

Folklore, the Arts, and the ESL Child

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ESL students are those who are learning English as a second language. Their primary language, or the first language they acquired, is not English. ESL children have been raised in homes where English is not spoken as the primary language. Some ESL children have been born in the United States, but did not learn English because their parents didn't speak it in the home. Some ESL children have moved to the United States from a country in which English is not spoken often. They may have little or no familiarity with the English language. Other ESL children may have limited proficiency with the English language (LEP), but it is not their primary language. All of these children face a challenge when confronted with a classroom where English is the only language spoken.

ESL children also have the same wide range of learning styles and experiences as all children. For example, the ESL child may be a kinesthetic learner who has trouble sitting still at a desk all day, and who has never experienced snowfall. A unit on sled dog races may assume the students are familiar with snow. For this child, not only is the language barrier a challenge, but also the subject matter and how it is taught in a way incongruent with the child's learning style. With all of these variables, how is it possible to help an ESL child learn the English language and the different subjects?

When considering teaching strategies that will be effective for ESL children, it is helpful to consider the universals that cross cultural lines. These universals include folklore and the arts. Folklore are stories that originated orally, and have been passed

from generation to generation by storytellers. The stories become literature when someone hears the tale and decides to write it down.

In every culture, language originates orally. Until there are symbols created to represent the sounds, ideas, or pictures, the language cannot be written. Even today, there are some languages that can be spoken but not written. The Tlingit language, for example, has been in existence for thousands of years. A system for writing it, however, has only been in existence since 1971 (interview with Nancy Douglas, Juneau, AK). Whether it is because a language does not have a written form, or simply because the story originated orally and was passed on in the same fashion, every culture has folklore.

There are some folk tales for which almost every culture has a variant. For example, there are 700 different versions of Cinderella around the world (Worthy & Bloodgood, 1992/1993). Folk tales embrace the universal theme of good winning out over evil, and this predictability is beneficial for ESL students. Even though the ESL child may not understand all of the language, knowing a version of the story in his/her own language, and being familiar with the structure and theme of the story, helps the child to predict and comprehend the outcome of the story. When a version of the folk tale exists in the ESL child's own culture, it is meaningful to compare and contrast the different versions. The universal themes in folklore offer the opportunity to see the similarities among different cultures.

Another aspect of folklore that is beneficial to the ESL child is its meaningfulness to the reader or listener no matter what that person's prior experience or knowledge may be. Folklore has multiple levels of interpretations (Worthy & Bloodgood, 1992/1993). Whether from early childhood or late adulthood, the reader or listener will discover

his/her own special interpretation. The psycho-sociolinguistic perspective toward literacy instruction maintains that meaning arises from the transaction between the reader and the text. The reader brings his/her own special array of experiences, knowledge, brain function, and personality to the text. In reference to a version of Cinderella, deRegniers writes: “Over the years the story has taken on more and more meaning for me, and my perception of it changes as my perception of life changes – from sentimental to romantic to poetic to ironic to faintly comic, layer upon layer” (deRegniers, 1976). Because no two readers have exactly the same schema, or collection of experiences and background knowledge, no two readers will gain exactly the same meaning from a text. No one interpretation is more right or more wrong than another. They are just different. Because folklore is well suited for a variety of interpretations, there is less pressure on the ESL child to get the same meaning from the story as everyone else.

Folklore’s multiple levels of interpretations also make it well suited for use with the arts. The arts, be it drama, music, and/or art, are all modes of expressing one’s own special interpretation. Like folklore, the arts exist in every culture. Folklore encompasses all of the folk songs that a culture has preserved by passing them on from generation to generation. Folklore and the arts offer a rich connection to one’s heritage, culture, and history. The arts don’t have to rely on written language, or even oral language.

For example, music is a universal language that can be nonverbal. Music is able to express any feeling. When a child is unable to express him/herself through words, music offers another way. In 1991, Catherine Geach, a 19-year-old from England, went to Cambodia where she began a school for the children who had been orphaned or

abandoned by the war-torn country. Most of the children had been so traumatized that they simply couldn't speak. They didn't understand her English language. She used the universal language of music to communicate with them, and to allow them expression of their feelings. Over the next few years, a school was built and the children who came began to have their broken wings mended through music, and through the compassion and acceptance of this young woman (Emmons, 1998).

Another form of nonverbal communication, body language, is evident in drama and dance. Pantomime depends completely on body language to convey a message. One of the multiple intelligences identified by Howard Gardner is bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. People who are strong in this intelligence are very adept at communicating through body language, and perceiving the body language of others. Dancing may be as simple as listening to music and moving one's body to express the feelings or thoughts that the music brings to mind. A whole story may be acted out using only body movement, facial expression, and a variety of musical instruments or noise makers that bring forth different images or emotions.

For example, running feet, slow heavy footsteps, and going down a staircase all have different sounds. Quickly drumming one's fingers on a tabletop will probably not make one think of slow heavy footsteps as much as some heavy slow beats on the drum. Not only does acting out a story, with or without music, require one to make decisions as to how best represent an image or feeling, but it requires one to understand the sequence of events in the story, the cause and effect of events in the story, the different characters and setting, and the conflict and resolution. Because folk tales tend to have a predictable structure, with a problem, about three action steps, and a resolution, these stories are

often easy to act out. The Three Little Bears, the Three Billy Goats Gruff, The Three Little Kittens who lost their mittens, and The Three Little Pigs are all examples. The “trip-trap, trip-trap” of the goats crossing the bridge is perfect for a rhythmic beat. There is no language barrier to acting out these stories with music and pantomime.

Creating art is, of course, a great way to express oneself. The important thing to remember is that creating art is about the *process*, not the end product. When one’s hands touch play dough, cookie dough, bread dough, finger paints, sand, snow, rice, dirt, or mud, it feels good. As fingers move and slide through the tactile experience of these media, one is enjoying the process of art, of changing the shape and form of something, of creating something new. Different colors are associated with different feelings, and adding some food coloring to snow, water, or play dough brings out different feelings and expressions. An ESL child may hear the teacher read the story of Cinderella. Perhaps the child doesn’t understand any of the English words. However, the child will understand the facial expressions, tone, and rhythm in the teacher’s voice. The child will see the pictures throughout the story. The child may well be familiar with a version of Cinderella from his/her own culture. If the teacher hands out two pieces of paper to each child, and asks the children to finger paint on one page how Cinderella feels at the ball, and on the other page how the stepsisters feel toward Cinderella, it is likely that different colors will be chosen! It is not important what the pictures look like. What is important is that as the child experiences the feel of sliding his/her fingers around on the page in the colors he/she chooses, he/she is recognizing the point of view from different characters. Again, language is not a barrier.

Teachers at the Reggio Emilia school in Italy believe that creating art is part of cognitive development. The cognitive process requires thinking of a feeling or idea and finding a visual symbol to express it. Looking for patterns and thinking of symbols require reasoning, problem solving, and decision making. Through creating art, children “develop perceptual sensitivity to their world, perceiving likenesses, differences, shapes, sizes, textures, and colors” ((Seefeldt, 1995). The philosophy of Reggio Emilia is that art “communicates to others just as language does. What were once personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences belonging to one person are now shared visually with others” (Seefeldt, 1995).

Through drama, music, and art, one is able to clearly express and communicate one’s feelings without speaking a single word. For the ESL child, the arts provide the freedom to express oneself without having to worry about verbal or written language. The arts offer a release for all the thoughts that are stockpiling in the child’s head and not able to be easily expressed in the English language.

Using the arts with folklore is very effective for the ESL learner. Not only do the arts allow the ESL child an opportunity to express him/herself in a nonverbal way, they also allow for the whole brain to be used. The left side of the brain tends to focus more on sequential events and individual aspects or parts of a whole. It approaches a problem in a very systematic, step-by-step way. The right side of the brain tends to focus on the big picture. It is less analytical and more intuitive. The side of one’s brain that a person uses most often is sometimes described as part of one’s learning style. A person’s learning style may change over time, and may be influenced by one’s culture and how one is taught. If, for example, a culture values global thinking, or looking at the whole

picture rather than the individual parts, children of that culture may grow up with that style of thought emphasized in the home and classroom. The child may be used to using the right side of his/her brain to learn in that way. If so, he/she may struggle in a classroom that primarily taps into the left side of the brain. The arts offer a way to incorporate the whole of one's brain.

The psycho-sociolinguistic approach to literacy instruction is also focused on using the whole brain. Rather than beginning with the individual parts of words and building into a sentence and then into a story, which uses the analytic quality of the left lobe of the brain, the child learns to read by first experiencing the language of the whole story, which uses the global quality of the right lobe of the brain. Because language processing occurs in the left lobe of the brain, the whole brain is being used.

The psycho-sociolinguistic approach also recognizes the individual schema that each child has, and thus is an excellent approach to use with ESL children. Because folklore, including folk songs, offers a connection to the rich history of a culture, both legendary and real, folklore has personal meaning for people. It makes people feel connected to their heritage. It also helps people of different cultures to feel more connected to each other. "Using folklore in teaching reading helps students to understand their own cultural heritage and the heritage of others while developing their reading interests" (Lutz, 1986). Through studying folklore, "students learn about the relationships between oral and written literature, verbal and nonverbal expression, and folk art and more complex forms of artistic impression" (Lutz, 1986). Also, because "folklore deals with out universal experience, with recurring human problems, it touches our humanness" (Hadaway & Mundy, 1992).

ESL children have experience in a different culture. There is much personal meaning for them in being able to explore and share the folklore of their culture. It is also meaningful for the English-speaking children in the class. Even if one's ancestors arrived on the Mayflower, they came from some country in Europe. The Native Americans have a rich history of myths, legends, and animal tales passed on by storytellers. As children explore the folklore of their ancestors, they interview their parents and grandparents. They research. They uncover "jokes, riddles, puzzles, and rhymes; folk songs, tales, myths, and legends; traditional/folk medicine; beliefs and superstitions; gestures; architecture, handicraft, and art; fairy tales and tall tales; horror and ghost stories; animal tales; place names; and oral history" (Hadaway & Mundy, 1992). When what one is studying has personal meaning, it increases motivation for learning, and it is more fun.

Folklore has personal meaning and cultural connections. It has universal themes. It has predictable structure. Drama, music, and art offer nonverbal modes of communication. Combining the folklore with the arts is an ideal approach to teaching ESL children who come to the classroom with very different schema and an inability to communicate well in English. As their individual experiences and background knowledge are engaged, and their thoughts and feelings are given a nonverbal outlet of expression, they will enjoy the process of learning and creating.

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