Planning for English Language Learner Success

Alternative Responses in Teaching Learning to Reducing Achievement Gaps

Jack Dieckmann, M.A. and Aurelio Montemayor, M.Ed.

Mounting accountability pressures from state and federal legislation are prompting schools to closely examine the performance of English language learners both in language acquisition and in core content areas. State education agencies closely monitor yearly student progress to ensure that English language learners are progressing and that there is significant acceleration in closing persistent achievement gaps.

While this monitoring is good practice, typical responses by school districts to the achievement gaps are inadequate, inappropriate and ineffective, especially for secondary students.

Common responses by school district central offices include a few days of generic English as a second language (ESL) strategy teacher training, sporadic team lesson planning, and counterproductive meetings to identify performance gaps through analysis of student outcome data.

In this article, each of these three responses – ESL teacher training, teacher co-planning and data analysis – will be critiqued for weaknesses in approach and implementation, followed by recommendations to strengthen teacher learning leading to the instructional improvement required to achieve excellence and equity.

Counterproductive ESL Strategy Training

A few days of generic ESL training for a large interdisciplinary group of teachers is usually counterproductive. This generic training is often conducted by district bilingual or ESL specialists without co-presentation by content specialists who represent the courses and levels of the teachers in the audience. It usually creates more anger and frustration than new and effective content area instruction for English language learners.

A teacher training approach that distributes pieces of sheltered instruction techniques is a common superficial approach. This may stem from the belief that a few well-chosen strategies, incorporated into teachers' repertoire, will lead to English language learning gains.

When teachers in staff development sessions observe strategies that are perceived as "just good teaching," they leave the sessions with limited knowledge about instructional adjustments they can make. Generic and facile inter-grade and interdisciplinary training sessions do not help resolve teacher gaps in effective pedagogy for English language learners and also may perpetuate complacency because the techniques modeled seem so close to what they already know and do.

Worse still is the chance that these techniques may drive some secondary teachers into deeper despair about there being any pedagogical solutions to improve English language learners' language acquisition through content mastery.

Team Planning Without Deep Collaboration and Reflection

Time set aside for teachers to co-plan lessons is an emerging strategy that combines research around teacher co-planning that is informed by sheltered instructional models. Because this response can produce "useful" teacher products (i.e., lesson plans), it engenders interest both in administrators and teachers.

While there is substantial research evidence that collaborative planning can dramatically influence teacher learning and instructional practice, the research points to long-term collaboration and deep probing to understand and apply the theories at work in a given teaching strategy (Fullan, 1998).

If a strategy is a tool for learning, teachers need time to figure out when, why and with which students the strategy will work. Sporadic co-planning provides too limited a context for the possibility of deep reflection or for ongoing assessment of the effects of specific approaches with specific students. It also provides no strong connection between ongoing planning and instruction.

The power of co-planning is rarely optimized to a peer dialogue that leads to deeper comprehension of language and content acquisition, teaching and learning.

Misinterpreting Student Outcome Data

Data-driven decision-making dominates public education. This now largely mandated approach in schools gives teachers and other educational leaders timely access to large data sets for schools, classes and individual students. Even in under-resourced schools, teachers often have online access to district databases for benchmark testing results, with amazing abilities to easily generate reports by individual students or by their characteristics.

These technological and informational revolutions are, in many cases, having counter-intended effects on teacher's instructional decisions and practice. The pitfalls are facile, ill-reasoned or "all children have the same problem" conclusions drawn from the data.

One problem is the way the data is looked at. What students may demonstrate on any performance measure gives little information about what students really know. The perceived primacy of the available outcome data feeds the myth of its applicability. Many educators believe (erroneously) that the performance measure *is* the actual learning. The incorrect assumptions are: if a student answers correctly, that student understands the underlying concept; conversely, if a student responds incorrectly, that student does not understand the concept.

These assumptions effectively block alternative explanations to the outcome data that would lead to varied and in fact more accurate explanations that would in turn produce better teaching and increased student learning.

The common response to low test scores has been to increase the use of practice classwork, which has increased student boredom, reduced comprehension and resulted in student failure.

The access to large amounts of quickly-generated student test data gives the illusion that one has pedagogically useful information. Most aggregated test reports provide no inherent

solutions.

On the other hand, using dramatic illustrations of English language learner gaps to conclude that intensive and extensive student drilling is the solution aggravates the problem by demoralizing teachers and increasing student failure.

The preceding data problems are in reference to highly refined, nationally and state norm- or criteria-referenced tests. Data analysis and interpretation become more problem ridden when the instruments are locally developed and drawn for various test item pools.

Clearly, teacher-developed classroom assessments are useful and powerful for that teacher in that classroom. But to extrapolate those assessment items and tools to a campus- or district-wide assessment process is a different matter that requires guidance and refinement through a rigorous process.

The decisions that follow from faulty or incomplete interpretations of test scores mirror the faulty or incomplete conclusions about how to proceed instructionally. Thus, the informational infrastructure and teacher time spent analyzing student scores may not yield more effective teaching when there is not a clearer idea of: (1) what the data mean and (2) what additional data are needed to make appropriate instructional decisions.

In addition, if a test is not specifically designed as diagnostic, and most are not, the data that result are weak indicators for instructional decisions. This is probably the major abuse of student data that leads to misinformed instructional decisions.

Evaluation questions designed solely to determine students' mastery of a concept or concepts do not effectively inform instruction. A students' incorrect response does not reveal the reason(s) for the error. Unless a teacher can determine what exactly the student does know, it is extremely difficult to make any informed decision about where to take that student.

A track coach, observing a runner unable to jump over a hurdle, needs specific and individual observations to help the athlete clear the hurdle successfully and consistently. Successful sports programs use video feedback and direct observation to assess performance. Key factors the coach observes in the athlete are stride, speed, conditioning, familiarity with the course, a poorly designed hurdle, etc. Determining which factor or factors are critical barriers informs the coach about how to help the athlete adapt for success.

This type of analysis and response typically is missing from teachers' analyses of student data. The raw data given to teachers in their present forms have little similarity to the video feedback alluded to above. The incorrect and often off-target conclusion that teachers make from the data available, to a great part, stem from the fact that the simplistic picture drawn is a crude stick figure when what is needed is something akin to a video of ongoing student performance.

Thus, while the combination of approaches in teacher strategy training, co-planning lessons and analyzing student data are useful and valid for improving English language learning opportunities, we find that the implementation of these approaches may require further resources (time, money, personnel), monitoring, and increased staff capacity.

Supporting Teachers of English Language Learners

The following recommendations for improving how we support teachers of English language learners are grounded in concrete experiences of the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) staff and pilot programs and emerging research. They are based on the following three key principles.

- All students will learn and thrive in the classroom if provided with meaningful classroom instruction.
- All teachers can be effective with all students if supported in a process of effective planning, peer collaboration and ongoing reflection on their teaching.
- A broad array of data is a powerful tool for making effective and appropriate instructional decisions for each child.

Recommendations for ESL Strategy Training

Effective schools institutionalize long-term support and sustained reflection time in order to expand a teacher's practice to adapt instruction congruently with the characteristics of English language learners. Staff development must integrate language and learning in all content areas throughout the year and not separate language acquisition from instruction in math, science, social studies and language arts.

Presenters, facilitators, master teachers and mentors must be chosen for (a) strong content teaching skills and (b) success in teaching English language learners. Content area teachers benefit significantly from professional development conducted by content peers who have demonstrated success with the specific classroom challenges presented by students of varied English language proficiencies (Dieckmann, 2003a).

The bilingual and ESL department and the content area departments must plan jointly and give mutual support. District-wide leadership must oversee this process and facilitate and press for collaboration while concurrently reducing department territorialism.

Recommendations for Co-planning lessons

Lesson plans, collaboratively developed, even if in short sessions, have deeper value when these are part of an ongoing process of reflection and refinement. In lieu of pull-out sessions, teachers might co-develop or adapt a research-based rubric for an exemplar lesson plan that is responsive to English language learners (Echevarria, 2004; Robledo Montecel, 2004; García, 2003; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996).

Teachers can refine lessons through e-mail and other electronic communications, sustaining dialogue and feedback. Teacher teams participating in an ongoing process of developing and refining exemplary lessons are afforded the *luxury* of reflection into a *regularity* for internalizing the deep characteristics of the lessons.

The consistent reflection enlightens teachers to extrapolate effective principles and strategies to other lessons. Whether online or face-to-face communication, this process also facilitates a dialogue for reflection and adaptation based on the degree to which these practices support student success.

Recommendations for Analyzing Student Data

To offset and remedy the incorrect interpretation of student data and the lack of useful data on student learning, it is important for administrators and educational leaders to be clear with each other about the correct uses of the student data available. Large gaps in test scores should be used to generate *questions* rather than to produce quick conclusions and remedies.

Teachers must unlearn the inappropriate use of data and learn how to make more productive interpretations. Principals, staff developers and department chairs should engage with teachers in developing and investigating useful and solution-producing questions about student learning that arise from the data.

Teachers need to look at data that illuminate what a student knows, how a student goes about learning something, what is helping and what is hindering. This is as rich as information about what a student *can* do as it is about the gaps in comprehension.

For instance in mathematics, an incorrect answer to a fractions test item might generate the following questions: What student work samples exist that demonstrate prior mastery? How has this student performed in class on the prerequisites to learning about fractions? What is it about fractions that may be problematic: calculations, proportional reasoning, the context of the story problem, etc.? How does the language level and linguistic complexity of the question correlate to the student level of English language proficiency? Beyond instruction, what other relevant factors are present in the classroom?

The more productive data analysis context must include teachers:

1. Reflecting together in and out of the classroom (Dieckmann 2003a, 2003b, 2003c),
2. Keenly pouring over student work,
3. Regular conferencing with students,
4. Engaging parents as partners in the education of their children (McCollum, 2004).

All these are needed to inform the effective teaching of English language learners.

Teachers must approach available student outcome data tentatively, recognizing them as *indirect* measures of students' abilities. Low test scores are symptoms. Changes in instructional practice must come from a more nuanced examination of possible causes.

Conclusion

We have discussed three enhancements of teacher training, collaborative planning, and productive data analysis by identifying pitfalls and making suggestions for improvement. Teachers can be meaningfully taught to improve their teaching of English language learners; teachers can be effective co-planners in joint reflection in support of the academic success of all students; and teachers can use multiple data sources to diagnose and teach English language learners effectively.

With careful, collaborative planning, appropriate resource investment, and a commitment at every level to quality instruction, school leaders can accelerate the language and content learning for students who speak a language other than English.

Resources

Dieckmann, J. "Learning Through Teaching: New Patterns for Teachers of English Language Learners," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, August 2003).

Dieckmann, J. "Learning Angles with English Language Learners," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, March 2003).

Dieckmann, J. "Learning Angles with English Language Learners: The Discipline of Noticing," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, May 2003).

Echevarria, J., and M. Vogt, D.J. *Short. Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model* (Boston, Mass.: Pearson 2004).

Fullan, M., and A. Hargreaves. *What's Worth Fighting for in Your School?* (New York, New York: Teachers College Press 1996).

García, J. "Writing on Purpose: A Fourth Grade Volcano of Words," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, September 2003).

McCollum, P. "Circles of Engagement A Different Take on Parent Involvement," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2003).

Robledo Montecel, M., and J.D. Cortez. "Successful Bilingual Education Programs: Indicators of Success at the School Level," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, January 2004).

Uhl Chamot, A., and J.M. O'Malley. *The CALLA Handbook: Implementing the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1994).

Jack Dieckmann, M.A., is a senior education associate in the IDRA Division of Professional Development. Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is lead trainer for the IDRA Division of Professional Development. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at feedback@idra.org .

Close Window