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Parent and Child Activities in a Community-Based English Tutoring Program

■ **A Community-Based English Tutoring (CBET) program at Burbank Adult School taught English as a Second Language (ESL) and tutoring skills to adults, as CBET programs are designed to do, but in a unique variation, children were included in the classes. The teachers faced major challenges in designing activities in which parents and children learned together, because of the varying developmental levels of the children and the greater proficiency of some children related to some adults. This paper describes successful activities and practices from the program.**

A unique adult-child program at Burbank Adult School taught both English as a Second Language (ESL) and tutoring skills to the adults. The teachers faced major challenges in designing activities in which parents and children learned together. This paper describes successful activities and practices from the program.

In 1998, voters in California passed Proposition 227, thus eliminating most bilingual classes. At the same time, the proposition included \$50 million per year for adult ESL classes. Most of the students were to be parents who promised to tutor ESL children when the classes were over. Districts designed Community-Based English Tutoring (CBET) programs in different ways. In Azusa, parents checked out videos, books, and workbooks

and completed their lessons at home. In Glendale, parents attended adult ESL classes.

In Burbank, the Adult School director and the ESL coordinator decided on a different model. Parents attended evening ESL classes at the same time that children met in multiage groups for their own activities. Each evening, for 30 to 45 minutes, adults and children met together. Some activities reinforced what the children and adults had just learned. Other activities gave the adults a chance to practice tutoring the children on part of the content they had just covered. Designing the joint activities for parents and children was a major challenge, since children ranged in age from 5 to 12, and parents were at various ESL levels. The problem of pitching activities at the right ESL level is a common one for teachers of adults and children. However, we had two particular challenges: the developmental levels of the children and the greater proficiency of some children related to some adults.

Bell (1988) dealt with ways to group students in a multilevel class: whole-class activities, groups, and pairs. Groups and pairs might be homogenous or heterogeneous in proficiency. She outlined whole-class activities in which learners take varied roles. For example, for a drama project, more advanced learners might write a script while beginners could sell tickets or paint scenery. However, we have found nothing written about planning activities for ESL parents and children at various levels. In fact, meeting the needs of these disparate students was more difficult than meeting the needs of any class of ESL adults or ESL children. Since accommodating varying students is always an issue in ESL classes, the Burbank CBET program forced the teachers to exercise all their knowledge, skill, and common sense about grouping. We hope that the solutions that we came up with in Burbank will be useful to other ESL teachers in CBET programs and in other settings. In this paper, we discuss successful parent-child activities, while keeping in mind the children's grade levels and the parents' ESL levels. The term "students" refers to both parents and children.

Successful Activities

Many successful activities were theme-based. By using a set of related activities over several days, teachers were able to accommodate parents and children. For instance, one set of activities dealt with emergency situations at home. First, students watched the video *Home Alone*. In later activities, they practiced fire drills and earthquake drills, drew a picture of their house or apartment with escape routes noted, and wrote riddles about natural disasters. For instance, "It's hot and smoky: What is it?"

The emergency activities were effective because the content was understandable, relevant, and often humorous, and because many learning modalities were engaged. The parents dealt with practical information, but children were still interested in the content. The listening demands varied from watching a comedy movie to doing a craft project while the teacher explained the directions. Students were asked to act out or draw information. Those at higher levels (children, probably) were asked to write riddles, a more sophisticated task. For some theme-based activities, the *CBET in Action* videos (McIntire, Powers, & Shushtari, 2000) were a useful resource.

Successful Practices in Parent-Child Activities

As we examined successful activities, four practices often emerged: learning accomplished at home and at school, preparation and study by parent and child, joint in-class learning by parent and child, and the teacher's skill in providing activities for a range of abilities.

1. Parents and Children Start the Activity at School and Follow Up at Home.

The advantage here is that students learn how to carry out the activity with the teacher's supervision. For example, the parent times the child and counts words as the child reads aloud from a fluency practice list. Children practice the list and graph their progress. Once they master the list, they read from a book at their independent level and

count the words read in a minute. In this task, the demands are appropriate for the child, and the parent has only to keep track of time and help in counting words or graphing.

2. Parents and Children Prepare Materials and Study Together.

To prepare a report on their native country, parents and children begin by using reference books to prepare a study guide. The teacher models how to make a poster from information in the study guide. Students work on posters to share with the class and then bring souvenirs and artifacts from home that come from their countries. In class, families circulate to see posters and artifacts belonging to other students. This activity works because the content is important to children and adults and because the language demands vary by type and by level.

3. Parents and Children Learn Together in Class Activities.

In some activities, parents and children naturally learn together. In reader's theater, several students may share a part, and some may be asked to hold up signs, make sound effects, or work on costumes and props. Thus, each student has an appropriate role. Children may already be familiar with the story, while adults may be working with it for the first time. In a storytelling activity, the teacher writes a version of a familiar story, making sure to have as many sentences as there are students. Each student receives a sentence, memorizes it, and recites it to the teacher. After the teacher collects the sentences, students must find a way to recite the story in order. In this activity, the children are often more familiar with the story than the adults are. The teacher needs to vary the length and difficulty of the sentences so that each student receives one that is appropriate.

4. Teachers Provide Activities for a Range of Abilities.

According to Bell (1988), activities that work with a range of abilities need to include

varying tasks. Each activity needs roles for weaker, stronger, and average students. For example, when playing 20 Questions, the weaker student thinks of a person or thing, or perhaps just picks a card from a selection made by the students. Then the stronger students work to ask understandable yes-no questions. In interviews, the stronger student asks the question while the weaker student answers. In preparation for field trips, stronger students research and write up their findings while weaker students hear others explain pictures or videos and prepare to draw or take photos of aspects of the field trip. In a role play, as in the readers' theater activity above, parts require varying levels of language proficiency.

Sample Activities for Parents by ESL Level and Children by Grade

We illustrate these practices below with activities that have worked with our CBET students.

1. Low-Level ESL Parents and Children in Grades K-2

Because of the age of the children—and the likelihood that some are at English Language Development (ELD) levels 1-3—the activities for this group need to be hands-on and include action, visuals, and real objects (realia). The activities need to appeal to primary-grade children. Adults will generally go along with the activities to learn or supervise. Kim's Game (Wright & Buckby, 1984) is suitable. The teacher shows a tray of objects, names them, takes the tray outside the classroom, removes an object, and asks the student what is missing. Another possibility is for the teacher to model and teach songs, particularly those that include repetition and gestures. Thematic units on primary themes are also possible: for example, the two listed above on emergency situations, on health, and many others. For instance, in a money unit, children learn the value of coins and bills, adults clip coupons, and all do a play shopping activity. In studying the community,

students make a map of the classroom and of the neighborhood.

2. Low-Level ESL Parents and Children in Grades 3-5

Some of the activities above also work for low-level ESL parents with children in grades 3-5. However, more challenging activities that require more reading, thought, and memory can also be used with this group.

- Board games (Monopoly format, trail game format). Teachers can vary the reading difficulty of the game cards. Parents and children can read together.
- Completing a cloze exercise for an unfamiliar song. Parents and children complete the same version of the cloze together. Alternatively, the teacher prepares an easier version, with fewer words deleted, for some students.
- Storytelling in stages. Three students leave the classroom and stand in the hall while the teacher tells a story. Then the three students return, one by one, to hear the story from other students and then to retell it to the next absent student. The teacher needs to choose the most competent speakers/listeners to leave the room. Then the rest of the class hears the story told and retold several times by the different speakers. The students who only listen get valuable practice as they hear the different speakers modify the story.
- Reader's theater. The teacher finds or prepares a script for a children's book. To accommodate weaker readers, the teacher groups students on the same parts or even assigns some students to hold props or handle sound effects.

All of these activities can provide suitable practice. The content appeals to both children and adults. The teacher can structure the activities so that weaker and stronger students participate in different ways. Still, because these activities are more difficult

academically, some parents may not be able to participate fully.

3. Higher-Level ESL Parents and Children in Grades K-2

Higher-level parents are in a stronger position as tutors because of their greater English proficiency. Their abilities allow them to learn and teach rhymes or to succeed at language-based games. In a unit on health, higher-level parents were able to teach the "Teddy Bear" rhyme. They also took the lead in a game of Hangman based on food vocabulary.

Hands-on activities that appeal to K-2 children are useful for this combination of adults and children. A hands-on activity gives the child context for the task and tempers the adult's verbal advantage. For example, as part of an "emergency situations" theme, parents and children made construction paper replicas of their house or apartment. They filled out a note card with their name, address, and phone number and placed it inside. All in all, activities suitable for K-2 children will suit parents at either ESL level.

4. Higher-Level ESL Parents and Children in Grades 3-5

Activities that require higher-level ESL and academic skills from parents can work well with children in grades 3-5. A poetry activity was successful with parents and children. Students read a poem aloud, cut apart the lines, numbered and reassembled the lines, and then recited the poem, read it aloud, and discussed it. In another activity carried out over 3-4 sessions, the parent and child pairs prepared a presentation about the native country through making a poster, assembling artifacts, and planning a short talk.

Children at these grade levels can work more independently at home, even with written materials. For example, students can read aloud for 30 minutes with the parent and then record a brief report. Children in grades 3-5 may respond well to themes that do not appeal to younger children. We found that they especially enjoyed doing the report on

the parents' native country. Within the community unit, they enjoyed the field trips to the library to obtain a card and borrow books.

Summary and Future Directions

In the Burbank CBET program, one of the largest challenges was to devise parent-child activities that engaged the participants and helped them to use, practice, or tutor English. When we were successful, we often had based the activities around a theme, instructed students in class and asked them to practice at home, or engaged students to prepare materials together. We often took the children's developmental and ESL levels into consideration, as well as the adults' ESL levels. The children's needs seemed more important than the adults' as the adults usually would adjust to a children's activity. We tried to design activities that allowed for a range of abilities.

In the future, we will need to plan more theme-based activities that appeal to grade 3-5 students. Curricula for family literacy (Ada, 1988; Auerbach, 1990; Holt, 1988) should prove useful. In addition, we can adapt practices that strengthen the home-school connection (Ascher, 1988). For instance, by analyzing district-adopted children's textbooks we will devise related parent-child activities. These activities might be conducted at school, at home, or both.

Although the parent-child activities are difficult to plan and carry out, we see many benefits when both parents and children learn together. We see that the parents enjoy themselves and improve their ESL proficiency. In addition, parents and children build respect for each other. While the parents can model adult study skills and competencies, some children model for their parents near-native competency in English and familiarity with U.S. school culture.

Authors

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Appendix

Useful Web Sites

- <http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/index.html>
Aaron Shepard's reader's theater site
- <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/drama.htm>
An index of Web sites dealing with reader's theater, drama, storytelling, and so forth