Enhancing Preschool ELL’s Early Literacy Skills
Through Socio-dramatic Play
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Ell’s Early Literacy Skills

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Abstract

Early Childhood Educators in Canada face challenges in assisting increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELL) develop literacy skills so they can succeed in learning. Hence, it is important to identify practical steps to integrate ELL into early childhood programs. This project examines how enriching socio-dramatic play with culturally relevant objects, symbols, and print from the ELLs’ home setting can help to create a meaningful context that encourages transfer of skills and knowledge from their own language and culture to the new one. The project analyses socio-dramatic play and literacy acquisition and extends its application to ELL, showing how emerging literacy can be enhanced when ELLs’ home culture and first language are included in school settings. It shows that ELLs’ literacy skills can be enhanced when play opportunities are culturally influenced, when a child’s first language is incorporated into play, and when children can integrate their personal experiences into play. The project finds that print enriched socio-dramatic play also encourages ELL to get more involved in a complex nature of play. The project shows that educators should take steps to learn about ELLs’ first language and culture through accessing resources and establishing active partnership between school and home. These steps can assist with integrating culturally relevant elements in socio-dramatic play, providing a setting where ELL are better able to transfer existing knowledge to the new context and thus enhance literacy learning.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Motivations and Relevance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Project</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Literacy</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL and Literacy</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Environment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Language</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Language</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Role in Enhancing in Early Literacy and Language in ELL</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Literacy and Language Enriched Environment</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-dramatic Play</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-dramatic Playful Experiences in Learning and Literacy</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-dramatic Play and Cultural Practices</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-dramatic Play in the Context of Print-enriched Environment</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-dramatic Play and the Role of Adult and Peer Helpers</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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I dedicate this project to my grandfather (thatha) who taught me the virtue of not giving up, a life lesson that encouraged me to finish this project.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Personal Background

“Diversity, in terms of social, cultural, and ethnic background or cognitive, physical, and psychological prerequisites is a characteristic of today’s pre-school” (Janson, 2001, p. 137).

Cultural and language differences may enrich any learning environment, but they can also form a significant barrier for learning and integrating into a new environment. This certainly has been my experience. I have always been fascinated by people who can speak many languages. My father, who was educated during British colonial rule in Sri Lanka, can read, write, and speak fluently in three languages, including English. I was introduced to English as a second language when I was five, and in Sri Lanka, I was regarded as quite fluent in speaking English. However, when I moved to Canada in 1998, I faced difficulties integrating into Canadian mainstream society, even though I spoke English quite well. Later, I realized that cultural differences may have been one of the challenges that prevented me from successfully integrating into mainstream society.

When it comes to school settings, teachers can play a vital role in helping to integrate students from different backgrounds. For example, when my son first entered school, he needed help with his comprehension. His English Language Learning teacher, knowing my son’s cultural background, was keen to include the ‘cultural component’ into the learning process. This enabled my son to improve his English language acquisition considerably, and as a result,
he was able to outperform his native speaking peers in English by the time he reached middle
school. This is a success story.

However, not all stories are as successful as my son’s. Children who enter into the school
system from families where English is not the primary language often face difficulties in
integrating as they struggle to develop English language fluency. This is not an insignificant
problem, given the numbers of children entering preschool whose primary language is not
English. These children are called English Language Learners (ELL). As of 2011, approximately
20% of the Canadian population speaks a language other than English or French (Statistics
Canada, 2011). About 16.6% of the children up to the age of 4 speak a language other than
English exclusively or together with English at home (Statistics Canada, 2011). This has resulted
in an increasing number of linguistically diverse children in preschool programs across Canada,
and those numbers can only be expected to increase. For instance, Canada is currently in the
process of welcoming 25,000 Syrian refugees, including children and infants (Jones, 2016). With
increasing numbers of non-English speaking children entering the school system, educators are
facing challenges to determine how best to support these linguistically and culturally diverse
children in their classrooms (Espinosa, 2010).

Professional Motivation and Relevance

Two years ago, I had a child in my class from India (whom I refer to as John, though to
respect his privacy that is not his real name). John spoke only a few words of English and
predominantly spoke the language of Punjabi. One of the key areas of our classroom is the house
keeping area, where children take part in various pretend play activities such as cooking, making
tea, playing mom and baby, and imitating doctor and patient. John was shy in the beginning, but
started to socialize well as time went on. He initiated his pretend play by taking teapots and containers and arranging the occasion into a tea party. Children benefit in their learning environment when they are surrounded by culturally relevant and culturally familiar objects (Kirova, 2010). Bearing this in mind, I encouraged John to use tumblers (teacups) from his native country, India, to play the pretend tea-party game. He called himself “Tea Wala” (an Indian name for a tea-seller) and pretended to pour tea for his friends. This culturally influenced make-believe play encouraged him to incorporate his personal experiences into his play, allowing him to feel more comfortable in a new environment.

Such make-believe play is a form of socio-dramatic play (Similansky, 1968). As defined by Hughes (2010), socio-dramatic play is a “form of group pretend play that involves intense group interaction, with each group member taking a role that complements the roles played by all others in the group” (p. 106). Culturally influenced opportunities for make-believe play encourage children to incorporate their personal experiences into their play (Kirova, 2010). For instance, John felt comfortable in his new school setting when he was able to incorporate his culture through socio-dramatic play, for instance by using teacups from India. By its nature, socio-dramatic play encourages culturally diverse children to integrate their personal experiences, knowledge, and culture into their play (Hughes, 2010).

Preschool children who are involved in socio-dramatic play have shown interest in emergent literacy skills such as reading, writing, and oral skills (Similansky, 1968; Welsch, 2008). Early literacy or emergent literacy has been identified as a critical skill for children to succeed in school (Mayer, 2007; Espinosa, 2010). As stated by Justice and Pullen (2003), “emergent literacy is the precursory knowledge about reading and writing that children acquire prior to conventional literacy” (p. 99). Oral language is also a part of early literacy development.
As research shows, oral language, reading, and writing skills are interrelated and they develop together (Dockrel, Stuart, & King, 2010).

I have personally observed how socio-dramatic play, when enriched with print (English and first language), can become a medium for enhancing ELLs’ emergent literacy skills (Kenner, 1997). In the case of John, when he scribbled the name of his shop (pretending to write in Punjabi and English) on a piece of paper and made a list of Indian sweets that he needed for his teashop, he was developing his emergent writing skills. Emergent writing can take the form of “scribbling, drawing, creating letter like forms and creating random strings of letters” (Mayer, 2007, p. 35). Likewise, when John pretended to read the orders that he was taking from his customers, he was developing his emergent reading skills. When a child holds a book upright, recognizes the cover, and scans pages, these activities are considered emergent reading (Snow, 2006).

When John conversed with his friends in order to socialize and prolong his play, he was able to not only learn English, but also develop social skills. My own classroom experience shows that when socio-dramatic play is textured with culturally familiar objects or pretend scenarios, it offers ELL an important way to develop literacy and language skills in the context of dominant culture schools. As well, it represents reciprocal exchange. In the situation played out in my classroom, John’s socio-dramatic play enabled the other children to learn the rudiments of a foreign language and culture, while John learnt to speak English by interacting with the other children. Seeing this acted out confirmed the idea that verbalizing and speaking form an essential component of socio-dramatic play, as well as being foundational to ongoing play (Similansky, 1968).
Similansky (1968) further argues that talk in socio-dramatic play has another function. In order to plan, maintain, and develop play, children need to negotiate, explain, and communicate among themselves. For this, they need to have strong verbal skills. Through socio-dramatic play, John developed both strong verbal skills and writing skills. In the course of such play, John learnt new vocabulary by conversing regularly in order to extend play with his native English-speaking peers. He also scribbled orders on paper, engaging in emergent writing skills, and engaged with emergent reading skills by pretending to read customers’ orders. Through pretend play, John’s language and literacy development was supported by interactions with his peers and his teacher. My experience with John showed that children connect home and school through culture in their play experience. John’s play experience motivated me to research more deeply to find out how a young preschool ELLs’ home literacy environment and first language can play a positive role in their literacy development in the mainstream language.

Purcell-Gates (1996) analyzed the relationship between knowledge created at home and knowledge acquired at school, and noted that pre-schoolers who had the opportunity to experience concepts and conventions of written English print had an advantage over peers who never had the same experience or knowledge. An individual’s home literacy practices may be influenced by social and cultural practices (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Snow 2006; Duursma, Romero-Contreras, Szuber, Proctor, Snow, August, & Calderón, 2007). Literacy activities may include listening to stories and rhymes, looking at pictures, being read to, playing with puzzles, games, and finger plays, interacting with adults, engaging with environmental print, and participating in dramatic play (Lawhon, & Cobb, 2002; Elliott & Olliff, 2008). In some cultures, oral story telling is a part of the culture. This was evident in John’s socio-dramatic play.
During group time, John loved narrating and sharing stories told by his grandfather. For example, John was able to translate a story told by his grandfather in Punjabi into English.

Developing their primary language is important for ELL to develop additional languages. This has long been acknowledged in the literature. For instance, Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained that all components in the environment, that is, child, school, community, language, and home, are interconnected and interrelated; Cumming (2005) describes the connection between first language and educational benefits; and Bialystok (2007) proposes that mastering skills in one language can be transferred to the other. In short, many studies indicate that there should be a bridge between school and home, and this is particularly relevant for ELL to succeed in school. To help create this bridge, it is important for teachers to recognize ELLs’ primary language, and they should be aware of their ELLs’ home cultural activities in order to create a supportive environment for them that bridges home and school.

Teacher support is critical for ELL to integrate into the classroom and develop early literacy skills. By being empathetic and using friendly gestures, teachers can make their students feel at ease in the classroom (Clarke, 2009; Konishi, 2007). In particular, showing personal interest in individual children and establishing contact with family can be very helpful. For instance, when John was having difficulties in communicating, I contacted John’s parents and compiled common words (i.e., thirsty, water, bathroom, mom, and dad) in Punjabi, his first language. I also included objects (i.e., tumblers, Indian doll, Indian clothing) in the housekeeping area, which he could use for his play. This helped me to create a relationship with John that helped him to feel confident and welcomed in the class. When educators are mindful of creating a culturally responsive classroom, they are able to create a relationship with ELL (Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013). For example, as indicated by Kirova (2010), it
is valuable for educators to include familiar cultural objects. Hence, I included Punjabi words when I was labeling common objects in English, and I read bilingual books (Punjabi and English). These steps made John proud of his culture and showed him that both texts relay the same meaning. As indicated by Dockrel, Stuart and King (2010), I took opportunities to interact with him a lot to improve his verbal skills. For example, when I was reading him a book, I asked open-ended questions, prompted him to give detailed answers, and made him predict the story. This helped John with his oral language development. It is clear that teacher support is important for assisting ELLs’ literacy development.

**Statement of the Problem**

Acquiring proficiency in literacy skills is a complex process, but it is additionally complicated for children who enter preschool from culturally diverse backgrounds. The medium of instruction in mainstream classrooms is English, and it is important for ELL to be able to comfortably negotiate their new environment and integrate into school life so they do not feel marginalized, disconnected, or penalized because of their distinct cultural and linguistic identities. Having feelings like this makes it difficult to develop the ELLs’ early literacy skills, but the obstacles created by these feelings may be overcome by integrating their culture and language in their classroom learning.

The value of socio-dramatic play in enhancing early literacy among learners whose primary language is English has been well documented. However, only a few studies have identified socio-dramatic play as one of the methods for ELL to include their culture, language, and personal experiences in their learning (Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Rogoff, 2003; Hughes, 2010; Kirova, 2010). For example, when I searched major databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC and
JSTOR for education studies with key words like “Socio-dramatic play,” “culture,” “pre-school,” “English Language Learners,” “early/emergent literacy” using various Boolean combinations, including synonyms of keywords in the Boolean combination, I found very few results related to socio-dramatic play, culture, and ELL literacy development.

It is clear that additional research in this area would be beneficial in helping educators to assist their ELL. Hence, my project aims to remedy this lack of direction by focusing on the value of creating a culturally enriched setting for socio-dramatic play as a way to help enhance the early literacy practices of preschool ELL. Through a literature review, and calling on my own professional and personal experiences, I intend to assemble practical guidelines for educators on how to integrate culturally enriched settings into socio-dramatic play.

**Purpose of the Project**

There are several reasons for choosing to explore how a culturally textured socio-dramatic play setting might be useful for enhancing literacy practices among preschool ELL as the topic for my Masters project. The main reason is that I believe providing ELL with a foundation in language and early literacy in their preschool years will allow them to be more successful in their later school years and beyond. Emergent language and literacy skills are critical as a foundation for later academic success (Mayer, 2007; Espinosa, 2010). When children communicate, learn to talk, and understand spoken and written words, they are better able to understand the world around them and therefore better able to function in it. In short, all children need to be literate (e.g., read, write, and communicate) to be successful in school and in the larger world (Espinosa, 2010), but teachers need help with assisting ELL to achieve literacy success.
Given the growing number of linguistically diverse children in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011), and considering the importance of socio-dramatic play in literacy development, the proposed project seeks to analyze the following research questions:

1. How does culturally influenced print enriched socio-dramatic play help preschool ELL with their early literacy skills?

2. How can educators create a supportive environment and facilitate socio-dramatic play to enhance preschool ELLs’ early literacy skills?

In answering these questions, my aim is to identify practical interventions for educators that can help them set up culturally respectful and inclusive opportunities for socio-dramatic play in the preschool and kindergarten setting. In doing so, teachers can more effectively enhance literacy among ELL and set them on the path for successful life-long learning.

Summary

In chapter 1, I have outlined the personal and professional motivations that influenced me to undertake this project. I have explained the need for educators to better understand and integrate culturally influenced socio-dramatic play as a way to enhance preschool ELLs’ literacy skills, given that teachers provide important support in developing children’s literacy.

The following topics related to my research area are discussed in chapter 2: (1) Emergent Literacy, (2) ELL and Literacy (3) Home Environment (4) Oral Language (5) First Language (6) Adult Role in Enhancing Early Literacy and Language Skills in ELL (7) Creating Literacy and Language Enriched Environment (8) Socio-dramatic Play (9) Socio-dramatic Playful Experiences in Learning Literacy (10) Socio-dramatic Play and Cultural Practices (11) Socio-
dramatic Play in Context of Print-enriched Environments (12) Socio-dramatic Play and the Role of Adult and Peer Helpers.

In chapter 3, I lay out how I changed my classroom practice to integrate an English Language Learner (John) and describe how I created a Power Point presentation for Early Childhood Educators using the knowledge gained from the literature review, course discussions, and my personal and professional experiences. In this presentation, I recommend best teaching practices that educators may use to benefit preschool ELL.
Chapter Two

The population of children who speak a first language other than English has grown in Canada over the past decade (Statistics Canada, 2011). Pre-school children who learn English as an additional language are referred to in the literature as English Language Learners (ELL). Learning English as a second language has an impact on emergent literacy. Educators face special challenges when it comes to fostering literacy development among ELL because of their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Espinosa, 2010). Part of the problem is that educators are, for the most part, not fully aware of the cultural background and literacy conventions of ELL.

Early literacy skills allow children to develop their ability to read and write, as well as gain language abilities that are essential for the foundation of later academic success (Espinosa, 2010). However, while a vast number of studies on early literacy learning with English speaking children have been conducted, there are relatively few such studies on early literacy learning among ELL (Purcell-Gates 1996; Snow 2006). To best assist literacy learning among this group of children, educators need to be aware that ELL come with unique home literacy practices, because the culture and language spoken at home can influence and shape early literacy development (Hammer et al., 2003), including how it emerges at school. Studies demonstrate that ELLs’ first language and literacy gained in the second, mainstream language are strongly linked (Bialystok 2007; Cumming 2005; Clarke, 2009).

Several educational methods have been suggested to support the learning needs of ethnically diverse pre-school learners whose first or primary language is not English. Among these methods, socio-dramatic play has been suggested as a means for enhancing literacy development. Socio-dramatic play incorporates children’s personal experiences, and this allows
ELL’s Early Literacy Skills

ELL to incorporate their own culture into their learning (Hughes, 2010). As a result, socio-dramatic play can offer an ideal medium for ELL to enhance their literacy skills.

Yet despite this promising approach, studies on socio-dramatic play in the context of ELL literacy learning are scant. In this literature review, the context of early learning practices among children whose first language at home is not English is nuanced through a focus on the method of socio-dramatic play. The importance of culture in socio-dramatic play is analysed, along with a discussion of how it might valuably be incorporated by ELL educators to enrich their preschoolers’ literacy skills. To emphasize the importance of incorporating culture, this chapter will review the literature on the following topics: (1) Emergent Literacy, (2) ELL and Literacy (3) Home Environment (4) Oral Language (5) First Language (6) Adult Role in Enhancing Early Literacy and Language Skills in ELL (7) Creating Literacy and Language Enriched Environment (8) Socio-dramatic Play (9) Socio-dramatic Playful Experiences in Learning Literacy (10) Socio-dramatic Play and Cultural Practices (11) Socio-dramatic Play in the Context of Print-enriched Environments (12) Socio-dramatic Play and the Role of Adult and Peer Helpers.

**Emergent Literacy**

Early literacy skills are developed before formal school begins, and it is an ongoing process. In the literature, the term “emergent literacy” is used interchangeably with “early literacy,” although for purposes of this review, the terms “early literacy” and “early language learners” will be used when referring to children’s formative acquisition of literacy from age three to age five, the years before they enter formal schooling. Initially, the concept of emergent literacy provided a new way of thinking about the development of reading and writing skills among preschool age children (Moon, 2005). According to Justice and Pullen (2003), “emergent literacy is the precursory knowledge about reading and writing that children acquire prior to
conventional literacy” (p. 99). Connor and Tiedemann (2005) claim that these forms of precursory knowledge “are the basic building blocks for learning to read and write” (p. 4).

Equally important, the term “emergent literacy” also denotes the social interactions in a literacy-enriched environment where children learn knowledge of the conventions and purpose of print (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2003; Lawhon, & Cobb, 2002; Snow 2006; Elliott & Oliff, 2008). In other words, the period of life prior to entering school, and the environment associated with those formative early years, is critical to early literacy, and early literacy, in turn, is critical in laying the foundation for later writing and reading skills (Mayor 2007; Espinosa, 2010).

Especially with respect to ELL whose formative years take place in a non-English speaking environment, it is essential to determine what kinds of strategies are most likely to assist them in developing early literacy skills, as these will lay the foundation for lifelong learning.

ELL and Literacy

As in other Anglophone countries, Canadian classrooms are now more diverse than ever, with increasing numbers of English language learners (ELL) in the classroom (Purdy, 2008). For instance, Statistics Canada shows that more than 23% of the Canadian population do not count English or French as their first language (Statistics, 2011). As a result, teachers are increasingly faced with the task of meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Purdy, 2008).

For many children, due to immigration and greater world mobility, having to master bilingualism or multilingualism is a cultural and educational reality that they have to tackle (Muter & Diathelm, 2001; Purdy, 2008). Achieving bilingual proficiency in a predominantly English-speaking country like Canada does not come without hurdles for such learners, especially when the dominant language is not spoken at home (Cumming, 2005). The major
ELL’s Early Literacy Skills

barriers faced by early English Language Learners (ELL), particularly in the pre-school years, are rooted in language and culture. These barriers hinder ELL from successfully integrating in the mainstream classroom (Kirova, 2010), despite the fact that they bring rich language and cultural diversity to school and early childhood settings (Clarke, 2009).

Children’s home and family environment is deeply rooted in culture, social practices, and first language. Exploring and developing appropriate learning strategies for early ELL that value their culturally diverse experience will not only help them to achieve literacy rates comparable with English-speaking learners, but will also enable them, by extension, to draw from their own family and cultural heritage to make valuable contribution to the classroom setting. Duursma, Romero-Contrearas, Szuber, Proctor, Snow, August, and Calderón (2007) emphasize that because learners’ home environments are part of a larger social and cultural context, when examining children’s literacy development, it is essential to remain aware of cultural differences in literacy-related activities at home. In other words, as they work to develop strategies to assist ELL, educators need to be mindful of distinct cultural practices among ELL and foster the positive roles these cultural and linguistic practices in the home environment can play when it comes to shaping cognitive development—thinking, reasoning, remembering, and solving problems (Rogoff, 2003)—as well as literacy itself.

If educators remain unaware of the variety of home literary practices among ELL, they risk mistaking cultural differences for language and literacy deficiencies. Heath (1983) documented this well over thirty years ago. In his carefully documented ethnographic study, Heath showed that in working-class African American communities, families do not expect young children to become involved in adults’ language activities, but rather to learn by observing the adults’ actions and conversation. As a result, children from these backgrounds tend not to be
forthcoming in responding to questions in class, particularly when they are presented in a discourse style that the children are not accustomed to. From this, it can be inferred that educators who are unaware of these kinds of culturally different home expectations with respect to conversation conventions might mistakenly interpret African American children who do not respond appropriately in class as lacking in either comprehension or verbalization or both. Heath’s pioneering study underlines the importance of educators remaining aware of ELLs’ home cultural practices to enable them to better assess ELLs’ actual language and literacy proficiencies.

**Home Environment**

Interconnectedness of the society plays a vital role in a child’s learning, as researchers have long noted. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that environment is comprised of one’s nearest settings, as well as the various settings in relation to social and cultural contexts such as home, school, work place, and community. According to Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal (2005), the home literacy environment involves “the experiences, attitudes, and materials pertaining to literacy that a child encounters and interacts with at home” (p. 346). The relationship between knowledge created at home and knowledge constructed at school is therefore paramount to learning and crucial to literacy development (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2011).

Wiegel and Martins (2005) compared the influence of home and child-care environments in relation to early language and literacy development among preschool children. Data was collected from interviews with parents and childcare educators, along with standardized assessments from 85 preschool children measured for language skills, print knowledge, expressive language, and receptive language. Findings revealed that parental and teacher literacy
habits, types of activities they provide for the young children, and the beliefs they hold about literacy and language development all play a key role in preschool children’s language and literacy development. These results suggest the importance of strengthening literacy and language skills both at home and in childcare settings for preschool children.

In some cultures, storytelling at home forms part of the tradition. Literacy activities may include listening to stories; looking at pictures; being read to; playing with puzzles and games; finger plays; interacting with environmental print; and engaging with adults, rhymes and dramatic play (Lawhon, & Cobb, 2002; Elliott & Olliff, 2008). Purcell-Gates (1996) further noted that when a preschooler’s experience, knowledge, and concepts of print and written English are rooted in the home environment, it places them in an advantaged position over their peers without such experience. Home literacy practices can range from availability and use of reading materials, parent–child book reading, shared book reading, or other literacy events such as storytelling, rhyming, and singing (Lawhon, & Cobb, 2002; Sénéchal & Le Fevre 2002; Hammer, Miccio & Wagstaff 2003; Wiegel & Martins, 2005). As important as these kinds of home literacy activities are, however, it has been shown that they work best in conjunction with oral language proficiency (Kieffer, 2008).

**Oral Language**

Oral language can be defined as behaviours and knowledge of language. Language consists of a range of attributes, including vocabulary, comprehension, narrative knowledge, listening, and talking (Sénéchal, LeFevre, Smith-Chant, & Colton, 2001; Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2011). As soon as children start formal schooling, the first thing they have to do in order to express themselves and their needs is to learn to speak (Englezou & Fragkouli, 2014). In so doing, other skills develop. Hence, it is important to develop oral language in preschool years
because it lays the foundation for building broader literacy, both reading and writing (Bradley & Reinking, 2011). For instance, when children feel that they are confident speakers, then they usually move confidently to printed language (Englezou & Fragkouli, 2014). As a result, to form a solid basis for emergent literacy, it is important for children to carry on quality conversations with adults and peers. Teacher talk is part of the preschool program (Dockrel, Stuart, & King, 2010), and educators should be providing opportunities for meaningful conversations for preschool children.

Especially useful for starting meaningful conversation is what researchers call decontextualized language (Rowe, 2013). Decontextualized language involves asking children for explanations or answers that are not present or apparent in the immediate context. This type of teacher talk has the benefit of getting children to draw on previous knowledge and experiences (Rowe, 2013). We can extend this as a way for teachers to include ELLs’ own cultural knowledge and experience during teacher talk. Providing opportunities for decontextualized, knowledge-based talk is vital because it encourages proficiency in other language domains. For instance, when teacher talk and shared book reading interventions were given to improve oral language proficiency among ELL, they went on to improve in receptive language and vocabulary (Dockrel, Stuart, & King, 2010).

In an earlier longitudinal study of 626 children varying from preschool through the 4th grade, Storch and Whitehurst (2002) showed a strong relationship between oral language and development in reading skills. Examining whether code-related skills such as print concepts, phonological awareness, and oral language functioned as precursors to reading skills, the study showed a strong relationship between oral language and development in reading skills. In other words, there is a high degree of continuity between oral language and emergence of code-related
ELL’s Early Literacy Skills

skills. These results are consistent with more recent findings (e.g. Swanson, Rosston, Gerber, & Solari, 2008). Miller, Heilmann, Nockerts, Iglesias, Fabiano, and Francis (2006) confirmed that the finding remains constant even when children are negotiating two oral languages: “oral language skills contribute to reading within and across languages” (p. 1).

As well as developing proficiency in reading skills, oral language is also related to developing proficiency in writing skills, as longstanding research shows. The one enhances the other (Sénéchal, et al., 2001; Shanahan, MacArthur, Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006). To understand the role of oral language in developing writing skills, an early study by Dyson (1983) focused on children’s talk during writing and came to the conclusion that talk influences the writing process by providing meaning (a representation function) in the one domain: talk. This, in turn, allows children to more easily get the meaning down in the other domain: on paper.

In short, early and more recent studies both agree that oral language influences overall literacy development: it enhances and promotes both reading and writing skills (Shanahan, et al., 2006; Dockrel, Stuart, & King, 2010). From these studies, it can be inferred that proficiency in oral language, even if it is not the same language as that spoken at school, may help ELL to develop literacy and language skills in English. It is not spoken English, but engaging in spoken language—any language—that is the critical factor. It is therefore fruitful for educators to be aware of the important role of oral language, even if that language is not English, in assisting early literacy development among ELL. Preschoolers can and do benefit from their engagement in oral language, so educators need to be mindful that for ELL to gain literacy benefits, the spoken language does not need to be English. Studies have shown that mastery in one language can be transferred to another (Bialystok, 2007; Konishi, 2007).
First Language

Through their primary language, ELL are linked to their culture and family. In Canada, it has been increasingly recognized that it is important not to discourage the use of first or primary languages, as these are carriers of cultural values and heritage that foster positive identity and self-worth. The Preamble to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act states that while English and French remain Canada’s official languages, this policy should not impinge on the “rights or privileges acquired or enjoyed with respect to any other language” (Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1985). Not surprisingly, albeit contrary to earlier thinking, children who have had a solid foundation in their primary language are usually successful at school (Cumming 2005; Kohnert, 2010). According to Tabors (2008), children try to understand the world by asking questions from adults, and normally they do this in their primary language, the language spoken at home. Using their primary language, children are able to develop a knowledge base that they can later use in their school years. When parents involve children in complex language activities, regardless of which language they are conducted in, children are able to make sense of the world (Tabors, 2008).

In contrast, children whose parents are not proficient in the English language and who fail to master their parents’ native language not only lose a vital connection with their family, they also lag behind in overall literacy development. Early on in the literature, Fillmore (1991) had warned of the connection between primary language loss and education difficulties among language minority students. On the positive side, Bialystok (2007) concludes that mastering skills in one language can be transferred to the other. When this happens, the results are rewarding for bilinguals, who have a richer linguistic and cognitive resources compared to monolinguals: “Knowing more has never been a disadvantage when compared to knowing less”
ELL’s Early Literacy Skills

(p. 71). Hence, as a first step to successful literacy development in English, it is vital for parents of ELL to interact with their children in their first language at home, and for educators to encourage this.

**Adult Role in Enhancing Early Literacy and Language in ELL**

Families and early childhood programs play an important role in the development of literacy and language during preschool years. During these years, children gain early literacy experiences in their home and childcare environment, which are used as a foundation for future learning. These literary experiences are mediated by parents and other early childhood educators: children are influenced by adults and family members in their language and literacy acquisition (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2003; Tabors, 2008). Literacy development occurs when children are actively engaged with, or interact with, knowledgeable peers or adults. It has long been observed (Vukelich, 1994) that children’s ability to read environmental print is significantly influenced not only by a print enriched environment but also by interaction with a knowledgeable adult. Children become aware of the usefulness and meaningfulness of print when they observe adults’ informal interaction with print, in the context of sharing books and in their own early exploration with writing (VanKleeck & Schuele, 2010). The early beliefs and attitudes developed by children towards print, drawn in large part from their interaction with knowledgeable adults, lay the foundation for eventual transition to formal reading and writing.

However, this process of literacy acquisition is complicated when English is not the primary language spoken in the home. When children with limited or no English proficiency enter a new environment, they are often intimidated. To remedy this, teachers need to create a relationship with ELL to help them to integrate into the new environment. When children create a relationship with the educator and when educators provide culturally responsive learning
methods, they are encouraged to more easily learn how to communicate their needs (Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013). To help ELL, educators need to be aware of language, culture, and home literacy practices of ELL to assist their social and linguistic integration into the school environment as a means to assist overall literacy development.

To assist ELL literacy acquisition, educators should also be mindful of the stages of language development that are typical of learners whose first language is not English. According to Clarke (2009), ELL children go through three stages before they become confident in speaking English. The first stage is a silent period when the child refuses to try to speak in English, which can last for months (Tabors, 2008). During the second stage, the child begins to try to communicate in English, for example by trying to join group interactions. Finally, the third stage is when children start to talk confidently and independently, striving to use proper grammatical structure when they speak. Being aware of these three stages, adult educators of ELL remain better equipped to understand and, in turn, prompt the stages of language development that children from non-English speaking families go through. However, as well as positive adult interaction geared to supporting oral linguistic development, ELL also benefit from exposure to an array of print-based resources.

Creating Literacy and Language Enriched Environment

While it is true that listening, speaking, reading, and writing enhance literacy (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002; Shanahan, et al., 2006), ideally ELL should also be immersed in a print-rich environment. Children learn about reading from environmental print, not just books: labels on objects, signs, symbols, and other modes of print in their environment. Visible labels or notices on bulletin boards can represent practical use for emergent literacy (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2003; Elliott & Oliff, 2008). It makes sense that when children are
immersed in environmental print, they will learn the concepts of print. For instance, the literature has long noted that when they are immersed in print-enriched environments, children will often include literacy in their play (Vukelich, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Moon, 2005). In addition, exposure to a print-rich environment helps orient children to the functions and conventions of print (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2003; Smith & Pellegrini, 2013). Through such exposure, pre-literate children have already “learnt” to handle books with an understanding that text reads from left to right, have practiced scanning the text and images on pages, and can differentiate words from pictures (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Snow, 2006). By and large, long before they have learnt to read, immersion in a print-rich environment ensures that children have developed pre-literacy skills such as awareness of letters and print and the purpose of books (Smith & Pellegrini, 2013).

Furthermore, linguistic activities such as listening to nursery rhymes and visually tracking adults’ storybook reading may allow children to understand the sound relationship between spoken and printed words, helping them to develop the emergent literacy skills needed for the onset of reading (Lonigan et al., 2000; Snow, 2006). Pretending to read and reading simple environmental print are considered emergent reading (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2003; Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts, & Benedict, 2007). By way of example, Snow (2006) points out that a child scribbling on paper, sitting next to his mother while she makes a shopping list, spelling his own name, reciting the alphabet names, and identifying books by their titles are all signs of children’s early literacy development.

It is highly evident that immersing children in print-enriched environments is conducive to enhancing literacy. Moreover, when this kind of environment is combined with socio-dramatic play, the opportunities for literacy development undergo a leapfrog effect. As Stone and Stone
ELL’s Early Literacy Skills

(2007) point out, “the very nature of symbolic play (first order symbolism) has an intimate relationship with reading and writing (second-order symbolism) in that children use a similar representational mental process in both” (p. 1). The functions and value of socio-dramatic play, as shown, can offer tremendous potential to boost literacy development among ELL.

**Socio-dramatic Play**

According to Similansky (1968), there are six critical elements of socio-dramatic play. These include (1) imitative role play: here, the child undertakes a make-believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalization; (2) make-believe play in regard to objects: here, the child substitutes movement or actions for real objects; (3) make-believe in play regard to actions or situations: here, verbal descriptions are substituted for actions and situations; (4) persistence: here, the child engages in a play for at least 10 minutes; (5) interaction: here, two or more players interact in the play episode; and (6) verbal communication: here, children engage in verbal interactions related to the play episode (p. 9). As is evident from this list, socio-dramatic play involves complex performances and functions (Similansky, 1968).

Group pretend play becomes socio-dramatic play when children begin to engage in group talk, group interaction, and role taking (Hughes, 2010). According to Deunk, Berenst and de Glopper (2008), early pretend play transitions into socio-dramatic play as play becomes more complex, when verbal skills are gaining traction. Emerging verbal skills allow children to engage in creative group play that involves taking on various roles: they imitate, socialize, and verbalize. At all points, socio-dramatic play is child-initiated and child-centered: the teacher is not directing the play, but ideally has prepared an enriched and supportive environment for the play setting (Calabrese, 2003).
Socio-dramatic play emerges spontaneously among children during their pre-school development, coinciding with developments in observational and verbal skills. When children are about three years old, they start observing adults around them and become interested in what they do. At this point, children are ready to initiate socio-dramatic play (Similansky, 1968; Hughes, 2010). However, socio-dramatic play—symbolic imitation and role-playing—only emerges when children are able to verbalize (imitate linguistically) what they are observing around them, normally between the age of two and four (Piaget, 1962), though it continues beyond this age. Developments in oral language and symbolic play are therefore related.

According to Stone and Stone (2007), when a child makes a dramatic move in symbolic play, he is also beginning to talk. Both literacy and socio-dramatic play require the “ability to use words, gestures, or mental images to represent actual objects, events, or actions” (Stone & Stone, 2007, p. 1).

**Socio-dramatic Playful Experiences in Learning and Literacy**

When children play, they are learning. In symbolic play, children are able to practice their emerging understanding of symbols by manipulating objects and interacting with the environment. In one of the early studies on socio-dramatic play, Calabreses (2003) notes that socio-dramatic play is a form of symbolic “pretend” play where children imitate, undertake different roles, use their imagination and creativity, and deploy manipulatives or objects. Research suggests that it is specifically during play that children present the most advanced displays of language and that these displays relate strongly to emergent literacy (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002; Burton & Edwards, 2006). Not surprisingly, it has been shown that children who engage in play and playful learning perform better at school than children who do not play as much (Hiresh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008). Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) view play as an
enjoyable and self-assuming activity, and it can be argued that these enjoyable qualities of voluntary, self-selected, self-directed play are what make socio-dramatic play, already linked with emergent language skills through verbalization, imitation, and role playing, an ideal medium for ELL to advance in early literacy acquisition.

Socio-dramatic play offers a vital role in enhancing communication through oral language. In a key study, Vedeler (1997) postulated that children’s knowledge of language during periods of dramatic play was more elaborated, explicit, and linguistically complex compared to the language used by the same group of children engaged in other play activities. This early finding is supported by additional research. For example, Riojas-Cortez’s (2000) study of play among bilingual preschoolers confirms that during socio-dramatic play, children have to use appropriate vocabulary and functions of language, such as statements, questions, commands, and give-and-seek information for such play to develop and to be sustained. Results showed that children’s storytelling during play enhanced their emerging literacy skills. More recently, Huerta and Riojas-Cortez (2014) highlight that fantasy and symbolic play prompt children to engage in critical thinking about language, problem-solving verbal and written conflicts, and developing expansive understandings of literacy. In addition, as shown in the following section, it is particularly useful for ELL if a significant part of socio-dramatic play includes props, objects, and other culturally familiar artefacts, as these can play a role in enhancing literacy in the dominant language.

**Socio-dramatic Play and Cultural Practices**

According to Hughes (2010), play has been identified in all cultures and cannot be understood unless it is seen in the social and cultural context in which it occurs. During play, as
Rogoff (2003) observes, children “work out the scripts of everyday life, adult skills and roles, values and beliefs” (p. 298). Hughes (2010) states that make-believe reflects children’s personal or life experiences (links to their culture), which then get integrated into their dramatic play. It follows that when cultural objects and cultural practices from an ELLs’ home background are incorporated in socio-dramatic play in a classroom setting, ELL can transition from home to school more smoothly and as a result learn better. Pretend play, the root of socio-dramatic play, advances many learning functions (Smith & Pelligrini, 2013). All learners benefit from socio-dramatic play, but ELL can be particularly advantaged if the play setting is mindfully textured by educators with culturally relevant, culturally familiar objects.

Kirova (2010) focuses on the role of play as a cultural activity. This study examined a pilot play program, which comprised 16 children from various linguistic backgrounds, aged 3 ½ years, plus their families, with data collected through research conversations, focus groups, field notes, and focus observations. The language of instruction was the ELLs’ native languages (Somali, Arabic [Sudanese dialect], Kurdish) and English to ensure the successful transition of children from home to school (Kirova, 2010). Since the children were surrounded by play objects and artifacts of their culture, as prompted by the author of the study, they manipulated these objects, observing and imitating the adults. The study confirmed that children recreate cultural practices and experiences from home in their socio-dramatic play at school.

Clearly, then, encouraging socio-dramatic play for ELL by providing them with familiar cultural objects and artefacts for imaginative social play in a school setting is highly productive. Through having this kind of culturally supported play setting, ELL can draw on existing “funds of knowledge”: “the essential cultural process and bodies of knowledge and information” that enable immigrant families “to survive, to get ahead, or thrive” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González,
1992, p. 21). For instance, in two different studies of Mexican children, it was found that during socio-dramatic play, children are able to use “funds of knowledge” provided by their parents and other family members to create meaningful conversations (Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Huerta & Riojas-Cortez, 2014). Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti’s (2005) study draws on Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González’s earlier 1992 research to confirm their current findings on the value of “funds of knowledge.” Tapping into these existing funds of knowledge paves the way for ELL to make new advances in learning.

The value of being able to draw on existing “funds of knowledge” for ELL is highlighted in Kenner’s (1997) important case study of Meera, a child from India whose parents speak Gujarati in the home. The objective of Kenner’s project was to find out how three and four year old bilingual children use their knowledge from home to advance their learning at school. For instance, it was noted that Meera’s pride about her parents’ shop was displayed when she went on an outdoor trip and took a photograph of the front of a shop. She later copied the name of the shop and printed her own text saying “that’s my shop.” In addition, Meera would bring leaflets, coupons, and so on from home to school to be incorporated in the home corner play area. At the same time, Meera also brought school experiences to her home, role playing about school with her sister. This role-playing involved all the literacy activities that she encountered at school, which in turn helped her with developing her own overall literacy, including skills in writing. Kenner’s case study strongly illustrates the value of culturally-nuanced play in enhancing English language learning and literacy. It shows the value of incorporating children’s home practices, language, and values in the classroom to help develop ELLs’ literacy skills.

The relevance of Kenner’s (1997) case study has been validated by other studies, for instance, Kenner, Gregory, Ruby & Al-Azami (2008) and Sze, Chapman, and Shi (2009). These
studies confirm that, when harnessed to cultural objects from a family’s distinct cultural setting (and hence the “funds of knowledge” they represent), socio-dramatic play offers ELL a productive and enjoyable avenue of learning. Especially when targeting learning outcomes that result in literacy development (the process by which children begin to understand reading, writing, and functions of language), educators should be mindful of the valuable learning opportunities that culturally nuanced socio-dramatic play offers early ELL.

**Socio-dramatic Play in the Context of Print-enriched Environments**

When settings for socio-dramatic play are enhanced with literacy materials, literacy learning is likely to be enhanced. Literacy-enriched play areas encourage children to spend more time engaged in literacy activities. Saracho and Spodek (2006) observed that children enhance their literacy when their play is immersed in a print-rich environment: children in literacy-enriched play areas will tend to experiment with storytelling, emergent reading, and emergent writing. Likewise, in observing nine preschool children during free play, Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts, and Benedict (2007) aimed to determine whether changing the environment by adding literacy props would lead to an increase in spontaneous literacy activities. To ascertain this outcome, they had teachers introduce various literacy related materials such as pencils and notepads, books, reading glasses, and puzzles into the play area. The results showed that the props led to an increase in children’s literacy activities during free playtime.

Socio-dramatic play can also help enhance interest in reading among preschoolers. A study by Welsch (2008) gave fantasy related books and props to a group of children. The fantasy themed books were chosen on the assumption that the children get more motivation from reading such books. Several props were also provided to the children to aid the fantasy themes of the books. The children were then exposed to the books, with the teacher giving attention to the
repeated language in the books and including props during the “read aloud” sessions. The findings suggest that the children achieved a better understanding of the stories and gained personal connections with the literature through the pretend play that the book and props prompted. As Ortlieb, Cramer, & Cheek (2007) observed, when children play with themes from the storybooks that have been read to them, they dramatize the plots and re-enact the text, which in turn motivates them to want to read the books and engage in learning: “we must make learning and reading as ‘dramatic’ as a life page” (Ortlieb, Cramer, & Cheek, 2007, p. 175). Dramatizing and retelling the story encourages children, especially ELL, to connect with their personal experience and enables them to get motivated in reading (Gillanders & Castro, 2011).

As well as fostering reading skills, socio-dramatic play supports emergent writing skills. Wohlwend (2008) indicates that play activities promote children’s writing. This connection is especially valuable for ELL. For instance, aided by props such as calendars, telephone directories, magazines, catalogues, writing paper, envelopes, notepads, and pens, ELL can play-pretend various scenarios in their home language. Using these materials and props, labeled in various languages that parents brought to the nursery, Kenner (1997) found children end up generating written responses in the course of their socio-dramatic play. Kenner’s results find detailed support in reiterated studies: Kenner, Gregory, Ruby, and Al-Azami (2008) conclude that even second and third generation children benefit from being able to draw on “the full range of their linguistic and cultural knowledge” (p. 134) in a classroom setting. From this, it can be inferred that bringing a full range of cultural and linguistic knowledge into the arena of socio-dramatic play will likewise be useful for enhancing ELLs’ early literacy skills.

In their case study of a five-year old boy named Daniel who was having difficulty in identifying the relationship between written and spoken language, Boyle and Charles (2010)
observed how this child was able to improve his written skills through the intervention of socio-dramatic play. Daniel had been able to communicate his thoughts but was unable to make connections between aural, oral, and visual concepts to grasp how words as texts are constructed. Over five sessions of about 25-30 minutes each, five teaching strategies were used with Daniel: hearing, identifying, segmenting, locating, and representing through socio-dramatic play intervention. The learning behaviours prompted by each of the strategies were carefully tracked and the outcomes—Daniel’s completed work—carefully analyzed. Of these five strategies, socio-dramatic play proved valuable in facilitating Daniel’s writing development. Immersing the child in a socio-dramatic context (play/literacy connection), with a supportive teacher to alleviate the heavy cognitive work of scribing, helped to unlock and support Daniel’s writing/spelling development (Boyle & Charles, 2010).

If the principal idea of literacy development is that preschool children should be able to begin to understand reading, writing, and functions of language, then the evidence strongly shows that engaging in socio-dramatic play in a literacy-enriched environment is a powerful and effective medium for achieving that goal. For example, opportunities for book handling provide knowledge of text structure; set purposes for reading and writing; and foster understanding about the processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Wohlwend, 2008) that are essential to successful literacy. The more knowledge ELL students have of writing, listening, reading, and speaking, the faster they learn English. Moreover, when socio-dramatic play is textured in culturally appropriate ways in a print-rich environment, it shows great promise for enhancing literacy among ELL.
Socio-dramatic Play and the Role of Adult and Peer Helpers

Competent adults and peers can also help children to advance their literacy skills. The “distance” between what young learners can achieve working independently and what they can achieve under adult guidance is termed the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky states that children are able to further their knowledge or skills by interacting with someone who is more competent than they are. Adults and competent peers can help children learn or achieve a skill that they have not learnt but are capable of learning (Korat, Snapir, & Barat, 2003; Konishi, 2007).

Socio-dramatic play has been shown to be particularly fruitful in the context of proximal development, that is, when educators or skilled peers take the opportunity to guide children through the medium of socio-dramatic play. For example, in two separate studies, Burton and Edwards (2006) and Konishi (2007) found that play scenarios with children who are native speakers help ELL create bonds with those more competent speakers, which in turn enables them to gain confidence using English and so advance literacy learning. This is especially productive in the context of socio-dramatic play, where engagement with competent peers helps advance learning. In the two studies, initial language barriers meant native speakers and ELL could not routinely socialize, but play encouraged them to form friendships and prompted communication. By communicating with their native-speaking play companions in socio-dramatic role-play, ELL enhanced their English language ability, and as a result were able to integrate more successfully into the mainstream classroom.

As well as skilled peers, adult helpers can also assist ELL to develop greater linguistic and literacy competencies. Roskos and Neuman (1993) mentioned in their study that day-care teachers could facilitate literacy in the context of children’s socio-dramatic play by using
characteristic behaviors and roles as an observer, participant, and trainer. Benerjee, Alsalman, and Alqafari (2015) confirm that children’s socio-dramatic play can be valuably enhanced by educators who can enrich children’s language and literacy by prompting them to extend their play themes, interests, and plot developments. Other studies suggest similar productive outcomes when adults provide close and supportive roles.

For example, using Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, Korat, Snapir, and Barat’s (2003) study shows that the guidance of an adult can enrich children’s literacy skills in the context of socio-dramatic play. This guidance functions well for children throughout their early learning, because acquiring literacy skills is an ongoing process. In this case, the study took place in Tel-Aviv, Israel, with 32 children from middle class backgrounds aged from 5.5 to 6.5 years, plus an experienced Kindergarten teacher. The children participated in socio-dramatic play that involved written symbols. The duration of the study was six months and data was collected through observations, field notes, still pictures, and samples of children’s emergent writing. The authors indicated that literacy development does not emerge from a “vacuum,” but instead arises from children negotiating with peers and adults, both of whom can provide an enriched context of literacy experience. Korat, Snapir, and Barat’s findings are valuably supported by Tongson (2014). Tongson observed Filipino preschool teachers’ redirecting and extending style of interactions during socio-dramatic play and found that these interactions enhanced the preschool children’s reading and writing abilities. From this, it can be inferred that in the context of socio-dramatic play, educators of ELL need to be aware of the value of providing opportunities for adult and peer relationships. This would include encouraging supportive, friendly interactions with teachers as well as friendships with native
speaking children (those with greater language competency) to allow ELL to develop greater proficiency in both oral language and literacy skills.

Recognizing the value of adult and peer roles is particularly valuable in the context of teaching ELL. For example, in one early study, Moon and Reifel (2008) reviewed teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about play in relation to the literacy learning of children from diverse language backgrounds. The authors noted that the teacher who participated in this study was interested in helping ELL and came up with many ways to assist these young children. The measures taken by the teacher involved attending various workshops, reading articles, and completing a certificate program in ELL instruction. The study concluded that teacher beliefs and understanding of the specific needs of ELL is strongly helpful in positively influencing ELL in the classroom. Providing adult and peer supervision in the context socio-dramatic play goes a long way to enhancing emerging literacy among ELL.

Competent peers play an important role in fostering language skills among less skilled users. In a case study of a four-year old bilingual (English and Spanish) child, Galeano (2011) examined how the child increased her weaker language ability (Spanish) in the course of engaging with her highly skilled peers over five weeks of socio-dramatic play sessions. The author noted that the child’s vocabulary, grammar, and fluency in her weaker language increased during the time of the study. The study concluded that the girl’s highly skilled peers helped her to make progress in her weaker language through meaningful conversations enacted with those peers in the course of self-assumed, self-directed socio-dramatic play.
Conclusion

A range of literature confirms that early literacy skills pave the way for academic success in later years. However, acquiring early literacy skills is complicated for ELL whose backgrounds may be culturally diverse with respect to literacy and whose home setting may not include English as a primary language. Nevertheless, a range of productive strategies can enhance language and literacy learning among ELL. For instance, evidence from both early and current studies shows that developing strong first language skills is critical to enhancing English language and literacy skills, as knowledge developed through a first language can be transferred to the second language. Studies also indicate the usefulness of educators being aware of the need to talk with ELL and to be mindful of the cultural and literacy practices associated with ELLs’ home setting. These studies further suggest the value of providing play areas with culturally relevant objects and artefacts to assist ELL in more comfortably integrating into the school setting, thereby encouraging English language and literacy proficiency.

According to the literature, socio-dramatic play can serve as a pivotal arena for deploying any and all of these strategies. As children start to develop verbal skills, socio-dramatic play involving symbolic imitation, pretend role-playing, interaction, and information seeking comes to the forefront of preschoolers’ social play. Its usefulness for enhancing literacy has generally been recognized, although research on its value in the context of ELL is fairly scant. However, as this literature review shows, playful, self-selected socio-dramatic play offers ELL a rich venue for advancing literacy, especially if (a) it is textured with culturally meaningful, culturally familiar manipulators and objects to enable those learners to draw on their own individual “funds of knowledge”; (b) it is enriched with print objects, labels, signs, and other literacy artefacts to
encourage familiarity with print conventions and purposes as a means to prompt story-telling and “pretend reading”; and (c) it is supervised with adults and competent peers as guides to learning.

In conclusion, the literature in this survey reveals that play is influenced by culture and that current early childhood practices need to include culture in play. Socio-dramatic play affords opportunities to incorporate culture. Socio-dramatic play might therefore offer a comfortable medium for ELL to integrate into a new environment and at the same time encourage them to learn a new language (English or French in the Canadian context) and at the same time may enable them to integrate in a new environment. There is promising evidence that culturally textured, well-supported socio-dramatic play offers a promising avenue for advancing language and literacy proficiency among ELL.
Research and Professional Practice

Children who come to Canada with different language and culture than English or French have a difficult time integrating in the classroom. Classified as English Language Learners (ELL), these children may have very little familiarity with English, or not speak it at all. This can make it difficult for them to integrate into school, make friends, and play with others. As a result, it can be more difficult to develop English language literacy. Individual cases can help illustrate the challenges ELL children face. For example, one of the students in my class, a four-year old named John (pseudonym) who had recently emigrated from India, spoke only few words of English when he first joined my classroom (see Chapter 1). His native language was Punjabi. John serves as a poster boy for the kinds of difficulties ELL face when they encounter Canada’s new linguistic and cultural environment. The first day he joined preschool, he just sat in a corner looking sad. The other children were curious about him and wanted to befriend him. However, he was unable to communicate either with his fellow playmates or with the teachers because of the language barrier. He tried to tell me something in his first language, assuming that I could speak his language. Unfortunately, he was wrong as I do not speak Punjabi. I could see that he was heart-broken that no one was able to understand him.

As an immigrant myself, I empathized with his predicament, but was unable to help him overcome his sense of linguistic and cultural isolation. For example, during lunchtime, he was looking for a tumbler (a type of drinking glass from India) to drink water; he was searching for familiar items from his own culture. I tried my best to talk to him, and gave him extra time to get comfortable in the classroom but neither of these strategies seemed to work. My colleagues and I wondered if he might be having developmental problems.
I looked for ways to help John. I searched for materials and resources that would support the school’s early childhood educators to integrate preschool ELL such as John. However, I found that this area is sparsely researched, with very limited support materials available. I also asked for help from my fellow English language assisting teachers who work primarily with elementary school children, and also for ideas from friends who work with new immigrants, but advice was limited. I was concerned that there seemed to be little practical advice, either evidence-based or anecdotal, that I could use to help young preschool ELL integrate into their new cultural environment. My experience with John prompted me to undertake this project so I could find ways to help preschool ELL to successfully integrate into preschool settings and so foster literacy development in the mainstream language.

The research on literacy development shows that having a strong foundation in early literacy skills helps children with their future academic success (Mayer, 2007; Espinosa, 2010). With an increasing number of children arriving in Canadian schools and preschools from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it has become a challenge not only for children but also for teachers to find ways to integrate them in the mainstream classroom, let alone learn a new language. The 2011 Canadian Census reported that more than 200 languages are being spoken as a home language or as a first language (Statistics Canada, 2011). This figure shows it is increasingly important for Early Childhood Educators to find reliable techniques for assisting children who are not native speakers to “feel at home” in the school setting, so they can more easily and confidently develop emergent language and literacy skills. From my own experience observing John, it was clear that if our classroom had provided some culturally familiar objects (such as an Indian tumbler), John would have been able to hold on to a comforting point of cultural reference to help him feel more “at home,” in turn easing the way to successful literacy
learning. I reflected that incorporating culturally familiar play objects into the preschool classroom (not just functional objects like a tumbler) would probably be even more likely to enhance an ELL’s “comfort zone” in a linguistically and culturally unfamiliar school setting.

The current literature reveals that play is influenced by culture and that socio-dramatic play in particular has the added bonus of incorporating culture, language, and personal experiences in play (Hughes, 2010; Kirova, 2010) potentially offering an ideal medium for ELL to develop early literacy and language skills. This is useful to know, because there is strong evidence showing the role of a child’s first language in helping to develop fluency in a second language (Kohnert, 2010). To this end, home and school partnership is essential for ELL because knowledge created at home, and transferred to school, can assist in literacy acquisition (Purcell-Gates, 1996). Ideally, such partnerships should be mandatory as a way to promote literacy development for ELL (Wiegel & Martins, 2005). Whether mandatory or not, it is clearly important for educators to have a partnership with parents of ELL in order to better understand their culture and language so they can incorporate these elements into classroom settings (Tabors, 2008). Based on this perspective, Kirova (2010) recognized the value of incorporating culture in socio-dramatic play. Bearing this in mind, I wanted to make changes in my own classroom environment.

**Changes to Classroom Practice**

My classroom consists of 16 pre-school children, aged 3 to 5 years, and 2 teachers. The classroom is divided into sections such as housekeeping area, art area, block area, library, and writing area. Based on my understanding of socio-dramatic play, I decided to change the housekeeping area to help John to integrate more comfortably into his new preschool setting.
The first change I made to assist my approach was to get to know more about John. As revealed by the literature, classroom environments must be welcoming and friendly in order for ELL to integrate in the classroom (Tabors, 2008). When children come to school for the first time they are often nervous and scared, as my observation of John indicated. Therefore, first, I make it a point to give new children space and to make friendly gestures (i.e., smiling, appearing friendly) so that they know I am there for them if they need me.

Talking with parents is also a great way to help children settle into school. I have always routinely chatted with parents about their children to find out about their routines, likes, and dislikes. This helps me to know the children better and gives me tools to interact with them. The same applies to ELL (Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013), though it may not be as easy to come by, because language barriers could be an issue with the parents as well. Although John’s mom spoke Punjabi at home with John, she was able to communicate in English fairly well. I took advantage of this to speak with John’s mom to learn more about John to support his integration into the classroom. During the informal interview, John’s mother also gave me a few keywords in her native language so her son could communicate with me. Learning a few key words in ELLs’ first language is crucial since with these words the educators can communicate to some degree with ELL and make them feel welcomed in the classroom. Even this minor linguistic exchange will enable the child to create a relationship with the teachers. I compiled a list of commonly used Punjabi words (such as hungry, bathroom/ washroom, sad, happy, wash, mom, and dad) and posted it near the play center, as well as on the teacher board where other teachers could also access it.

A review of the literature reveals that when children come to school they come with knowledge about their customs, food, and music and are able to incorporate this knowledge
during socio dramatic play (Similanksy, 1968; Hughes, 2010). I have observed that various types of themes emerge in the house keeping area such as playing hospital, family, school, and baby. Therefore, I thought the house keeping area would be an ideal dramatic center for ELL to use their imagination, their personal experience, culture, first language, and knowledge to create their own free socio-dramatic play. I was fully aware that I cannot make significant changes to the class environment due to time, classroom resources, and budget. However, small changes are well within my reach.

Before reorganizing the house keeping area, I sent out letters to all parents about the changes I was planning to make to the area. In the letter, I requested that parents provide materials (magazines, catalogues, note pads, objects) from different cultures and share anything from their own culture if it is different from the mainstream culture. This way, I thought I would not be favoring one culture over another, but instead introducing various cultures from around world, and at the same time integrating John in the classroom.

In gathering culturally influenced materials, some parents provided picture postcards, dolls, and various objects that they had collected during vacations. John’s mom also provided me with various types of materials for the center (e.g., an Indian doll, pictures, tumblers, books, picture postcards, and clothing). I found that the best way to gather information regarding different cultures, their languages, and clothing is from parents, community resources, thrift stores, and the internet. In a related vein, Moon and Reifel (2008) explain how the teacher in their study went out of her way to gather information, props, and attend workshops to help the ELL in her class. For my part, I changed the dramatic center to be aesthetically pleasing while also ensuring it was practically useable by children. I also rearranged the house keeping area to
create an open space where children could dramatize stories that they had heard or been told at home and included a small table and few chairs for children to sit, write, draw, or make puppets.

Normally, the housekeeping area would be arranged with specific themes such as doctor or restaurant. However, I wanted the centre to be an open centre, not reflective of any one theme. I arranged the centre to remain clear of specifically-themed props, where children could use their imagination and explore any theme they wanted. Once they started using the centre, I gradually changed the look by adding or changing objects and rearranging the centre to make it more exciting and interesting for the children. In particular, I added culturally relevant plastic food items such as tofu, rice, bok-choy, and beans. I also included commonly used Indian, Chinese, and European items such as pots and pans, plates and cutleries such as chopsticks, bowls, and Indian and Chinese tea sets. I collected some Indian, Japanese, African, and Indonesian items (silk kimonos, hats, slippers, shoes, chef hat, and dolls). On top of the table, I added a small shelf to include pencils, paper, crayons, and glue sticks for children to make puppets and use the space creatively. The writing table turned into a multipurpose platform for different activities such as preparing and serving food, playing baby and mom, and playing doctor and patient. Finally, I decorated the walls with pictures of families from different cultures, landscapes, and a world map. I used Chinese and Indian fabrics and lanterns to decorate the area and included multicultural books since children love to look at books and pretend to read to their friends. This gave an inviting feel to the area for the children.

Next, I began to provide more explicit literacy materials, specifically marking some of these in additional languages. For example, I labeled common objects in the environment such as tables, chairs, books, pens, papers, and felt markers in English, Punjabi, and Tamil (my first language). John’s mom helped me to label the objects in John’s first language (Punjabi). I also
hung commonly used words in the pocket charts in those three languages: for example, names of fruits, colours, transportation, and clothing. It is evidenced from the literature (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002; Elliott & Oliff, 2008) that if children are surrounded by visible literacy enriched materials to enhance their language and literacy skills, they will be motivated to include them in play (Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Vukelich, 1994; Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts, & Benedict, 2007). By pointing to the labels and discussing the words around them, the children become aware of print conventions, while also developing more vocabulary and a newfound awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity.

By labeling objects in both languages, including that of ELL, the teachers can help ELL feel comfortable in using their own language and proud of their culture. It was noted in the case study by Huerta and Riojez-Cortez (2014) that Lucía, a girl of Mexican heritage, thrived in both languages when she was encouraged to use both Spanish and English. By using both languages in printed materials, a teacher shows that both versions relay the same message, identifies the connection between the two languages, and assists the ELL children to use their first language skills to help develop the second language. The literature demonstrates that the skills learnt from a first language can be transferred to a second language (Konishi, 2007; Bialystok, 2007). Having a strong foundation in a first language paves the foundation for the addition of a second language (Cumming, 2005).

During circle time, I talked to the children about the changes I made to the dramatic area and how it should be used. I explained about the world and people and sang a song (see Appendix C) about the continents of the world, which I had learnt from my colleague (Personal Communication, 2006). I also explained to them the rules of the drama area and how they should use the materials. In this way, the ELL feel welcomed in the classroom while the other children
get an opportunity to learn a new culture and language. The benefits of incorporating the changes described above extend not only to ELL but to all children in the setting. Making ELLs’ first language available in print form in the dramatic area can provide overall literacy benefits, as printed text often prompts talk, therefore enhancing oral development.

Oral language lays the foundation for reading and writing (Dockrel, Stuart, & King, 2010). Hence, it is important for ELL to improve their oral language proficiency in the preschool years. Oral language can be fostered by supportive educators. This is especially important in the case of ELL, who may lack oral proficiency in the mainstream language. Keeping this in mind, I started observing John use his oral skills in English and encouraged him to use standard forms of English. For example, When John says, “I apple eat,” I model it as “I want to eat an apple”. In John’s case, development of his oral skills was sensitively guided by me, the educator, acting on the principle that literacy development does not arise in a vacuum; instead, it develops when children interact with adults and peers (Korat, Snapir, & Barat, 2003).

An especially valuable way for adults to encourage children’s oral proficiency involves the use of decontextualized language (Bradley & Reinking, 2011). Decontextualized talk involves making comments or asking questions designed to get children thinking and reasoning beyond the immediate context: because answers are not immediately apparent or “given” in the environment, children have to draw on their own cognitive and linguistic resources to create a meaningful response. According to Rowe (2013), it is valuable for teachers to ask open-ended questions or invite comments about a story they are reading in a way that prompts children to think imaginatively about their responses. In this way, they are encouraged to make connections with their own previous experience. Using decontextualized talk, I prompted John to use descriptive sentences, rather than just one-word answers. For example, when John pretended to
make chappathi (a type of Indian bread), he said things like, “I like chappathi, I make for you.” I would then extend the conversation by asking open-ended, decontextualized questions like, “Why do you like chappathi?” or “How do you make chappathi?” Likewise, when we were reading a bilingual version of the story *Brown bear, brown bear what do you see?* in both English and Punjabi, I asked John to describe what kinds of animals he had seen in India. In this way, I encouraged John to elaborate on his oral skills, deepen his engagement with the story, and advance his oral skills. Decontextualized questions are a valuable strategy that adults can use to invite children to make creative, productive connections with their own cultural-linguistic experiences and, at the same time, provide opportunities for meaningful adult interactions.

I personally have observed that when teachers interact with the children in their care, quite often they create warm and meaningful relationships with them. For example, John established a meaningful relationship with me because I conversed a great deal with him, and I satisfied his need for connection and familiarity by providing culturally appropriate objects for him to play with. This type of warm connection with a supportive adult is especially important for ELL (Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013).

As the literature reveals (Galeano, 2011), peer interactions are crucial for language and literacy development. Talk has an important role in socio-dramatic play, and children must have verbal skills to negotiate and sustain the play (Similansky, 1968). Keeping this in mind, I encouraged John to make friends. When I first observed him, John was quiet and played by himself. For example, when a little girl named Emily wanted to play with him, he was initially too shy to engage with her. However, with my encouragement to “come out of his shell,” the shyness gradually faded, and he started to play with Emily. Still, I found it was necessary to keep encouraging John through making short but pointed interventions, even after he had started
making friends with the other children. For example, once when John was playing with his English-speaking friend Emily, he did not understand what a scone looked like. As a teacher, I explained what scones look like, and this helped sustain their play for longer. I found interventions could be made in other ways as well, not always as directly as this. A more subtle form of intervention came in the selection of books for reading.

The literature shows that book-related dramatic play has motivated children to read (Korat, Snapir, & Barat, 2003; Welch, 2008). To facilitate book-related play, I have found it is best to observe the children and to look for their interests and choose a book accordingly. Moreover, when I chose a book, I chose one with less text but more pictures and themes that would attract the children; I have often observed in my class that children are more focused when a book contains less-text-more-pictures. The value of book-related dramatic play is unmistakable when it comes to preschool children who arrive at school already speaking English and are familiar with English books for children like nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and so on. However, the situation is different for ELL. They are unfamiliar with English books and with English literacy and cultural conventions. I was wondering about ways I could encourage John to engage with book-related dramatic play, when he was not familiar with either the language or the books he was surrounded by.

The academic literature reveals that ELL children are motivated to get involved in literacy related activities when their language and culture are recognized in the classroom (Kenner, 1997; Kirova, 2010). This prompted me to choose culturally relevant Punjabi books for John to read to the children in the dramatic area. I also read the book *Brown Bear Brown Bear What Do You See?* in English and Tamil. I already had a collection of felt pictures for this story and added this to the dramatic area so that children could use it in their play. I encouraged
children to make props for the book with the materials available for them in the centre (i.e., craft materials, pens, and papers) and to dramatize the events in the story. To make the reading session even more interesting, we pretended to fly to different countries. For instance, during the week of Diwali (an Indian festival), we pretended to fly to India. Additionally, I invited John’s mom to talk about the Diwali celebration and read *Brown Bear Brown Bear What Do You See?* in Punjabi. John’s mom hesitated, but agreed to share her culture. She was impressed when children showed their involvement by joining the Punjabi dance, asking questions about the language, and expressing interest in the folk story that she narrated. Following this, John took the book home to read with his mom, then started to make pictures and drawings, saying he was writing in Punjabi and English. This showed that John was proud of his language and culture and at the same time had shown interest to learn a new language.

**Outcome:**

John did not use the dramatic area right away even though I had accommodated his culture and language from day one. Clarke (2009) indicates that it takes time for ELL to join the group interaction. They might choose to remain in a silent period where they just observe. Keeping this in mind, I did not force John to join the center. After a few weeks, John slowly started to use the center and play with the Indian tumblers I had provided. He made tea and pretended to be a Tea Wala (a tea seller). As Kirova (2010) suggests, when children are given the familiar objects with which they are surrounded from birth, they tend to manipulate these objects to their own satisfaction and will creatively use them in their new cultural environment, thus creating an inventive tool that fits the new environment. Other children were curious about John’s pretend play (Tea Wala) with the tumblers. As mentioned above, one other child, Emily, wanted to befriend John. She approached him and asked him whether she could join his pretend
play. In response to these kinds of overtures, John slowly started to pick up English words and communicate with both Emily and me. Both children shared their own cultural knowledge and created a common ground for communication and interaction. John gradually started to get comfortable in the environment. Eventually, his group of friends grew from one to five.

By the end of the year, John was comfortably integrated into the class and conversing reasonably well in English. Language was no longer a barrier for him as it was when he first joined the class. John showed interest in books and writing by creating notes and cards for his friends and families; as previously mentioned, he also showed interest in taking the Punjabi version of the book, *Brown Bear Brown Bear*, home. John’s mom has mentioned that her son loves to pretend play school at home with his brother and talks about different cultures around the world - a clear indication that his early literacy skills are developing. John’s experience shows that differences in language and culture can act as barriers for new ELL when they try to fit in the mainstream culture at school, but if opportunities are given to respect their language and culture, integrating ELL into the mainstream classroom will be easier to achieve.

In fact, including diverse print and oral culture not only benefited John, but also the other children as well. Parents of the English-speaking children in the class indicated that their children too were talking about other cultures, reading books on other cultures, and listening to cultural folk stories. I believe if children are given the right opportunity to learn from one another, this will lead to greater tolerance and acceptance in the classroom (Konishi, 2007).

**Future directions:**

As suggested by the literature and from my own professional practice as a teacher, ELL may benefit when their culture and language are integrated, enabling them to develop their language and literacy skills. Socio-dramatic play is an ideal medium for them to incorporate their
culture, language, and personal experiences. Extending from this, home-school partnerships are essential to develop ELL literacy skills since home environments influence literacy skills of ELL.

Building on the steps I have already taken and outlined above, I am planning for additional strategies to assist ELL develop literacy. As one of my future goals, I am hoping to conduct a parent education session to inform the ELL parents about the importance of first language and ways to support their first language at home such as reading and talking to their children in their first language. One of my plans is to include shared reading sessions of bilingual books with the ELL parents. In this exercise, parents will read a story text in their own language, while the teacher will read the story text in English.

The need for educators to be prepared for an ever-growing ELL population cannot be overstated. The present government’s promise to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of February, 2016 (Jones, 2016) will be a huge challenge for Canadian educators. Yet when I looked at the list of past conferences (2000-2015) by the Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC), I saw only very few workshops related to supporting a diverse population, and nothing for supporting preschool ELLs’ language and literacy. This motivates me to share my experience, and the knowledge I have gained from the literature I reviewed during my time in the Masters in Education program. To this end, I will be presenting a workshop for Early Childhood Educators on how to support ELL in their literacy enhancement through socio-dramatic play (See Appendix D).
Conclusion:

As the literature and my personal experience reveals, I would like to continue to learn and evolve my teaching practice to ensure ELL in the classroom feel included. Creating this culturally-inclusive environment can initially seem daunting, as it does involve making a number of changes. However, I believe small nudges make a profound effect. Personally, I have found the results of making small but significant changes inspiring. Having a positive outcome with my classroom experience regarding ELL motivates me to consider what other ways there might be to support ELL. Luckily, there are resources (e.g., Web, Apps, and books) that can be used to inspire teachers to include ways to assist their ELL students. I have collected a small number of books, which helped me in creating a culturally responsive classroom practice. (See Appendix A). I have also collected cultural objects, clothing, and artifacts, which will be helpful in creating a culturally responsive, print-enriched classroom that invites culturally relevant socio-dramatic play. (See Appendix A). Finally I have compiled a list of websites that can help educators of ELL in making a culturally responsive classroom. (See Appendix B). It is evident that creating this kind of classroom takes effort and involves teachers in learning and doing things in different ways, but creating a welcoming classroom for all students is possible if we have the resources, motivation, and courage.
Chapter 4

Introduction:

This is the final chapter of my capstone project. It will look back on my two and half year journey and show how this journey has changed my professional thinking towards education. It will also explain my plans for implementing my newly acquired knowledge and thinking. Finally, my chapter will end by providing recommendations for educators.

Looking Back:

The journey through the Masters in Education program has taken me far, and I am confident I will be able to use the knowledge and the experience that I acquired through this Masters journey in my future role as an educator and teacher.

My thinking on what I can do and accomplish as a teacher has changed; my knowledge base has become broader and deeper as a result of the learning journey. For instance, not only do I feel more informed because of all the research I did, I feel more confident as a teacher. My Masters journey has taught me to take risks and be open minded and flexible. For example, after learning about some simple but inspiring classroom strategies from the research I did on ELL for my literature review, I was inspired and emboldened to make changes in my classroom, adding a number of cultural artefacts and posters, bilingual books, and print labels in different languages. To my delight, these changes had great success in getting my ELL students to feel welcomed and included in their new learning environment. Due to making these relatively minor but significant changes, I had the fulfillment of feeling like a teacher who has the ability to make a difference in young lives.
In addition, I believe that as a result of the great amount of reading I did for the Literature Review, I am now able to think more critically and analytically, as well as respond to situations in a more organized way. Even though completing my project seemed to be daunting and confusing at times, the process of refining my thinking and understanding through the reading, thinking, and writing I had to do helped me develop stronger analytical skills. These analytical skills now enable me to analyze the situation in my class and act accordingly, based on the new insights I have learned about how to assist ELL develop literacy skills in English. In addition, I was also able to learn to manage time more effectively, as I had to work towards strict deadlines. Creating and sticking to a schedule to meet these deadlines helped me to become more organized. I personally believe these skills are basic yet important skills for personal as well as professional reasons.

**Looking forward**

With this valuable graduate experience, I am confident that I can move forward to put theory into practice and become a better teacher in the classroom. In the past, I tended to focus more on product instead of the process. This educational journey has given me a more holistic outlook. For example, as an Early Childhood Educator, I had been always known that play is essential for children’s development. However, from the knowledge I gained during my research, I now realize more fully that preschool English Language Learners (ELL) face challenges due to differences in language and culture when they transition from home to school. From the more holistic view that I gained, I can now see that when ELL’s culture and language are included at school, particularly in the context of print enriched socio-dramatic play, ELL are able to enhance
early literacy skills. This understanding is highly significant, as early literacy skills lay the foundation for later academic success (Mayer, 2007; Espinosa, 2010).

Keeping this in mind, I would move forward to advocate for changes in classroom practices. To encourage educators to implement these changes, I am planning to conduct presentations for my fellow educators at my school as well as offer presentations for other Early Childhood Educators. For example, with the knowledge I gained from going through the Master’s program, I have created a power point presentation for Early Childhood Educators to show how ELL culture and first language can be integrated in the mainstream classroom. With a few modifications, I am planning to do the same presentations for Primary teachers (Kindergarten to Grade 4). As well, with the knowledge gained from the research I completed, I am also looking forward to conducting a parent education night at my school and hope to extend this to more public child-friendly venues like local libraries, where I hope to reach a wider number of ELL’s parents to emphasize the value of practicing and maintaining first language in the home.

In addition, there are a number of more formal professional opportunities to share my findings, such as Making Tomorrow and ECEBC conferences, where I can present evidence-based findings from my project to show early childhood educators and policy-makers the practical value of implementing simple but highly effective strategies to welcome ELL into an unfamiliar learning and cultural environment. I am excited to showcase my research in a variety of professional settings, as it demonstrates that by making small changes, educators can make giant strides in helping ELL to feel included in the classroom, which then paves the way for them to develop their early literacy skills.
Recommendations:

As a result of engaging in this research project, I have three main recommendations to help educators assist ELL in the preschool setting.

Be Empathetic and Friendly:

My first recommendation is a building block for everything that follows, that is for educators to practice empathy: educators need to create a welcoming atmosphere for ELL and create partnerships with their parents (Tabors, 2008). Being friendly and empathetic makes children feel valued, welcome, and appreciated. To demonstrate empathy and welcome, educators should try to learn a few words from their ELL’s first language. Doing this shows that the educators care about them. This will encourage ELL to create a positive and trusting relationship with the educator. As well, establishing a home-school connection is important for ELL. When educators take the extra step to connect with the parents of ELL, they not only are able to learn more about their ELL’s culture and language but also create a strong, positive partnership with the parents, so they do not feel culturally alienated. Partnerships with parents and home enable the ELL to integrate in the mainstream classroom more easily.

Include culture and first language in the print enriched socio-dramatic play:

It is important that educators are aware that first language influences the development of the second language (Bialystok, 2007; Cumming, 2005). It is revealed in the literature that play is influenced by culture (Kirova, 2010) and culture includes language (Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Kenner, Gregory, Ruby & Al-Azami, 2008). Knowing this,
educators can use socio-dramatic play as an ideal medium for ELL to include their personal “wealth of experience.” Educators need not make drastic changes to the classroom but making small changes to include ELL background culture will have a positive effect on ELL children’s sense of their value and worth.

**Learn with the students and allow time to see the results.**

Children are the ideal teachers. My final recommendation is for educators is to listen and learn from their ELL children to find out about their needs and their behaviour, as otherwise these may sometimes seem strange or odd. I have also learned that as teachers we need to give time to see the results. Patience is another virtue when it comes to teaching ELL children.

**Conclusion:**

Before I began the Masters of Education program, I was not aware of the challenges I was going to face. After going through the process, I have realized the need to expand my thinking and framework for understanding. Even though this learning journey required a great deal of time for researching, reflecting, writing, and reviewing, all the discoveries I have made make it a learning experience well worth the effort. I am excited at the prospect of using these insights to help ELL children in the classroom and to share my newfound insights with other educators.
References


Early Childhood Videos. (2013, January 30). *Supporting English Language Learners in the Preschool Classroom* [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09PrmLppQ1A


Appendix A: Professional Resources for a Culturally Responsive, Literacy-Enriched Dramatic Classroom

Title: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do you See?*

Author: Bill Martin Jr.

These beautiful bilingual (English and Tamil; English and Panjabi) picture books, containing repetitive phrases and coloured pictures of various animals, excite the children when they listen to the book in a read aloud session. The bilingual nature of the books also make the children engage with the story because of the different languages used and also the rhythmic nature of the text.
Title: *One Child Two Languages*

Author: Parton O. Tabors

This book is ideal for early childhood educators, showing how to create a supportive learning environment for young ELL and how they can establish home school partnership with the parents. It also discusses how to include and encourage the ELL’s first language and culture in the classroom.

Title: *Cleversticks*

Author: Bernard Ashley

This book for children tells the story of how Ling sung did not want to go to school in the beginning because he could not do things other children can do. When he realized he could do something special that others could not do, the book shows he was motivated to go to school to show his extra special skill to other children.
Title:  *Playing Their Way into Literacies*

Author: Karen. E. Wohlwend

Karen Wohlwend’s book offers new ways to think about engaging literacy and play. The framework she outlines encourages educators to see play as part of the literacy continuum that includes reading, writing, and design. The book shows how children use play as a medium to enact the text that they read, write, and draw.

Title:  *Supporting the Settlement of Young Immigrant Children and their Families: A Guide For Early Childhood Educators*

Author: Julie Dotsch

This is an excellent resource for Early Childhood Educators integrating immigrant children in the classroom as well as strategies for supporting the families of these children.
Compiled key words from Tamil, Japanese, and Punjabi

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<th>Tamil</th>
<th>Panjabi</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>Amma</td>
<td>ਮਾਂ</td>
<td>Aisan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>Appa</td>
<td>ਪਿਤਾ</td>
<td>Housan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Thanner</td>
<td>ਪਾਣੀ</td>
<td>Mizu</td>
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Compiled key words from Spanish and German

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<tbody>
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<td>Madre</td>
<td>Mama</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>Padre</td>
<td>Papa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Agua</td>
<td>Wasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Comida</td>
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Labels in Punjabi and English

Labels in Japanese and English
Cultural Artifacts

Indian doll

Spanish clothing

Japanese kimono
Greek artifact

Chinese slippers
Appendix B: Useful Resources

Web sites
The following website offers guidelines to help educators enhance ELL’s literacy skills.


This next website provides a teacher’s personal account of the value of incorporating socio-dramatic play in the classroom.


Multi-lingual, bi-lingual, and multi-cultural books
The following sites offer book in various languages and on various cultures for purchase.

http://www.languagelizard.com/
http://multilingualbooks.com/bilingual-all.html

The website of the Greater Victoria Public Library, below, offers a variety of multi-cultural, multi-lingual books for preschool children that are available for borrowing.

http://gvpl.ca/

Videos
The video below posted by Early Childhood Videos shows experts discussing ways of supporting ELL in the preschool classroom.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09PrmLppQ1A

This next video posted by Teaching Strategy for Early Childhood Education discusses the importance of oral language in developing literacy among ELL.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HD2wydP0mE
Appendix C: Continent Song

North America South America Africa Europe and Asia,

Don’t forget Australia,

Don’t forget Antarctica,

These are the continents,

These are the continents,

These are the continents of the world.
Appendix D: PowerPoint Presentation for Early Childhood Educators

Introduction:

Based on my professional practice and the research findings, I aim to share my experience with Early Childhood Educators on how to develop ELL’s early literacy skills through socio-dramatic play. This presentation is intended to help the Early Childhood Educators learn about the importance of ELL’s first language, culture, socio-dramatic play, and home-school partnership and how these elements can be incorporated in the classroom to integrate ELL successfully. I also want to emphasize the fact that educators do not need to change the whole classroom to integrate the ELL; instead we can create a small change which may have a meaningful impact on ELL. Through being aware of their culture and language and by helping to integrate them into Canadian classrooms and schools, we are also better able to integrate them more broadly in the mainstream culture. Though my presentation is designed for Early Childhood Educators, it can be adapted for librarians, parents, primary teachers, and administrators with a few modifications. Although I made this into a power point presentation, I intend to make this presentation interactive and interesting to the audience. There will be opportunities for educators to discuss among themselves and share their opinions with rest of the group. There are 23 slides and the presentation is divided into three sections: 1) The Challenge and the Research, 2) Sharing my Professional Experience, and 3) Recommendations for Educators (providing books and hands-on materials for educators to experience.)

The Challenge and the Research:

I will begin the session with a positioning activity. I will ask the audience what are their beliefs about integrating ELL’s culture and language in their classroom. The audience will
position themselves to the left of the room if their belief is “yes” (to fully integrate the ELL’s culture and language), to the right of the room if they do not believe in integration (believe English only should be used in schools) or in the middle of the room to show that they are undecided. Then I will ask the participants to form into groups of 5 and direct them to the tables where the instructions regarding the next activity is to be found. I will have written these instructions in my language (Tamil). The goal here to make the educators understand how ELL feel when they come to an environment where they cannot understand the language nor the culture. Then I will ask them what it was like for them to read instructions they could not understand. I will then give them a few minutes to talk about it. Then, I will introduce myself and show the slides (Slides 1 to 4), while discussing the contents on the slide. In these slides I will show Statistics Canada’s census results showing the multiple languages spoken in Canada, and outline research identifying the challenges faced by educators and ELL in confronting these demographic shifts in their student populations. My classroom experience (Slide 4) will follow on from this. Here I will talk about my experience (my case study of John). My goal in discussing my own classroom experience and observations is to make the audience understand the challenges faced by ELL and educators. At this point I will ask the participants to partner up and discuss experiences that they have had with preschool ELL and what type of challenges they faced and how they overcame those challenges.

Next, I intend to share the information derived from reviewing the literature. The topics I will discuss include the importance of emergent or early literacy (Slide 7), the importance of recognizing and valuing first language and oral language (Slide 8), the importance of home school connection (Slide 10), the importance of culturally influenced, literacy enriched socio-dramatic play (Slide 12), and methods of enhancing ELL’s literacy development through adult
and peer interaction (Slide 13). After sharing the information on the literature I reviewed, I will discuss a few articles which inspired me to make changes in my classroom (slide 14). From Kenner (1997), I will share the experience of a girl who spoke Gujarati and was able to learn both the languages (English and Gujarati) successfully: She was able to proudly display her culture and her first language (Gujarat) in her predominantly English-speaking class. I will also show how in another study, Kirova (2010), indicated that when children are surrounded by culturally familiar objects they are able to creatively use the objects to their own satisfaction as way to help them settle into the unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environment of their new school, enabling them to integrate in the new environment successfully. I will also add another study by Riojas-Cortez (2001) on Mexican children, which showed that children were able to use their “funds of knowledge” given by their family members to create a meaningful conversations in the mainstream classroom.

**Sharing my Professional Experience:**

I will begin this next session (Slide 15) by letting the audience know that the first change I made in my classroom was to learn a few key words of John’s language, Punjabi, and to ensure I continued to remain empathetic and patient. The second change was to re-furbish the house keeping area into a culturally influenced area where many cultures are represented. Next I will do a dramatic activity with the audience. I will request the audience to pretend to be seated (as though they are in an airplane). I will sing the song “Flying on airplane looking through the window,” a song from Barney (2010). During the journey, I will be saying to them that we are going to India and will be pointing to India on the globe. When we pretend to arrive in India, we will be greeted by an Indian speaking in Tamil (that’s me). After this, I will say we are going to listen to a story in Tamil and English. At this point, I will ask the participants to be seated so that
they can listen to a story. I will read the story both English and Tamil. This will help the
audience to understand how it feels to hear the same story in both languages and also to
emphasize the fact that the print relays the same message even though the text looks different. I
will then stop at this point and explain how I created props and encouraged the children to act out
this story. I will let the audience know my children enjoyed the pretend part of this activity,
while the same time it helped them to enjoy learning about a different culture, encouraging them
to accept John in their classroom. I will also use this anecdote to emphasize the importance of
oral language and how adult interaction is important for children to enhance their literacy skills.
At this time I would revisit the positionality activity which we began with to see if the opinions
of the participants have changed.

After this activity, I will show the educators some hands on materials such as
environmental labels in Panjabi, Tamil, Japanese, and Greek (table, chair, doll, and book) and
show cultural objects which I have collected over the period of time, all of which are designed to
enhance a sense of cultural inclusivity in the classroom (Slide 16 and 17). I will also let the
educators know that I referred to several resources before I started making changes to my
classroom (internet, books, friends, community resources). I will recommend certain resources
for them to refer to in order to create a culturally responsive, literacy enriched classroom.
Finally, I would let them know that Victoria Public Library is a good resource for bilingual
books, and provide a useful resource for introducing an awareness of multi-lingual multi-cultural
experiences into the classroom.

**Recommendations for Educators:**

In this section (slides 18 and 19) I will be giving a few recommendations to the audience
which they may go on to use in their classroom:
1. Be empathetic and patient: As educators, we need to be empathetic and welcoming to new ELL.

2. Create partnerships with the parents: Having informal conversations with the parents enables us to know more about ELL’s values, culture, and language. Parents must be assured that using their first language at home makes a powerful contribution to learning a new language at school.

3. Include culture and first language in the classroom through socio-dramatic play: Children enjoy pretend play because it is fun and free. Include cultural artifacts in the school’s dramatic play area.

4. Use repeated pattern books every day: This will motivate the children to become active participants in read aloud reading sessions. The children will also enjoy the rhythmic patterns of the lyrics.

5. Read aloud: This will help the ELL to develop vocabulary and also connect with words.

6. Create a permeable classroom: Provide many opportunities for children to talk and respond (not just listen to the teachers): do this one to one, in pairs, and in small and large groups. Ask open-ended questions.

7. Learn with ELL: Allow the children to teach you, and give credit to yourself for trying.

Conclusion:

At the end of the presentation, I will let the audience know that the intention of the workshop is not to isolate one culture and make it the prime culture of the classroom. Instead, by making small changes to accommodate ELL’s culture and language, I will stress that we are helping these children to integrate in the mainstream classroom. I will end this presentation with a video which summarizes everything I have covered (Slide 20). Then, I will leave time for
questions and comments (Slide 21). With all of these tips and strategies, I hope to inspire educators to experiment with their teaching so their ELL can enjoy greater success in the classroom and life in general.

**PowerPoint Slides**

**Slide 1**

Enhancing Preschool English Language Learners' Literacy Skills through Socio-dramatic Play

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Slide 2

Overview

- Challenge and the Research
- Sharing my classroom experience
- Recommendations

Slide 3

Introduction

-Diversity, in terms of social, cultural and ethnic background or cognitive, physical and psychological prerequisites, is a characteristic of today’s pre-school” (Janson, 2001, p. 137).

- Canada has a diverse population with more than 20% of the population speaking languages other than official languages (French or English).

- Our immigration population is growing. For example, 25,000 Syrian Refugees are expected to arrive in Canada by the end of February (Jones, 2016).
Slide 4

Challenges ELLs face when transitioning from home to preschool

It is not easy for ELL’s to transition into school for three main reasons. They may face any or all of the following:

▶ Language barriers

▶ Educators’ lack of understanding of their cultures, beliefs and values

▶ Loss of their primary language

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Slide 5

Vignette
Slide 6

Themes explored in the Literature Review

Studies repeatedly stress the importance of the following in fostering ELL literacy development:

- Emergent or Early Literacy
- First Language and Oral Language
- Home school connection
- Culture and Literacy enriched Socio-dramatic play
- Adult and peer interactions in enhancing ELL’s literacy development.

Slide 7

Emergent Literacy or Early Literacy

Emergent literacy is “the precursory knowledge about reading and writing that children acquire prior to conventional literacy” (Justice & Pullen, 2003)
Slide 8

**First Language and Oral Language**

Promoting a student’s home language and encouraging talk is important for a variety of reasons:

- Mastering skills in one language can be transferred to the other (Bialystok 2002)
- There is a connection between primary language loss and education difficulties among language minority students (Fillmore, 1991)
- Oral language influences overall literacy development: it enhances and promotes both reading and writing skills (Snow, 1983; Sénéchal, et al., 2001; Dockrel, Stuart & King, 2010)

Slide 9

**ELL’s Three Stages of Language Development**

ELL’s typically go through a series of learning phases (Clarke, 2009)

1. The first stage involves a silent period where a child from a non-English speaking background may refuse to try and speak English. This stage may last for many months

2. The second stage begins when the child starts to try to communicate in English, for example by trying to join group interactions

3. The third stage is when children start to talk confidently and independently, striving to use proper grammatical structure when they speak
Slide 10

Home and School Connection

Establishing continuity between home and school is proven to result in learning benefits:

- Interconnectedness of the society (home, school, and community) plays a vital role in a child’s learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- The relationship between knowledge created at home and knowledge constructed at school is paramount to learning, and specifically to literacy development (Purcell-Gate, 1996).

Slide 11

Socio-dramatic play

Similansky (1968) identifies six components of socio-dramatic play (p. 9):

- Imitative role play
- Make-believe play in regard to objects
- Make-believe in play regard to actions or situations
- Persistence
- Interaction
- Verbal communication
Culture and Literacy enriched Socio-dramatic play

Learning contexts that are familiar and enjoyable improve learning:

- When cultural objects from a family’s distinct cultural setting (and the “funds of knowledge” they represent) are harnessed, socio-dramatic play offers ELL a productive and enjoyable avenue of learning (Kirova, 2010; Riojas-Cortez, 2000)

- Make-believe reflects children’s personal or life experiences, which are linked to their culture, thus can be integrated into their dramatic play to promote learning (Hughes, 2010)

- Children enhance their literacy when their play is immersed in a print-rich environment (Klenk, 2001; Kenner, 1997)

Educators and Peers’ role in Socio-dramatic play

The support of teachers, friends, and more experienced peers can have a meaningful impact on ELL’s learning:

- Socio-dramatic play (Symbolic play) is a medium for early literacy development where teachers provide in-depth literacy activities and interactions for young children (Cooper and Dever, 2001)

- Literacy development does not emerge from a “vacuum”; instead, it arises or develops from children negotiating with their peers, adults, and siblings, all of whom provide context of literacy experience (Korat, Snapir, & Barats, 2002; Konishi, 2007)

- With more competent peers or adults, a neophyte can acquire skills which he or she is not capable of doing autonomously (Vygotsky, 1978)
Sharing the articles which inspired me

- Kirova (2010)
- Kenner (1993)
- Riojas-Cortez (2001)

Sharing my classroom experience

I have used various methods to help create an inclusive and welcoming classroom for my ELL’s:

- Welcoming ELL’s in a supportive and friendly way
- Creating a culturally influenced house-keeping area
- Reading bilingual books
Slide 16

Classroom resources

Slide 17

Cultural Materials
**Recommendations for Educators**

The following strategies are proven winners when it comes to integrating ELL’s into the classroom:

- Be empathetic and patient
- Create partnerships with the parents
- Include culture and first language in your classroom through socio-dramatic play
- Learn alongside your ELL students

**Recommendations for Educators**

- Use repeated, pattern books
- Read aloud often
- Provide repetition and structure
- Create a permeable classroom
Slide 20

Conclusion

Slide 21

Questions or Comments?
ELL’s Early Literacy Skills

References

References