

The Challenge of Many Languages in Our Classrooms

Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section

JoAnn Wong-Kam and Curt Dudley-Marling, Coeditors

Although there are no easy answers for dealing with the challenge of providing effective literacy instruction to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the work of Luis Moll (1988) has provided teachers with some guidelines. Moll recognizes the importance of presenting second language learners with many opportunities to engage in reading and writing in meaningful contexts. In effective classrooms, teachers also work from students' strengths by building on their background experiences and encouraging connections between academic concepts and students' own lives. The articles in this issue show how these ideas have been used successfully in real classrooms.



Three Types of English Language Learners

by David Freeman and Yvonne Freeman, University of Texas–Pan American

Mai is a Hmong girl who was born in the United States. Her family lives in a neighborhood with many other immigrants, especially Hmong. When Mai began school she spoke only Hmong; her classmates included Hmong-, Spanish-, Khmer-, and Russian-speaking students. Her school offered limited support for Mai and her classmates through ESL pull-out or the occasional help of a bilingual Hmong paraprofessional.

Most of Mai's instruction has been delivered in English. Now that she is going into fifth grade, she has lost most of her ability to speak her native language and has trouble understanding even her parents and grandparents, who speak mainly Hmong. She never developed literacy in her first language, and her English literacy skills are below grade level.

Pepe started school in kindergarten in south Texas. He hadn't gone

to preschool as the other children had because his family had been working in another state that had no preschool program. Pepe is the middle child of seven. His family originally came from Mexico, and his father and mother work in agriculture. They move often, and Pepe has attended several schools. He is now in third grade in a new school and is behind the other children in almost every subject. His English is still quite limited.

Alondra came to the United States from a city in northern Mexico when she was in the fourth grade. When she entered school, she was at grade level in writing, reading, math, social studies, and science.

At first Alondra was overwhelmed by the differences in the way school was conducted in the United States. Group work, hands-on activities, and the movement of students for computers, library, and other special classes





confused her. In addition; she had no English beyond the little she had been taught in Mexico. In those classes students studied grammar and vocabulary but seldom actually used the language.

But when Alondra entered school in the U.S., she was already literate in Spanish and had subject matter knowledge that could be transferred to English as she became more proficient. By the time she got to the sixth grade, she was able to read and write in English. She now is one of the top students in her class.

Mai, Pepe, and Alondra are part of the growing population of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students in U.S. schools. A large number of these English language learners never finish high school. Although dropout rates vary across national origin groups, they rise for all groups in the third and subsequent generations. Students of Mexican origin drop out at a rate at least double the national average (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2000). To begin to change these trends, it is important for us to understand the differences among English language learners.

These three students were all classified as LEP; however, the literacy skills and the academic content knowledge they brought to their classes differed considerably. It is important for teachers to recognize the differing needs of their English language learners so that they can instruct them effectively and begin to help close the achievement gap between native English speakers and these struggling English learners.

Types of English Learners

Researchers, including Olsen and Jaramillo (1999) and Ruiz de Velasco et al. (2000), have identified three types of English language learners: long-term English learners, recent arrivals with limited or interrupted formal schooling,

and recent arrivals with adequate schooling.

Mai is a typical **long-term English learner**. Such students have been in U.S. schools for several years. They have often been placed in bilingual or ESL classes, but few have received a consistent, well-articulated program of instruction. Long-term English learners speak English and are often no longer designated as LEP, but they still struggle academically. Their perception of their progress is often positive because if they turn in assignments, they receive enough credit to earn B's or C's. When they do poorly on standardized tests and have trouble with state mandated exams, they get discouraged and later drop out of school.

Mai is an example of a student who has developed conversational proficiency in English. She can talk to her native English-speaking friends; however, school success depends on mastery of academic language, which she never developed proficiency in, in either English or Hmong. In part because she lacks the language of science, math, and social studies, Mai has not developed many of the academic concepts from those content areas. Her lack of content knowledge and her limited academic vocabulary contribute to her struggles in school. Even though she appears to speak English well, she does not have the more formal register of English that schools demand.

Pepe represents a second group of students who often struggle in school. These students are often referred to as having **limited formal schooling**. Pepe started school behind his classmates, who had had a full year of preschool. His education has been interrupted because his family travels to follow the crops. Pepe speaks little English, and it is not surprising that his grades are low and that he scores poorly on tests. He has difficulty with

math, which is not so language dependent, and this signals his limited and interrupted schooling.

Unlike Mai, Pepe has not yet developed conversational English. While he does have conversational proficiency in his native language, he lacks academic Spanish and has not developed many of the content-area concepts that students his age are expected to know. Pepe faces a real challenge. He needs to develop conversational English to function in social situations in and out of school. At the same time, he needs to develop academic English and academic subject matter knowledge to succeed in school.

Alondra speaks a little more English than Pepe. Her bilingual school in Mexico didn't fully prepare her to converse with native English speakers, but it did give her a start. What school in Mexico also gave Alondra was academic language and academic content knowledge. As her English develops, Alondra will be able to draw on this background and catch up with her classmates.

Cummins (2000) has shown that academic language and concepts transfer into a second language because there is a common underlying proficiency. What students learn in one language, they can access and express in a second language once they have developed sufficient proficiency in the second language. Alondra needs new words to express concepts she already knows. This is a far easier task than having to develop both the concepts and the academic English vocabulary.

The three students we have described face different challenges as they attempt to succeed in schools. But many programs for English language learners are based on the assumption that all students are like Alondra. When she succeeds and Mai or Pepe fails, teachers and administrators may blame the student or student back-

ground factors. However, since these students are not alike, it is not surprising that their school performances differ significantly.

Effective Instruction for English Learners

Even though long-term English learners and students with limited formal schooling face a considerable challenge, they can succeed in schools that provide both time and appropriate support. Collier (1992) has shown, though, that even students with adequate formal schooling take four to nine years to score at grade level on standardized tests of reading in English. If struggling English learners make test gains that equal those of native English speakers, they will never catch up. They have to achieve one and a half to two years gain each year to close the gap. This is only possible if they receive the best instruction.

Research has consistently pointed to certain characteristics of successful programs for students like Mai and Pepe (Freeman & Freeman, 2002). In classes that provide effective instruction, teachers engage students in challenging, theme-based curriculum to develop academic concepts. They draw on students' backgrounds—their experiences, cultures, and languages. And they organize collaborative activities and scaffold instruction to build students' academic English proficiency.

Sandra taught a fourth-through-sixth-grade class for students like Mai and Pepe and always organized around themes. By doing this she gave her students a more consistent and comprehensible curriculum. Students understood what the theme was about, and all the subject areas were connected. In addition, Sandra could have students with different levels of proficiency all respond to the same lessons in different ways. Some students drew pictures and labeled them while others wrote paragraphs or short essays. Through themes, Sandra helped all her students develop the academic

knowledge and English proficiency that they needed to succeed.

A second feature of effective classes is that teachers draw on students' backgrounds. One way to do this is to use culturally relevant books (Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman, 2003). When students are given texts that reflect their background experiences, they become more engaged and develop reading skills more rapidly.

A third feature of effective classes is that teachers scaffold instruction by providing additional supporting elements. Because English learners may find whole-class instruction difficult to follow, they can benefit when teachers organize them into heterogeneous groups where they can develop academic content knowledge and academic English as they interact with native speakers (Kagan, 1986). Teachers also support English learners by providing scaffolds, such as graphic organizers, to guide their learning. Effective teachers ensure that all instruction includes the comprehensible input English learners need to develop language proficiency (Krashen, 1992).

Struggling English learners like Mai and Pepe face a real challenge in school. They must learn English and academic concepts at the same time. There is often a considerable achievement gap between these students and their English-speaking classmates, and they will not be able to close the gap without effective instruction. However, when teachers provide challenging, theme-based curriculum; build on students' backgrounds, languages, and cultures; and organize collaborative, scaffolded instruction to help students build academic English proficiency, the students become more confident. They begin to value themselves as learners and to value education. In the process, they develop the academic content knowledge and the academic language they need to succeed in school. ▲

Planning for Writing: Defining Purpose, Audience, and Topic with English Language Learners

by Elizabeth MacDonald, Boston
Public Schools, and Maria Estela
Brisk, Boston College

My [Elizabeth's] fourth-grade class includes English speakers as well as English language learners (ELL) from Colombia, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, China, Vietnam, Brazil, and Ghana. Analysis of writing samples revealed that many of my students, particularly my ELL students, needed to improve planning, topic development, vocabulary, and sentence structure in their writing. To address planning and topic development, I decided to try using the rhetorical approach developed by Alvarado (1984) for teaching with ELLs. The focus of this approach is on preparation for writing, which includes the following steps:

- choosing and exploring the topic
- defining purpose and audience
- defining subtopics
- choosing genre and organization
- determining specific information to be included

ELL students then follow this process with writing a draft, revising, editing, and finally publishing their writing (Brisk & Harrington, 2000). This approach is particularly useful for those ELLs who rush to write and then wait for the teacher to correct their work. The rhetorical approach scaffolds writing and language, develops good habits, and helps ELL students pace and, ultimately, understand the writing process. It is particularly helpful for expository writing, a more difficult genre to produce in a second language.

In order for the class to practice expository writing, I combined social studies and writing time and decided to have all my students write in relation to our unit on immigration. Although I wished to target the ELL students, I assumed this approach would benefit all my students. I estimated that it would take about

four to five weeks to carry out this writing project, with the final product being a published piece of writing. We explored the topic by doing a word family mapping with the word *immigration* as a whole-class activity. Students were not sure if immigration meant the same thing as moving from one town to another or even one school to another. Finally one student said, "Just because Jane is moving to another city, she is not an immigrant." Another student remarked that you have to move to another country to be an immigrant. We ended the discussion with a final conclusion that immigrants are those who leave their home country to start a new life.

The next step was to choose purpose and audience. We brainstormed all of the reasons that writers write nonfiction and decided that we were going to share knowledge with those who did not know about immigration during the turn of the twentieth century. The students decided that they wanted to write for Mr. C, a former student teacher who had taught several lessons on immigration to the class. They wanted him to know how much more they had learned about immigration.

To my surprise, even native English-speaking students struggled with the development of subtopics. We did a variety of activities to help with their confusion. For example, we read nonfiction books and articles to identify the topics and subtopics. When I felt the students had an understanding of topics and subtopics, I reviewed with them how I had sequenced the study of


Leaving the Homeland	The Journey	Settling in a New Place
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diseases Reasons for leaving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> poverty war family discrimination natural disasters famine 	Diseases	Meeting People
	Ellis Island <ul style="list-style-type: none"> stairway of separation examination baggage room 	Finding jobs
	Steerage	Where did immigrants go?
	How long did it take?	Getting a disease in the new place
	Inside the boat	Homes
	Traveling on the ocean	Schools
	Meeting people on the boat	
	Buying tickets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> different classes 	

Table 1. Immigration Chart

immigration during social studies. The students named leaving the homeland, the journey, and settling in a new place topics close to the ELL students' experiences. These became the three major subtopics (see Table 1). Then we brainstormed all of the possible subtopics. The students wrote them on note cards and placed them on the chalkboard under the three major topics. Students discovered that some subtopics could be categorized under more than one topic. All along we were reading books such as *If Your Name Was Changed at Ellis Island*, *Letters from Rifka*, *The Tenement Writer*, and *Watch the Stars Come Out*.

At this point students were ready to do the research. They worked individually or in groups on specific topics chosen from our chart (see Table 1). I scaffolded the process with various mini-lessons on using the table of contents and index to look for information, developing questions to locate specific information, note taking, and synthesizing and organizing information. While the students were doing the research, I noticed that two of my second language learners, Addo and Cecilia, were having difficulty with the process. Knowing that these students had direct experiences with immigration (Addo, a recent immigrant, and Cecilia, a child of immigrants), I suggested that they do their own personal immigration stories. Their research tool became parent interviews. The students together prepared questions for the interviews modeled on what they had already learned about the research process.

With all the information at hand, I demonstrated how to move from notes to paragraphs. Pedro, an ELL student, produced the following paragraph based on his questions and notes:

Reasons People Left their Homeland

There were different reasons why people left their homelands at the turn of the 20th century. Some people left their homelands because of poverty and famine. They didn't have enough money or food where they lived. Others left because of natural disasters or catastrophes which included volcanic eruptions. Another reason people left their homelands was because of discrimination in their country. Many people were not allowed to practice their religion as they choose so they left their country. These are some of the reasons why people left their homeland.

The class collectively decided to use a science text that appealed to them as their model to organize their book. The book will conclude with the current immigration stories written by Addo and Cecilia.

Although planning for writing took much more time than I had anticipated, the interactions that took place at every step of the process enriched the ELL students' knowledge of English. Even though the process took some unexpected turns, I realized that all my students were much more motivated to write when they were part of the process of planning. ▲

Learning from Children as Skillful Teachers of Their Peers

by Susi Long, University of South Carolina, with Donna Bell, South Kilbourne Elementary School, Columbia, SC, and Jim Brown, Mars Hill College, SC

It is October in this kindergarten classroom. The teaching assistant, a bilingual speaker of Spanish and English, is reading an English picture book with a small group of native Spanish-speaking children. The group includes Marcial, who is just beginning to learn a few English words, and Dalia, a Spanish/English bilingual student. At one point, the teaching assistant stops reading and, in English, asks the children to describe an illustration from the text:

Assistant: Tell me what you see here.

Marcial: (Looks closely at the illustration)

Assistant: What do you see here?

Marcial: (Looks confused)

Dalia: (Turns to Marcial and translates the assistant's question into Spanish)

Assistant: Tell me about the picture.

(Repeating her request)

Dalia: He is looking. (Explaining Marcial's hesitation to the assistant)

Assistant: Marcial, what do you see here?

Marcial: (Describes what he sees in Spanish)

In this simple piece of dialogue, we observe five-year-old Dalia displaying incredible insight and sensitivity as she provides support for her peer and for the teaching assistant. For Marcial, Dalia translates the teaching assistant's English question, "What do you see here?" into Spanish. Although the assistant speaks both English and Spanish, Dalia is the "teacher" who recognizes the need to translate at that particular moment. When Marcial does not respond, even when the question is translated into Spanish, Dalia understands his need to study the picture and to take time to formulate a response. She clarifies his behavior for the teaching assistant by saying, "He is looking." Dalia, in the role of mediator, recognizes the needs of both



The teacher created opportunities for all children to formally and informally play the role of expert (Rogoff, 1990). She let the children know that she valued their knowledge as teachers and as bilinguals.

teacher and child and strategically scaffolds Marcial's successful participation.

In this ESL kindergarten, we observed children's support for one another over and over again during the six-month study of three Mexican American five-year-olds. We watched the children and their peers move in and out of the roles of expert and novice (Rogoff, 1990) as they mediated one another's learning in perceptive ways. Dalia's support for Marcial is only one example. The children also displayed perceptive teaching as they engaged in spontaneous side-by-side reading with peers; made offers of help (sensitively timed to be of the most value); provided explicit and precise demonstrations of how, where, and when to perform specific tasks related to classroom rituals and routines (lining up for lunch, signing in

at the beginning of the day, pushing in their chairs, and so on); congratulated one another as language experts in both Spanish and English; and created opportunities for expertise to be spotlighted by asking peers to sing, speak, or read in Spanish.

While on the surface, it may seem that there is no "news" in a story of children supporting one another, it provokes consideration of the kind of classroom environment and teacher attitudes that promote such skillful teaching, particularly in multilingual settings. Too often, we see the rich potential of multiple languages buried as districts mandate and teachers implement what are perceived to be better ways to move every child toward English proficiency (English-only approaches, for example). In too many classrooms, there is neither time nor reason for children to engage in the kinds of meaningful interactions that allow their abilities as teachers to emerge. But in this classroom, it was clear that opportunities for and encouragement of students' spontaneous support for one another and the teacher's genuine celebration of both Spanish and English were key to the success of children's strategic support for peers. The teacher created opportunities for all children to formally and informally play the role of expert (Rogoff, 1990). She let the children know that she valued their knowledge as teachers and as bilinguals. She promoted a sense of respect and awe for those who brought new languages into the community, and the children emulated those attitudes and values. She recognized students' skill, knowledge, and enviable sensitivity as teachers of peers and, in doing so, created a place for them to grow through their support of one another. ▲



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