Chapter 18

“What Is the Meaning of Of?”:
The Untold Reading Struggles of Young African–Born Immigrants in US Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a small reading intervention program, in the form of participatory action research, which was conceived for African-born, elementary level immigrant children upon a third grader’s indication that she did not know the meaning of the word of. The twofold purpose of the intervention was to: (1) uncover the challenges of being from a non-reading culture and being taught by a teacher from a reading culture, and (2) propose ways these challenges could be minimized. The chapter describes in detail the noticing strategies—punctuation discovery, sentence recall, copying, word dictation, etc.—that were used to develop basic reading and writing skills of p-6 French-speaking, African immigrant children. The chapter concludes with a call on educational policy makers to sponsor reading immersion programs for newcomer students, with a recommendation that these courses be taught by qualified immigrant educators, to ensure that these students’ school integration process assures success.

INTRODUCTION

“What is the meaning of of?”, asked a teary-eyed, African-born 3rd grader, who could not decode the title of a small Easter Bunny book she was asked to read aloud. Many American-born teachers, including teachers of English Language Learners (ELL), would have found this child’s question surprising!

A third grader does not know the meaning of of!

How do you explain of to someone?

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3955-1.ch018
These are some of the questions that a US-born teacher with no experience learning a new language might ask herself or himself. In contrast, a foreign-born teacher of non-English speaking background can relate to the experience of learning to read in a foreign language and, therefore, might find the child’s question normal. It did not mean that the student, who I will name Sweet-T to maintain her anonymity, had never used the preposition “of” during the seven months that she had been living in the United States of America. Judging from her conversational English, her basic interpersonal skills (BICS) were very well developed; she spoke fluently and articulately. During our social conversation, Sweet-T understood me very well, and I understood her the same way (perhaps because we shared the Africanness as well as the French language influence). The situation was different when I asked her to read; her reading proficiency seemed undeveloped.

According to Tienda (2011), analyses of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS–K), revealed that students from underrepresentative groups, who begin kindergarten with limited oral English proficiency fall behind native speakers in their reading ability, resulting in a substantial achievement gap by fifth grade. As soon as I asked her to read to me from a storybook I had downloaded from the Internet, Sweet-T’s face changed and she became ill at ease. “What is the meaning of of?”, she asked with an air of not wanting to read. Her inability to figure out the meaning of a word as simple as of perplexed me; it made me question the nature of the reading instruction she had been receiving. Of is a short and ubiquitous word that one would assume would be easy to recognize for a child who has either read aloud, read along, or been read to by an experienced adult. Several hypotheses crossed my mind as I looked with empathy into the face of the frustrated child.

Was she too shy in class and never volunteered to read? Or, had she been laughed at by peers and decided not to volunteer to read aloud anymore? Or, was she being ignored in class? Research suggests that “yes” could be the answer to any of these questions; however, my intention was not to research them further but, rather, (1) to uncover some of the challenges that a child from a non-reading (oral) culture might face when s/he is being taught by a teacher from a reading (literate) culture, and (2) to propose ways these challenges be minimized and underrepresented newcomer students be given the literacy support they need from their teachers from the moment they arrive in the United States. Thus, this chapter describes in details the noticing strategies – punctuation discovery, sentence recall, copying, autodictation, cloze dictation, word-image matching and guided read-alouds—that were used to develop the basic reading skills of 9 newly arrived elementary children (grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6) from French-speaking Africa, who showed acute signs of being performing below grade level in basic reading and writing skills. The chapter is comprised of four main sections. First, the introduction provides a background on the oral versus literate dichotomy. Second, the context and background history of the intervention program are provided. The third section consists of the review of the literature on bilingual theories of second language acquisition and how they conflict with the biological age-based policy of US school placement for immigrant children. Section four of the chapter introduces the reading intervention program, explicates the noticing technique within the context of second language acquisition, and describes in detail the noticing strategies that were used in the reading program. Finally, the chapter concludes with a call to action to educational policy makers to sponsor reading immersion programs for newcomer children, and a recommendation that these courses be taught by qualified immigrant educators, to ensure that these children’s school integration process is a positive one so that they are able to progress as naturally as their American-born counterparts.

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