The Teaching and Learning of Language Arts

Pablo Neruda, in his prose poem, *The Word,* shares with us the grace and delight that language can bring. This aesthetic dimension allows us to discover the power and beauty of literature as a mirror of human motives, conflicts, values, and traditions. But language has other powers. It allows us to communicate with each other not only through reading fiction and nonfiction, but through writing, listening, and speaking; it lets us make meaning of our lives. Language provides us with connections to the lives and worlds of others, thereby extending our own boundaries. Language helps us to be thoughtful, informed, creative, and compassionate.

To a very large extent, academic and professional success is determined by our competence in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Language is the vehicle through which we become informed, think critically, make reasoned judgments, create, appreciate, and analyze. Therefore, the study of language arts is of the utmost importance in the achievement of both personal and academic fulfillment. Literacy creates effective citizens, productive employees, and lifelong learners.

NEW YORK STATE *English Language Arts Standards*

1. Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.

2. Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.

3. Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

4. Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction.

In its effort to improve student performance in language arts, the New York State Education Department has developed four learning standards in English language arts which set clear, high expectations for all students, along with specific performance indicators for each standard.

The **ELA learning standards** represent a statement of the knowledge, skills, and understanding that individuals can and do habitually demonstrate over time as a consequence of instruction and experience. **Performance indicators** define the levels of student achievement and stipulate the nature of evidence and quality of student performance that are expected at different developmental levels. (see Appendix A)

In addition, performance indicators incorporate five dimensions of growth that increase in complexity at successive levels. Those dimensions are range, flexibility, connections, conventions, and independence. Student achievement is measured through a revised series of assessments in the fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades aligned with the new learning standards and performance indicators.

Key Concepts:

◆ Learning standards

◆ Performance indicators

◆ Initial language acquisition

◆ Second language acquisition

◆ Receptive skills: listening/reading

◆ Productive skills: speaking/writing

◆ Theoretical approaches to language arts instruction

It's the words that sing, they soar and descend . . . I bow to them . . . I love them, I cling to them, I run them down, I bite into them, I melt them down . . . I love words so much . . .

Pablo Neruda

✔ A student's native language is a powerful resource for learning a second language.

✔ A student's native language knowledge should be used to develop English language proficiency.

✔ ESL instruction and native language knowledge are the "bridge" to develop English language arts.

✔ ELA standards are the framework for native language arts instruction.

✔ ELA standards are the framework for ESL instruction.

✔ To achieve the NYS standards, NLA, ESL, and ELA teachers must focus collaboratively on an integrated, process-oriented system of instruction.

Impact of New York State English Language Arts (ELA) Standards on Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners

As stated in the *Preliminary Draft Framework for English Language Arts,* New York State supports the view that:

" . . . diversity is an advantage and a foundation that should be built upon, rather than a deficit or a problem. In a culturally responsive classroom, students are encouraged to rely on all the linguistic resources they have and to see their home language as a valuable resource. . . . Their primary language, their talk and their stories, the experiences reflective of their native culture will all contribute to their own learning and the learning of their classmates. For students for whom English is a second language, the expectation is that all students will gain competence in the English language even while they are encouraged to maintain and strengthen their ability in their first language. . . . The role of the teacher is to provide opportunities for those with less command of English to interact in meaningful ways with those whose command of English is greater, while also helping competent English speakers to grow in their use of the language. The teacher's role is to provide a safe and comfortable environment for students to use and reflect upon the various language uses and forms that characterize language in various cultures while learning standard English uses and forms." (p. 10)

In an effort to underscore the importance of collaboration among teachers, administrators, students, and their parents, the NYSED Office of Bilingual Education has been instrumental in developing a program entitled the **Bilingual/ESL Staff Academy for Raising Standards (BESARS)** throughout New York State. BESARS helps LEP/ELLs meet the high expectations established in the State's learning standards for English language arts and pass the Regents Comprehensive Examination in English through one of three types of academy.

The Professional Development Academy is a collaborative turnkey training model in which an English language arts teacher, a native language arts teacher, and an English as a second language teacher participate in a strong professional development and tutorial program. The academy is designed to capitalize on the strength and expertise of each member of the team to develop the language arts instructional program necessary to help limited English proficient/English language learners meet the challenge of the English language arts standards. The teams, in turn, work with other teachers in their schools to ensure that limited English proficient/English language learners meet the new graduation requirements. The Instructional Academy provides for the extension of the school day for LEP/ELLs to participate in intensive tutorial sessions before or after school, or on Saturdays, under the leadership of the Professional Development Academy teams. The Parent Academy provides information to parents on the State's higher standards and revised assessment system, along with strategies to help them assist their children.

Principles of Language Acquisition

Learning one's native language is a natural process that is supported by family members and the surrounding society. Second language learning, like native language learning, develops best in a naturalistic and meaningful environment, starting with social language and eventually moving to competence in academic learning.

"Learning to talk in the language of the culture into which one has been born is a stunning achievement, almost universally successful, extremely rapid, . . . and durable . . . once having mastered talk, those who have learned it continue to use it and develop it."

(Cambourne, 1988)

This naturalistic theory lays the foundation for the continuing modeling and learning of a student's native language, not only in speech, but similarly in reading, writing, and listening. The theory applies as well to second language acquisition (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1985). In ways similar to the family setting, the teacher and instructional environment are similarly supportive, so that language approximations are met with encouragement and modeling, not with constant correction. The teacher can thus incorporate, appreciate, and celebrate the diversity students bring to their classroom (Tchudi, 1991).

The key features of the **naturalistic theory of language learning** (Cambourne, 1988) include the following:

- Language skills develop in a natural progression.

- Language is viewed as an integrated whole, rather than as separate skill components.

- Social interactions support and enhance complex language development.

- Instruction in language arts takes into account students' learning styles, academic level, and linguistic growth.

- Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are integrated. Language and literature learning are connected.

- Language learning comes best through a variety of meaningful and enjoyable activities.

- Students' life experiences will be used as the entry point for learning to listen and speak and to read and write.

The Teaching and Learning of Language Arts

With Cambourne's research in mind, the philosophy of teaching reading, writing, listening, and speaking to limited English proficient/English language learners as well as monolingual English-speaking students rests on the following basic assumptions:

The Teaching and Learning of Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking: Basic Assumptions for Monolingual and Bilingual Students

- *High standards are held for all students.*

- *Native and second language reading, writing, listening, and speaking are all connected.*

- *Native and second language reading, writing, listening, and speaking are taught in a literate environment* in which teachers surround their students with multicultural and bias-free literature, nonfiction, newspapers, periodicals, non-print media, and technology, including materials in the native languages found in each classroom.

- *All teachers of LEP/ELLs are role models, guides, facilitators, and co-learners* who recognize individual student needs; learning styles; developmental stages; and diverse cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds as they build on student strengths.

- *The process used in completing a task is as important as the product.* Students should be given opportunities to operate at all levels of the cognitive domain, striving to reach the higher end of thinking skills: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

- *Computer-based innovations are used to enhance student achievement in English and in the native language* (Soska, 1994). Word processing, desktop publishing, the World Wide Web, and e-mail should be used to make learning more interactive, link distant classrooms, encourage critical thinking and independent learning, and foster language development (Dolson and Meyer, 1992).

CONSIDERATIONS *for LEP/ELLs*

✔ A student's native language is the starting point for instruction in the second language.

✔ Students should be encouraged to make connections between the second language and their own languages, cultures, and lives.

CONSIDERATIONS
for LEP/ELLs

✔ Provide meaningful listening and speaking activities through ESL and native language instruction to bridge LEP/ELLs' cognitive development and English language learning.

✔ Be aware that LEP/ELLs may undergo a "silent or nonverbal period" while engaging in intensive listening before attempting to speak in English.

CONSIDERATIONS
for LEP/ELLs

✔ The reading process is similar in all languages.

✔ Reading ability in the native language can be transferred to learning to read in English.

✔ Select appropriate reading approaches based on LEP/ELLs' strengths and needs.

✔ Assess students' literacy skills in both the native language and in English.

✔ Incorporate students' prior knowledge, experience, and cultural background into reading activities.

✔ Create a print-rich classroom environment which reflects the LEP/ELLs' cultures and languages.

✔ Emphasize comprehension and higher-order thinking.

✔ Use reading aloud judiciously to measure LEP/ELLs' comprehension of text.

- *Evaluation in an integrated program with an emphasis on meaning* focuses on how successful students are at discovering and creating meaning for themselves.

- *Ongoing, joint professional development enables staff in NLA, ESL, and ELA to apply the knowledge and technical skills* necessary to design and implement those curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices most effective in the teaching and learning of language arts.

The Teaching and Learning of Listening and Speaking

> "I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen. . . . And accrue what I hear into myself. . . and let the sounds contribute toward me . . . . I hear the sound of the human voice. . . a sound I love. . . ."
> Walt Whitman

Research suggests that listening is an interactive, dynamic, interpretive process in which the listener engages in the active construction of meaning. Because oral communication involves the negotiation of meaning between two or more persons, it is always related to the context in which it occurs. Speaking means negotiating intended meanings and adjusting one's speech to produce the desired effect on the listener (O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce, 1996). Listening and speaking are interdependent processes, and need to be taught and assessed in an integrated manner (Murphy, 1991).

The Teaching and Learning of Reading

> "Because reading is such a complex and multifaceted activity, no single method is the answer."
> (Snow, 1998)

Reading is an interactive process between the reader and the text in which the reader's prior knowledge, together with his/her knowledge of the graphic, syntactic, and semantic systems, is used to comprehend the text.

There are, generally speaking, three approaches to reading instruction which can be applied to learning to read in many languages, especially for those languages that use the Roman alphabet. Jeanne Chall, in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1983), divided beginning reading approaches into code-emphasis and meaning-emphasis. The first suggests that reading is primarily learned and processed from the part to the whole; that reading is sounding out words, identifying them, and combining them to get the meaning of a sentence. Meaning thus comes from the text to the reader.

The second approach, the one that has been found through research (Smith, Goodman, Harste, Weaver, and many more) to be more effective in fostering literacy, says that language processing primarily occurs from the whole to the part. In this socio-psycholinguistic approach, the reader uses both visual information (letter-sound relationships, syntax, illustrations, etc.) and nonvisual information (the knowledge stored in the mind). One may look at a sentence in a foreign language and possibly even sound out the words, but that is not reading. The knowledge necessary to make sense of the sentence is missing (Smith, 1986). In this approach to reading, the interaction between the reader and the text, as well as the use of prior knowledge to bring meaning to the reading selection, is of primary importance. It cannot happen without the visual information (the skills required in identifying the words and language) but it is the primary focus of reading instruction (Weaver, 1988).

A third, the "balanced approach" (Snow, 1998; Strickland, 1997), places emphasis both on phonics and other word identification strategies, while retaining the idea that making meaning is the ultimate goal of the reading process and that skills should be taught in the context of authentic reading experiences. In other words, this approach combines the best elements from phonics instruction and the whole language approach. In support of the "balanced approach," a panel of experts from the

National Research Council (1998) argues that the complex process of learning how to read cannot be undertaken by one specific approach and calls for an end to the reading wars that have divided educators, researchers, and lawmakers. The panel recommends teaching children how to read through explicit phonics instruction and by sounding out unfamiliar words, but also urges daily exposure to literature and attention to comprehension.

Many experts believe that a combination of phonics and whole language may be the most effective way to teach the beginning reader. In order to meet the needs of a variety of students, teachers and administrators need to have a clear understanding of these approaches and how they can best be adapted and applied to classroom learning experiences. As stated in their position paper, *Using Multiple Methods of Beginning Reading: A Position Statement of the International Reading Association* (IRA, 1999):

> "There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of children in their care so they can create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach."

The Teaching and Learning of Writing

> "Through reading, children enter imagined social worlds and through writing they create them."
>
> (Saez-Vega, 1996)

As in the development of speech and reading, the process of learning to write begins early in a child's life. If given the opportunity, very young children will experiment with writing. Even their scribbles display characteristics of the writing system of their culture, so that the writing of a child from China differs from the writing of a child from Egypt or the United States long before the children can write conventionally (Harste and Carey, 1979).

In any language, reading and writing are closely linked. Readers use their own knowledge and experience to construct meaning *from* text, writers to construct meaning *in* text. To communicate successfully, children need to read like writers and write like readers. They can then see the elements common to both forms of expression — that both are purposeful, express meaning, share the same functions, and use the same print conventions (Holdaway, 1986). During writing, students use their knowledge of their native or second language in constructing text and organizing ideas. They reread their pieces to confirm that what they have written is what they intended. As E.M. Forster expressed it, "I don't know what I think until I see what I've said."

It is understood from the general principles and underlying assumptions described above that instruction in English and native language arts must integrate the four strands of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. One strand cannot be separated from the others. At some point in every classroom activity, each of the strands must be touched upon. The reading of a story, for example, involves discussion not only about the topic, but about the craft of writing; students respond to the story orally and in writing.

For the purposes of elaborating on the general principles of teaching and learning language arts, the following chapters will deal with assessing student progress and with instructional approaches and practices which incorporate these principles in both native language arts and ESL instruction.

"Because reading is such a complex and multifaceted activity, no single method is the answer."

Snow, 1998

CONSIDERATIONS *for LEP/ELLs*

✔ Writing ability in the native language can be transferred to learning to write in English.

✔ Promote writing for multiple purposes through meaningful activities related to the ELLs' cultural background and experience.

✔ Value LEP/ELLs' writings in the native language and in English.

✔ Address LEP/ELLs' learning styles through a wide range of writing activities.

✔ Allow LEP/ELLs to focus initially on the expression of ideas, not necessarily on complete mechanical accuracy.

✔ Use LEP/ELLs' writings to bolster their knowledge of the mechanics of language.