability to create active learning environments to facilitate the second language learning and literacy skills in English Learners (ELs). Specifically, this paper critically examines three aspects of scripted programs that include whole-group instruction, repetition, and pacing guides to understand how ELs experience these lessons. Additionally, it describes how one first-grade teacher in a highly diverse urban school has been able to embed strategies that work for ELs within a classroom guided by scripts.

Developing functional literacy in a second language can be a great challenge to the English Learner (EL) (Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004; Fitzgerald & Noblit, 2000). With parents who speak a language other than English in the home and limited access to print resources such as books and reference materials (Brisk & Harrington, 2000), ELs often depend on teachers to help them develop the literacy skills they need to become successful in school (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000; Valdés, 1996). While students struggle to gain access to information, teachers and administrators are challenged to teach these students to speak, read, and write in English both quickly and effectively (Adger, Snow, & Christian, 2002). With the current national focus on high-stakes testing, teachers and students alike are held accountable (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 1999), particularly in the area of reading (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). In response to the pressure to improve student performance in the area of reading, many school systems have attempted to “teacher-proof” instruction through the use of packaged and scripted literacy programs, offering the teacher a manual as the basis for literacy instruction (Peck & Serrano, 2002).

There is research to support that scripted reading programs with an explicit phonics focus can increase literacy skills and test scores for “at-risk” students and in low socioeconomic status (SES) schools (Adams, 1990;

Foorman, Francis, Novy, & Liberman, 1991). Thus, scripted language-arts programs are being implemented in numerous urban schools across the nation (Moustafa & Land, 2002), even though they were designed primarily for native English speakers (Stritikus, 2006). Despite much research on the teaching of reading to ELs that supports the need to use whole-language and phonics teaching, otherwise known as a balanced approach to literacy instruction (see Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2002; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Asato, 2000; Hudelson, 1994), scripted programs that emphasize explicit phonics instruction continue to prevail in low SES schools where the large majority of these populations are minority and/or nonnative English speakers (Moustafa & Land, 2002; Neufeld & Fitzgerald, 2001; Stritikus, 2006).

To understand how ELs and teachers respond to scripted reading lessons, we explore one first-grade teacher's classroom in-depth. This paper is guided by the following question: How can teachers facilitate second language (L2) and functional literacy development in ELs when they are mandated by their schools or districts to follow a script? Using this classroom context as a space of critique, we first explore how scripted programs can conflict with teaching practices that promote L2 development and literacy. We also describe the fundamental components (whole-group instruction, repetition, and pacing guides) of scripted curriculums and examine the specific ways in which ELs respond to this type of instruction. Last, we offer teachers alternative strategies to use in response to these program mandates. While many educators feel their hands are tied when they are offered a script, some teachers have found very effective ways to meet the complex and multiple needs of diverse learners, particularly ELs. In describing the journey through scripted instruction from the perspective of a first-grade teacher, we argue that with creativity and innovation, classroom teachers can find ways to meet the complex needs of ELs.

### **Second Language and Literacy Development**

Language and literacy are interconnected, and each is supportive of the other's growth. Learning to *speak* English as a second language is one of the first stages in language acquisition and contributes to children's eventual fluency in *reading* and *writing* (Cummins, 2000). Oral proficiency provides a foundation to support subsequent learning about the alphabetic principle. Students achieve this learning through an understanding of the structure of spoken English words, as well as through language and content (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). For many ELs who have yet to acquire even beginning language, scripted programs often require that they decipher phonemes, construct word parts, and begin literacy practices in the second language before they are ready.

For an EL, the opportunity to speak and use authentic language through interaction with peers in the classroom is essential for second language development (Cummins, 2000). However, strict adherence to scripted programs significantly limits the students' natural use of language. At best, it enables students to demonstrate their ability to memorize and recall discrete pieces of information. Scripted programs present an exclusive focus on phonemic awareness and isolated skills, providing few connections to meaning and few

opportunities to develop communicative competence and vocabulary necessary for success in reading for English learners.

In addition, scholars have argued for teachers to present material in small chunks and in ways that are active and engaging (see Brisk & Harrington, 2000; Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004; Fitzgerald & Noblit, 2000). Perego and Boyle (2000) specifically found that ELs perform better with small lessons that allow students to comprehend language in small doses or chunks. Students are then able to build background knowledge to later apply when engaging in independent reading activities. The implementation of scripted programs not only hinders the vocabulary development of ELs. It can also challenge students' ability to progress in reading. Ultimately, scripts ask students to perform tasks before they can effectively become successful, strict pacing guides limit the use of natural language, and whole-group instruction disallows teachers to present material in smaller, more meaningful chunks. These practices are inconsistent with what researchers have identified as good practices in the facilitation of language and literacy development for ELs. To understand and help resolve the tension between scripted lessons and best practices for ELs, we describe one teacher's experience in a highly diverse urban school and the ways that she has been able to embed strategies that work for ELs.

### **The Classroom Context**

Kendra has been an educator in differing capacities for the past 12 years and is now in her 9th year in the public classroom setting. She holds a master's degree in Literacy and has completed the National Board certification process in Early Grades Literacy, which provides a strong academic foundation for what she teaches. Yet, how she teaches and how she engages students in learning stems from her experiences with children in city schools in New Orleans, Baltimore, and different areas of the Southeast. Her understanding of diverse students has also been informed by her time working in small villages in Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer.

She now teaches in an urban elementary school where 20% of the school population is Spanish speaking. Numerous students with diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds are in her classroom each year. Approximately half of the students in her class each year are African American. The other half of the class comprises Mexican students who speak Spanish as their native language. Most of the Mexican students she serves are identified formally as ELs by the district and usually have varying levels of English language proficiency. Although each year her classroom looks a little bit different, it is a classroom that is known to be a little "noisier" than the other first-grade rooms. This is a place where children are given multiple opportunities to make independent choices for their own learning.

Observations of Kendra's classroom reveal that her classroom is quite different from other teachers' classrooms in this school. The physical classroom is arranged to facilitate dialogue. There are shared spaces where children can interact with texts, with one another, and with her. Bulletin boards, the types of books she displays in her reading corner, and what she chooses to display in her room reveal a deep commitment to social justice and multiculturalism. Students have

daily opportunities to explore some of the many artifacts she has brought back from her time in Africa in the Peace Corps. They can also peruse her photos from her recent three-week study of orphanages in South Vietnam as they discuss social issues related to poverty and unequal distributions of wealth abroad and within the US. Although these are first-grade students, Kendra infuses her teaching with lessons that incorporate equity and social justice.

Informal conversations and interviews with Kendra show that she is an advocate for her students and actively tries to teach to the whole child on a daily basis. She not only values the academic identities of her students, but she also considers the physical, psychological, linguistic, social, emotional, and cultural dimensions of her students. Despite her rich years of experience, she is continually challenged by aspects of the program that often prevent her from engaging her ELs in meaningful literacy practices. In response to the scripts she must follow, she uses external resources/materials and supporting activities to enrich the prepackaged curriculum she is given.

### **Guiding Principles of Scripted Programs**

Three aspects of the scripted program that Kendra is mandated to use include whole-group instruction, repetition, and pacing. These three components guide reading instruction and are identified as effective teaching strategies for the program's success. However, scripted lessons that teachers conduct in a whole-group format leave little time for students to work in small groups. This method can also limit a teacher's ability to appropriately differentiate instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, a practice that accounts for students' varying levels of readiness, interests, and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2001). Students who are taught to read through the observation of repeated-instructional segments of isolated skills in a whole-group format can easily fall behind. Although some purposeful small-group work may help students catch up, teachers are given little time to address students' needs when the instructional pace is predetermined.

#### ***Whole-Group Instruction and Repetition***

Concepts taught using scripted lessons are commonly done in whole-group class settings. Teachers are commonly asked to begin lessons with a call-and-response drill that focuses on repetition of sounds, blends, or words. Adams (1990) claims that this repetition and practice are key to the success of these types of programs. They allow children to have many opportunities to pick up the missed skills, reassuring teachers that students will not fall through the cracks. While repetition and practice can be useful tools to assist in retaining existing skills and new knowledge, Kendra has observed how this practice (delivered daily in a whole-group setting) has contributed to a superficial acquisition of language for her students. Instruction that is supportive of diverse learners allows students to make real connections to content rather than simple rote memorization of facts. Executing a lesson guided by a script does not necessarily allow teachers to address the needs of diverse learners. While some children continue to practice and repeat skills they may already have mastered, others simply mime along in the hope of masking their lack of understanding.

Instruction that depends on repetition and recall can in fact reinforce concepts that students may have learned incorrectly. Practice can make perfect, but it can also make learning *permanent*. The permanence that derives from repeated whole-group call and response could be a permanent wrong understanding. In addition, an EL's understanding of language and literacy may be significantly skewed through misheard or misinterpreted choral responses. This response could negatively affect both groups later and inhibit the building of advanced language and literacy understanding. Reading instruction based heavily on repetition of uniform isolated facts and whole-group delivery can leave ELs without the opportunity to build the essential components needed for reading and language proficiency in the L2. A teacher's ability to meet the needs of ELs is further limited by the pacing guides they must use in each lesson.

### ***Pacing Guides***

Because of the pacing guide provided by the program, there is little time to deviate from the assigned script if the teacher is to keep instructional content aligned with the grade level. Without modification for diversity in the classroom population, there is little opportunity to explore spontaneous ideas and thoughts of children. Failing to acknowledge the need to make these changes in instruction can ultimately disaffirm each student's sense of uniqueness and stifle their innate curiosity. Pacing grade-level instruction adds significant pressure on the teacher to lead the children to produce an accepted response offered in the teaching manual in a very short time. Forgoing teachable moments to stay on a predetermined pace of the program can cause both the teacher and the students great frustration and anxiety.

Whole-group instruction used in isolation, repetition drills using call and response, and guiding instruction through predetermined pacing guides can greatly affect L2 and literacy development for ELs and a teacher's ability to respond to their needs. At the student level, literacy instruction presented through rigid scripted lessons can (a) limit students' time to catch up when they fall behind, (b) reinforce concepts that may have been misinterpreted or misunderstood, and (c) hinder student creativity and/or natural curiosity. On the teacher level, these three aspects of scripted programs can greatly (a) limit a teacher's ability to respond to diverse student needs through differentiation, (b) limit a teacher's ability to be creative and responsive to learner needs, and (c) create great frustration in the classroom.

### **How ELs Experience Scripts**

A typical day of reading instruction using a scripted curriculum begins with a morning lesson of repeating isolated sounds or blends, conducted in a whole-group setting. After this call-and-response exercise, students begin to interact with text by moving to the use of decodable books, big books, and anthologies. While many native English-speaking students are able to keep up with the pace and use each part of the day to build upon the other, the ELs struggle throughout the entire instructional segment.

### ***Morning Lesson: Oral Language Recall***

While trying to learn the English language, many early elementary students are led down a very confusing road of repeated isolated sounds that may have little relevance to their native language. A child trying to learn the mechanics of the English language and literacy would have little reason to make a connection with a letter card displaying an *Aa* accompanied by a picture of a lamb (as is offered in the program Kendra uses). The child's confusion may be compounded when, for example, instruction of the sound of the lamb saying /a/ /a/ /a/ is stated as a tool to use to reinforce the sound of the letter of the alphabet. Decontextualizing the language and vocabulary appears to have little relevance to what the child wants to know about or is interested in learning (Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999). The initial call-and-response lessons offered in this reading program lack meaningful language opportunities essential for ELs to make connections and build social and academic vocabulary.

For many ELs, participating in the rigid lessons read from a prompt by the teacher would also offer a confusing and unnatural presentation of the English language. For example, the initial phonics instruction as presented through the manual offers a script to blend phonemes as a whole class. The call and response moves quickly with the teacher writing letters on the board and requesting the sound(s) from the class—the teacher says: “sound” (writing and pointing to the letter *b*); the students respond: /b/.

Teacher: “sound”; students: /a/

Teacher: “blend”; students: /baaaa/

Teacher: “sound”; students: /t/

Teacher: “blend”; students: /bat/

Teacher: “word”; students: “bat”

The teacher then offers a sentence orally to the class and asks for a student to provide an additional sentence orally to support building further connections for the whole group. This process moves very quickly and as the children are conditioned to the process, the teacher no longer says sound/blend/word, but instead simply points to the writing on the board and the children chorally respond. This daily routine of quick-paced, call-and-response, whole-group literacy instruction often leaves ELs and nonreaders failing to grasp the intended lesson behind the activity. While emerging readers begin to develop phonological awareness and vocabulary, ELs often move their lips, mouthing nonsense or jibberish in an effort to look as if they are participating.

### ***Interactions With Text***

To contextualize and further guide reading instruction, the program offers decodable books, big books, and anthologies for teachers to use in whole groups. Teachers are instructed to read the decodable books in a whole group. The books are designed to be easily decoded by beginning readers, so words in a particular story often follow a rule that was recited and practiced during the morning phonics lesson. Unfortunately, the students' success, or lack of success, with reading the decodable books is largely based on their

understanding of the morning lesson. While the materials commonly address the instructional level of the program's target population, students performing beyond this level move through the decodable book independently while beginning readers laboriously attempt to decode each word, catching hints from their fluent peers as they read aloud. Many ELs and emerging readers merely mimed or parroted in whole-group instruction and continue that practice as the class moves through the decodable book. Because of the varying levels of students, using a decodable book during whole-group instruction, as suggested by the manual, provides little support for low-performing students and those with limited English proficiency. If the target sound in a given lesson is /ng/, the decodable-book story line will invariably house many words with the /ng/ sound (*king, swing, running*). Just as the class reading level is intended to grow throughout the year, so is the reading difficulty of the decodable text. Viewing five words on a page within the decodable book could afford low-performing students an opportunity to independently identify the letter(s) associated with the target sound. Unfortunately the text increases to multiple lines and introduces diphthongs, diagraphs, and additional punctuation such as quotation marks, commas, and ending punctuation. Kendra often provides highlighters to partners and asks children to support each other in finding a word with the target sound on each page. This practice alleviates some of the perplexity seen with lower-performing students and ELs interacting with the decodable text in a whole-group setting.

Big books and anthologies can also be used to support literacy instruction. Although these resources are more contextualized, pacing guides limit the time a teacher can spend talking about the story. In addition, teachers often struggle in finding the time to use small groups to increase material usefulness. While the texts could stimulate child-led discussion and engaging dialogue, the script offers teacher-led lessons with information provided to read to students before, during, and after the reading of a selection. Peregoy and Boyle (2000) found that for ELs, daily reading activities need to have meaning, and the purpose for the activity must be deliberately clear. While scripted programs offer a clear purpose, lesson content is often not at a level conducive for ELL learning. Comprehension skills and strategies are the focus of the whole-group reading activity rather than the pleasure of gathering as a class to read and learn. Stories are divided into segments with specific skills or strategies to target when reading through the designated pages of the text. While reading through a big-book story about gardens, many ELs eagerly conjure background knowledge and hope to contribute to the dialogue within the lesson. Upon viewing the large illustrations, they identify objects and attempt to use English language. Their excitement is quickly squelched when the script moves toward discussions of simple machines, levers that pivot, and ramps used to make work easier. The script, pace of the lesson, and comprehension objectives reduce the possible opportunities to use the children's knowledge as a base to scaffold instruction.

First-grade classes uniformly move through the book following the comprehension-skills or strategies script provided in the teaching manual. Teachers are prompted to pose questions identified by the program. The script initiates a desired response from the children, ensuring they are able to use



comprehension skills or strategies (predict, clarify, question, observe details) taught in the lesson. The repetition that the program finds supportive of learning is also infused in this activity. After the initial three-day lesson in which students are asked to display the ability to use comprehension skills, the story is read through a second time, again in segments, and students are asked to apply comprehension strategies when prompted by the script read by the teacher. Often, the joy of reading a story with the children is lost in skills and strategies instruction. Rarely is a story read through in its entirety in one day. Even if students find an interesting point in the story that they would like to discuss further, the script dictates that the teacher move on rather than engage the students. This practice can easily negatively affect how students view their own roles in learning and through time devalue their contributions.

**Table 1**  
**Scripted Programs and L2 and Literacy Development**

| <i>Aspects of scripts</i>  | <i>How scripts hinder L2 development and literacy</i>  |
|--|--|
| 1. Focus in the deciphering of phonemes and construction of word parts | 1. Limits the students' natural use of language  |
| 2. Focus on phonemic awareness and isolated skills                     | 2. Teaches students to memorize and recall discrete pieces of information                                  |
| 3. Whole-group delivery  | 3. Offers few connections and/or opportunities to create meaning   |
| 4. Repetition and recall   | 4. Provides few opportunities to use authentic language through interaction with peers                     |
| 5. Quick pace  | 5. Provides few experiences to develop communicative competence and limits time for vocabulary development |

**Negotiating Scripted Lessons: One Classroom Example**

In the following example, ELs are given multiple opportunities to participate actively in their learning to facilitate literacy development. As a class community, children are asked to recall vocabulary from the morning lesson or offer their own from the class environment. Additional students are invited to demonstrate writing the text or illustrating the word on the board. The class then enjoys a fast-forward charades, in which selected students act out specified vocabulary that conveniently has accompanying illustration to support all learners in every phase of the literacy process. Children can practice decoding and read the written word or use the child-drawn picture to make a connection and decipher the text. ELs may recall new vocabulary as they enjoy a peer's humorous performance acting out a target word. Those ELs not comfortable with English language usage may simply observe the environment and find heightened understanding of the classroom language and literacy

culture. After the participatory review, knowledge of target pictures and the action is confirmed by the lesson participants. To strengthen a connection between the reading and writing process for all students, the engaging learning environment provides a foundation to scribe a silly sentence or ministory using words and rebus pictures provided by students.

The sentence often begins with text. Students are then asked to supply a drawing of the instructed vocabulary to accompany the text in the sentence or story. For example, a student may initially offer the vocabulary word *chair*. This word is then written and then illustrated by students. For the next learning segment, the vocabulary word will serve as a beginning idea for the student-created sentence, "Jessica is in the chair." Kendra may draw a humorous caricature of the child above Jessica's written name and then direct attention to the illustration of the chair. Another child may offer the sentence, "Jessica is on the rug." The illustration of a chair would be replaced with a student-constructed picture of a rug to accompany the new text. In this activity, a student may be given the role to move to a different classroom area before the written sentence construction. This can support oral language and vocabulary development for participating students as they follow oral instructions.

As students navigate the room after the sentence construction, they are encouraged and challenged to interact with written vocabulary of simple classroom objects. Activities such as this allow ELs an opportunity to experience and relate to vocabulary within their daily and real-life experiences. Throughout the experience, students will gain context and meaning, pairing the understanding of new vocabulary with the sounding out of letters and decoding words. For example, children learning the word *pair* may have a greater chance of recalling it if they are given the opportunity to observe a student's pointing to a friend's pair of stinky socks.

Unfortunately, rather than activities such as this being the norm, they are the "extras." Moreover, they are often done in the hopes of being undetected by administrators. Through authentic activities, each child follows his own script and plays a role in his or her own learning. Children are natural actors. Allowing students to bring forth their own script using their knowledge, Kendra can easily recognize content and skills to target in follow-up lessons. This kind of understanding unfortunately cannot be derived solely from students' participation in call-and-response whole-group instruction.

### **Moving ELs Beyond the Script**

In Kendra's classroom, students are affirmed on every dimension and provided with opportunities to discover meaningful connections between language, authentic experiences, and literacy. In addition to these strategies, there are many activities that teachers can or already may use for their native English-speaking students that can also be used to effectively promote the L2 and literacy development of ELL students. Kendra uses the following strategies in her classroom to support English language learners. These strategies have helped her move students beyond the scripted lessons.

**Table 2**  
**Suggested Teacher Strategies**

***What can teachers do?***

- Present material in small chunks
- Present in ways that are active and engaging.
- Provide students opportunities to discover meaningful connections between language, authentic experiences, and literacy
- Understand the lives of diverse students and develop instruction that is engaging and based on students' prior knowledge
- Use games and word banks to supplement learning
- Use small poems, songs, act out simple finger plays or directions
- Use developmentally appropriate activities and visuals
- Infuse authentic tasks when possible

Avalos (2003) found that teachers can facilitate the transition to L2 when they are knowledgeable about individual student needs and make instructional decisions based on these needs. Therefore, it is important to understand the lives of diverse students and to develop instruction that is engaging and based on students' prior knowledge. English language learners eagerly engage in language games (Richard-Amato, 2003) and also find themed word banks helpful for daily classroom assignments (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). Students would respond more positively with discussions on recipes or small poems that shared culturally relevant topics or to acting out simple finger plays or directions (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Beginning readers all enjoy and benefit from songs and poems. As ELL children progress in their literacy development, they need to hear numerous books read with fluency and proper intonation rather than the disjointed reading experiences offered in scripted instruction.

ELs experience language growth through opportunities to play with language in an environment. Kendra supports diverse student learning of lesson content by moving through and beyond the script with developmentally appropriate activities, visuals, and games. She understands that second language learners may attempt to participate in the choral responses during prior instruction, but she recognizes that they may actually acquire very little understanding of the English language. Kendra infuses authentic tasks while teaching these sounds within her lesson. Authentic tasks involve children in immediate use of literacy for enjoyment and communication.

Despite localized attempts to standardize teaching and learning, Kendra remained abreast of best practices that she found useful for her diverse population of students. She consistently found ways to move the scripted instructional program, geared toward English speaking children, toward lessons benefiting and engaging all levels of literacy learners and language speakers in her class. Through her efforts and awareness as a professional educator, and with her children's learning at the forefront of her instruction, she helped her students develop the desire and ability to seek out new knowledge and recognize the individuality of each child that creates the diverse classroom community

of learners. Kendra was able to move her learners through and beyond the script through her discovery of meaningful connections between language, authentic experiences, and literacy.

### **Conclusion**

Prepackaged scripted programs can fail to emphasize authenticity in children's learning and can often devalue teachers' abilities to teach effectively. Often with these programs, children are expected to learn to read words by isolated instruction in blending rather than in meaningful literature and dialogue. Lessons are often followed by workbooks to practice and reinforce the isolated skills taught during the phonics lesson. Requiring that teachers read from a script throughout a lesson often encourages them to bypass teachable moments, ultimately devaluing the rich knowledge, variety of skills, and understanding of children that a teacher brings to his or her individual classroom. In the standardization of instruction, children and teachers are given a subtle message that their knowledge is not valuable and that all students should learn and perform in the same ways and at the same rates. For many educators capable of meeting the needs of all levels of students, this daily scripted scenario is devastating.

Experienced educators need to look beyond the script to reach all students. Classroom teachers must teach and be encouraged to teach in ways that incorporate authentic experiences, drawing on the rich prior knowledge that each student brings to the classroom. By failing to acknowledge the experiences of students, those who struggle in school will continue to do so. Literacy instruction through the narrow implementation of scripted programs can fail to support the diverse needs of all children, particularly the EL. Teachers must respond by infusing strategies that support meaningful engagement in literacy practices and L2 development, providing students with opportunities to interact with texts, the teacher, and their peers in authentic ways, and by using supplementary resources and materials that will challenge students while providing opportunities for success.

This article explored one teacher's response to the ELs in her classroom by the renegotiation of the scripted program used in her school. Through a critique of several major aspects of scripted programs, a discussion of how ELs respond to scripted lessons, and a review of practices that foster L2 and literacy development, we hope that educators and policy makers are encouraged to use teaching practices that support ELs in the classroom. Using balanced strategies that support both language and literacy development, experienced educators who are mandated to use scripted lessons in their classrooms can find ways to support the multiplicity of needs of their English learners.

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