

From Majlis to Manuscript: Leveraging Emirati Oral Traditions to Scaffold Phase 1 Literacy in the PYP

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Abstract

Emirati children arrive in KG2 as competent storytellers. Most have spent their first five years in households where narrative is an ordinary daily practice: a grandmother recounting life before the oil economy, moral tales told at bedtime, the conversational turn-taking of the majlis. When formal English literacy instruction begins, it usually begins with imported texts about snow, forests and farmyard animals, and the confident five-year-old narrator often becomes a quiet one. This paper reports a small-scale practitioner action research study conducted in a single KG2 classroom in an English-medium IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) setting in the United Arab Emirates. Over several inquiry cycles, the class teacher and a research partner introduced three linked practices: co-constructed Storytelling Adventures built from Emirati folktales and family narratives; Word Detective play, in which children hunted for sounds and rhymes inside stories they already knew; and Visible Thinking routines anchored by familiar cultural artefacts. Data was generated through pedagogical documentation, audio-recorded storytelling sessions, anecdotal records, samples of child talk during play, and teacher reflective journals. These are observations from one classroom, generated by the teachers who taught it, and they carry the limits that implies. They do not establish that culturally familiar storytelling causes measurable literacy gains. What they do suggest is more modest and, we think, still worth saying: cultural familiarity appears to function as a scaffold for early English literacy rather than a decorative addition to it and treating it as such costs a teacher very little.

Keywords: early literacy, oral tradition, Emirati children, culturally sustaining pedagogy, IB Primary Years Programme, translanguaging, action research

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Introduction

The claim that oral language precedes and supports written language is not new, and it is not seriously contested. Children learn to mean before they learn to read, through interaction, joint attention and shared narrative (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1986). Longitudinal evidence has since put numbers to the intuition: narrative retelling and linguistic comprehension measured at age five make unique contributions to reading comprehension five and nine years later, even after controlling for cognitive ability, phonological skill and maternal education (Babayigit et al., 2021), and preschool language skills sit on the main pathway to later comprehension in meta-analytic reviews of the field (Hjetland et al., 2020).

What is less often examined is whose oral language is being counted. The narrative skills a child brings to school are culturally shaped: they are stories of particular kinds, told in particular settings, about particular things. Emirati children typically arrive at kindergarten with a great deal of narrative competence developed in Arabic through family gatherings and the *majlis* which is a gathering space that UNESCO (2015) inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity specifically for its role in transmitting oral heritage, including folk stories, folk songs and Nabati poetry, largely to children who accompany adults there. This is what Moll et al. (1992) would call a fund of knowledge: a household resource that is real, transferable and generally invisible to the school.

The problem this study grew out of is a practical one. In an English-medium PYP classroom, the entry points to formal literacy are usually commercial schemes and picture books produced elsewhere. A five-year-old Emirati child meeting these texts is asked to do two unfamiliar things simultaneously; to decode a new language and infer a new cultural world with the second demand rarely acknowledged as a demand at all. Teachers notice the result before they can name it: children who talk fluently in the playground go silent on the carpet.

We wanted to know what would happen if we stopped treating the children's existing narrative repertoire as background and started treating it as curriculum. This paper describes what we did, what we saw, and what we think it does and does not show.

The Emirati Early Years Context

The UAE is an unusually complex setting for early language education, and some of that complexity bears directly on this study. Emirati citizens are a minority within a superdiverse expatriate population, Arabic is the official language, and English functions as the working lingua franca and, in much of the private sector, as the medium of instruction from the earliest years (Gallagher, 2022). Successive policy efforts in Abu Dhabi have pursued Arabic–English bilingualism from kindergarten onwards, but the ambition of “balanced bilingualism” has proved considerably easier to state than to deliver (Gallagher, 2011, 2022).

Two features of this landscape shaped our thinking. The first is diglossia. Emirati children grow up speaking a spoken vernacular and encounter Modern Standard Arabic largely through school, television and books; the two varieties differ enough that the distance between them measurably affects children's phonological representations and their early reading in Arabic (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003; Saiegh-Haddad & Spolsky, 2014). Some scholars working in the UAE argue that the situation is better described as triglossia once the classroom presence of English is included (Carroll et al., 2017). The practical implication is that an Emirati five-year-old is not moving from one settled language into a second one. They are already negotiating varieties,

and English is a third demand layered onto an existing negotiation. Any account of “the child's home language” that treats Arabic as a single undifferentiated block will misdescribe what these children are actually doing.

The second feature is what happens at home. Barza and von Suchodoletz (2016) found that Emirati parents' preferences around shared reading function as a form of cultural transmission rather than simply as skills practice—the reading matters partly because of what it carries. Tibi and McLeod (2014) document how young children's Arabic language and literacy develops in the UAE specifically, and Al-Qaryouti et al. (2016) survey emergent literacy provision across the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Read together, this work suggests that the home is doing substantial language and literacy work that the English-medium classroom is not systematically connected to. Our study is, in one sense, an attempt to build a short bridge across that gap.

Review of Relevant Literature

Oral Language and Narrative as Literacy Foundations

Strong oral language underpins phonological awareness, vocabulary breadth and later reading comprehension (Hjetland et al., 2020; Snow et al., 1998). For bilingual learners, competence developed in a first language does not sit inertly alongside the second; it can support it, and the relationship between the two is developmental rather than zero-sum (Cummins, 2001; Hammer et al., 2014). Narrative is a particularly productive site for this because it demands extended, decontextualised talk of the kind that written language later requires. When children narrate, retell and argue about stories, they rehearse the structures they will meet again on the page (Wells, 1986).

Familiarity, Cognitive Load and Willingness to Speak

Isbell et al. (2004) found that storytelling and story reading produced measurable differences in young children's oral language complexity and story comprehension. The mechanism most commonly proposed is a reduction in competing demand: when a child already knows how the story goes, attention is freed for how it sounds. Krashen's (1982) affective filter offers a complementary account at the emotional level—anxiety, low confidence and fear of error suppress production regardless of underlying competence. Both accounts predict the same thing in practice, which is that familiar content should increase the volume and the riskiness of a young learner's talk. That prediction is straightforwardly testable in a classroom, which is what drew us to it.

Funds of Knowledge and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Moll et al. (1992) and, later, González et al. (2005) reframed household knowledge from a deficit to be compensated for into an asset to be drawn on. Ladson-Billings (1995) made the pedagogical case that children learn more when their cultural backgrounds are treated as resources; Paris and Alim (2017) pushed further, arguing that relevance is not enough and that schooling should actively sustain the linguistic and cultural practices children arrive with, rather than using them as a stepping stone and then discarding them. The distinction matters for our design. Using an Emirati folktale as a warm-up before returning to the “real” scheme would be cultural relevance. Treating the folktale as the site where phonological and vocabulary work actually happens is closer to what Paris and Alim have in mind.

Translanguaging in Early Years Classrooms

The translanguaging literature provides a way of describing what bilingual children do without treating their languages as separate compartments to be policed (García & Kley, 2016). Flynn et al. (2021) offer a close case study of an emergent bilingual preschooler whose storytelling improved in both of his languages when he was permitted to draw on his whole repertoire in the telling—an important finding, because the usual anxiety about translanguaging is that it will slow the acquisition of the target language. In the UAE specifically, Al-Bataineh and Gallagher (2021) examined how prospective teachers view the meshing of Arabic and English in children's storybooks, and found attitudes considerably more mixed than policy rhetoric might suggest. We took this as a caution as much as an endorsement: translanguaging in an English-medium school is a pedagogical choice teachers have to be able to defend.

Play, Inquiry and Literacy in the PYP

The PYP treats literacy as transdisciplinary and socially constructed, emerging through inquiry and authentic experience rather than through isolated skill drills (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2018). This is philosophically compatible with what we wanted to do, though compatibility is not the same as ease. Pyle and Danniels (2017) describe a continuum of play-based learning and are candid about the risk at its centre: adult intentions can hijack play until it stops being play. Baker (2015) documents exactly this tension in Abu Dhabi kindergartens, where English-medium teachers found their beliefs about play difficult to enact under curricular and assessment pressure. We designed with that warning in view, and we return to it in our findings.

Methodology

Design and Positionality

This was a qualitative practitioner action research study, structured as iterative plan–act–observe–reflect cycles (Kemmis et al., 2014). We chose action research because the question was a teacher's question and the answer had to be usable on a Tuesday morning. It carries an obvious cost: we were not neutral observers of these children. One of us taught them daily and had a stake in the interventions working. We have tried to manage this by documenting what did not work alongside what did, by keeping reflective journals that record disconfirming as well as confirming instances, and by having the second author, who did not teach the class, review the documentation independently. Readers should nonetheless weigh the findings as those of interested parties.

Setting and Participants

The study took place in one KG2 classroom in an English-medium school in the UAE following the IB Primary Years Programme. Participants were 32 Emirati children aged five, all English language learners, all with Arabic as the dominant home language and Emirati vernacular Arabic as their everyday spoken variety. The classroom operated on play-based, inquiry-driven principles consistent with PYP early years practice. The study ran across *3 terms per year*.

The Three Interventions

Storytelling Adventures

Children co-constructed English storytelling experiences drawn from Emirati folktales, desert and coastal animals, family gatherings and the moral tales commonly told at home. The design principle was to hold the narrative structure constant—the shapes children already knew—while varying the language. Children were not required to tell the story in English; they were required to help build it. In practice this meant a good deal of translanguaging, with Arabic used to negotiate meaning and English used to perform it, which is close to what García and Kley (2016) describe.

Word Detective Play

During play-based centres, children hunted for sounds, rhymes and repeated words inside the stories they had just built. Framing this as detection rather than testing was deliberate: a detective who is wrong is still doing detective work, whereas a child who is wrong on the carpet is often just wrong. Target vocabulary was selected using Beck et al.'s (2013) Tier 2 criterion—high-utility words that recur across contexts—rather than the concrete nouns that dominate imported schemes.

Visible Thinking Routines

We used *See–Think–Wonder* and related routines (Ritchhart et al., 2011) with authentic artefacts: the *dallah* coffee pot, traditional clothing, photographs of desert and coastal life, and prompts inviting children to bring a family story. The artefacts gave abstract English something physical to attach to, and—more usefully than we expected—gave children who were reluctant to speak something to point at.

Data Generation

Data sources were pedagogical documentation of child talk in the Reggio-influenced sense of documentation as a shared, interpretable trace of learning rather than a record of outcomes (Rinaldi, 2006); anecdotal observational records; audio recordings of storytelling sessions; samples of children's language use during play; and teacher reflective journals maintained across all cycles.

Analysis

Audio was transcribed and analysed inductively alongside documentation and journals using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding proceeded in two passes: an initial open pass across the full corpus, then a focused pass in which candidate themes were tested against the whole dataset, including instances that did not fit. Both authors coded independently before comparing; disagreements were resolved by returning to the recordings rather than by averaging. Trustworthiness was pursued through prolonged engagement, triangulation across data types, and an audit trail of coding decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We make no claim to inter-rater reliability in a statistical sense, which would be inappropriate to this design.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from parents and school leadership, and assent was sought from the children in age-appropriate terms before recording. Children could decline to participate in any activity or recording without consequence, and two occasions on which children did so are noted in the documentation. All names used in reporting are pseudonyms, and identifying details of families' stories have been altered where they could identify a household.

Findings

Willingness to Speak Arrived Before Accuracy Did

The clearest and earliest change was in volunteering. Children who had participated in English sessions only when directly addressed began putting their hands up, interrupting, and correcting the teacher's version of stories they knew better than she did. Crucially, this happened before any improvement in accuracy. The English was often wrong—mixed word order, Arabic function words carrying English content words, verbs left uninflected—but there was much more of it, and it was offered rather than extracted.

This is consistent with the affective account (Krashen, 1982) and with Isbell et al.'s (2004) findings on storytelling and oral language. We would add one observation from the documentation that we did not anticipate: the children who changed most were not the ones with the weakest English. They were the ones whose families told the most stories at home. Several children with comparatively strong English but less narrative-rich home environments changed very little. We cannot substantiate this pattern with the data we have, and we report it as a hypothesis worth testing properly rather than as a finding.

Sound Became Easier to Attend to When Meaning Was Already Secure

During Word Detective play, children sustained phonological work—initial sound isolation, rhyme detection, syllable clapping—for noticeably longer when the words came from a story they had helped build than when the same skills were practised on scheme vocabulary. Sessions that had previously fragmented after a few minutes ran to their natural end.

The mechanism we infer is the one the literature proposes: comprehension was not competing for attention, so attention was available for form (Snow et al., 1998). There is a diglossic wrinkle worth naming. Some of the sound work children found easiest in English involved phonemes with close analogues in their spoken Emirati Arabic, and some of the hardest involved contrasts absent from it. This mirrors what Saiegh-Haddad (2003) found within Arabic itself, where distance from the spoken vernacular predicts difficulty. A properly designed study could examine whether the vernacular, rather than Modern Standard Arabic, is the more useful reference point for planning English phonics for these children. Our data can only raise the question.

Children Brought the Home Into the Classroom Without Being Asked

By the 20th cycle, children were arriving with stories. They had asked at home, been told something, and wanted to tell it. Some of these were folktales; more of them were family history—a grandfather's work, a relative's journey, a house that no longer exists. Children

negotiated these in Arabic with each other and then worked, sometimes laboriously, at rendering them in English for the teacher.

This is the finding we consider most significant, because it changed the direction of supply. The classroom stopped being the only place where legitimate content originated. That is precisely the shift Moll et al. (1992) and González et al. (2005) describe, and it also produced the translanguaging pattern Flynn et al. (2021) document, in which drawing on the full repertoire supported rather than displaced the developing second language. It also had a practical benefit we had not planned for: parents who had previously engaged with the school mainly around behaviour began asking what stories were needed next.

What Did Not Work

Two things went less well, and reporting them seems more useful than not.

First, we hijacked the play. In the middle cycles, our enthusiasm for phonological outcomes turned *Word Detective* into a thinly disguised assessment. Children's talk dropped off immediately and did not recover until we pulled back and let the activity be genuinely open-ended again. This is exactly the failure mode Pyle and Danniels (2017) describe, and the fact that we had read the paper beforehand did not prevent us from committing it. Baker (2015) reports the same pressure operating on English-medium teachers in Abu Dhabi kindergartens, which suggests it is structural rather than personal.

Second, artefact-based routines were uneven. The dallah and the clothing generated sustained talk. Photographs of desert life generated much less, and on reflection we think we had chosen images that represented a heritage version of Emirati life rather than the lives these particular children actually lead in a city. Cultural familiarity is not the same as cultural iconography, and children can tell the difference faster than adults can.

Discussion

Taken together, the observations point to a fairly narrow claim. Cultural familiarity in the narrative frame appears to lower the cost of participation for these young Emirati learners, and lowering that cost makes more language available to work on. This is a scaffolding claim, not a motivational one. The argument is not that children tried harder because they felt good; it is that a story they already possessed carried part of the cognitive load, and what it carried was released for other work.

Framed this way, the findings sit comfortably with Cummins (2001) on the relationship between identity affirmation and academic engagement, and with the culturally sustaining position that children's existing competencies are the material of instruction rather than a preamble to it (Paris & Alim, 2017). They also fit the PYP's own commitment to inquiry, agency and learner voice (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2018), though we would note that the fit is easier to describe in a paper than to sustain in a term, as section 5.4 indicates.

There is a broader point about the UAE context. Policy discussion of Arabic–English bilingualism has tended to concern medium of instruction, timing and balance (Carroll et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2011, 2022). Less attention has been paid to content—to what the English-medium classroom is actually about. Our small study suggests that the content question may be doing more work than it is credited with. A child can be in an early-immersion programme

with excellent structural design and still meet English exclusively through material that has nothing to do with them.

Limitations

The limitations here are substantial and we would rather state them plainly than let a reader discover them.

This is one classroom, one cohort, one school type, and a small number of children. Nothing here generalises statistically, and it is not intended to. The teacher-researchers were personally invested in the interventions succeeding, and while we took the steps described in section 4.1, we cannot eliminate that. There was no comparison group and no pre- and post-testing, so claims about vocabulary retention or phonological gain cannot be made on this evidence; where an earlier version of this work described such gains as measurable, that was an overstatement, and we have corrected it. What we have is documented change in participation and talk, interpreted by the people who produced it.

There is also a selection issue in what got documented. Teachers notice children who start talking. Children who remained quiet throughout are underrepresented in our data, and we do not know whether the interventions did nothing for them or whether we simply failed to record it. A study designed to look for non-responders would be a more useful next step than a larger version of this one.

Implications for Practice

For teachers in comparable settings, four things seem worth carrying forward.

Treat home oral traditions as instructional material, not as warm-up. The distinction is whether the phonological and vocabulary work happens inside the familiar story or after it.

Plan English phonics with the child's spoken variety in mind rather than a generic notion of "Arabic". The vernacular is what the child actually has, and the distance between it and any target is what predicts difficulty (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003).

Ask families for stories rather than for reading minutes. The request is culturally legible in a way that a reading log often is not, and it recruits a resource that already exists (Barza & von Suchodoletz, 2016).

Protect the play. If the activity becomes assessment, the talk stops, and the talk was the point (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Conclusion

We began with a teacher's observation that confident five-year-old storytellers were becoming silent English learners, and we asked whether the silence was about language or about content. On the evidence of one classroom, some of it was about content. When these children met English inside narratives they already owned, they talked more, risked more, and brought more of their households into the room with them.

We would not want to make this sound larger than it is. A single KG2 class, a handful of inquiry cycles, and two invested teachers do not settle anything. But the intervention was cheap, it required no new resources beyond a coffee pot and a willingness to ask, and it moved the thing early years teachers most want to move, which is how much a child is prepared to say. If that is right, then a good deal of the literacy resource these children need is already in the house. The *majlis* has been doing this work for a long time. The classroom has mostly not been listening.

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