



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper

Working with English Language Learners

He who knows no foreign language does not truly know his own.

~ attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Literacy is a major focus in education today. As the students in our country and state become more diverse, providing effective reading instruction for all becomes more complex. The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) reported that during the 2003-2004 school year, 282,066 English language learners attended public schools and 220 native languages other than English were spoken (FLDOE, 2004). Meeting the instructional needs of this increasing number of English language learners has become a challenge for educators. There are two essential questions teachers of English language learners should consider when planning for instruction:

- *How do I provide effective language and reading instruction that aligns to the diverse needs of my students?*
- *How do I create an optimal learning environment to foster English language acquisition while respecting students' heritage language?*

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

English language learners are a diverse group of students with varying strengths, needs, and educational experiences. Students come to school with different literacy and language skills in their heritage language, which may have an impact on their acquisition of a second language (oral and written). Students who are literate in their heritage language may be more successful in transferring their literacy abilities to English, whereas students who have difficulties reading in their heritage language may struggle in both languages.

According to research in language development, there is a continuum beginning with basic conversational skills and extending to academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1981). More specifically, Cummins described this continuum ranging from interpersonal communication to cognitive academic language proficiency. As English language learners begin to acquire the second language, they are developing their interpersonal communication. Proficiency of interpersonal communication takes two to three years for English language learners (Williams, 2001). Interpersonal communication may include describing a story read aloud, requesting assistance, engaging in simple conversations, and expressing feelings. This beginning communicative level is typically context embedded and cognitively undemanding (Williams, 2001). The other end of the language development continuum is cognitive academic language proficiency. In order for English language learners to be successful academically, they need to acquire this level of language, which takes 5-10 years to achieve (Cummins, 1981). With this in mind, how do teachers scaffold reading instruction as English language learners develop along the continuum?

ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

It is possible to learn to read at a high level of proficiency in a second language, just as it is possible to become a proficient speaker of a second language (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1998). However, this is more likely true of learners who are literate and orally proficient in their native language. In a transitional language program, English language

learners are taught how to read in their heritage language while acquiring oral proficiency in English and then subsequently being taught to extend their skills to reading in English (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Transitional programs are more likely to be effective if appropriate resources are available, such as heritage language teachers and appropriate reading materials. If these resources are unavailable, English language learners should receive their initial literacy instruction in English with support focusing on building oral proficiency. If English language learners are to develop reading and writing skills that are comparable to those of their English-speaking peers, they must develop literacy skills as they continue to increase their oral English language proficiency (Hickman-Davis, Kouzekanani, Linan-Thompson, & Vaughn, 2003).

There are a variety of instructional practices teachers can use to make instruction meaningful as students acquire the English language. It is important to keep in mind the students' level of proficiency since varying degrees of support may be needed. Badia (1996) suggested the following techniques when teaching English language learners to read and develop oral language:

- *The Natural Approach* – Teachers provide students with meaningful experiences by learning new concepts and vocabulary through context. Students use visuals, such as objects, pictures, models, etc. to make connections.
- *Language Experience Approach* – Teachers use the students' language and a shared experience to develop reading and writing. Students create a story orally based on a common experience as the teacher records the story. Students and the teacher read the story aloud, often rereading over a period of time.
- *Activating Background Knowledge* – Eliciting background knowledge before introducing the content provides students with opportunities to make connections and construct meaning.
- *Using Realia* – Using real objects through authentic experiences before introducing content will help students make connections to the lesson. Examples may include cooking a meal or growing a plant. This experience should relate to content of the text or instruction.

- *Using Audiovisual Materials* – Using Films, DVD's, and CD's can supplement instruction and provide another venue for reinforcement of the new concept or content.
- *Using Graphic Organizers* – Using visual representations to introduce concepts can assist students making the abstract more concrete. Examples of graphic organizers include webs, Venn diagrams, and concept maps.
- *Incorporating Interactive Instructional Practices* – Structuring students into learning communities can foster oral language development. Teachers can guide student interaction through facilitated dialogue, think-pair and share, jigsawing, and brainstorming. Instructional conversations offer students opportunities to use, practice, and reinforce their oral language.
- *Read-Alouds* – Reading stories or poetry aloud provide students with a good model of oral language. In addition, the interactions and discussions throughout this activity can guide the students' understanding of the text or concept.

English language learners may benefit from the same reading instruction as native English learners. However, curriculum and instruction may need to be adapted in order for the content to be comprehensible. Integrating various teaching techniques that support oral language and literacy will scaffold students' learning by providing connections to existing knowledge.

CREATING OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Teachers may provide ELL students meaningful instruction by creating optimal learning environments based upon social constructivist theory, such as that of Vygotsky, which fosters learning by modeling, scaffolding, and helping students to construct meaning (Meyer, 2000). The goal of creating an optimal learning environment is to provide ELL students with opportunities to become independent thinkers and problem solvers. Meyer identified four "loads" that can hinder meaningful instruction for ELL students: cognitive

load, culture load, language load, and learning load. Being aware of these potential barriers can enable teachers to plan and provide instruction that focuses on reducing the barriers and truly meets the learning needs of their students.

Cognitive Load refers to the number of new concepts or vocabulary words being taught or embedded in a lesson or activity. ELL students can be inundated with unknown terminology, concepts, and vocabulary throughout the school day. To minimize this overload, teachers should assess students' background knowledge with the purpose of learning what concepts the students know. Through this assessment, teachers can develop clear focus lessons connecting the unknown to the known.

Culture Load refers to the relationship between language and culture and the amount of cultural knowledge required to comprehend oral and written language. English language learners need to learn the explicit meaning of words in English as well as the cultural interpretation of the words. To improve comprehension for ELL students, reading and vocabulary instruction should be embedded in authentic literacy experiences in order for these students to make culturally relevant and meaningful (Meyer, 2000).

Language Load refers to the number of unfamiliar words encountered as an English language learner reads a text or listens to a teacher speak. The student's level of English proficiency will determine the extent to which the teacher needs to differentiate instruction and scaffold the student's learning. An effective way to improve understanding is "uploading" students with rich, engaging discussions and active demonstrations before reading texts. Providing different levels of

texts on the same topic can also help adapt instruction to meet the learning needs of English language learners (Meyer, 2000).

Learning Load represents what teachers expect students to accomplish in the process of learning English. This includes how the students will receive instruction and how they will respond to a lesson or activity. To facilitate students' participation in the use of the new language, visual aids and demonstrations may be necessary to activate students' background knowledge. Awareness of students' learning styles and needs can also help teachers ease the learning load (Meyer, 2000).

By creating an environment that promotes meaningful learning, students are more likely to be motivated and willing to take a risk. Working on reducing the cognitive, culture, language, and learning "loads" can facilitate growth and development of oral language and literacy.

CONCLUSION

To become a successful reader in a second language, students need appropriate reading instruction that meets their individual language and literacy needs. As English language learners acquire their second language orally and in writing, teachers must assess their level of proficiency, plan instruction that is comprehensible and appropriate, scaffold and support their learning, and offer opportunities for meaningful interactions and experiences.

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