How Can We Help Students Who Are English Language Learners Succeed?

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To attain the most academic success among adolescent English Language Learners (ELL), the efforts of all the people associated with them must be combined along with multiple resources. Integration of curriculum content, instructional strategies, assessment, cultural responsiveness, and community resources are all critical components of success. During instruction, strategies and supportive techniques must follow the steps adolescents go through when attaining conversation and academic language. Learning strategies to be used by teachers, students, parents and community members are offered in this paper to keep your English Language Learners from falling behind academically, and ultimately lead to academic success.

Helping children who are English Language Learners (ELLs) is a multifaceted challenge that calls for strategic pedagogy to ensure the best possible success for emerging bilingual students. Recognizing that the individual cultural and linguistic strengths of such students provide a solid foundation for future learning, it is essential to not only help our students learn to communicate well in English, but also to engage with the varied curriculum offered in schools. Individual efforts by teachers, students, and helpers may be combined to reinforce the children's individual efforts and form a community of learners. Curriculum content, instructional strategies, assessment, cultural responsiveness, and community resources need to be coordinated as critical but different aspects of learning components for English Language Learners' ultimate success. Specific examples of learning strategies for teachers, students, parents, and community members will be identified in this paper.

Although bilingual education has been found to provide the best outcomes for the English Language Learner (Collier, 1992), many schools lack the resources or find themselves in a political environment where bilingual education is not currently a possibility. Although often framed as a problem, we choose to frame this discussion as an opportunity for teacher development, for improved educational outcomes for all students, and for a more just system of education. This section describes the changing demography of the student population in the United States.

Students arriving in classrooms who are English Language Learners (ELLs) have either come to this country as immigrants or were born in the United States, but speak a language different other than English at home. Educational backgrounds vary; some (ELLs) are immigrants who have not had much schooling in their countries of origin, while others are literate in their native language and possess excellent content knowledge. The majority of ELLs were born in the United States (i.e. 76% of elementary and 56% of secondary students are native-born) (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwantoro, 2005).

According to the US Census (2010), over 55 million people in the United States speak a second language. When polled, 19.7% of those who spoke a second language reported to have a family member who spoke a language other than English at home (US Census Data, 2010). Of the 55 million people who speak a different language at home, 24.2 million are five years old or over, do not speak English well or not at all (US Census Data, 2010). What this means to a teacher is that in a classroom of 25 students there will likely be at least two students who have a family member who does not speak English well or not at all. The US Census (2010) census ranked the languages spoken at home as follows: Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, French, Vietnamese, German, Korean, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, and Polish. The language data underscore the importance of addressing effective teaching using strategies which will enhance learning for any child who appears in your classroom.

Due to mobility either within the United States or between the student's country of origin and the United States, many ELLs have not developed the literacy skills in English that are expected by schools. Developmental characteristics also come into play. Middle level English Language Learners have to learn both a new language and content material while simultaneously experiencing the biological, emotional, and social changes that accompany adolescence. Thus, while ELLs represent an ever-increasing proportion of middle grade students in nearly every state, they face challenges in speaking, reading, and writing complex content material in English (Perkins-Gough, 2007). The teaching of ELL students is further complicated by the fact that most teachers have little or no training in language acquisition or bilingual education (Nieto, 2000; Rueda & Garcia, 2001).

Students do not succeed if they cannot read well. According to the Working Group on ELL Policy (2010), starting in middle school, academic performance in English and Math are tied to literacy skills as a high predictor of success. Most ELL students do not perform as well as their peers. For example, only 19% of

students learning English meet state standards for reading comprehension, and 89% of Hispanic middle and high school students read below grade level (NCES, 2005).

The ELL Working Group (2010) found that the linguistic strengths ELLs bring to the classroom are rarely used in schools (Working Group on ELL Policy, 2010). For example, an ELL learner often engages in translating and summarizing complex documents for family members in a variety of out-of-school settings. They often bring complex and relevant literacy skills to US schools, yet such skills are rarely employed by teachers to further students' education. Teachers have to consider strategies that will help the student excel in the subject area as they continue to learn English. Acquiring and developing the "register of schooling" is a very complex process and requires significant institutional support (Cummins, 2000). Whereas the academic forms of English may take from seven to ten years to learn, it is imperative that educators develop competencies and pedagogies to successfully engage the ELL students (Collier & Thomas, 1989).

Working with English Language Learners: Taking Advantage of the Opportunity

In this section, we share research findings, personal experiences as teachers, and reflections of an English learner that may help educators take advantage of the opportunities yielded to both the ELL student and the class as a whole by having emergent bilinguals enrolled in our classes. We begin with a discussion of the importance of approaching the opportunity in a positive and productive manner. Then, we discuss how to create an environment that encourages student success. Finally we will provide four instructional components that benefit ELL students.

Choosing an Approach

An educator's stance or approach to the English Language Learners in his or her classroom has a significant impact on the instructional choices a teacher will make (Karabenick & Clemens Noda, 2004). In particular, the educator's approach to the native language of the students is important. Ruiz (1984) identified several common stances toward native languages. Perhaps the most helpful of which identifies a students' native language as a benefit. Rodriguez (1982) observed the importance to the healthy socialization of ELLs of being encouraged to speak their native language in social and familial settings. Additionally several studies have provided evidence that creating spaces for a student's native language in academic settings provides significant academic benefits to ELLs (Collier, 1992; Bialystock, 2001; Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006). As such, approaching the primary language, cultural background, and community experiences of an ELL student as a rich opportunity for learning and growth is essential to providing equitable access to educational experiences for the ELL student.

Culturally responsive teaching builds upon this approach in that it requires that teachers critically examine pedagogy and curriculum. Teachers must "find ways to use the language, culture and experience of students meaningfully in their education" (Nieto, 2000, p.203). Everything about the student becomes an access point to help the student learn. Student culture, family background, student interest and high expectations for all learners regardless of the kinds of differences and issues they bring to school, are critical components for success. Taking a culturally responsive approach that recognizes the value of a students' primary language helps the educator engage the opportunity of teaching ELLs to the benefit of all involved.

Honoring students' culture through curriculum choices and instruction is another dimension of culturally responsive teaching. Literature and cross curricular content provide a great opportunity to honor students' culture and ethnicity. Read literature from the student's culture, or add statistics in math class related to their country of origin. Relate the study of social studies to include facts about your English Language Learner's culture. Incorporate comparisons to the student's culture in all subject areas.

Creating a Productive and Nourishing Environment

Teachers need to build a welcoming and trusting environment (Howard, 2007) which can significantly contribute to student success. Establishing a positive learning community in the classroom where students feel comfortable and accepted is done through "practicing inclusive and non-judgmental discussions, reflection, and engagement strategies" (Howard, 2007, p.18). Students want to trust that their teacher is interested in them and their unique life experiences. Through team building processes, educators can "establish that racial, cultural, and economic differences are real in the context of the student's background" (Howard, 2007, p.18). Classroom discussions must engage students and create a learning environment that is understanding and supportive of individual differences. Part of the trust an impactful educator creates is to demonstrate to students that as a class or as an individual, they can discuss difficult and sensitive issues in an environment that is honest, safe and productive. Through the trusting environment students become more aware of the struggles they need to work on individually or as a class.

A variety of strategies can be used to make all children feel welcome. For example, a teacher may decorate the classroom wall with historical figures and famous persons from different cultures. Business owners in the community, craftsmen, craftswomen and service volunteers can act as role models as well. When teaching ELL children, include home life examples from many cultures in urban, suburban, and rural settings featuring home and work life from textbooks and other resources. By addressing these and other factors in the classroom setting, English Language Learners begin to feel welcome.

Authenticity is another aspect of teaching responsively. Young people's level of trust and openness is closely tied to how they view their teacher as authentic (i.e. caring, loving, and trustworthy). Aronson and Steele (2005) find that student motivation and achievement outcomes are greatly influenced by the feeling of belonging, awareness that their teachers value their intellectual competence, and that they can trust the people around them. Thus teachers have to engage in this process and ongoing personal growth and cultural competence while showing interest in the culture in which students belong.

Providing Access to English Language Learners

This section discusses four critical aspects. These components include: instructional practices, resources, assessment techniques, and community connections. These learning components play a major role in the success of ELL students.

Instructional Practices

English Language Learners need opportunities to engage with the expected grade level curriculum. Rather than dumbing down the curriculum, teachers can critically evaluate their content area, focusing on the most essential aspects of such, and create modified and supported instruction for the ELLs. Using a model such as Understanding by Design encourages content area teachers to rethink what is most essential in their content area (Wiggins &

McTighe, 1988). In doing so, focusing on the most essential aspects creates an opportunity for teachers and their English Learning students to learn the curricular core while still learning the language.

Often English and literacy skills are focused on leaving little time to focus on academic content. Students soon fall behind in curriculum content material as a result. Consideration must be put into providing students with standard based culturally and age appropriate content. Using content material to teach literacy is one way of helping the ELL student to not fall behind. For example, instead of giving a 3rd grade book to a 13-year-old English Language Learner from India who reads at a 3rd grade level, a teacher might work with the science teacher providing the student with ESL material from *National Geographic*. Selecting relevant science from India and the United States will enhance student interest, as well as develop language and science understanding.

Recognizing the level of language understanding is an important element of language instruction in content area. All teachers should understand how language is acquired because all teachers teach students who are learning the English language. It should no longer be the sole responsibility of the language specialist (Nieto, 2000). It should be recognized that ELL students go through a series of steps of English understanding. Although their conversational language development may occur after only two years of immersion, the real academic employment of the language will occur up to five to seven years later (Cummins, 2000; Collier & Thomas, 2002).

While working with middle level ELLs, it is vital to recognize the potential mismatch between the level of language understanding and the level of questions. Upon early immersion of the ELL student to a new language, the levels of questioning should include levels of higher level thinking. Initially, low-level questions, which may have the student identify basic pictures or words in English, may be appropriate. Yet, the student will likely be able to answer much higher-level questions in their native language. After moving beyond that point, students can be asked questions which have one word answers or yes/no answers. As students progress in language development, the why, how or prediction related questions are helpful. Engaging in summarizing is the last stage of development and will enhance language development as the child makes sense of what they have learned. Using wait time to allow processing of the language and the information, previewing the material prior to the instructional process, and reviewing what was learned previously will help as well (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Focus your questions, hints and instruction on the most critical portions of the lesson by limiting the standards for students who are English Language Learners.

Selecting question prompts which enhances learning for ELL students is also critical. Questions you can ask children must match the English understanding level of each ELL student. Focus on higher order questions if the students are functioning high in the content area or if you or a peer can ask such questions in their primary language.

Teachers can support language acquisition and content understanding through the use of various strategies. One strategy is flexible peer discussion methods. Although allowing peers to discuss class content in their native language is uncomfortable to some teachers, peers discussing content in their home language leads to deeper understanding of the texts (Moll and Diaz, 1987; Robinstein-Avila, 2006). The content discussion in their primary language is critical since it allows the students to learn new content while developing their academic language skills.

Secondly, teachers can help students relate words between languages. Approximately one-third of all words in English have a related word in Spanish. A great website for finding cognates is: (Colorin Colorado, 2011) Familiarizing students with words in their language that have the same meaning in English is a useful tool to bring meaning as students engage with content material. Additionally, a modified word wall chart which has the key content vocabulary words translated to other languages may enhance the vocabulary learning and understanding for your students. These can be modified for desk charts or notebook charts. Vocabulary from reading, mathematics, science and social studies can be translated to languages relevant to the needs of that classroom.

Furthermore, teachers need to use multiple modalities. We know that approaching learning through the use of multiple modalities helps students make meaning. Understanding curricular topics requires the use of visual, kinesthetic and auditory teaching strategies. Providing a variety of text and genres such as videos, music, print/text (such as newspapers, books) photos, internet, and artifacts will enhance the learning for all regardless of their different learning styles (Heydon, 2003).

Giving ELL students an opportunity to participate in authentic ways allows for clarified roles through cooperative learning groups. When students are given responsibilities or roles their participation is maximized. Flexible grouping, which responds to native and second language development, allows children access to support as needed rather than be identified in a special group. Grouping which changes on a daily or weekly basis allows children to seek help only when academic support is needed for understanding rather than be identified by a particular type of student carrying a label such as English Language Learners.

The use of graphic organizers technique should not be underestimated. Graphic organizers allow ELL students to visualize, see connections, and decipher text information (Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). There are numerous samples of graphic organizers such as example to idea, graphic organizer, reversible chart, using blocks to list causes, actions, or events.

High quality teaching makes a difference for all learner and particularly ELLs according to an intensive study of exemplary schools serving Mexican American students (McLeod, 1996). Garcia in Banks and Banks (2004) suggests a variety of high quality teaching such as the following:

- Organizing instruction in innovative ways. The use of looping, keeping teachers and students together for more than the typical one year term, allows the teacher to become more familiar with and respond to the diversity of his or her students. This also allows for deeper trust among the students with regard to the teacher (Banks and Banks, 2004).

- Protecting and extending instructional time. Programs extending the school day, such as offering supportive computer-based instruction, voluntary Saturday schools and summer academies allow for extra support and extended learning time. (Banks and Banks, 2004).

- Curriculum Integration. Integrate "…reading, writing, listening and speaking across the curriculum; focusing on vocabulary development, and building background knowledge" (Perkins-Gough, 2007, p. 91). Vocabulary related to content must be targeted specifically. Use vocabulary cards which can be targeted at key content words and constructed by the students. The vocabulary cards can include the vocabulary word, things related to the vocabulary word, synonyms, where the word is used, and a drawing, picture, or a symbol for the word.

Resources

An important factor is the resources the children use in your class. The teacher should ask the following questions regarding resources: Do the resource examples match the students' lifestyle? Are the examples used in their textbooks indicative of rural, urban and suburban areas? Do the names used for children in the text cover a broad spectrum of diverse names, including ones in which children might recognize their own culture? Do the pictures in the text provide examples of children of color, children of different nationalities, and from different socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical areas?

A variety of resources are available and it is the teacher's responsibility to access as many as possible for assistance. Some possible resources for supporting English Language Learners are: peer tutors; high school tutors, senior citizen volunteers, volunteer teachers, classroom teacher, church or other community volunteers, social service volunteers, principal or assistant principal, guidance counselor, technology-voice programs for language development, and older siblings.

Assessment Techniques

Many of the same considerations in assessment apply when working with students who are English Language Learners. For the ELL student, "continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment and evaluation are essential components of the learning process" (National Middle School Association, 1995, 27). To accomplish successful meaningful assessment of children who are working in a second language will take a variety of assessment strategies. Assessing a child who is an English Language Learner needs to be focused on the critical aspects of the learning for that child. An analogy can be made between assessing English Language Learners and compacting curriculum for gifted and talented students. Like the gifted and talented student who does not need to do the same quantity of work as the other students, the English Language Learner may only need to be assessed on the most critical items. Before assessing a child who is an English Language Learner, ask questions similar to the following to make the assessment meaningful:

- "What are the critical components of the curriculum for this particular child?"
- "What particular skills will he/she need to continue progress at other grades and more complex curriculum?"
- "What is the needed vocabulary (curricular and direction related) to accomplish these tasks?"

Only after asking such questions, is it possible to design effective assessment that is appropriate for ELL students.

Fair assessments can be hindered by unintended biases related to gender, race, or ethnicity. For example using only cooking examples or sports statistics for teaching mathematics can have unintended gender biases and cultural biases. Like the sports examples, it is easy to see how using examples in class may have no connection to the culture of your ELL student. Select music, art, theatre, politics, shopping, and other things that are relevant to all students.

To encourage high performance among all your students and in particular those who are English Language Learners is to show them quality work, essentially giving a visual of the task or product to be completed (Heiss, 1995). The traditional method of showing the "best papers or projects" can be useful to a child who might be able to understand a visual better than an oral direction.

Using a variety of assessment methods may help your ELL student. Besides paper and pencil tasks, include such evaluation techniques as posters, starters, homework, projects, compositions, group participation grades, individual participation grades, writing, problem solving, art work, portfolios, group tests, labs, peer and self-evaluations, and oral presentations. According to McTighe & Ferrara (1994) some effective ways of using visual representations in assessments are as follows:

- Think in terms of developing webs, concept maps, flow chart, graph/tables, matrices, and illustrations. Move away from the traditional methods of assessments by doing product-based assessments such as the: essay; research paper; log/journal; lab report; story/play; poem; portfolio; art exhibit; science project; model; video/audiotape; or spreadsheets.

- Use performances assessments such as: oral presentation; dance/movement; lab demonstration; athletic competition; dramatic reading; enactment; debate; or musical recital.

- Use process related assessments: oral questioning; observation; interview; conference; process description; think aloud; or learning log.

Every assessment is likely to have one task that applies the learning the students are doing to some real task that is done outside of school. This is an area where ELL students can thrive. Recognize that not only will subject-related vocabulary need to be taught, but directional words have to be taught and reinforced in order for your ELL students to demonstrate their real level of learning. For example, make sure your English Language Learners understand and can respond to direction verbs often found in standardized tests such as: *observe, investigate, explore, describe, justify, develop, represent, predict, design, explain, create, compare, solve, classify, construct, summarize, discuss,* and *use* (Heiss, 1995).

It is also helpful to assess ELLs informally. The questions you ask during daily interactions with an ELL student will enable you to see the strengths and weaknesses of their understanding in the classroom. For example, math follow-up questions may look like the following:

- "What patterns do you see..." in these numbers? Can you tell me what the next three numbers will be?

- "What was the most important..." thing to remember about adding and subtracting decimals? Where are the errors most likely to occur?

- "What would happen if ..." to the answer if we changed this fraction problem from an addition to a multiplication problem?

Incorporating a large number of assessment types and multiple ways to question your ELL students will give you a clearer understanding of their content knowledge while giving your ELL students a better opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge.

Community Connections

Family and community background knowledge of English Language Learners students can provide cultural and job related information for the class. Cultural days, parents as guest speakers, and volunteers from multiple backgrounds with different language skills will enable all children to connect through language and culture. Family and community strengths ought to be incorporated into the curriculum making obvious and intentional connections to the culture of the students in the class (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Parental connections to schools have been shown to improve learning making good connections critical between home and school. Involving parents is equally important if not more critical with students who speak English as a second language.

Letters and other forms of communication to the parents of ELLs should be friendly and inviting. For example, translations into primary language can be done for many school functions such as invitations to back to school nights, curriculum outlines, web-site information such as homework assignments, test reviews, long range projects, sign-up lists for parent volunteers, mid-term reports, and introductory letters to parents. Furthermore, in many districts, an interpreter can be requested at critical times such as parent conferences, field trips, school functions, after school programs, PTA meetings, and school governance events. Other community connections can be provided by mentors for individual students. Teachers may learn more about the communities and their inherent strengths by visiting the homes of students, visiting places of worship, or other cultural event in the students' communities. Finally, a teacher may not only learn about the culture of the ELL student but also learn some words in the students' native language.

Conclusion

To develop a successful learning environment for English Language Learners, a multi-faceted approach is needed. Understanding the steps adolescents go through to attain conversation and academic language must be followed during instructional strategies. Support mechanisms for English Language Learners to keep them from falling behind their peers must be used along with adaptations in curriculum, assessment and instructional strategies. Parents must be aware of the instruction, content, assessment, and their child's performance in order to support their child's success. A combined effort from all the people and resources associated with the young English Language Learner will be the most successful way to help your students succeed.

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