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Infusing EL Content and Instruction into English Education Courses

Donna Niday, Iowa State University

Introduction

As a teacher of English Education, young adult literature, and methods courses and of student teaching supervision, I am a firm believer in infusing English Learner (EL) content and instructional strategies into my courses. The students in these courses are undergraduate students, some of whom are non-traditional students. I also infuse EL content into my graduate methods course for experienced English teachers and for teaching assistants who wish to teach on the two-year or four-year college level. I want to assist teachers in their goal to help all students be successful, which, of course, includes English learners.

Examples of methods courses in which I have infused EL content and instruction at Iowa State University for the past several years include English 494: *Practice and Theory of Teaching Literature in the Secondary Schools*. This course is required for English Education majors and serves as the methods course taken in the junior or senior year prior to student teaching. A few students may be working toward an ESL endorsement in addition to their English education licensure. All students in the course would have previously taken English 396: *Teaching the Reading of Young Adult Literature* in which they read two novels about English learners and devised a teaching unit with EL accommodations. Therefore, these skills are scaffolded into higher expectations for the teaching unit and for EL accommodations. This methods course includes the opportunity to read a professional educational text about either English learners, students who are talented and gifted, or students with disabilities and then work within a group to plan and teach the rest of the class the information they have learned. The course also requires preservice teachers to create a unit in which they are to describe universal design strategies, as well as accommodations specifically for EL students.

Professional Learning

Since there were no EL classes available during my own teacher preparation, I have observed EL teachers in K-12 classrooms, tutored EL students, attended EL sessions at state and national conferences, read journal articles, and read professional books. I have also had several of our ESL professors talk to my methods classes in which I have positioned myself as a learner. Finally, I have taught ELs, many of whom have high language proficiencies, in my introductory college freshman composition classes. Of these strategies, the most helpful resources have been these three: teaching ELs (so I can share my own experiences), talking with EL teachers, and reading applicable books such as Stephen Cary's *Working with English Language Learners: Answers to Teachers' Top Ten Questions*, which provides down-to-earth methods for classroom

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teachers. Even though I consider myself well read and somewhat knowledgeable about teaching ELs, I still feel somewhat inadequate since I have not had a single course in this area.

Process of Embedding Courses with EL Content

Most of the key theoretical EL principles concur with my own teaching philosophy. For instance, both EL and English Education groups believe in student-centered practices, including John Dewey's experiential learning and universal design strategies. Both emphasize visual learning, which is especially important for ELs in which the visual can either be the primary or supplementary learning technique. Because English educators work toward differentiated classrooms, providing alternative texts such as graphic novels, picture books, or bilingual books is a natural part of individualized learning.

On the other hand, I find it intriguing that the linguistics professors with whom I've worked tend to be more concerned about theory than practice. When I've invited professors to be guest speakers in my classroom, they have focused solely on theory and not described effective teaching practices, much to my students' dismay. Their lectures often center on language acquisition, which is important, but my students want to know, "How can I help ELs learn the content and the English language more easily?" For instance, although I've encouraged the instructors of our introductory linguistics class (taken by all teacher education students) to include effective teaching strategies in the course, they have not done so. When they ask me what they could remove from the course to allow time for this addition, I have encouraged them to eliminate requiring the memorization of the parts of the mouth used to make specific sounds. While this knowledge may be quite helpful to some language professionals, it is often extraneous information for the classroom teacher. Since Linguistics professors view this as a basis for language development, I have accepted this requirement while still championing teaching classroom practice. Whenever my preservice teachers have become frustrated over the heavy emphasis on linguistics theory, I encourage them to ask, "How will this help me as a classroom teacher?" Their linguistics professors do respond with effective responses to this question and then return to teaching theory. I fully believe in the need for a marriage between theory and practice, so I have finally capitulated to realizing that the linguistics professors can provide the theory, and I will need to prepare the preservice teachers for classroom practice within my own courses.

Teaching Embedded Courses

I have attempted to infuse EL content into my methods course for 15 years. At the beginning, I invited linguistics professors to be guest speakers in the class, but, as mentioned earlier, this resulted in students learning about theory but not about practice. I then tried a student exchange of having the ESL methods students talk about teaching methods, and my English Education students teach the ESL methods students about lesson planning. This seemed to be more fruitful since students could learn from students. However, the meeting time of the ESL methods class was changed, not allowing any further exchanges in succeeding semesters.

Today I embed EL content into my course in two ways: by spending specific time in teaching practices for ELs and by referring to ELs during nearly every class period. I used to include the EL teaching methods at the end of the course, but now I include it at the beginning, so it is truly infused. I have adopted a five-stage teaching method: awareness of the opportunity to teach ELs, recognizing effective strategies, using recognized techniques in teaching writing, providing alternative reading texts, and connecting theory to practice.

Step 1: Awareness of ELs. I have discovered that preservice teachers, as a whole, tend to develop the following misconceptions:

- #1 Misconception: “The chances that I will need to work with ELs is very low.” Since many of my students grew up in rural Iowa schools with few or no ELs, they often think this will be mirrored in their practicum and student teaching experiences. Therefore, I show students the statistics of ELs in Iowa and in specific schools, including the national statistics that at least ten percent of all students are ELs who speak a total of 384 languages (Cary, 2007).
- #2 Misconception: “The ELs in my classroom will speak the same language, probably Spanish, so I should be fluent in that language, but I’m not.” Many people—including teacher education students—hear so much about Mexican immigrants that they sometimes inaccurately assume that ELs tend to be Spanish speakers. Many classrooms may have a dominance of students from Mexico and Central American countries, but even Iowa classrooms include students from Bosnia, Sudan, Vietnam, Korea, China, Iraq, and other parts of the world. Because classrooms may include many languages, teachers obviously do not need be fluent in any language—and most certainly not all of them.
- #3 Misconception: “All—or nearly all—ELs are in the beginning stages of learning English.” While some ELs are newly arrived immigrants, many ELs have been in the U.S. for several years. Other ELs are U.S.-born students living in non-English first-language homes. These students may need to refine their English language usage by working on plurals, articles, tenses, and other grammatical areas.
- #4 Misconception: “ELs should sit in the front row so they will follow what is happening in class.” Instead front-row seats can be given to those who have sight or hearing disabilities. Seating ELs in the center of the classroom where they can view classmates’ actions is often more productive for both the teacher and the ELs.
- #5 Misconception: “ELs should learn oral language by listening.” Actually visual aids—pictures, films, words on the whiteboard, body gestures—are some of the most effective ways for students to learn the language.
- #6 Misconception: “ELs are another problem for the teacher.” Instead of being a problem, ELs can be a positive influence on the classroom. Giving students an opportunity to share their culture can add to the teacher’s and students’ knowledge and cultural experiences.

After students become aware of the true picture of their classroom audience, classroom discussions can dispel these six misconceptions.

Step 2: Recognition of effective teaching practices. The next strategy I have used with my preservice teachers is to help them become aware of and recognize good teaching practices for all students, especially ELs. I give my preservice teachers excerpts from several young adult novels about ELs and ask them to make generalizations about the language learning experience:

- From his autobiographical book *The Circuit*, Francisco Jimenez describes how he often became bored with listening to a teacher talk in English for an entire morning:

“Miss Scalapino started speaking to the class, and I did not understand a word she was saying. The more she spoke, the more anxious I became. By the end of the day, I was very tired of hearing Miss Scalepino talk because the sounds made no sense to me. I thought that perhaps by paying close attention, I would begin to understand, but I did not.” (1988, p. 18)

Because he couldn't understand the teacher's words, Francisco often found himself daydreaming and either looking out the window or watching a caterpillar in a glass jar. Since the teacher had placed a picture book about caterpillars in front of the jar, Francisco matched the words to the pictures and began learning English.

- In An Na's *A Step from Heaven*, the elementary teacher talks to Young Ju, the protagonist, during recess. When she offers some goldfish crackers, Young Ju waves her arms in the air as if the fish were swimming, and the teacher utters “goldfish.” With this successful beginning, the two start communicating.

Preservice teachers usually list their first generalization as students' frustration, and we talk about the connection between students' irritation and how this anxiety often escalates into classroom management problems. Next, students note the specific learning methods: using objects, pictures, and body motions. When I ask for the commonality of the three, they finally recognize the use of visuals. This then allows us to discuss what other visuals can be used in the classroom (e.g., PowerPoints, Smart Board, films, etc.).

Step 3: Infusion in writing. To help English Education preservice teachers become aware of the challenges and opportunities afforded by ELs, I give them student-written compositions on the same topic to grade and respond to with teacher comments. The essays feature a diverse array with some being highly proficient, others being off-topic or not following directions, others being brief and needing explication, and some essays indicating English as a second language. The teacher education students are directed to look for the strengths of each writer and goals for their writing improvement. This strategy allows us to discuss the diverse range of students and the special gifts and needs each student brings to the classroom. Rather than marking every error, teacher education students are encouraged to look for two or three patterns of errors for each student in learning growth. I propose the following questions:

- What strengths did you see within the entire class in which you can orally commend all students?
- What error patterns did you see within the whole class in which you can provide whole-class instruction?
- What are strengths that each student individually brings to the composing experience?

- What are three goals you could have each student individually work on to improve his/her composition?

Often, teacher education students feel they need to respond to every error, and this system helps them to target specific areas to work on gradually, so neither they nor the students feel overwhelmed.

Step 4: Infusion in literature. To help my English Education students understand how to help ELs with the content of the course, I ask them to work in groups to devise ways to teach *Romeo and Juliet* to a mixed class of regular students and ELs. Students immediately recognize the applicability of this task since this text is commonly taught in schools around ninth grade, and they devise a series of activities and assignments: using drama, costumes, props, films, role plays, newspapers, etc. I also make students aware of alternative texts such as bilingual novels, picture books, graphic novels, or books such as Sharon Draper's *Romiette and Julio*, in which an African American girl falls in love with a Latino boy, replicating the Romeo and Juliet story.

Step 5: Theory and practice. After these student-centered activities in which the preservice teachers have brainstormed effective EL teaching practices, I then bring the theory into the course and introduce universal design strategies and Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory. Many of the universal teaching concepts and Gardner's intelligences work well for all students, including ELs:

- using visuals (whiteboard, Elmo, videos, graphic novels, PowerPoints, Smart Boards, etc.)
- using art or drama (other types of visual learning)
- using small-group work (ELs can learn from other students)

The areas in which ELs may need further instruction, not needed by non-ELs, include the following:

- context for various types of literature. (For instance, students reading *The Great Gatsby* may have little knowledge of the Roaring 20's in the U.S.)
- vocabulary such as idioms (Teachers need to be alert to their own language use, explain idioms used by other students, and provide explanations for jargon or idioms within literature.)
- grammatical usage for pronouns, articles, tenses, and plurals.
- composition organizational style (Some students may not be familiar with the Western writing style of an introduction with a thesis sentence, a body with examples, and a conclusion which re-emphasizes the main points. The teacher needs to decide whether to value former cultural writing styles or teach the Western writing method.)

As a final aspect of Step 4, I allow the methods students to write their preferences for learning more about ELs, students who are talented and gifted, students with physical disabilities, students with special education needs, and struggling learners. I then group students into these areas, give them professional academic texts, and ask them to teach the class what they have learned from the text using both theory and practice.

I also share with my English Education students my own experiences with ELs, especially in working with American student teachers in Norway. I have found that I need to teach the student teachers effective strategies for working with ELs, even those students who have an ESL endorsement. Since English is taught in all Norwegian schools every year beginning with first grade, English is taught as a regular subject rather than as a foreign language.

Again, the two steadfast strategies of visuals and group work aid in success. I tell my methods students these strategies have worked well for American student teachers in Norway:

- Visuals—objects, PowerPoints, or such simple practices as writing unique words on the whiteboard or chalkboard work well.
- Music—word repetition and motions can be especially effective.
- Small-group work—students feel more at ease in risking language attempts with a small number of peers.
- Writing—this is a helpful assessment tool in determining students' prior knowledge, areas for future lessons, and daily learning achievements, as well as in one-on-one conversations in discussing writing.
- Learning Norwegian words—the student teachers receive a first-hand experience of being a language learner while also obtaining the respect of the Norwegian students for their language attempts.
- Learning about culture—this can be a two-way exchange for the American student teachers and Norwegian students, benefiting both groups.

By sharing this experience with English Education students, they can see how visuals and small group work play out in the classroom.

Conclusion

By infusing EL content and instruction from the first days of the methods course, students view ELs as a natural part of the course instead of a problematic add-on. Thinking about universal design strategies becomes a part of their being as teachers in making decisions about curriculum and lesson planning.

Overall, I really look forward to teaching my English Education students about effective teaching strategies for ELs. Once they realize that they will have ELs in the classroom and that working with these students can be highly positive experiences, they are eager to learn about how to help these students become successful learners. I strongly encourage other teacher education instructors to infuse EL content and instruction into their methods classes, starting on Day one!

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