

BILINGUAL INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

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The aim of this working paper is to identify research-supported strategies for reading and writing that can be integrated effectively to promote the development of biliterate academic literacy by English language learners (ELLs) in middle-school bilingual classrooms. The paper begins with a review of the theoretical foundations that highlight the learning needs of the adolescent ELLs at the middle school level. The reading and writing strategies selected for inclusion in this paper will provide a scaffold for these learning needs and will be presented in an integrated framework supporting one of the curricular areas for eighth grade ELLs in the school district where the author teaches.

Theoretical Foundations for Bilingual Education

“A primary goal of bilingual education is English language development” (Krashen, 2006, p. 1).

Children acquire language, both native language (L1) and second-languages (L2), by engaging with their environment, interacting with those around them, working to solve challenges and problems, and making neural connections that allow the brain to build-up a reservoir of connected sounds, images, feelings, results, gestures that are meaningful. This reservoir is referred to as the child’s lexicon (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002). When ELLs understand messages, understand what people tell them, and understand what they read, they have acquired language (Krashen, 2004a).

Learning through Interactions

From both cognitive and sociocultural perspectives, learning comes from increasing participation in a community of practice. The nature of the community itself needs to be examined and the kinds of participatory opportunities the community supports or discourages.

Learning comes from engagement in the specific practices of their communities and appropriating the knowledgeable skills that these practices involve (Haneda, 2008). The literacy skills children acquire are directly related to how they interact with others in specific problem-solving environments. Children internalize the kind of help they receive from others and subsequently use what they have learned to direct their own problem-solving behavior (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002).

Improve academic language proficiency

Cummins (2000, 2007a) and Krashen (2006) indicate that English language learners (ELLs) build on their acquired L1 language proficiency as they move to learn the L2. Starting with comprehensible input, ELLs can enjoy real language use right away. ELLs can listen to stories, read books, and engage in interesting conversations (Krashen, 2004b). The reading ability of ELLs, their ability to write in an acceptable writing style, their spelling ability, vocabulary knowledge, and their ability to handle complex syntax is the result of reading (Krashen, 2004a). The social environment of the classroom creates opportunities for ELLs to engage in collaborative activities integrating their interests and experiences with higher-order thinking and giving them opportunities to practice language associated with higher-order thinking skills through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002).

As students progress to secondary school (grades seven through 12), they experience a growing need for academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2000, 2007a, 2007b; Haynes, 2005; Krashen & Brown, 2004). ELLs with a sound foundation of academic language proficiency in L1 will require between three and seven years to achieve appropriate academic language proficiency in L2 (Cummins, 2000, 2007a; Haynes, 2005; Krashen & Brown, 2007).

Learning Style Preferences

Language discourse patterns have been found to influence thinking and cultural behaviors (Montaño-Harmon, 1991). Those same discourse patterns are known to carry over into learning style preferences. Hispanic ELLs have been identified as having a field dependent learning style, contrasted with the typical field independent learning style preferences traditionally preferred in dominant culture (middle-class, Anglo) classrooms (Gibbons, 2003). See Table one.

Table 1—Characteristics of Field Dependent and Field Independent Learning Styles

Field-Dependent Learning Styles	Field-Independent Learning Styles
Global perspective—aware of whole more than parts	Analytic perspective—aware of parts more than whole
Value practical information	Interested in concepts for their own sake
Inferential reasoning (inductive)	Logical reasoning (deductive)
Active, hands-on, kinesthetic learning	Learning more mental—hands-on not required
Prefer group learning situations	Prefer impersonal learning environments
More proficient nonverbally than verbally	More proficient verbally than nonverbally
Focus more on people than things	Focus more on things than on people
Use approximations for space and numbers	Prefer exact measurements for space and numbers
Prefer active learning on group projects	Prefer passive learning with individual accountability
Learn by interacting with others and engaging in a variety of activities	Learn from texts and references in individual learning activities
Influenced strongly by prevailing context or setting	Work with self-defined goals and self-structure
More aware of surroundings while learning	Can “tune-out” distractions in the environment

(Adapted from Gibbons, 2003, pp. 371-373)

Gibbons (2003) cited research by Parsons, Hinson, and Sardo-Brown (2001) which shows that students learn best when congruence exists between students' preferred learning styles and teachers' preferred teaching styles.

Effective Reading and Writing Strategies

Based on the research into the preferences for adolescent ELLs, the most effective reading and writing strategies for bilingual classrooms involve authentic tasks in cooperative learning settings that build both language and content skills in multidisciplinary, problem-based (and sometimes project-based), thematic units of instruction. Support is scaffolded in that the teacher structures tiers of support and models desired behavior and strategies needed to engage in the problem-solving activity. Students practice these behavior and strategies with teacher support, then begin practicing and applying the behaviors and strategies on their own. Students work with and refine their academic language proficiency in both L1 and L2 although language is not the primary focus of these activities (Allison & Rhem, 2007; Willis, 2007; Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004; Farris, Nelson & L'Allier, 2007; Gordon, 1998; Wilson & Horsch, 2002).

Multidisciplinary, Problem-based Thematic Unit with SIOP-oriented support

Students will be assigned to three or four person teams and will work with a series of both content and language objectives for a multidisciplinary, problem-based thematic unit which will extend over the length of nine weeks. Content will come from ESL and language arts, science, health, social studies, and mathematics (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004). Students will also work to use and apply learning strategies in the use of the academic language required for the project (Krashen & Brown, 2007). The focus of this unit will revolve around the award-winning novel by Laurie Anderson (2002), *Fever 1793*. Many of the Web Quest activities were suggested by Wolfe (2002). Most of the other reading and writing activities during this time

frame will be connected with this overall project. Teams will change for each of the sub-activities and teachers will continue to focus on the use of appropriate learning strategies in all the activities of the unit (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004; Gordon, 1998). ELLs will use graphic organizers suggested by Project CRISS (Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies)¹ (2008) extensively throughout the unit.

Teacher-Professional Read-aloud with text support

Fever 1793 (Anderson, 2002) is available as an audio book. Students will have the book read to them, at times by the teacher and at other times using the audio-book. They will start by listening and working with graphic organizers to take notes or make drawings about the text. Later they will read the text along with the audio book and use sticky-notes to identify important parts or areas they want to look into later. This is the book they will discuss in their Literature Circles in a separate activity.

Literature Circles

Students meet in small groups and use sticky-notes to jot down ideas, quotes, and questions, pasting them in their journals to take back to their desks. They are reading two chapters per day in *Fever 1793* (Anderson, 2002), an award-winning novel that frames part of the multidisciplinary unit of instruction involving ESL/language arts, science, and social studies focused on the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793. The literature circle has questions from the other parts of the project and their outputs will contribute to the work of other teams on an integrated problem-solving project which will culminate in the publication of a newspaper set for the 1793 time-frame (Farris, Nelson & L'Allier, 2007).

Adapted Picture Word Inductive Model—Picture Dictionaries

Small teams of three or four work with pictures related to the multidisciplinary thematic problem-solving unit dealing with the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793. In the beginning, they label the parts of the pictures with vocabulary they already know in either L1 or L2. Gradually they create an inferential picture dictionary of the period that they will share with other teams in the completion of the other activities for the problem-based learning project. The culmination of the project will be a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation including photographs, a “period newspaper,” and copies of the picture dictionaries being created. This Microsoft PowerPoint will be converted by a “specialist” team into a PhotoStory3 DVD Movie to be shared with parents on DVD’s playable on home DVD players (Wood & Tinajero, 2002).

Creating Related Theme Stories-Histories

Students working in another small group of three or four will use what they are learning in the other activities to develop a series of questions or ideas to share with their families with the purpose of creating a story or an example of family history tied to the theme of medicine and healing. For some families the stories could focus on the birth of a sibling or on someone recovering from a childhood illness. While these will be individual student projects in L1 or L2, depending on the language spoken at home, the other students in the group will help each other formulate and shape the stories from a rough draft to a finished product. The finished stories or histories will be typed into a word processor and will be “published” at the conclusion of the thematic unit. Students will go through the steps of process writing as they move through the development of their projects (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002).

Creative Collaborative Outputs for Authentic Audiences

Because ELLs have multiple talents, according to Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, some will prefer to have a more artistic or free-form opportunity for expression as they move through this multidisciplinary thematic unit. Students who are like-minded, that is, students who wish to engage on a creative project of this nature and who can come to a shared vision of what they expect to do, will be supported in creating alternative outputs (e.g., art, music, plays, simulations, games) which reflect the learning and knowledge they are gaining over the course of the unit (Shearer, 2004). Their outputs will be shared with their parents and with the school learning community as part of the culminating activity for this unit (Johnson, 2005).

Rubrics and Authentic, Informal Assessments

All student work throughout this unit will have specific rubrics which can be used for students to self-assess and peers to assess and provide formative feedback to teams. The teacher(s) and the teams will continue to refine the outputs until the culmination of the unit which will take the form of a complex finished product measured according to the standards of the rubric created for the final product. Student work will be compiled into paper-based or electronic portfolios which will be shared with parents at Family Literacy celebrations held at certain times of the year or in the context of completing a complex multidisciplinary thematic unit. Rubrics will include requirements for meeting all content and language objectives as well as developing academic language proficiency and on improving the use of metacognitive, cognitive, and affective-social strategies to facilitate learning (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004; Krashen & Brown, 2007).

Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this working paper was to identify research-supported strategies for reading and writing that could be integrated effectively to promote the development of biliterate academic literacy by ELLs in middle-school bilingual classrooms. The paper began with a review of the theoretical foundations that highlighted the learning needs of the adolescent ELLs at the middle school level. The reading and writing strategies selected for inclusion in this paper provide a scaffold for these learning needs and were presented in an integrated framework supporting one of the curricular areas for eighth grade ELLs in the school district where the author teaches.

This paper can serve as a starting point for collaborative discussion and planning among ELL teachers at the middle level within the district who share a goal of aligning classroom instruction with research-based best practices and strategies proved to assist adolescent ELLs to develop academic literacy in bilingual middle school classrooms.

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¹ This is the way the organization wishes to be called. See Project CRISS (2008) for more detail.