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Book Review

Teaching English Language Learners through Technology

Tony Erben, Ruth Ban, and Martha Castañeda. New York: Routledge. 2009. Pp. xiv + 220.

As the fourth book in the series *Teaching Language Learners Across the Curriculum*, this volume by Tony Erben, Ruth Ban, and Martha Castañeda serves as a straightforward and practical handbook for pre-service and in-service K-12 classroom teachers who have no formal pedagogical training in second language teaching. Whereas the previous books in the series focused on specific subject areas, *Teaching Language Learners through Technology* is relevant to all content areas and bridges linguistics, language learning research, and practical day-to-day teaching strategies to show educators how the use of technology in differentiated instruction can help facilitate language learning.

Erben, Ban, and Castañeda divide their book into three distinct sections. Part 1 provides an overview of English for Speakers of Other Languages research, a description of English Language Learners (ELLs) language development, and targeted strategies for meeting the specific needs of ELLs through technology. Part 2 focuses on the theoretical framework behind the book, which relies heavily on Vygotsky's foundational theories as related to differentiated instruction and constructivist pedagogy. Part 3 offers tangible best-practice approaches that can help classroom teachers use technology as a means of fostering English language development among ELLs.

Broken into eight mini chapters, Part 1 opens with a short introduction titled "Orientation," (Chapter 1.1) which reminds educators that all students deserve a valuable and equitable education and petitions them to use all available resources to help their ELLs. In Chapter 1.2, "The Process of English Language Learning and What to Expect," teachers are urged to create acquisition-rich classrooms. The chapter emphasizes one of the book's main themes—that teachers cannot directly change the way ELLs develop, but can profoundly influence the rate of their development. Five specific principles influencing the rate of language acquisition are presented: (1) giving ELLs many and varied opportunities to read, write, listen to and discuss oral and written English; (2) drawing attention to English language structural patterns; (3) giving students classroom time to practice their English usage productively; (4) offering opportunities for ELLs to notice their errors and correct their English; and (5) maximizing occasions for ELLs to interact with others in English. Each principle is foregrounded with both extensive research as well as strategies for implementation.

Chapter 1.3, "Deciding on the Best ESOL Program," examines the types of ESOL programs currently used in US schools (i.e., ESL-class period, pull-out ESL, sheltered instruction, and bilingual education) and discusses the pros and cons for each approach. By explaining the variety of services available for ELLs, this chapter is particularly helpful for pre-service and novice teachers who often are not familiar with these varied approaches. Chapter 1.4, "Teaching for English Language Development," then elaborates the differences between social and academic language abilities. The authors espouse Cummins's (2001) four quadrant approach to developing academic language, which is particularly relevant given that many states assess annual yearly progress (AYP) among their ELL populations based on the ELLs' ability to use and process academic language.

Chapters 1.5 to 1.8 focus on diversity among ELLs by drawing attention to the nuances of cultural differences and special needs. Chapter 1.5, “Not all ELLs are the Same,” explores the stages of assimilation that ELLs experience and the hurdles they sometimes face in the form of cultural practices at schools, such as health and safety protocols. The authors provide a guided exploration through the stages of cultural adjustment ELL students’ experience (i.e., Honeymoon, Hostility, Home, Assimilation, and Re-Entry Shock) in order to help classroom teachers better understand their students’ emotional and behavioral adaptive processes. Chapter 1.6, “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy,” and Chapter 1.7, “Not all Parents are the Same: Home-School Communication,” urge teachers to look beyond the assumed values of suburban white America and to foster access, approachability, and commitment with ELL parents. As an example, the authors include a conversation between a child and his parent as they discuss the Alamo. The parent reframes the Alamo from the perspective of the Mexican government in order for the child to better understand that there are valid perspectives beyond those of the dominant hegemony. In order to further promote a supportive school environment, the authors include tips and ideas for fostering access and approachability among students, families, and the school system.

Finally, Chapter 1.8, “English Language Learners with Special Needs,” explores the unique challenge of diagnosing and supporting ELLs with cognitive disabilities, which the authors project to include over 1 million students in the United States. The chapter provides an overview of four effective instructional models from Ortiz (1984): Coordinated Service, Bilingual Support, Integrated bilingual special education, and Bilingual special education. Additionally, the authors recommend the model developed by the Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) Project (Ruiz, 1989) which uses interactive journals, writer’s workshops, shared reading practices, literature conversations, response journals, patterned writing, and extended assignment time. Chapter 1.8 ends with Hoover and Collier’s (1998) recommendations for teaching ELLs with special needs and includes tips such as: knowing specific abilities of each child, documenting success, being consistent, and knowing relevant cultural practices related to each child.

Part 2 presents research supporting the use of technology infusion and differentiated instruction in the classroom with particular emphasis on the teaching of ELLs. Chapter 2.1, “Taking the Lead from Vygotsky,” discusses Lev Vygotsky’s work and emphasizes the need for both the teacher and the student to be involved in meaning-making within the students’ *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), which represents what the student can do without assistance from the teacher and what he or she needs help with. Specific examples on how to do this appear in Part 3 of the book. Moving from Vygotsky’s ZPD to its offshoot, differentiated instruction (DI), chapter 2.2 gives an in-depth survey of what this entails. Specific DI strategies are provided and described, including: creating flexible groups based on the readiness of learners, adjusting questions to scaffold students’ learning, compacting curriculum so that enjoyable and fun activities are on hand for fast finishers, and using tiered assignments or activities that allow students to work within the same focus at differing cognitive levels. The chapter includes several web addresses for articles detailing DI strategies, websites that provide fun educational games for students who demonstrate mastery quickly, and examples of tiered and differentiated lessons.

The book makes a decided turn in the next chapters, from an emphasized focus on scholarly research towards specific practical applications. Chapter 2.3, “Making Accommodations for ELLs and Infusing Technology into a Lesson,” begins with a lesson plan that goes through a series of changes, shifting from a one-dimensional tutorial to a rich multi-faceted plan specifically targeting different populations in the class. The chapter ends with an easy-to-follow table that illustrates how differential instructional technology can help ELL students during lesson transitions. The left side of the table details a teacher’s differentiated daily lesson plan, including strategies to address the needs of ELL students during the opening activity, assignment explanation, and direct instruction. The right side of the table then adapts the traditional strategies given into those that can be enhanced by the use of instructional technologies. For example, rather than sending ELL students to the library, the table suggests using a teacher created web-quest that still allows students to search for information but in a much more structured, less overwhelming way.

In an effort to motivate teachers to begin incorporating technology into their instruction, Chapter 2.4 “Principles of Technology Use in Educational Settings,” highlights some of the best practices when using technology with ELL students by providing specific instructional strategies that target language development stages. The authors explain that as teachers incorporate technology into their instruction, a shift occurs and the classroom becomes more student-centered and less teacher-driven, promoting discovery learning, learner autonomy, and learner-centeredness which can then lead to an increased use of language play and increased language production. The authors also provide a brief discussion on the challenges of technology use in the classroom, including technical know-how, security, quality and appropriateness of material.

Chapter 2.5, “Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) Research,” provides additional strategies when implementing technology in the classroom and touts the research and benefits of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), especially in the areas of improving English language acquisition among ELLs. The authors cite numerous studies in CALL which show that ELLs experience increased and equalized participation, better language quality and increased output, and greater opportunities to negotiate meaning when instructional technology is used to support learning. The chapter includes several websites and CALL resources and concludes with nine recommendations for infusing technology into curricula, which serve as a transition in the book’s final section.

Part 3 provides educators with learning activities that apply the previously described principles of instructional technology by offering sample lesson plans, learning activities, Web-based resources, classroom implications, and a variety of teaching tips and strategies for classroom teachers to use when fostering an acquisition-rich environment in middle and high schools. The strategies do not require the classroom teacher to have an extensive background in technology or a room filled with state-of-the-art computers. Rather, many of the examples and tips involve classrooms with only one computer and require only average computer skills. Filled with websites and resources to help teachers, the final chapters show teachers how to make web based exercises, create social networking sites, use podcasts and PowerPoint Jeopardy games, start Wikis, and even incorporate text messaging. Chapter 3.2 gives teachers an introduction to e-creation tools (podcasts, PowerPoint, moviemakers, audiomakers, and web publishing) that allow language to be used and manipulated in creative and engaging ways. *E*-creation tools also enable

students to create their own assessment tools. Chapter 3.3 shows how *e*-communication tools (email, instant messaging, listserves, and discussion boards) can facilitate ELLs' written and verbal communication.

Additionally, chapters 3.4 and 3.5 introduce teachers to language production software programs, including reading, writing, listening and speech instructional technologies that specifically target ELLs. Chapter 3.6, "E-assessments: Portfolios, Quizzes, and Rubrics," offers both formative and summative assessment strategies and different perspectives in research surrounding the assessment of ELLs. The final chapter, 3.7, provides an overview for teaching through virtual environments as a way to help students store and share information. At the end of Part 3, the authors include a lengthy list of resources, organized by subject, as a quick guide to the wealth of instructional technologies mentioned in the previous chapters.

Teaching Language Learners through Technology is both timely and relevant, serving as an excellent, teacher-friendly resource with step-by-step instructions to help K-12 educators infuse curricula with research-based instructional technology strategies that target the more than 10 million English Language Learners enrolled in US schools. Erben, Ban, and Castañeda's work is accessible both to educators who do not have an extensive background in language learning and teaching and to those without much technological expertise. The strength of *Teaching Language Learners through Technology* lies in its detailed explanation of differentiated instruction and the practical tips and up-to-date web site resources: all this enables any classroom instructor, pre-service teacher, or teacher educator to create lesson plans that seamlessly incorporate technology into any curriculum design in order to provide ELL students the opportunity to increase their rate of language acquisition.

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