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Classroom Practices for Literacy Development of English Language Learners



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INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging the importance of assessing and working with each individual student to ensure academic success for all is essential in today's K-12 classroom. Teachers can expect students to possess a very wide range of literacy skills regardless of the classroom setting. Ability levels can range anywhere from completely non-literate to fully literate in their first language usually depending upon the students' socio-economic status. English Language Learners (ELLs) often vary academically in their motivation to learn, and in parental support, just as native English-speaking students. Therefore, their literacy levels in the English language are just as unpredictable as their English-speaking peers. However, some ELLs may be literate in their first language, yet lack basic English literacy skills, while others enter school illiterate in their first language and lack any knowledge of English. Meeting the literacy needs of all students presents a great challenge for teachers due to the wide range of abilities found in any one particular classroom.

Considering the number of students in our schools representing language communities other than English, there is a need to adjust current teaching practices to meet the needs of linguistically diverse students (Kennedy, 2001). Some schools are fortunate enough to have Dual-Immersion or Sheltered English programs in place. However the reality is that most ELLs

are assigned to the regular classroom and teachers are left without support or specialized training in this area. What should these teachers do? The first step is to keep these students in the regular classroom and never designate them as "disabled" or "below grade level" just because their first language is not English. Despite diversity of student linguistic skills, regular classroom teachers can address the interests and needs of ELLs without neglecting the rest of the class. Given the wide range of literacy abilities common to any K-12 classroom, all students should be placed in mixed groups for reading and language arts so they can gain more experience using the English language. Activities that emphasize working together improve students' self-concepts and allow students to be proud of their heritage as well as their academic accomplishments at the same time. Through tiered assignments or placing students into flexible learning groups, students of differing linguistic levels and content knowledge can gain equal access to grade-appropriate content information and participate cooperatively in learning activities that incorporate hands-on, interactive, higher level thinking skills (such as problem-solving), that easily establish collaborative frameworks within the classroom (for specific examples utilizing flexible learning groups see: Kennedy & Canney, 2000).

Most all second language learners experience a silent phase during their initial learning period. Time is the critical factor regarding lit-

cracy fluency and it is essential to provide ample opportunities for listening, speaking, reading and writing to promote communication skills. ELLs need a very supportive classroom atmosphere—one where they feel confident that new language can be attempted and where mistakes are both common and acceptable. They need to dialogue, take risks and become active learners in the classroom. Activities must encourage students to listen to, read, and write language that is meaningful and challenging. It is critical to identify students new to the school who possess limited English-speaking skills and immediately assign a student-mentor from their class to help them become familiar with the school. These students must also be taught some “survival” words in English so they can communicate their basic needs; such as how to phone home from the school, asking directions to the rest room, etc. The key to academic success for ELLs is to provide them with a comfort zone from which they can begin their journey of achieving literacy in both languages.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING ELLS’ LITERACY SKILLS

It is critical to learn as much as possible about each student’s culture and background—both academic and personal. Children learn a second language in different ways depending upon their individual personality and culture (Tucker, 1999). Therefore, it is helpful to incorporate reading materials that stress cultural diversity and emphasize the positive aspects of the various cultures found in the United States. Teachers should provide sources that empower and educate all students in the classroom since bicultural readers comprehend and remember materials that deal with their own culture better than those of another culture (Horowitz, 1984). Encourage ELLs to share their history, culture, and language with the class and look for opportunities to bring home customs and language to school so that school becomes a more authentic learning environment for all students. By doing this, teachers are establishing direct connections with the existing knowledge (generally culturally-based) that each learner brings to the task

at hand. Teachers who allow their students to bring their culture into the classroom are creating a positive classroom community and recognizing the interests, needs, and cultural value of each student (Quinn, 2001).

Using environmental print (the print that children see around them everyday) and stories from the students’ native culture are effective tools for introducing new words and vocabulary (Griffiths & Keohane, 2000). These types of activities allow students to learn through classroom experiences to value one another’s language and customs, including that of their own. It has been shown that students typically develop positive attitudes toward the countries whose language and customs they have studied or been exposed to (Kennedy, Nelson, Odell, & Austin, 2000). Resources within the community can also be used to promote student literacy skills. Allowing parents and community members to contribute to and be included in the instructional process of ELLs is very helpful. Invite the parents of all your students to take an active role in their child’s education. Family literacy programs (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995) and home-based reading programs (Dingboom, 1994) allow parents to become involved with their students’ learning and offer many helpful insights into ways parents can promote English usage in the home.

Basically speaking, employ the same literacy teaching strategies used with the rest of the class (Canney, Kennedy, Schroeder & Miles, 1999). Maintain high grade-level expectations for ELLs, set a challenging pace for covering the curriculum, and employ basic teaching practices that work with all students. It is especially important to set appropriate linguistic demands so that learners are capable of making full use of the verbal skills they possess and are able to build upon these skills. The importance of providing clear, understandable instructions for student activities and assignments cannot be overlooked. It is helpful if teachers use visual aides, model expected behavior, and provide learners with appropriate ways of asking for clarification if they do not understand.

Teachers must help their students negotiate meaning within natural learning contexts that

include modified speech, providing visual support, and planned meaningful redundancy of content. Questioning provides an important entry point for language development. Teachers must assist students to move beyond single-word answers and elaborate on their thoughts. Questions and responses are valuable language development tools. It is helpful if teachers provide students with a discussion period prior to questioning individual students in class since students are more motivated to actively engage in a discussion when they feel prepared and have been provided with a rehearsal session (Cameron, 1997). Teachers should use different types of questions for checking for understanding and increase wait time after asking each question in order to assist students to develop competence in the English language.

English can be learned through a variety of teaching methods such as Total Physical Response (Asher, 1993), Total Physical Response Storytelling (Ray & Seely, 1997), the Gouin Series (Grittner, described in Curtain & Pesola, 1993), and the Draw and Describe Method (Gibbons, 1993) to name a few. Creative language arts activities that utilize games, songs, rhymes, dances, acting and role-play are extremely effective with ELLs. The objective of such activities is to promote recall by utilizing multiple meaning reinforcers such as physical action; visuals and props; logical sequence; incorporate beginning, middle, and end scenarios; and multiple sensory features that encourage higher order thinking through classroom collaboration. Visualization and hands-on features to instruction that pairs students and engages them in active collaboration while requiring them to use language enhances learning for both ELLs and English-speaking students. Instruction that evokes the senses such as the use of slides, transparencies, videos, pictures, and real objects provide meaning to new words. Advanced organizers preceding a lesson or discussion provide and activate valuable background information for all students.

Provide opportunities and strategies for students to find out the meanings of new words. It is important to take into account that learning new vocabulary requires multiple exposure in

meaning contexts, practice using the words in purposeful tasks and receiving corrective feedback. Teacher talk is particularly important in regard to student vocabulary development and it is therefore extremely important not to oversimplify speech that is being modeled to the students. Cameron (1997) recommends teachers provide meaningful, supported input to extend receptive vocabulary; include activities that draw attention to key words and phrases; include short but frequent activities in content areas to practice recall and production of words and meanings; offer explicit, and planned, work on vocabulary integrated across the curriculum; and support learners' attempts to search for the most appropriate word for particular meanings at all times.

Make a reading/writing connection through the use of high-interest stories and a print-rich classroom environment. All children use coping strategies to learn to read and write. However, the speed with which English speakers and non-English speakers decipher text differs greatly. Teachers must always assist students in re-reading critical portions of the text as needed.

Well-structured writing activities insure that students comprehend what they have read. Students should be encouraged to write on a myriad of topics and the use of dialogue journals can be a powerful tool for developing literacy skills (Nelson, 1995). Teachers should neither criticize nor edit student entries in any way. Hudelson (1988) explained that if there is no fear of being marked "wrong", writing can be one of the best literacy tools available for teachers of ELLs. Teachers should respond to entries in a manner that provides students with grammatical modeling as well as opportunities for conversational writing and expansion on their ideas and thoughts. It is through this safe environment that students experiment and excel in literacy development.

EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT MEASURES TO MONITOR LITERACY PROGRESS OF ELL STUDENTS

Continual assessment of student abilities allows teachers to aim instruction slightly above

the students' existing level. Use multiple measures for assessing and evaluating reading interests, attitudes, self-perceptions of reading ability, and overall progress. Monitor student progress using anecdotal records, noting in particular which teaching methods and conditions seem to be effective. The use of multiple assessment measures, including student portfolios, for gathering accurate and reliable information is essential to student success. The appropriate use of language assessments and consistent delivery of instruction is important. Desegregated test results are also very informative for determining programmatic strengths and weaknesses as well as making appropriate curricular changes based on data to ensure academic success for ALL students.

CONCLUSION

English Language Learners and culturally diverse students are the fastest growing group of students in public schools in the United States today. Teachers must strive for the development and reinforcement of multiple language proficiency of America's youth in order to promote proficiency in international languages of wider communication together with proficiency in national and regional languages. Recommended strategies for promoting the literacy development of English Language Learners in the regular classroom setting are to:

1. Learn as much as possible about each student's culture and background in order to establish direct connections with existing knowledge (generally culturally based) that each learner brings to the task at hand.
2. Allow parents and community members to contribute to and be included in the instructional process of English Language Learners.
3. Place students into flexible learning groups and utilize tiered assignments, employing multiple cueing modes to relay information.
4. Create an instructional program that provides abundant and diverse opportunities for speaking, listening, reading and

writing while utilizing a variety of different teaching methods.

5. Incorporate reading materials that stress cultural diversity and emphasize the positive aspects of the various cultures found in the United States.
6. Set appropriate linguistic demands so that learners are capable of making full use of the verbal skills they possess and are able to build upon these skills.
7. Provide clear, understandable instructions for student activities and use visual aides, model expected behavior, and provide learners with appropriate ways of asking for clarification if they do not understand.
8. Help students negotiate meaning within natural learning contexts that include modified speech, providing visual support, and planned meaningful redundancy of content.
9. Provide students with discussion periods or rehearsal time before each questioning session. Use different types of questions for checking for understanding and increase wait time after questioning.
10. Use multiple measures for assessing and evaluating reading interests, attitudes, self-perceptions of reading ability, and overall progress. Aim instruction slightly above the students' existing level.

Most importantly, if you have English Language Learners in your classroom, it is imperative that you participate in some type of staff development program in order to fully understand second language acquisition principles, how they can be included into communicative learning activities and facilitate adaptation of instructional practices to meet the needs of your students, as well as to gain information about accessing native language resources that support comprehension and learning.

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