Guidelines for Using Volunteer Literacy Tutors to Support Reading Instruction for English Language Learners

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Juan proudly colored in his graph showing the number of words he could read correctly in one minute. “Look, I am reading much better and faster!” he exclaimed to his beaming tutor.

Juan’s first-grade teacher uses volunteer literacy tutors to supplement and support her classroom reading instruction. Using one-to-one tutoring within inclusive general education classrooms to provide individualized instruction can be very effective in preventing reading failure, especially during the primary grades (Wasik, 1998). It is critical to boost Juan’s language and reading skills early. As a member of the fastest growing percentage of the school population, English language learners (ELLs), Juan is twice as likely as a native English-speaking student to have reading achievement levels significantly below average for their age (August & Hakuta, 1998). Helping Juan early in his school career is doubly important because he has been diagnosed with a reading disability. This means he performed significantly below peers who have similar linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds (Ortiz, 1997).

As a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA) and other legislative mandates, such as No Child Left Behind, students like Juan increasingly receive the majority of their English reading instruction in general education classrooms. Placement in a monolingual general education classroom, however, does not guarantee Juan’s success, from either a social or academic perspective. Teachers can turn to volunteer literacy tutors as one means of providing much needed additional support for students like Juan because research has shown powerful effects of literacy tutoring (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes & Moody, 2000; Juel, 1996; Morrow & Woo, 2001; Wasik, 1998).

This article provides guidelines that will empower elementary teachers to design and to implement successful volunteer literacy tutoring programs. Specifically, we give suggestions and strategies for using literacy tutors to provide extra language support as ELLs learn to speak and read in English.

Using one-to-one tutoring within inclusive general education classrooms to provide individualized instruction can be very effective in preventing reading failure, especially during the primary grades.

These suggestions include selecting materials, recruiting and screening tutors, training tutors, and ensuring the program is well-implemented. Our suggestions come from the existing research base on literacy tutoring which has found that tutoring is most effective under the following conditions: (a) the tutoring program is consistent with classroom reading instruction, (b) tutors are well trained, (c) tutoring is conducted a minimum of three times per week, (d) tutors and tutees develop rapport, and (e) programs are well-implemented (Elbaum et al., 2000; Juel, 1996; Morrow & Woo, 2001; Wasik, 1998).

Our purpose in writing this article is not to advocate one type of program over another because clearly, no one size fits all. We also emphasize that tutoring should be only a supplement, but never a substitute for classroom reading instruction.

Selecting Tutoring Material

Teachers are advised to select reading tutoring materials that are consistent not only with their general classroom reading program, but also with reading goals on participating students’ individualized education programs (IEPs). This congruence can be accomplished by soliciting input from ESL/Bilingual teachers, reading specialists, special education teachers, and parents from the community during the initial planning stages. Continued involvement of these important stakeholders can pro-
mote the inclusion of culturally relevant content.

Any balanced and integrated classroom reading program should incorporate the five components (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) of Scientifically Based Reading Research (SBRR) described at length by the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000). Nevertheless, among the five SBRR components, a student like Juan may need additional focus on vocabulary to develop English language literacy skills. Hence, a teacher might seek tutoring materials that support interactive read-alouds to promote vocabulary development and comprehension. Or Juan may need additional practice to build reading fluency. Then, his teacher should select tutoring materials that focus on rereading stories or practicing high frequency sight words.

Our list of relevant resources for research-based curricular materials, (see box “Internet Resources and Instructional Resources”), may be considered a good starting point for selecting materials, including those designed specifically for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. There are a variety of programs to choose from, including more structured scripted curricula and less formal programs that include strong mentoring components, such as chat sessions and book clubs. Naturally, teachers may need to adapt programs and materials for participating students and tutors. Furthermore, ESLs with reading disabilities may need not only a skills-based component but also emotional support that encourages reading confidence and self-esteem. Once teachers have selected appropriate materials for their students, they should decide how to find a pool of tutors who can be trained to administer the tutoring program.

**Recruiting and Screening Volunteer Tutors**

An active recruitment process that is systematic and thorough is needed to recruit a reliable tutoring pool. We encourage teachers to involve the community in order to find dedicated volunteers among parents and grandparents, as well as from local businesses and faith-based organizations. Migrant education programs, library literacy programs, family literacy programs, and literacy councils can also be effective resources. In addition, there are several federally funded mentoring/volunteer programs, such as Big Brother and Big Sister or AmeriCorps. Research has shown that tutoring programs using college students were five times more effective than those using community volunteers (Elbaum et al., 2000). Therefore, we encourage teachers to contact local professors in Colleges of Education. Formalizing and maintaining ongoing University-School collaborations, such as service learning programs, or Professional Development School (PDS) relationships may also increase the sustainability of a tutoring program. We also provide a list of Web sites regarding volunteer programs (see box, “Internet Resources Regarding Volunteer Reading Tutors”).

Through purposeful interviews and an application process, teachers can screen volunteers to identify culturally sensitive participants who possess the following characteristics as well as those who require additional training.

- Volunteers are competent in the literacy skills addressed in the tutoring

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**Internet Resources and Instructional Resources**

**Internet Resources About Tutoring ELLs**

TESOL: [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org)

Content ESL across the USA: A training packet: [http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/miscpubs/cal/contentesl/contente.htm](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/miscpubs/cal/contentesl/contente.htm)

Everything ESL.net: [http://www.everythingesl.net/](http://www.everythingesl.net/)


Curriculum Resources in ESL: [http://www.cln.org/subjects/esl_cur.html](http://www.cln.org/subjects/esl_cur.html)


Activities for ESL Students: [http://a4esl.org/](http://a4esl.org/)

**Instructional Resources**


accomplished in fostering interest in reading for enjoyment. We also caution that choosing materials that are culturally and linguistically relevant is not enough. Teachers still need to emphasize to tutors the importance of maintaining students’ home cultures and languages. Doing so will reinforce ELLs’ self-esteem and pride in their native cultures and languages. In addition, teachers must consider how structured the materials are.

Furthermore, in our experience, tutors are often inexperienced in positive behavior management techniques commonly advocated in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, teachers should clearly articulate the objectives of these techniques, as well as the reasoning behind them. For example, many schools do not allow candy or other food items to be used for reinforcement. Yet, tutors might be tempted to circumvent this rule if they do not understand the rationale behind it. Additionally, tutors should be apprised of social and behavioral IEP goals for individual students.

A second step, general orientation, helps tutors understand the tone of the school environment. The orientation process should include information about school and community demographics, the philosophy and mission statement of the school, the culture and values of the classroom, and clear expectations and goals for the tutoring program. These expectations should clarify attendance and confidentiality policies in order to emphasize to volunteers the need to be reliable and consistent.

A third step that is particularly important for ELL students involves rudimentary preparation in second language acquisition. Even bilingual tutors often do not understand the process of acquiring a second language in an academic setting. It is imperative that training address the relationship between first and second language literacy, the stages of second language acquisition, the differences between social and academic language proficiency, and the importance of social interactions. It is easier for students who come to school with literacy in their native language to transfer those skills into a second language. Tutors literate in Spanish can read in Spanish and English with a Spanish-speaking ELL to facilitate transfer of literacy skills from one language to the other. This tutor can also emphasize the use of cognates (words that are similar in both languages—numéro/number) and help students to eventually look for them on their own.

It is widely accepted that ELLs move through a variety of stages of language acquisition (see Krashen and Terrell, 1983 for a more thorough discussion), and teachers can help tutors use this information to tailor activities for individual children. Table 1 represents one way of looking at these various stages, including different strategies that can be used in each see. Tutors must understand that social English and academic English are not acquired in the same amount of time. ELLs who achieve social proficiency in a few years will still need 5 to 7 years to become proficient in academic English. Most tutors find this evident in the discrepancy between an ELL’s ability to read a story and his or her ability to respond to comprehension questions.

Ensuring the Tutoring Program Is Well-Implemented

Once tutors have learned these three basic steps, (i.e., can deliver the curriculum, are oriented to the school, and understand the rudiments of second language acquisition) teachers should
## Table 1. Progressive Stages of English Language Development

### Silent Stage (also known as Preproduction)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Appropriate Instructional Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key characteristic: Communication with peers is very limited, which in turn, hampers development of social language proficiency.</td>
<td>Particular instructional focus: Help children adapt to the classroom culture and establish instructional routines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student may continue speaking in his or her first language (L1).</td>
<td>Tutors are responsible for up to 90% of conversational burden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student is processing language, but oral communication is limited or nonexistent.</td>
<td>Use pictures, props, manipulatives, and other hands-on materials to ensure active student involvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This period may last longer in very young students than students in later elementary.</td>
<td>Use simplified language that focuses on key concepts and the repetition of essential vocabulary.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use Total Physical Response (TPR).</td>
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### The Early Production Stage

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Appropriate Instructional Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key characteristic: Students tend to use imitation and repetition (formulaic phrases or speech patterns such as I goed to lunch) to become part of the social fabric of the class.</td>
<td>Particular instructional focus: Provide basic tools for immediate use including explicit instruction in vocabulary and social communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student begins to develop aspects of social English that will become building blocks of English proficiency.</td>
<td>Tutors are responsible for up to 50%-60% of conversational burden.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ social skills in English based on highly contextualized language.</td>
<td>Ask who, what, where, and either/or questions, labeling activities, questions that can be answered formulaically.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student may decode print, but struggles to comprehend.</td>
<td>Use TPR with responses—verbal and nonverbal, role-playing activities.</td>
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### The Productive Language Stage

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key characteristic: Students begin to manipulate language on their own, rather than relying on formulaic phrases (e.g., I goed to lunch).</td>
<td>Particular instructional focus: Modeling, scaffolding, providing guided instruction with academic language. Increased support for reading to learn versus learning to read and for building content-area knowledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students may begin to overgeneralize language rules and may appear to regress.</td>
<td>Tutors are responsible for up to 40% of conversational burden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students begin to develop academic skills in English.</td>
<td>Use Language Experience Approach, ask how and why questions, and increase social interaction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students may appear to have fairly complete fluency because they can handle most social situations, but academic English development is still critical.</td>
<td>Emphasize increased problem-solving, predicting, comparing, describing, labeling, listing.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Provide graphic organizers that include more text.</td>
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</table>

### The Intermediate Fluency Language Stage

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Appropriate Instructional Strategies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key characteristic: Students struggle with reading comprehension and other advanced literacy skills although overall English skills appear fluent.</td>
<td>Particular instructional focus: Teachers should continue scaffolding academic skills and advanced critical thinking skills, providing motivation for wide reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social English is well established and the student appears fully proficient in English to an outside observer. However, student will continue to struggle/develop higher level academic English.</td>
<td>Tutors are responsible for up to 10% of conversational burden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students may become frustrated with what they perceive to be their own language limitations.</td>
<td>Use scaffolded writing process activities that use graphic organizers, analyzing charts and graphs, more complex problem-solving and evaluating, research and support questions, literary analysis.</td>
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</tbody>
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Note that at all stages, tutors should support native language retention.
encourage them to play an active role in fostering successful social interactions that will lead to increased peer acceptance, peer interaction, and friendship (Vaughn, Elbaum, Schumm, & Hughes, 1998). This concept is important because in developing a rapport with their tutees, tutors may feel overly sympathetic toward ELLs. Consequently, they may, in effect, do the work for the students rather than encouraging their independence. Such well-intended sympathy can unintentionally undermine ELLs’ inclusion and social acceptance in the classroom, which is a critical component of their English language acquisition.

Training sessions and orientations can introduce these topics, but volunteers and teachers generally feel more comfortable if some of these issues are outlined in a letter that volunteers receive when they actually enter the classroom. An example of such a letter from an actual first-grade classroom appears in Figure 1. In this letter, Ms. Doe not only reinforces aspects of the volunteers’ orientation session, but she also points out issues that are specific to her classroom, such as the table of When You Are Done activities where she has set up activities that are related to the content of that week.

It is more likely that the tutoring program will be well-implemented if the tutoring environment is well prepared. Teachers must create uninterrupted time for tutoring. For example, tutoring may take place during literacy centers time. It is important to create a relatively quiet tutor’s corner with space to organize tutoring materials, books, rewards, and an individual file for each child. This individual file could be a time-efficient way for teachers and tutors to communicate with one another and to monitor students’ progress. To be consistent with IDEA, ELLs’ progress in reading must be monitored by teachers using a variety of alternative assessment procedures. Assessment alternatives can include portfolio and performance-based assessment, curriculum-based measurement such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, and student journals, (Salend & Salinas, 2003). The choice of evaluation method should be based on the overall program outcome goals and individualized goals for specific learners.

**Final Suggestions**

Although teachers clearly maintain responsibility for reading instruction for all students in inclusive classrooms, volunteer literacy tutors can support efforts to differentiate instruction. Because reading improvement is impacted by the stages of language development, ELLs
clearly need more time to learn to read in English than native English speaking children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Literacy tutoring programs can boost the intensity of reading instruction and enhance language acquisition. Furthermore, instruction in a one-to-one setting can extend and reinforce ELLs’ core reading program in a more relaxed manner, away from the potentially stressful whole group environment. Additional benefits to ELLs with learning disabilities include the ability to practice their social and academic language skills and the opportunity to work with a variety of English models. Finally, in a successful volunteer literacy tutoring program, tutors must be well trained and reliable; tutoring should be conducted a minimum of three times per week; programs must be well-implemented; and student results should be formally evaluated.

References