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Thinking and Learning: Teaching English Language Learners

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the College Honors Program

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Abstract

In response to a continually changing demographic in U.S. schools, this paper looks at the current needs of English Language Learners from an instructional standpoint. The author seeks to provide insight and understanding into the metacognition of English Language Learners as well as a cultural awareness for working with these diverse learners. The overall goal of the paper is to demonstrate various ways educators can use this knowledge of English Language Learners to meet the needs of their students and help them reach their academic potential.

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Thinking and Learning: Teaching English Language Learners

Introduction

“Culture is so much an integral part of our life that it is often difficult to realize that there are different, but equally valid, ways of thinking, perceiving and behaving.”

-Peter Chinn

The American culture is unique just as any other. Even with its diverse background, the United States does have some unifying cultural aspects. Overall, there is a very strong value system entwined with the everyday ways of thinking. Often times, the beliefs most Americans live by, such as freedom and human rights, are so engraved in American perception, it is easy to forget how varied the nation's history truly is.

As the foundation of the United States is one of true diversity, it is vital to consistently keep in mind how this fact has impacted the cultural identity of the nation. Furthermore, it is clear the nation's demographics only continue to transform and as such, it is also necessary to understand the influence these variations have on the nation's cultural perspective as a whole.

Consequently, by better understanding the ever-changing cultural identity of the United States, it becomes easier to comprehend what changes must occur to

better meet the needs of the nation and its citizens. One area in which change is a necessary constant is education. Education must continually adapt and grow in order to best meet the needs of the students. Evidently, as the demographic and cultural backgrounds of U.S. students continue to vary, it is necessary to accommodate resources, instruction, and practices in order to educate each individual.

Currently, the U.S. demographic is transforming as a result of an increase in immigrants with limited English proficiency. Thus, there has been a higher need for adjustment in our education system to meet this group of diverse learners. Although some areas of the U.S. are greater affected by this increase, it is evident this demographic change will eventually effect most, if not all, areas of the nation. Therefore, the importance of understanding English Language Learners and how to best meet their needs is relevant to all educators throughout the United States.

Why is it Important? ELL Students in the U.S. and All Content Areas

Not only was the United States founded on immigration, it continues to play a major role in the country's dynamics on a regular basis. People from different countries have flocked to the United States for a multitude of reasons and continue to do so on a day-to-day basis. This increase in immigrants has lead to a variety of positive and negative impacts on the United States, culturally, politically, economically, etc. One such impact is easily seen in the U.S. school systems. As the

large number of immigrants continues to grow, so does the number of English Language Learners in the schools. In diverse areas such as Rochester, New York City, Chicago, and Miami, the number of English Language Learners in school districts is especially high. Statistically speaking, “early 2006 reports from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition... claim that the enrollment of Limited English proficient students over the 10 years from 1993-94 to 2003-04 has increased 65.06%” (Verplaetse and Migliacci, 4). Since 2004, these numbers have only continued to rise. With such high numbers of English Language Learners in school districts, it is vital that educators understand who English Language Learners are and what programs are available for them.

English Language Learners (ELL) are limited English proficient students. Basically, this title deems these students limited in their ability to speak, read, write, and/or comprehend English. As English is usually the language of instruction in most schools within the U.S., it is very difficult for ELL students to succeed academically. Therefore, various programs have been created to help meet the needs of these students. Schools have the option to provide different forms of services from bilingual education programs, English as a second language programs (ESL), or immersion/mainstream programs. Among bilingual education programs, there is transitional, maintenance, and dual language programs. Transitional programs have the end goal of being proficient in English, while maintenance has

the goal of being proficient in English and also maintaining the native language. Dual language bilingual programs are for both native English speakers and speakers of a different language and they seek to have proficiency in both English and the native (target) language. ESL programs, on the other hand, are generally pull out programs that give ELL students extra support in English throughout their school day and mainstream/immersion programs believe ELLs will learn English the best by being surrounded by as much English as possible and, therefore, the students are in all general education classes. Clearly, there is a wide array of program options for districts, each of which have their own goals for teaching ELL students.

Although each of these programs provides different types of support for ELLs, no matter what program is in place in schools teachers of every subject encounter these students in their classroom. Thus, educators of every content area must to be aware of their unique needs. It is evident that with the large growing numbers of English Language Learners, nearly every educator of all content areas, will come across ELLs in their classroom and thus need to find a way to meet their needs. As a result, it is vital that teachers seek out resources and continue learning new ways to help their students.

Understanding ELL thought Process and Classroom Management

First and foremost, educators need to understand how ELL students think. One cannot meet the needs of one's students if he/she doesn't understand what the students really need. Similarly, it is easier to teach ELL students if one understands

first where the issues with the language and cultural barriers occur. Primarily, language and cultural difficulties are the most obvious issues English Language Learners face. However, the manner in which the students demonstrate these issues can make it difficult for the educators to recognize. In her article, "Linguistic Diversity and Classroom Management," Mary Curran conveys how educators view the behavior of ELL students and where this behavior might actually derive from. According to Curran,

"...[Teachers] need to understand the perspective of ELLs and the natural responses to being immersed in a second language...[they] need to understand, expect, and feel comfortable with the natural responses (e.g., laughter, first language use, silence, and fatigue) that occur when our students participate in interactions in which they are not completely proficient in the language" (334-335).

Curran hits the nail on the head and explains that teachers must first understand how to view the behavior of ELL students in order to comprehend the challenge language plays in the classroom. In order to help students overcome this linguistic challenge, a positive classroom environment must be created.

Most teachers would agree that learning doesn't just occur solely as a result of good instruction, rather it is a combination with a positive classroom environment and classroom management techniques. Thus, it is equally important to keep ELL students in mind when developing a community in the classroom and creating the classroom management structure.

One way we can make our classroom management techniques appropriate for ELL students is by viewing their behavior from their perspective and understanding where the behavior comes from. For instance, seemingly inappropriate laughter could actually be very natural and even therapeutic for ELL students when they feel out of their comfort zone (Curran, 335). Other common behaviors that can be taken the wrong way by instructors are boredom, laziness, and inattention, which can simply result from the lack of understanding and comprehension (Curran, 336); students may appear bored or lazy when they are simply fatigued from trying to decipher the language for a long period of time.

Another area of classroom management when working with ELL students that needs to be handled appropriately is determining the allowance of first language use. While it is true that "...when student's first languages are valued and fostered...they are actually more successful academically because they are allowed to draw on a richer and larger source of background..." (Curran, 336), it is also important that the students understand when they can use their first language and why (Curran, 336). Not only does this allow the ELL students to understand how their first language can help them become better at English and content area knowledge, it also allows other students in the class to understand why the ELL students might appear to have special 'privileges.' Overall, it is vital that educators do not make decisions regarding classroom management based on "...fear and ignorance..." but rather "...a culturally responsive classroom management model..." (Curran, 338). Meaning, before jumping to conclusions about student behavior,

educators should step back from the situation and analyze the cultural misunderstanding that could be present. By viewing behavior from the ELL perspective and using this point of view in our response to behavior, teachers can positively create a culturally welcoming environment.

The final important aspect of classroom management when meeting the needs of ELL students is creating a welcoming environment. By creating a positive community in the classroom that celebrates diversity and accurately assess the needs of the students, one can provide a beneficial learning atmosphere for English Language Learners. First, it is important to understand that classroom management is not universal; it is likely that ELL students are not familiar with the daily routines or simple day-to-day procedures. Therefore, it is helpful to teach these aspects of the classrooms to these students and stick to regular routines (Curran, 338). Also, the best way to make students feel welcome in a classroom is by learning their names. Not only is it important to know each student's name but it also important to know how to pronounce them correctly. This, in addition to reaching out to ELL parents and making an effort to learn about their background, culture, and maybe even their first language, makes ELL students feel welcome and important in the class (Curran, 339).

Using these basic techniques for classroom management, teachers can already begin to meet the needs of English Language Learners. Feeling welcome in the classroom helps to reduce anxiety and allow for more learning to occur. Also, understanding student behavior results in more effective behavior correction

because the source of the issue is understood and met. Finally, reaching out to these student's and their culture will ultimately provide the best opportunity to connect with this group of students and better educate them.

ELL Students and Metacognition

Once a positive environment and appropriate classroom management have been established, the next important thing for educators to remember when teaching ELLs is how they naturally think about their learning. In order to help these students take ownership of their learning and develop new strategies for comprehending lessons, it is first necessary that instructors understand what their initial thought processes are. According to Chamot and O'Malley, ELL students "[learn] conversational skills in English in about 2 years but typically [need] 5-7 years of exposure to English in school before they [are] successful academically" (260). Meaning, the ability for ELL students to speak, write and understand language in a social context may be a lot easier for them than understanding the same language in an academic setting; vocabulary and sentence structure, for instance, are much more complicated in an academic setting than a social one. Thus, educators should look at student's English abilities from a social and an academic standpoint. One cannot assume a student who appears well spoken in English about social events can have the same fluency in a science classroom. Furthermore, opportunities to learn academics with a social context should be made so students can draw a bridge from their richer English background.

In general, teachers need to give ELLs a strong base for them to grow from in the academic setting. In order to do so, one must first understand where their thought processes struggle so they can aid students' learning through metacognition. For example, some ways in which ELL students process the language in the classroom is actually fairly obvious; these students may simply ignore words or phrases they don't understand or wait for more instruction to see if they get it later. They might form a general hypothesis of what they think the word or phrase might mean, reread the information, or even look at previous material for help determining the meaning. Or, if all else fails, the students may even go directly to the source and ask for help (either from a dictionary, another student, or the teacher) (Curran, 335).

In addition to these strategies, ELL students also use context and connections to help their understanding. Therefore, social contexts are often easier because the students are more familiar with the themes and ideas. Also, language that has more real-world connections is easier for the students to grasp than language with fewer connections. Thus, teachers should keep these facts in mind when developing classroom activities for English Language Learners so they do not miss content knowledge simply because they do not understand the context it is given in.

Finally, ELL students often use bottom up processing when first learning English instead of listening or reading for the gist. In short, they try to decipher every single word and phrase to understand the whole meaning instead of listening

or reading the whole to get the gist of it (Curran 335). Guiding students through listening and reading activities and teaching them how to look at the bigger picture is a tool they can apply to all content areas. In the end, instructors should use ELL metacognition to help these students take ownership of their learning and provide them with learning strategies they can apply in all subject areas.

Content Area Specifics

Up to this point, everything mentioned is applicable to all content areas. However, it is still very important for specific content educators to understand the specific difficulties ELL students might have in their subject. Often times these issues arrive not only from the language barrier, but also the cultural differences as well. As reading and writing apply to all content areas, it is also a good idea for other subject areas to understand the difficulties ELLs have with reading and writing in English.

Reading

First, literature is often culturally based. This can result in uncommon story themes that could be difficult for ELL students to comprehend as well as unfamiliarity with culturally connected literature activities. For example, a reading piece about the three little pigs may seem like something every student will understand because they all know the general story might be a story students from a different culture aren't as familiar with. Furthermore, activities dealing with

literature can also be culturally unfamiliar. For instance, some cultures do not encourage students to brainstorm, think creatively or express their opinions. This would result in ELLs having trouble drawing conclusions and analyzing characters. Additionally, while vocabulary can definitely be an issue, idioms, figurative language, imagery, and symbolism can be especially difficult for English Language Learners to grasp. In this sense, ELL students might understand each individual word in a sentence but struggle to understand the overall meaning, as the words do not seem to fit together. This could occur with phrases 'barking up the wrong tree' or 'standing on thin ice' where the literally meaning of the sentence is much different than the implied meaning.

Finally, in English reading overall, it can be hard for ELL students to understand the correlation between letters and sounds, especially since English vowels have many different sounds they can make (Haynes, 59). This fact can make reading allowed more of a challenge as well as increase the difficulty between reading words and writing them (students might struggle with spelling as the learn to familiarize themselves with the phonetics of the English language).

Writing

Writing is another area that similarly crosses content areas and can be very difficult for ELL students. In general, content writing is always restricted to known words and phrases. This can make it even more difficult for ELL students to demonstrate their true comprehension of the subject as they can only write as much

about the subject that they know how to say in English. For instance, if students already have a background in science but in a different language they might not be able to share the full comprehension of the subject material in writing if they simply cannot express it in English.

Furthermore, some specific problems these students might have with writing derive a lot from translation issues and full comprehension of the language. Often times, verb tenses are frequently used inaccurately and many ELL students have not internalized the sentence structure of English grammar. Consequently, ELLs often do not have a sense of what 'sounds right' in English and thus have a harder time producing the language on their own (Haynes, 61). As a result, students may begin writing in English by trying to think of the sentence in their native language and then translate it into English. Unfortunately, this leads to many issues in translations such as unknown vocabulary, different sentence structure, and different overall meaning (some words or phrases cannot completely be translated from one language to another without losing meaning or feeling).

Math

In addition to reading and writing, other content areas have some big obstacles for English Language Learners to overcome. One subject, for instance, that most people believe involves very little reading and/or writing is Math. However, Math examples, which seemingly do not involve a lot of English, still have a number of challenges for ELLs. First of all, the language in the Math textbooks can actually be

quite overwhelming for ELL students. Not only is vocabulary different, some words students already know may have a different meaning in Math.

Additionally, students may have learned very different processes for solving the same type of problems. Cultural differences can also result from a different number system (in many Spanish countries, for example, the comma is used in numbers where the period would be used) and a different measurement system. The lack of familiarity with these base concepts makes it very difficult for ELL students to comprehend the overall content. Furthermore, using math vocabulary and the concepts of money are also two very new things for many ELL students (Haynes, 64). Thus, even in a content area where there is seemingly a limited amount of English, ELL students can still have a lot of struggles with the content.

Science

Science is another content area that has a lot of overwhelming vocabulary for English Language Learners. Not only is the vocabulary difficult, but also the way science is taught in the U.S. is also very unfamiliar to most ELL students. This includes following multistep directions, understanding the visuals, using science labs or equipment, applying the scientific method, and drawing conclusions and making hypotheses. Teachers may need to guide ELL students through the materials and procedures used in a science in order for them to truly understand the content. Thus, not only is reading the textbook a struggle, trying to follow along in lab can also be a huge challenge (Haynes 71).

Social Studies

Finally, Social Studies is definitely another content area where ELL students can struggle to comprehend. Not only does this subject involve a lot of English in all manners, reading, writing, and listening, it also relies on a lot of background knowledge ELL students are unlikely to have. They have limited knowledge, for example, of U.S. history, geography, and current events. Additionally, they may also have to learn to recognize the proper names of countries, cities, and oceans in English as well as figure out how to navigate a nationalistic or culturally focused map. Other difficulties in Social Studies may include using higher-level thinking, reading text containing passive voice, understanding lecture-style presentations and knowing how to take notes. Teachers may have to walk students through note taking skills to help them gain footing in the class. Finally, ELLs may have a hard time figuring out what is important in a text and what is not (Haynes 69). Therefore, it is helpful to teach ELL students how to determine importance from reading so they can apply this tool on their own. Thus, it is evident ELL students have a number of barriers to overcome in Social Studies.

Overall, there are a lot of linguistic and cultural challenges that ELL students face in every content area. By understanding a few of these challenges, teachers can work to overcome them and provides students with tools to learn. In general, it is important to note that educators must first simply understand where ELL students

might struggle with the content in order to provide them with assistance in those areas.

Meeting the Needs of ELL Students

With all these various challenges English Language Learners face, it is clear that educators need to be aware of these factors in order to better meet their needs. Without understanding the struggles they face and the way ELL students think, it becomes more difficult for teachers to be proactive in their instruction. Fortunately, as ELL students become more and more prevalent in our schools, the number of resources for teachers continues to increase as well. Consequently, there are a multitude of theories, strategies, tips, and techniques for instructors of all content areas, ages, and even education levels to help them better help their students. With these tools, it is possible for all teachers to accommodate the special needs of English Language Learners in their classroom. Hence, by understanding the metacognition of English Language Learner's and by teaching learning strategies, teachers can better meet the needs of these students and increase their overall comprehension in various content areas. In the end, differentiating instruction for ELL students can help them to grow and reach their true academic potential.

Culture

Awareness and Understanding

As previously mentioned, in order to best meet the needs of their students, teachers need to understand the perspective of their students and truly comprehend their individual needs. With English Language Learners it can be somewhat difficult for teachers to grasp their perspectives as not many teachers have the experience of being an ELL student. As Helmer and Eddy put it, “[t]hese new learners bring with them languages, experiences, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds that are unfamiliar” (13). Almost everyone remembers what it was like to be a student, however not everyone knows what it is like to learn where his or her native language is not the language of instruction. Furthermore, specifically with ELL students, it is crucial that teachers understand the different experiences these students go through as they adjust in the school setting. Some students may be joining the school system very shortly after arriving in the U.S., while others may simply have a different language spoken at home. With most ELL students, there will still be a major adjustment and even cultural shock from what they experience in school. Therefore, “an awareness and understanding of some of the more obvious stages of culture shock will help us, as teachers, work more effectively with these new ESL students.” (Helmer and Eddy, 15)

Stages of Culture Shock

Stage 1: ELL students initially have a positive reaction to their school experience. Although there may be some natural nervousness, most ELL students experience optimism and excitement. This may be due to the fact that these students may be refugees or immigrants that are excited to start a fresh new life with a lot of opportunities. As a result of this optimism, students often feel they can do anything and overcome all challenges.

Stage 2: This stage is the first real experience of culture shock. During this time students realize how different the behaviors and values of the new culture are from their own; ELLs notice they are the minority and that everything around them, food, language, social norms, etc. are all very different from the culture they are accustomed to.

Stage 3: At this stage ELL students attempt to adjust and fit in to the new culture. However, while changes are made, they are not extreme and do not completely change the student as a person; although the student may adjust, he/she will still be comparing everything to their home culture.

Stage 4: This stage of cultural shock is one of the most important for teachers to understand and possibly the most challenging to work through (both for instructors and students). During this time, ELL students deal with a lot of depression and frustration. These emotions result from experiencing serious real-life problems such as racism, discrimination, and language issues, as well as educational difficulties. As ELL students try to fit in within the school system, they

are still very much different from their peers. Additionally, much of the stress and pressure students feel cannot be related to with anyone, as they don't have a lot of extended family or friends for support. Often times, this is the stage where most dropouts occur. Thus, it is extremely important for teachers to be patient and understand what ELL students may be going through.

Stage 5: This point in the cultural shock is not a stage that all ELL students reach. At this time, ELLs begin to accept and even identify with the new culture. Not only do day-to-day and even major problems begin to be easier to resolve, many immigrants or refugees begin to appreciate North American culture at this stage. Although they may not completely give up who they are, individuals make bigger adjustments to truly fit in with culture.

Overall, each of these stages of culture shock is very different. These stages are not only natural for ELL students to experience but also play a major role in their success in the school system. In order to understand their perspective and better meet their needs, it is important that teachers have a firm understanding of these stages. Without this perspective, teachers will have difficulty supporting these students and guiding them through a very rough transitional period in their lives, let alone teach them something in their subject.

Understanding Behavior

Once educators understand the different stages ELL students may be going through, they can also begin to comprehend how their different cultural background

will affect their behavior in the classroom. When speaking of culture, Edward Hall explains the effect culture has on behavior, “[culture] is a mold in which we are all cast, and it controls our daily lives in many unsuspected ways” (17). Often times, people do not even realize how affected they are by their culture. This can make viewing behavior difficult, as one needs to understand how culture can affect even the smallest of day-to-day activities or seemingly inconsequential matters.

As a result, students may appear to behave strangely and inappropriately in class simply due to a cultural difference. Therefore, teachers need to understand where a student’s behavior is coming from in order to effectively and positively change the behavior if it is prohibiting the student from learning. Such behavior might include, reluctance to answer questions, fatigue, or inattentiveness. Many of these behaviors were already touched upon but there are a lot of other classroom behaviors that teachers might assume are resulting from a different cause.

For instance, some behaviors that teachers may take the wrong way but could simply be the result of a cultural difference include, avoiding eye contact, being reluctant to help a peer, appearing tired or uninterested, refusing to eat with peers, and being reluctant to answer questions. Teachers may think a student who is avoiding eye is hiding something or being rude, but the student could just come from a culture where downcast eyes is actually a sign of respect. When reluctant to help a peer, the student may have different concepts about sharing and owning knowledge, meaning it may not be a norm for them to share their ideas with others. Finally, students may be reluctant to answer questions because they need a longer

time to process the question and the answer or they could be used to answering questions as a class rather than individual (Helmer, Eddy, 17). Basically, it is important for teachers to understand that classroom management, instructional practices, and seemingly normal 'routines' are not universal and may be different for ELL students. By understanding this difference, teachers will have more patience with students and can help them adjust to the new classroom culture.

Appreciating Different Values

Another major issue educators may face when teaching English Language Learners is a difference in personal values. Although every individual has a different set of values, these values are often very culturally based. Therefore, ELL students may come to school with a totally different set of values as the teacher. For instance, as mentioned above, eye contact may be a cultural difference that could result in different behavior; if an educator values people who give eye contact when talking, he/she may have difficulty with a student who believes down casting his/her eyes is really a sign of respect. Frequently, conflict situations are caused directly by a difference in values. By understanding that the student may simply have a different set of values, the teacher can avoid problems in the classroom and show respect to the student by not forcing him/her to change his/her values. This type of practice affirms diversity and creates a welcoming environment for all students, not just English Language Learners.

The list of different values around the world could extend pages. However, it is important that educators understand the different values students from other countries may have. Some of these values may include, stability, tradition, and continuity (rather than accepting change as natural and positive), hierarchy, rank, and status (instead of equality and fairness), cooperation over competition, dependence and group welfare over independence, and finally human interaction rather than time (and its control) (Helmer and Eddy, 24). In general, values are going to be different for every culture and every person. The important concept to remember is simply that everyone has the right to his/her values and by appreciating the different perspective, teachers create a better learning environment for their students.

Creating a Positive Environment

In general, in any classroom and all content areas, creating a positive learning environment for all students is critical. No matter what their background, ability, age, or gender, all students benefit from a learning environment that fosters a welcoming atmosphere and overall positive energy. This is also extremely vital when working with English Language Learners. As the general school environment may already overwhelm many of these students, in order to best help their learning, these students must feel very safe and welcome in the classroom.

Theory

Since classroom environment is such an important part of education, there are a lot of theories to help teachers create the optimal atmosphere. One theorist who discusses in detail classroom environment and whose theory is easily relatable to English Language Learners is Stephen Krashen. Krashen developed what he called a “Natural Approach” which not only describes ways to create a positive classroom environment, but also demonstrates ways to develop more beneficial instruction for students. Along the lines of positive classroom environment, Krashen describes an “affective filter” which inhibits students from learning; “...anxiety creates a block, the affective filter, which closes students to comprehensible input and gets in the way of learning” (Dragan, 33). Basically, the more anxious, nervous, and/or uncomfortable students are in their learning environment the less they will actually be able to learn. Therefore, it is vital that teachers create positive environments to avoid such an “affective filter.”

On the basis of instruction, Krashen also describes instructional theories that would greatly benefit English Language Learners. For example, Krashen believes in the idea of “comprehensible input.” Comprehensible input is basically any form of knowledge, written or spoken, that is at the student’s level or just above the level. If the input given during instruction is way below the students’ level than they will not grow. Similarly, if the input is way beyond the students’ level, they will struggle and also not grow. The later of the two is often what ELL students face in the classroom, too high of input. As previously mentioned, ELL students may have a certain register

of language in a social context, but academically, their abilities in English could be very different. Thus, in order for ELL students to truly grasp all of the content, the instruction must truly use comprehensible input at the student's academic level (Verplaetse and Migliacci, 7).

Finally, Krashen discusses the need to create a safe and "interactionally stimulating" environment that provides ample opportunity for students to produce their own input (Verplaetse and Migliacci, 9). First, the atmosphere must be a safe environment that not only tolerates but celebrates difference. By creating a safe classroom, students are much more likely to participate. This aids Krashen's other key need, opportunity to produce input; students can only learn to produce their own language (written or spoken) if they are given the chance to practice. Finally, Krashen's idea of an "interactionally stimulating" environment refers to the necessity of having student interaction. Students, and ELL students especially, will grow and learn more if they are able to use their knowledge with their peers and practice their skills with each other (Verplaetse and Migliacci, 9).

Although educational theories can be very helpful for teachers, there is a lot of general knowledge that falls under a lot of different theories and practices. The same is true for strategies for working with English Language Learners; there are a lot of basic, general knowledge on how to create a positive learning environment for these students. While these tips may be general, they are still vital and are concepts all teachers working with English Language Learners should be aware of.

General Tips

Many general classroom management tips have been previously mentioned (using routines, increasing wait time, assigning a personal buddy, etc.). However, creating a positive classroom environment goes beyond simple classroom management; a class may be “managed” but that doesn’t mean the students will learn. To best meet the needs of ELL students, the classroom must truly have a positive, culturally accepting atmosphere. Such an environment can be difficult for teachers to create but it is definitely not impossible. First and foremost, educators must understand the complexity of culture in itself. “Culture is complex. Communication is complex. And working with students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds provides ample evidence that the complexity is greater than the sum of its parts” (Helmer and Eddy, 7). Helmer and Eddy hit the nail on the head; culture is not a simple $A + B = C$ equation. Culture is different from every country, every town, and even every school. This complexity definitely makes a teacher’s job more challenging.

One basic way teachers can overcome this complex challenge and develop a truly positive learning environment is by affirming diversity in the classroom (Curran, 1). Tolerating diversity and different perspective only teaches students to ‘deal with’ one another and not necessarily respect each person’s unique background, skills, and point of view. By affirming diversity, the educator makes each student and his/her culture feel important. Not only does this allow students to feel welcome and encourage their participation, it also helps students learn more than just the

content. Paul Watzalwick once said, “the belief that one’s own view of reality is the only reality, is the most dangerous of all delusions.” When we give our students the chance to understand and respect differing viewpoints from different cultures, we aid their growth in more than just the content area, but as a person as well.

In addition to affirming diversity, it is important for teachers to be aware of linguistic and cultural miscommunication that can happen in the classroom. As previously discussed, classroom management and structure is not a universal concept. Before teachers reprimand a student for misbehaving or not following directions, it is necessary that they first take a step back to see if the directions themselves were clear (Curan, 1). Similarly, educators always have to look for cultural bias in the classroom and in the instructional materials. Cultural bias in the classroom can be addressed by affirming diversity as just mentioned but it can also be addressed in the materials and contexts used in the classroom. Whenever there is an opportunity to create a different context (one from a different state, country, area, etc.), the teacher can alter the classroom bias that might have otherwise been very one-culture sided. Also, it is vital that teachers look at course materials with the perspective of cultural diversity. Without doing so, students may struggle with a task or assessment simple because they don’t have the background to understand it. For example, an assessment that uses a familiar children’s story for most Americans might be difficult for ELL students from different countries to understand (Curran, 5). In general, cultural bias can easily be found in the classroom as long as the

educators know what they're looking for. Reducing this bias will then increase the ability for ELL students to comprehend the material and grow as a student.

Establishing Cultural Democracy

Looking at these general tips for creating a positive classroom environment, there is one overall goal teachers can strive for using these principles: cultural democracy. "A culturally democratic environment is one that allows each individual to express and cultivate his or her own culture, while at the same time learning to negotiate the wider mainstream culture" (Houk, 11). As discussed previously, teachers can help students grow as individuals as well as students by affirming diversity in the classroom. Students will not only learn the content but they will also gain new perspectives on how to view the world.

Furthermore, teachers can guide and support ELLs in the process of becoming both bilingual and bicultural. Helping ELL students become bilingual and bicultural allows them to maintain their native culture and language while gaining new perspective of a different culture and new skills in a new language (Houk, 12). Overall, to develop bilingual and bicultural students, teachers must provide encouragement and recognition for home languages and embrace each child's culture. In the end, rather than limiting students' growth, teachers will help them reach their true potential.

Instructional Planning and Guiding Instruction

Clearly, teachers, especially teachers in English as a Second Language (TESOL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, must understand differences in language and culture, how to plan, implement and manage instruction, assessment, and professionalism around these differences (Tellez and Waxman, 8). Thus, the question is, how does one plan for cultural and linguistic differences? First,

“When planning instructional strategies, we need to consider differences in background and culture. In English-speaking Western countries, teachers tend to use a range of strategies that not only incorporate large-group discussions, as well as work in pairs or triads, but also focus on cooperative learning and problem solving through small-group activities. Though these strategies are used widely, they are not necessarily familiar to, or even considered appropriate by, others.” (Helmer and Eddy, 51)

Additionally, western cultures tend to emphasize ‘learn by doing’ and trial and error is often encouraged, not censored. It is important to note that learning styles are rooted in individual predispositions and there is a clear cultural influence (like with these western strategies for learning). Therefore, it is important for teachers to learn about and reflect on the variety of learning systems represented in the classroom (Helmer and Eddy, 53). Whether students are from the United States or a different country, they may very well have a different learning style. Students from different cultures are definitely more likely to have a different approach to learning

and thus it is even more essential that educators take time to note student learning preferences and styles. By doing so, teachers can better meet the needs of ELL students and students in general.

Finally, Verplaetse and Migliacci also mention numerous priorities for guiding instruction for immigrant students. Two of these priorities include using background knowledge and teaching academic strategies (105-116). Although background knowledge is definitely going to vary from student to student and culture to culture, it is still important that teachers do not assume ELL students come to class as a 'blank slate' with nothing to branch off of. It may be more difficult for teachers to determine what background knowledge ELL students have but they will be able to better educate these diverse learners if they do.

Also, teaching ELL students academic strategies gives them the tools they need to become better learners. It is like the saying 'if you give a man a fish, he will eat for the day, if you teach a man to fish, he will eat for life.' By giving students to tools they need to be successful academically, they can apply the strategies in multiple content areas and learn more of the content. Therefore, it is overall necessary for teachers to use their resources to develop the most beneficial instructional strategies for ELL students.

General Teaching Strategies

Now that we have an understanding of how English Language Learners think, what role cultural diversity plays in the classroom, and how to use this knowledge

to create a positive learning environment, it is now important to look at what specific teaching strategies are available for educators to use in TESOL/EFL classrooms or other content areas with ELL students. Three strategies that can be used in nearly every subject include the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), teaching strategies for literacy, and differentiating instruction. All three techniques are not only applicable to all content areas, but also extremely relatable to English Language Learners.

Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA)

The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) “integrates content-area instruction with language development activities and explicit instruction in learning strategies” (Chamot 1) Basically, this type of instruction is like the previously mentioned instructional technique of teaching the academic strategies, teach a man to fish; students learn the necessary tools to help understand the content as well as how to apply these tools in other contexts. Moreover, CALLA is “designed to increase the achievement of English-language-learning (ELL) students...” and their higher level thinking (Chamot 1-2). Teachers are able to encourage higher level thinking with ELL students by supporting their mental processes and helping them reflect on their own learning. This helps ELL students to learn more effectively (Chamot 2). Therefore, no matter what content area, teachers can better aid their ELL students by explicitly teaching learning strategies to the

students to help them not only understand and remember the content, but also the language.

Teaching Strategies for Literacy

In addition to CALLA, teaching strategies for literacy are also vital in all content areas as every subject uses literacy in some form or another (students will have to read and/or write in some way, shape, or form in all content areas). Therefore, by understanding different techniques for teaching literacy to ELL students, educators can better aid their learning.

Overall, when teaching literacy, especially to English Language Learners, vocabulary is extremely important. In order to help ELLs build background knowledge and understand unfamiliar vocabulary, teachers should present new concepts and words before reading (Haynes, 59). In an effort to establish the meaning of foreign words, teachers have used many approaches. Robert Lado suggests the following: “self-defining lexical contexts, definitions, opposites (if one word is already known), synonyms, dramatizations – acting out meanings, pictures, and real objects” are all great tools for teaching new vocabulary (Darian, 120-121). In general, the important thing is for teachers to teach vocabulary to English Language Learners rather than assume these words are already known.

In addition to reading, writing is another skill that is used in nearly all content areas and one that can be very difficult for English Language Learners. To help these students avoid using translation, teachers should use a variety of

strategies that promote student's thinking in English. Some of these strategies include teaching nonfiction reading and writing first, spending more time helping students in the prewriting stages, helping students brainstorm vocab and themes in small groups, use graphic organizes, and show good writing models (Haynes 62). Furthermore, it is crucial that teachers guide students on how to write specifically in their content area. As writing in an English class is completely different that writing for Science or Social Studies, ELL students may need a lot of guidance on formatting and language in each specific content area.

Differentiating Instruction

The last teaching strategy that can be seen and used in all content areas is differentiating instruction. Differentiation refers to teaching to the students as individuals rather than one group. This type of strategy involves creating options for students to better meet their needs, abilities, and skill levels. Differentiation can range from different assignments, assessments, and even different due dates. Overall, differentiation is as affective as the teacher is; the more effort teachers put in to meeting the needs of their students, the more the students will learn.

When striving to meet the needs of ELL students, there are a variety of techniques within differentiated instruction that educators can use. Some of these techniques include, encouraging flexible grouping, developing alternative assessments for ELLs, using visuals, choosing essential vocabulary, summarizing texts, using graphic organizers with ELLS and using Think-Alouds to help ELLs learn

(Haynes 73-81). Any and all of these techniques provide greater opportunities for ELL students to comprehend the content and remember more of the language. In the end, it is important to note that every student learns differently, especially English Language Learners and that instructors have the ability to change and adjust things as necessary. Learning is not 'one size fits all' and instruction should not try to be.

Conclusion

Overall, there is currently a lot of information regarding English Language Learners and there is a higher need than ever to utilize this information in the classroom. Clearly, ELL students are ever present in U.S. schools and have a desperate need for good instruction and accommodations. In general, the first start to helping these diverse learners is understanding their background and their perspective. However, this is not enough to help this students meet their true potential. In order to do so, teachers must utilize all the resources they have available and continue to seek out new strategies and techniques.

Understanding the Metacognition of ELLs is Key

Before one can teach English Language Learners it first necessary to understand their perspective and how they think. By doing so, teachers can better understand where ELL students struggle and need more help. Due to the fact that culture is complex and that it plays a very large role in the way ELL students think, behave, and learn, it is also extremely vital that educators understand how culture

impacts education and, furthermore, understand the unique cultural background of their students. Using this knowledge, teachers can create a positive classroom environment for their students and thus provide a better atmosphere for student learning. Most importantly, by supporting diversity in the classroom through instructional techniques, educators not only make ELL students feel more welcome but also allow all students to gain new perspectives.

Filling the Gaps with Resources

It is evident that teaching English Language Learners can definitely be a challenge for instructors. Since each student can come from such a diverse background and have such varying needs, it is difficult for educators to know all the techniques to help these students. Moreover, each content area has very specific challenges that ELL students must overcome and thus each content area has an array of techniques for instructors. In order to keep up with new strategies and find more ways to help one's students, teachers must continue to read literature on the subject, seek out professional development opportunities, and use co-workers as resources. Teachers of any and all subjects must commit to a lifetime of learning to become the best teachers possible.

Applicable to All Students

Although most of these techniques, strategies, and facts are related to English Language Learners, many of these tips can also be applied to all other students. In

general, all students benefit from individualized instruction and it is much easier to meet the needs of your students if you understand their perspective, their background. With these two concepts in mind, all teachers can become better instructors by simply getting to know their students and using this knowledge to create better instruction for their pupils. Finally, it is important that teachers never stop learning. If you don't know how to help your students, find the resources that will help you because at the end of the day, educators teach students, not subjects or content areas.

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