The Double Demands of Teaching English Language Learners

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Teachers of language minority students often help them learn a new language and master academic content. Here are key principles for effective instruction.

Looking for Pictures of Effective Instruction

Experts in professional development like Judith Little (1993) argue that training in complex topics such as combining English as a second language instruction with content area instruction requires new methodologies: "There is no well developed picture of what these principles look like in practice" (p.131).

My goal here is to create pictures of productive teaching strategies as well as an understanding of principles that underlie effective practice. Whereas prior research on second-language students has often focused heavily on the philosophical, policy, and program planning levels (Czikko 1992), our research project focused squarely on the observed learning environment of the child. We wanted to look at the quantity and quality of instruction offered to these students, and the coherence or fragmentation of the instructional program.

For three years, a team of seven researchers observed 26 classrooms in the metropolitan areas of San Diego, California, and El Paso, Texas. The members of the research team represented a wide range of perspectives, expertise, and professional experience: ethnography, bilingual education, and cognitive approaches to literacy instruction and direct instruction. Our team—four researchers and two bilingual practitioners (a special educator and a school psychologist)—observed more than 200 hours of reading/language arts instruction provided to language minority students in grades 3–6. Although most of the students were not fluent English speakers, they had graduated from their bilingual or sheltered English programs into what the districts called transition programs. By district standards, they were no longer considered limited in English proficiency.

Like Moll (1992), we observed that typical instruction in many of the 26 classrooms was "intellectually limited, with an emphasis on low-level literacy skills" (p. 20), even though most teachers were using literature rather than basal texts as the basis of their reading and language arts curriculum (Gersten and Woodward 1995).

However, 5 of the 26 teachers appeared to provide instruction that met the criteria set by researchers of being intellectually stimulating, clear, and explicit (Reyes 1992, Delpit 1988, and McElroy-Johnson 1993). These teachers seemed exceptionally artful in translating contemporary research on literacy and language learning into realistic instructional strategies. Gently but consistently, they encouraged students to reason, to use English to express their ideas, and to justify their conclusions. In order to analyze these situations, and to ensure that our
interpretations were accurate and made sense to the teachers, we interviewed these five teachers several times.

These expert teachers seemed not only to embody principles of the whole language movement (such as use of literature as opposed to basal texts, and integration of reading and writing), but also to sensitively incorporate many of the instructional strategies and techniques from the effective teaching research of the 1980s (Brophy and Good 1986). Following is one example of a particularly effective 4th grade teacher.

**A Look at Maria Tapia's Classroom**

Although Maria Tapia* is bilingual, her classroom instruction is in English, except for a daily 30-minute Spanish language arts block. In fact, when a student asks a question in Spanish, Maria answers in English, because “this is the English part of the day.” The students are in their second year in a primarily English language instruction classroom.

Students sit on the floor as Tapia reads Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge, an Australian story about a woman losing her memory. The readability of the book is well below 4th grade level, but the emotional and thematic content is subtle and complex. Children listen with rapt attention.

Even though the English grammar is incomplete, Tapia evaluates the response for content rather than the extent to which it conforms to correct language use.

Tapia never labels responses as right or wrong, but sometimes asks students to explain the rationale for their opinions. Jorge, for example, explains that he “liked it because it was sad and it was happy,” and proceeds to provide several examples.

Tapia chooses words for the class to analyze in depth that represent more complex ideas—adjectives like anxious, generous, and suspicious, and nouns like memory—words that second-language students are likely to need help with.

Later, she tells students they can use three sources of data to explain why they think a character is anxious. She lists the sources on a chart: actions, speech (or dialogue), and appearance. The class uses this list for discussing subsequent stories as well, and as a guide while writing in their journals. Tapia consistently challenges students to incorporate more complex structures in their analyses by referring to the list. For example, in response to student essays, she says, “None of you provided dialogue.” Students then search for dialogue to support their inferences about a particular character.

Throughout our three years of observations, “You have to prove to me” was Tapia's consistent message. Teacher and peers evaluated, but never directly criticized, all attempts to develop or support an inference. Tapia continually prompted students to provide evidence for predictions, hypotheses, and inferences. In our
observations, this sense of intellectual accountability was rare.

**Literature and Content-Area Instruction**

Over the past decade, teaching English as a second language through content-area instruction, particularly through the use of literature, has increased significantly. This approach is sometimes called *sheltered English* (Northcutt and Watson 1986), bilingual immersion (Gersten and Woodward 1995), or cognitive academic language learning approach (CALLA) (Chamot and O'Malley in press). Proponents argue for moving away from the more sterile emphasis on grammar and syntax or a contrived conversational approach, toward building knowledge of the new language by integrating language acquisition with understanding and enjoying and talking about quality literature.

In an articulate plea for integrating reading with English language development, Anderson and Roit (in press) note,

> Spoken language is fleeting and inconsistent over time. Text is stable and does not pass the learner by. It allows one to reread and reconsider that which is to be learned in its original form (p.2).

Another current of educational thought evokes the power of using literature from many cultures (Au 1993 and Greene 1993). Here the emphasis is not only cognitive and linguistic, but personal and sociocultural as well. The authors note the potential of multicultural literature for breaking down boundaries that often exist between non-European immigrant students, predominantly working class, and their teachers who, by and large, are middle class and white.

Greene demonstrates this with a quote from the novel *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid, a recent immigrant: “Outside I seemed one way, inside I was another; outside false, inside true” (p.18). The vocabulary is relatively simple, yet its power to resonate with students’ lives is fierce. Greene passionately urges teachers to make “imaginative efforts [that] cross the distances and [allow the teacher to] look through diverse others’ eyes” (p. 13).

In this approach, process writing is as crucial as literature-based instruction. An emphasis on process has the potential to push students, regardless of their current English language capabilities, to begin to “pursue the meanings of their lives—to find out how things are happening, to keep posing questions about the ‘why.’ “The ultimate goal, in Greene’s words, is to reach out for the proficiencies and capacities, the craft required to be fully participant in this society, and to do so without losing the consciousness of who they are (p.17).

Ten years ago, Woodward and I (1985) noted that “education of language minority students [is] relatively easy to write about, yet difficult to implement sensitively on a day-to-day basis” (p. 78). Our recent observations and interviews revealed that most of the 26 teachers understood the benefits of integrating English language learning with academic content instruction, but were overwhelmed with the intricacies of putting it into practice.

Many aspired to use literature and writing to stimulate interaction between themselves and their students, but didn’t possess the tools and techniques to do so. For example, Reyes (1992) notes that the high regard that Hispanics hold for teachers as authority figures indicates that they rely on and expect direct instruction. Yet many teachers routinely made only indirect requests of their students.

The issue of how to balance literature-based, personal instruction with explicit language instruction is a dilemma that consistently emerged in our interviews. Only the creative synthesis of many techniques seemed to enable the expert teachers to consistently engage their students and...
actively promote language learning. It is, I believe, the type of dynamic synthesis that researchers such as Reyes and Delpit and practitioners such as McElroy-Johnson have constantly advocated as optimal for working-class children from immigrant families.

Effective Literacy Instruction

Our analysis of observational and interview data revealed four productive practices for teaching language minority students:

1. Use evocative words as an explicit focus of lessons. Teachers we observed chose words that relate to human motivation and are critical for literary analysis (such as anxious and memory). On the surface, some of these words seemed too easy for 4th or 5th graders. Yet the words are critical for second-language learners, and discussion of critical to deep vocabulary learning, a subject that has been the cornerstone of pioneering research on vocabulary instruction (Beck et al. 1983).

We saw a dramatic difference in students' mood between a typical 5th grade class where students had to incorporate in a story as many of the day's 12 new words as possible, and students working in cooperative groups, pooling evidence on why a given character was "generous" or "vile" or "brave, but also frightened."

2. Use explicit strategies to help students become better readers. Expert teachers frequently used scaffolds to help second-language students. Tapia's request that students cite data sources for evidence is an excellent example; she encouraged students in their search for examples of dialogue and warmly rewarded their efforts.

While discussing another story, the effective teachers of second-language students seemed to be aware of the negative impact of telling students they're wrong. During an interview with Tapia, I asked her whether this was intentional. She replied, "Absolutely. It's intentional. When I was a child, I was taught that way—that is right, that is wrong. I'd never do that to a child."

In one case, Tapia's class was unable to provide an adequate explanation for calling a character "disobedient." They provided partial responses such as, "She was dying for gum." Finally, Tapia provided the full response: "She is disobedient because she eats gum despite what her mother tells her." This technique, however, was a last resort. Typically she elicited increasingly sophisticated responses from the students.

3. Teach children how to transfer into English what they know in their native language. Not long ago, bilingual education theorists believed that once students were academically proficient in their native language and could understand abstract concepts, they would easily transfer these abilities into English, provided they'd had adequate exposure to English and were motivated to learn English (Cummins 1980).

More recent research has shown that this type of transfer is much more difficult for children than was previously believed. Even proficient readers must work hard to transfer knowledge from one language to another. For less proficient readers, the problem is immense (Jiménez et al. 1995).

The research has also found that proficient bilingual readers use specific strategies to help them transfer what they know from Spanish into English. Chamot and O'Malley (in press) suggest that we may need to explicitly teach students how to access knowledge in their native language in order to successfully perform in

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their meanings can go well beyond standard dictionary definitions. The teachers also used words that were likely to be difficult for second-language students, especially idioms, because these words have the power to sharply increase comprehension.

The expert teachers did not drill students on lengthy word lists, even though districts or publishers usually provided such lists. Rather, they focused on two or three critical words and emphasized these for several days. Where possible, the teachers also used short stories, below-grade-level books, and personal writing projects to amplify understanding of the concepts. These types of activities helped establish the semantic networks that are
English language activities. Yet few concrete guidelines exist for facilitating this process.

Tapia and other teachers consistently provided feedback to Spanish responses during the English language arts part of the day. In our observations, expert teachers always accepted Spanish responses, but also encouraged students to try to answer again in English. They did this with the same gentleness, the same attentiveness, that they displayed when asking students to explain how they reached their conclusions. Allowing students to organize their thoughts in their native language before risking an English response seemed to be an effective technique.

4. Encourage students to speak and write about their lives. Although some topics were difficult and delicate to discuss, the expert teachers we observed did not sidestep such issues as poverty when they came up in students' stories. They allowed students, for example, to write about their despair over broken-down television sets or the time wasted sitting by the highway waiting for their truck to be towed.

Less proficient teachers, partly because of their discomfort, tried to guide students away from talk about poor living conditions, with the consequence that students withdrew from the teachers. Although merely allowing free expression of not-so-pleasant experiences is hardly a panacea for the complex tasks facing teachers, it does begin to break down barriers that often exist between middle-class teachers and working-class students, and helps maintain the integrity of each student's experience.

Breaking Down Barriers

With the increasing demands on all teachers to learn how to teach second-language students, articulation of lessons learned from teachers like Tapia and her colleagues becomes increasingly important. Their strategies, techniques, and tools for providing students with intellectually demanding content without unduly frustrating them; for appropriately using below-grade-level material to reinforce concepts and enhance English language growth; and for consistently supporting recitent or low-performing students are a basis for professional development efforts. These teachers' sensible, often gracious, means of breaking down class and cultural barriers can and should serve as models for practice.

The name is a pseudonym.

References


Author's note: My observational field notes, "El Paso, 4th Grade," (1990, 1992) and those of J. Woodward (1990) served as a source for this article. The research was supported in part by a grant from the Division of Innovation and Development, Office of Special Education Programs, U. S. Department of Education.

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