

Instruction for Diverse Groups of English Language Learners

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English Language Learners (ELLs), who constitute the most rapidly growing segment of the student population in American schools, are an immensely diverse group. Among the variables that account for the diversity are place of birth, developmental differences, language exposure, parental education, community attitudes, socioeconomic status, time in the United States, experience of formal schooling, immigration status, and ethnic heritage (e.g., Bailey, Heritage & Bulter, forthcoming; Butler and Stevens, 1997; Walqui, 2000). Because of the diversity of ELLs, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction. Rather, teachers will need to be aware of and responsive to the diversity of the students and the assets and resources they bring from their individual contexts to the classroom. However we note a serious concern about the current instruction this diverse group of students is receiving: even though the majority of ELLs are born in the United States, there is a growing presence of ELLs labeled “long-term English Language Learners,” or students who have had the official Limited English Proficient designation for seven years or more (Olsen, 2010).

The Common Core Standards (CCSS) provide an opportunity to implement significant changes to the way in which this diverse group of ELLs are served in American schools and to improve their educational outcomes. Every teacher will now need to be a teacher of the language and literacies that all their students, including ELLs, must possess to act in disciplinary valued ways in their classes. With this goal in mind, we take the view that for children entering school with little or no English, there is a pivotal role for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, which is to develop students’ initial English language, both social and academic, in deep, generative, and accelerated ways. Once students have reached an intermediate level of proficiency in English, further development of the academic uses of language becomes the responsibility of every teacher. Of course this will require a different level of teacher expertise than currently exists among most teachers. However we regard the advent of the CCSS as a catalyst for change in this regard. As we suggested earlier, because of the diversity of ELLs, there is no single instructional approach. Instead, we take the view that instruction should be based on sound principles that can be enacted within individual classrooms in ways that are responsive to who the students are. Below we offer five principles that have been abstracted from a broad base of literature and from our direct experience of working with ELLs and their teachers over many years.

Principle 1: Learning is always based on prior knowledge and experience. ELLs must have equal access to knowledge that is valued in school. Learners actively construct understandings within a social and cultural context (Greenfield, 2009), building new knowledge on what they already know (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978), and developing the metacognitive skills necessary to regulate their own learning (Bruner, 1985; Rogoff, 1998, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). All ELLs regardless of their socioeconomic or cultural background take to school immense resources and a range of learning skills that need to be appreciated and built upon. The cultural as well as social foundations of learning are important in that the prior knowledge on which students build new learning is culturally shaped (Greenfield, 2009; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 2003). This includes ideas about social roles in the

classroom, the role of schooling, and how to use language in the learning process (Bransford et al., 2000).

Academic language has often been conceived of as “decontextualized language” and defined in contrast to conversational language, which occurs in a shared physical context. It is also described as being explicit, as if all that were needed to interpret it were located in the text. However, academic writing is not decontextualized, nor is it fully explicit. It presumes a shared context with its readers who have to “add back in a large piece of the domain conversation that is left inexplicit in the writing” (Gee, 2006, p. 159). Therefore, making meaning of academic language – as with any language – requires drawing on relevant background knowledge and previous participation in discourse, a process Aukerman calls “situating that language vis-à-vis other experiences and what others have said” (Aukerman, 2006, p. 631). This contextualization serves as a gatekeeping mechanism and obscures meaning when students cannot draw upon this shared context.

A common solution to this challenge is to ask ELLs to work with texts of familiar or low-level content and simplified language. This works against their development of academic content, language, and literacy. To advance into what they do not know yet presupposes that their teachers “build the field” (Derewianka, 1991; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005), that is, help them develop the indispensable knowledge needed to construct new understandings. To this end, teachers will need to weigh the appropriateness of texts, taking into consideration a progression of content and linguistic complexity, bridging into new complex understandings and language.

For example, the ELA CCSS suggest reading an excerpt from Frederick Douglas’s autobiography in the middle grades. To be able to understand this text, students need to be aware of slavery’s historical existence in the U.S., and of the conditions and tensions it introduced. Linguistically, the text uses arcane language: “...This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge...I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids, not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them.” Historically, it has great value as a counterargument for the existence of slavery. The text merits being read by middle school students.

However, the pertinent questions are *when?* and *with what support?* If the teacher had mostly long-term ELLs in class, she might decide they had enough background knowledge to support their reading. She could not, however, assume that students who had recently arrived from other countries and had interrupted schooling would be able to work through the text meaningfully without her support. She would need to build students’ background knowledge of the historical moment and prepare them for the arcane features of the language used. On the other hand, the teacher may decide that while the theme is important, at this moment in the development of her ELLs’ English and literacy skills, it may be better to use a comparable text in modern English. Later on, with deeper and wider understandings, students would be able to tackle this text on their own.

Principle 2: Language and cognition develop together and progressively. As ideas and relationships become more complex, so does language. Ever since the emergence of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956), the general relationship between language and cognition has been disputed (Pinker, 1995), though recent evidence suggests that language does play a significant role in the specification of particular cognitive faculties (Lucy 1992; Gumperz & Levinson 1996; Levinson, 2003). A useful way to understand this relationship may be in terms of Boyd and Richerson’s (2005) concept of cultural evolution as a process through which collective

conceptual stabilization is facilitated by the role of linguistic categories. Such linguistic categories make particular relationships more highly codable, and retrievable by individuals and groups. For example, a child may note the recurrence of an object by announcing “another one X”, but subsequently refine the intention of the concept of “another one” by replacing it with the predicate “same” while successively touching the two objects (William Ziolkowski, 2011). Here, the underlying criterion for the expression “another one,” already cognitively available to the child in ‘practical consciousness,’ (Giddens, 1984) is becoming articulated through the availability of the term “same”, thus entering into “discursive consciousness” and becoming stabilized as a resource for use in ordinary interaction. In this way, an underlying criterion of judgment is externalized through the resources of culture.

Language learning is an essential feature of this process. In the specific context of EL instruction, teachers must pay attention to developing the language necessary to encode emerging concepts across domains so that they can be sustained. Learning concepts is not treated as distinct from the linguistic means through which the understanding is acquired and expressed; the demands of understanding concepts and relationships are not privileged above the demands of linguistic resources, nor vice versa. Thus effective instruction involves the integrated learning of concepts and language through meaningful experiences in conjunction with scaffolding by teachers and peers of the features of academic language, both spoken and written, that are needed to construe meaning (van Lier, 2004; Heritage, Silva & Pierce, 2007). To illustrate the integration of language and understanding, we turn to an example from a kindergarten-first grade science class. The teacher is planning a unit of study to develop the concept of the life cycle and has identified the following goals: 1) understanding that plants and animals have life cycles that include being born, developing into adults, reproducing, and eventually dying; 2) knowing that the details of this life cycle are different for different organisms; and 3) understanding that many characteristics of an organism are inherited from the parents. She decides on the particular language elements that she will be teaching alongside the development of students’ knowledge, understanding and skills so as to support their acquisition: the vocabulary and syntax to observe, describe, compare, question, sequence, and report; specific vocabulary, including the nouns *caterpillar*, *chrysalis*, *larva*, the verbs *grow*, *change*, *transform* and *reproduce*, and the prepositions *on*, *over*, *under*, *through*, *inside*, *outside*; words or phrases such as *like*, *same as*, *similar*, and *different*, in order to make comparisons between and among organisms; the use of active declarative sentences that include the specific vocabulary in order to describe a sequence of events; and interrogative structures so students can ask questions as part of their inquiry into the life cycle. Pedagogically, she will develop the children’s understanding of the life cycle and the language to support their understanding in the context of first-hand experiences, observations and questioning about phenomena and the use of second hand materials such as charts and books (Heritage et al., 2007).

Principle 3: The goal of learning is to develop the stance of generativity and autonomy. This is accomplished through apprenticeship in which the learner is invited to become a member of a community of practice. Generativity and autonomy refer to the ability students develop to support their own learning by using independently what they have learned in the context of apprenticeship with peers or adults within a community of practice (van Lier, 2004.) Communities of practice are organized so that learning occurs in ways that contribute to the students’ development of strong identities as learners and as effective participants in the social practices of their learning community. Participants operate within a situation of shared expectations and anticipated outcomes, and accepted and consistent regularities of activity, social and interactional practices and behaviors. Individuals participate in these practices of the community and, in turn, the collective practices of the community are mutually co-determined by the participant individuals (Lave, 1988).

Acquiring the linguistic resources is a vital condition to participate in communities of practice (Block, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). However, without a teacher who is able to invite and support students' participation, resources, while necessary, are not sufficient. Students are socialized into the academic practices of disciplines through joint activity and by being provided with the support, or 'scaffolding', and with the opportunity to practice and eventually own or appropriate practices so that they become generative (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002; Walqui & van Lier, 2010). In this sense, scaffolding is the "just right" kind of support required by students to engage in practice that helps them mature processes which are at the cusp of developing, while simultaneously engaging their agency. Pedagogically it entails participation in a task or project with predictable rules and recurring elements. This structure *only* exists to enable the unexpected, the unpredictable to occur. The framework of the task makes the innovation possible. For example, in an upper elementary math class students are working in groups of four to complete a graphic organizer (a Frayer model) to explore key properties and characteristics of a parallelogram. The process the teacher invites students to follow involves one student at a time offering an idea, which is then echoed and refined by a second student, then discussed by the whole group to reach a consensus, and finally is written up by all. In this case, the scaffolding manifests itself both in the use of the graphic organizer and in the participation structure. The graphic organizer focuses students' attention to key characteristics of the figure and the process enables all students to participate and refine their understanding and concomitant use of language. In the revisions and fine-tunings the language gets increasingly more academic. Furthermore students' appropriation of conceptual understandings and the language needed to express them meets their diverse needs since the activity has multiple points of entry. What students did in collaboration in class, they will be able to do alone in the future if supported by a teacher's well-designed activity. We see this stance of generativity and autonomy as being essential to college and career readiness, to success in the 21st century, and an espoused goal of the CCSS.

We further illustrate the process of participation in a community of practice in the following example. In a 5th grade writing class, the students are learning about persuasive writing with a focus, selected by the students, on "saving the environment." The students have learned about the idea of "arguments" and reasons to support the argument, as well as learning about developing counterarguments. One student, Angelica, who has written her arguments and counterarguments, requests a one-on-one conference with her teacher during independent writing time, opening with an invitation: "I would like to get your feedback." With this statement, Angelica is registering her agency as a participant in a community of practice. The teacher engages in the conversation with Angelica, first by asking what she is working on and then what she would specifically like feedback about. Her approach acknowledges the child's agency in the work and her own role as an assistant in supporting Angelica's writing. Angelica has started her piece of writing with two questions and is unsure if this is an effective beginning. In the collaborative discussion that ensues, they simultaneously conclude, in a meeting of minds, that the two questions address different aspects of the same topic and could be combined into one question. Satisfied that she has a solution, Angelica thanks her teacher and continues to revise her work independently.

In these examples, we see teachers who have established the norms, values, and routines that are understood and shared by all participants in a community of practice. That facilitates and hones generative learning and autonomy.

Principle 4: The goal of language use is to make it contextually appropriate; students need to be competent navigators within a range of different registers. Language is a tool human beings use to get things done in the real world. Acquiring proficiency in a language

entails developing a linguistic repertoire with which to negotiate different situations and cultural practices (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Valdés, Bunch, Snow, & Lee, 2005). Skilled language users vary their use of language depending on the context and on their purposes, employing different registers and genres as communicative resources. Registers are language varieties associated with a particular situation of use, and genres are regularly-occurring spoken and written message types that fulfill similar communicative purposes, have familiar organizational patterns, and recognizable linguistic manifestations (Derewianka, 1990; Halliday, 1994). Bauman (2001) describes genres as orienting frameworks that support our interpretation and creation of meaningful language.

To acquire these skills students need access to fluent models and opportunities to participate in interactions where they are also asked to recognize texts as instances of specific genres, with clear, understood purposes, and similar language features to then produce responses and engage in extended discourse.

For teachers of ELLs, it will be important to adopt the stance of assisting students to recognize the context in which specific language registers are appropriate – a case of *when* rather than an approach of *you can't*. This presupposes that when teachers are teaching, that they are aware of the contexts of use and how to bridge students' competence with new registers. Similarly, when students engage in communicative practices teacher emphasis should first be placed on their understanding of the purpose of communications, their recognition of genres (for example, “this is an argumentative essay that has as its purpose to convince me of the value of saving water as part of my daily routine,” “this is an autobiographical essay where the author wants to share with me some events in his life”), then on how students organize their ideas, and only finally on issues of correctness in language use (accuracy).

Principle 5: Assessment is integrated into the process of teaching and learning.

Assessment-elicited information is used by both teachers and students to consistently keep learning moving forward. In addition to being principled, learning for ELLs must also be contingent. Contingent learning occurs when teachers and students take the opportunity to build on what students already know to move them incrementally through a process of scaffolding from their current state of learning to a more advanced state. Contingent learning is dependent on a steady stream of information about how learning is progressing while it is in the process of developing. In the case of ELLs, teachers need to pay close attention to emergent language and content learning during the ongoing course of instruction so that they can adapt their teaching to keep student learning moving forward. Only when assessment is integrated into the process of teaching and learning will teachers and their students have the information they need to engage in contingent learning.

When assessment is integrated into teaching and learning, three key questions provide a framework for action: Where am I going? Where am I now? Where to next? (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989). In the context of language learning, to answer these questions, teachers and students first need a clear roadmap for learning, a progression of how language develops at the discourse, sentence, and word level across modalities and within different content areas (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Heritage & Bailey, 2011). This means that there will be multiple, related progressions of the sequence of necessary linguistic skills and knowledge associated with specific disciplines in listening, speaking, reading and writing. These include the discourse features needed to describe content area phenomena, the tenses required for both understanding and expressing causal relationships, and the vocabulary needed to understand concepts (for a more detailed description see Heritage & Bailey, 2011). From these progressions, teachers identify specific short-term language learning goals (*where am I going?*),

sometimes in collaboration with their students, which are the target of immediate teaching and learning. Second, teachers gather evidence about the students' current learning (*where am I now?*). When assessment is integrated into learning, there is no single way to collect evidence. Evidence gathering can occur through teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, tasks, and observations of actions (Heritage, forthcoming). From these sources, teachers draw inferences about students' learning relative to the intended learning goals. Whatever the source of the evidence, the role of the teacher is to construct or devise ways to elicit responses from students that are revealing of their current learning status (Sadler, 1989). To answer the final question (*where to next?*), the data need to be interpreted in relation to the learning goal so that both teacher and student can make decisions about next instructional steps.

To illustrate this process, below we describe two examples of assessment integrated into language instruction. In Ms. Olvera's third grade classroom of dual language learners, the children are learning about rock formation and because Ms. Olvera integrates reading, writing, listening and speaking into her science content, they have been reading and discussing text on the topic. Her current English language focus with the students is the development of interrogative structures and the use of specific topic vocabulary: *rock, mineral, igneous, sedimentary* and *conglomerate*.

She uses three sources of data to inform her and her students about their English language learning: 1) student responses to her questions in the discussion section of the lesson; 2) the oral questions about the text that she asks particular students to construct and the feedback that peers provide to them; and 3) students construction of questions that they think are answered by the text they have just read. They post their notes on what Ms. Olvera has labeled a response board (Figure 1 shows a sample of the post-it notes). When the questions are posted, Ms. Olvera leads the students through a discussion of the responses (without revealing who wrote which) to consider the degree to which the target vocabulary has been used, the question structure employed and suggestions for improvement.

At the lesson's conclusion, Ms. Olvera and her students decide that they need to continue the focus on vocabulary usage, particularly in relation to rock types, and to revise their questions in light of the feedback they have received from their classmates. Ms. Olvera also notes specific students whom she has decided need more focused work on question structures, for example, those influenced by Spanish language word order.

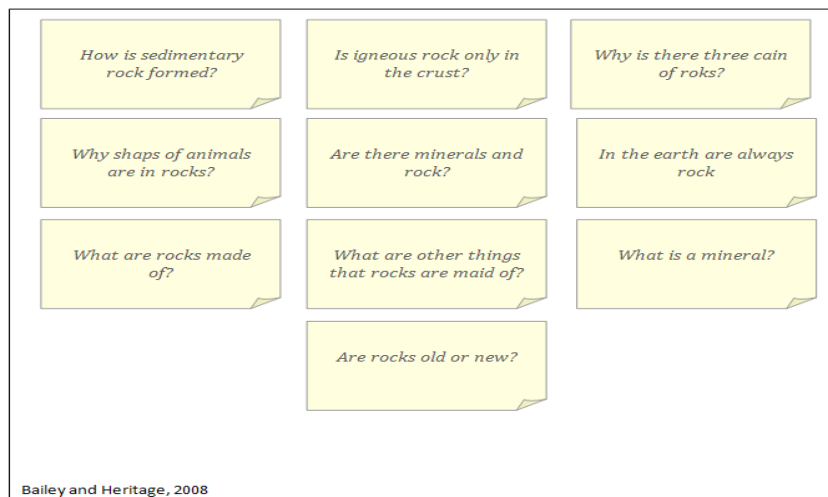


Figure 1. Student questions

Our next example comes from a secondary ESL class, with newcomers whose experience in the United States ranges from three months to two years. The teacher, Mr. DeFazio, has created a five-week unit on linguistics with the purpose of guiding his students through a deep exploration of an academic theme, while at the same time placing a focus on the language needed. This is the third class of the first week on the unit. Having formulated questions they would like to explore around language, students have then perused a variety of texts on the theme to get some information. They now write a letter to a person they know, telling them what they have learned so far about language. Before the lesson is over, five students write their beginnings on large sheets of paper to enable a discussion on what they have done and where they may go next. An animated conversation develops on whether animals have language or not. Julio, not part of the five initial volunteers, decides to read his letter aloud to the class.

Julio: ... First of all, I think that language is a way to inform others around you, your feelings or just a simple thing that you want to let know people what is the deal. And it can be expressed by saying it, watching a picture, or hearing it, you know what I'm saying? I don't know if you have heard about the kangaroo rat that stamps its feet to communicate with other rats. It's really funny 'cause we humans have more characteristics to communicate to each other, but we still have problems to understand other people. Characteristics like sound, grammar, pitch, and body language are some of them, while the rat only uses the foot (he stamps the ground).

In this lesson, we observe that the teacher has chosen the genre of letters, to have students write with the comfort that letter writing affords. This provides Mr. DeFazio with feedback on what the students understand, and how they are able to express these ideas in emergent academic uses of English. He then leverages his understanding of what students have developed to determine next steps in the process to extend his students' cognitive, academic and linguistic skills. In the above example, Julio demonstrates his understanding of the concept of language.

Both examples show how teachers focus on students' evolving understandings to decide where additional support needs to be centered so as to ripen in their students what is ready to develop.

Conclusion

The advent of the CCSS provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to reconceptualize how ELLs come to acquire increasingly sophisticated understandings, the linguistic resources to internalize and express them, the stance of generativity and autonomy, as well as adeptness in the range of language registers. This opportunity entails a retooling of the education profession to develop the skills to realize the immense potential that diverse groups of ELLs bring to American society. If we fail to take this opportunity, we risk doing a disservice to our students and to our nation as a whole. It is an opportunity we must surely grasp.

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