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Focus: Language

Three Teaching Strategies for Scaffolding Instruction for English Learners in the Content Classroom

by Paula Johnson, M.A.

In my early years as a high school math teacher, I often felt that I was short-changing my students whose first language was not English as they transitioned into my classroom. Not being fluent in any other languages, I didn't feel confident in my ability to deliver instruction to English learners. I had not received professional development that would have given me the proper tools to increase my instructional capacity for scaffolding information.

Over the years, I have taken every advantage of opportunities that would add to my "toolkit" of strategies. These practices are useful for teachers across disciplines and for students of all ages. All teachers can successfully contribute to the development of academic language and vocabulary.

Effective teachers scaffold instructional content for English learners by supporting development of academic language and objectives by first modeling a desired task, then gradually shifting responsibility to the students. For example, sentence stems may at first be provided to assist students in formulating responses to questions. These may either be posted around the room or listed directly on learning materials. Over time, these stems will be reduced and later removed once students have mastered this skill. This article highlights three teaching strategies that have been proven effective in scaffolding instruction for English learners in the classroom. Each of the strategies below includes a brief description, counter examples and benefits for English learners. It should be noted that these practices support learning for all students, not just English learners.

Authentic Learning Experiences

If we want students to be actively engaged in the instructional process, we must strive to present information in a way that is relevant to them and that they can find purpose in (Petersen, 2007). Authentic learning experiences are achieved when a task, activity or assignment is associated with a result or outcome that has clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student.

Rigorous, thought-provoking and reflective problem scenarios enable students to see the connections between the content they are studying and the world they live in. Exploring multiple applications of subject matter in the real world stimulates excitement and encourages further investigations.

Authentic learning experiences are *not*:

- Securing compliant behaviors on the part of the students that make them appear to be interested in the lesson;
- Using the word problems at the end of each section; or
- Having students simply complete a task or assignment by following procedures.

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"English language learners should not have to give up their language or their culture as the price for learning English. When ELL students walk into a classroom, they should not be limited in their access to an equitable and excellent education. And teachers and schools must be equipped to serve them."

– Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Three Teaching Strategies for Scaffolding Instruction for English Learners in the Content Classroom, continued from Page 1)

Authentic learning experiences are critical for English learners because they enable students to actively participate in their learning, drawing on their personal experiences, as they develop conceptual ideas and academic language surrounding relevant topics while interacting both with the content and their peers.

These learning events provide opportunities for students to choose activities based on their interests and readiness levels that promote looking for connections, making new associations with concepts, and exploring new contexts in which to apply conceptual understandings.

Visual Literacy

For students to derive meaning when learning, information must be combined with conceptual understanding using an organized framework. This is how our brains process new information (Vasquez, Comer & Troutman, 2010).

There are three types of visuals: **pictures**, **diagrams** (simple and analytic) and **graphic organizers**. And we must give students explicit opportunities to interpret, extrapolate, evaluate and express understanding of these visuals so they organize raw sensory data into meaningful patterns.

Building visual literacy is highly beneficial for students: their understanding of spoken words can improve six fold (Baylor College of Medicine, 2009) as 70 percent to 90 percent of information received by the brain is visual (Hyerle, 2009).

Visual literacy is *not*:

- Assuming textbook visuals can be interpreted by students;
- Providing over-copied, ink-blot visuals as an accompaniment to an activity or investigation;
- Posting student work that is never discussed or interpreted as a class (i.e., data charts and graphs);
- Showing pictures on a PowerPoint presentation to break up the monotony of lecture notes;
- Displaying vivid posters and graphics in the classroom without ever referencing or interpreting them; or
- Having students copy and label items in interactive notebooks without justifying the visuals.

Visual literacy is critical for English learners because it provides a safe space to take language risks as students develop their academic voice through observation, thinking, listening and communication skill-building when linking images to content. It also carries the potential to engage all four parts of academic language – reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Substantive Conversations

Substantive conversations require considerable interaction that is on task and involves higher order thinking processes during the negotiation exercise (i.e., drawing conclusions, challenging ideas, asking questions). The discussion can be guided but should not be completely scripted or controlled by the teacher.

These exchanges require students to generate genuine discourse in a coherent manner to promote an improved collective understanding of the content (Johnson, et al., 2013). They provide learning opportunities for students to interact with the content and with each other through authentic dialogue guided by an essential question or learning outcome.

Substantive conversation is not:

- Lecture-heavy teaching where students are recipients of facts and information that is copied into a notebook or journal;
- Just reading about a topic or discussing factual results of an activity (i.e., lab investigation) in small groups or partners;
- Providing lists of questions on a worksheet;
- Asking close-ended questions with one word responses or questions where the teacher self-answers; or
- Copying definitions out of the book as a vocabulary-building exercise.

Substantive conversations are critical for English learners because they provide specific opportunities to practice and build on listening and speaking skills using academic language that coincides with language learning standards and converges common core and state standards.

Bonus: Building Academic Vocabulary

The key to deep, powerful, long-term vocabulary learning is movement. **Total Physical Response** (TPR) links vocabulary learning with physical movements and is especially helpful for English learners (Cook, 2008). By combining strong physical movements and sounds with understandable new vocabulary, we create deep connections in our brains and bodies.

As this is done repeatedly with students, it reinforces the memory, connecting the new word to the physical motion. Each time students hear or use one of the new terms or phrases, have them use the same physical movement and/or sound practiced when it was introduced. This technique connects various learning styles and is fun for students.

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Transformative and Effective School Leadership in Culturally Diverse Environments

by Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., and Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.

Much has been written about the core competencies of effective school leadership, but less is studied about the transformative effect of these qualities within culturally diverse learning environments. This article explores a few examples of the virtues and transformational qualities of educational leaders working with diverse student populations. It poses the question of self-transformation as requisite for systemic transformation.

As a starting point for reflection, following are some virtues of transformative school leaders within a diverse learning environment for consideration.

Transformative school leaders display two inseparable aspects of their vocation: service and professionalism. Both of these are essential in order to dissolve the pessimism that causes schools to stagnate into inaction in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Worry and pessimism can erode the courage of school leaders and drain their energy and inspiration, robbing them of the serenity needed to confront and solve daily challenges that emerge. Many good and honest educational leaders find themselves frozen into inactivity because they have not taken the time to renew their spirits and remind themselves of the higher calling of their vocation.

Effective transformational school leaders are proactive and face seemingly insurmountable obstacles with courage and determination to succeed through their own daily personal reflection and renewal. This can help school leaders return to their initial calling and inspiration to their noble profession.

Transformative school leaders serve as a beacon and example to others, calling them to more noble action for the greater good. Equity in education is an example of a noble act for the greater good of citizens and society in general. Transformative school leaders are advocates for equity and are role models for all staff and students, ensuring that all students perform academically.

Especially within a culturally diverse environment, school leaders must communicate with joy and conviction through their lives, their work, and sincere commitment to valuing the diversity reflected in the student body and communities they serve.

Transformative leaders are not afraid of showing their humanity. In a technological age, data and outcomes often are valued at the expense of the personal experience. Learning is in the journey as well as in achieving the goal.

Transformative leaders are people who genuinely laugh, weep and show tenderness and courtesy to all people. Without advocating excess, transformative leaders relate to their diverse students and families within their unique cultural context. They see themselves with others in the shared journey of transformation.

Transformative leaders set themselves as faithful examples to valuing equity and diversity. They avoid all activity that would devalue equity, diversity and their commitment to their vocation as an educational leader and to their students' well-being and academic success. IDRA has long held that all children are valuable; none is expendable. This is the transparent guidepost for their lives and the measure against which they consider every action and decision.

They remind themselves consistently that a student and a parent are sitting on either shoulder as they navigate throughout their day. They are faithful to the public trust invested in them.

Transformative leaders achieve balance between reasonableness and gentleness. These leaders avoid emotional excess while working to reduce bureaucracy. They seek a

(cont. on Page 4)

Transformative leaders see themselves as co-creators in partnership with students, families and communities they serve. While there are special challenges to working in culturally diverse environments, the benefits and rewards are immeasurable.

(Transformative and Effective School Leadership in Culturally Diverse Environments, continued from Page 3)

balanced personality and create a school climate that pays careful attention to the unique needs of every person with whom they interact. They are highly sensitive to the diversity of their environment, delicate and respectful in their undertakings and interactions with people.

Transformative leaders are determined in their actions, yet cautious in making judgments. They refrain from impulsive, hasty actions that can be misinterpreted and cause irreparable loss of trust. This requires clear vision and resolute will that adheres to and advocates for diversity within the school setting and values each student. They are attuned to every action and reaction that might result and its consequences, and weigh these carefully.

Transformative leaders act with respectfulness and humility. The transformative leader is tactful and noble and shows genuine respect for their own work, their superiors and those who report to them. They show confidentiality and see themselves as public servants for the greater good and for the educational success of their students.

Transformative leaders are diligent and attentive. They are concerned with the little things that are ultimately important things, for doing their best, and not giving in to the lesser elements in their environment or in their own nature. These are sensitive leaders, aware of subtle verbal and non-verbal communication.

They are conscious of interactions and relationships that can either propel an agenda for valuing diversity or sabotage their shared vision for a thriving and culturally diverse environment that promotes equity and success for all.

Transformative leaders are trustworthy. These leaders reflect sobriety and tranquility, are prudent in their actions, simple, straightforward, acting with balance and temperance. They embody a style of life that is concerned for others, especially those most underserved.

They are people of heart and compassion, beyond superficial sentimentalism. These are long distance runners versus sprinters who achieve their goal, approaching decisions quietly and deliberately, with a calm spirit.

Transformative leaders see themselves as co-creators in partnership with students, families and communities they serve. While there are special challenges to working in culturally diverse environments, the benefits and rewards are immeasurable. Such transformational leaders realize that they are planting powerful seeds of equity and justice for the future, working to transform their schools and themselves.

While they cannot accomplish everything overnight, those seeds will ultimately grow sustainable roots on which others add to the work already begun. They have the vision, hope, strength and the will to begin something that ultimately will produce a better future for all children.

Resources

Bahena, S. "'Our children could get lost' – Rio Grande Valley Parents Gather to Discuss Policy Implications," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Associaiton, November-December 2015).

IDRA. Six Goals of Education Equity (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association).

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WEBSITE **IDRA's Six Goals of Education Equity**
http://budurl.com/6Goals

(Three Teaching Strategies for Scaffolding Instruction for English Learners in the Content Classroom, continued from Page 2)

The strategies outlined in this article are meant to provide a strong foundation on which teachers can build their instructional practices supporting English learners. It is crucial to keep in mind that the development of these skills takes time to master – and not all at one time. The willingness to find multiple pathways that enable students to access content knowledge is the first step in fortifying the skills that will assist English learners in mastering the content.

Resources

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Peterson, L. Authentic Learning Environments, website (2007).

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Giving English Learners Access to Language and Curriculum in Rural Arkansas

by Kristin Grayson, Ph.D.

Upon request, the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity recently returned to southern Arkansas to assess rural districts' needs in response to the growing numbers of English learners (ELs) in public schools.

At about the same time, the U.S. Department of Education released a new *English Learner Toolkit* (September 2015). As IDRA met with directors of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs from various school districts, we used the toolkit to shape the discussion about how to better serve EL students. For example, the first two chapters have lists of questions that participants used as an outline for describing their district's current EL programming and professional development needs for content and grade level teachers. Participants also had access to IDRA's *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English: A Guide*, a resource that districts can use to plan a quality, equity-based program for ELs (Robledo Montecel, et al., 2002).

The group discussed the sources of legal guidance that should form the basis of EL programs that must be provided in public schools. Central to the discussion were the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision that followed. The ruling states, "Where inability to speak and understand the English language excludes national origin-minority group children from effective participation in the educational program offered by a school district, the district must take affirmative steps to rectify the language deficiency in order to open its instructional program to these students."

A strong and viable foundation of quality English learners' programs is based on the Six Goals of Educational Equity developed by IDRA and the legal guidance provided in the aforementioned toolkit and a January 2015 Office for Civil Rights guidance letter (U.S. Department of Education, January 2015). Once districts have a program in place, they must continually assess whether the program, teachers, and students are achieving progress. The 1981 *Casteñeda v. Pickard* ruling gives districts three-prong guidance on how to plan and evaluate their programs (Office for Civil Rights, 2000):

- Is the program based on educational research recognized by experts in the field or as a legitimate experimental strategy?
- Are the practices and programs, as well as personnel and resources, reasonable for implementing this educational theory?
- Does the district regularly evaluate its programs and make the needed adjustments to ensure that language barriers are actually being overcome?

In the discussion forum in rural Arkansas, ESOL directors articulated a need for assistance knowing they cannot work in isolation through "pull-out" programs to meet the educational and linguistic needs of their English learners. Multiple researchers have shown that pull-out programs are the least effective method of ESL instruction, especially when such programs are not supplemented by the students' regular teachers. In other words, regular classroom teachers need to add specific ESL techniques to their teaching repertoire to address the needs of English learners.

All instruction must be comprehensible or understandable to the student and have an intentional focus on increasing that student's language proficiency to the next level. Students need to be immersed in language-rich environments and be structured and focused ESL instruction throughout the day.

Some ways that teachers can make language comprehensible for ELs include integrating into daily lesson plans the development of academic language from the various core content areas, ensuring that ELs participate in classroom environments rich in vocabulary building opportu-

(cont. on Page 6)

All instruction must be comprehensible or understandable to the student and have an intentional focus on increasing that student's language proficiency to the next level.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity

funded by the U.S. Department of Education

(Giving English Learners Access to Language and Curriculum in Rural Arkansas, continued from Page 3)

nities. Just like other students, English learners need to know what they are expected to learn and how, language-wise, that will be accomplished.

These objectives need to be clearly stated at the beginning of the lesson, posted in the classroom, and then restated by students. At the end of the lesson, teachers should return to these objectives, and EL students and teachers together should determine if they have met all the objectives for that time period. By having these specific beginnings and endings to instructional time, students can clarify and remember what they have learned, not just what they have done.

The focus on integrating language objectives throughout the instructional day needs to be tailored and differentiated to the language proficiency levels of each English learner in the classroom and the language domain (listening, speaking, reading, or writing) of the instructional task. Teachers must understand the rationale for integrating language development throughout the day. The rationale comes to life when teachers have the opportunity to observe model teachers as they integrate language in actual classroom situations without compromising content instruction.

Because English learner students are learning a new language, they need multiple oral and written exposures to the different language forms presented through the language objectives. This also means that ELs need plenty of practice speaking and using English frequently throughout the day. Some practitioners recommend that students interact with other students at least two out of every 10 minutes during the school day.

A focus on developing academic and language objectives helps lessons become more comprehensible or understandable for students. Lessons also should be accompanied by the continuous use of visuals, drawings, body movements, gestures, and facial expressions to add meaning to the spoken word of the teacher. (See "Three Teaching Strategies..." on Page 1.)

Ways to provide opportunity for student and teacher interactions include **interactive notebooks and essays** (teachers comment on student writing) and **student pass-arounds** (students write something, then pass to the next student who adds to the writing, with an eventual conversation after several rounds). During **gallery walks**, students move in small groups, commenting on visuals posted at given stations with appropriate oral prompts. A **"parking lot"** is a place that students can place post-it notes with thoughts or questions that come to their mind during teacher direct instruction.

IDRA promotes a language-rich environment, rigorous content instruction, and an accountability system from the classroom to central office administrators that holds the school responsible for the academic success of EL students. This means that there are many anchor charts, visuals, posters, word walls, and plenty of other legible print around the classroom. This language-rich environment can reinforce learning, while students are gazing around the room during instruction. Be sure to periodically change this environmental print.

The conversation about educating English learners is in full swing in rural Arkansas. The IDRA SCCE is ready to support school administrators' strong leadership to promote the type of changes needed so that equitable instruction ensures the academic success of all language diverse students. The common goal is to celebrate the language that students know and give structure and opportunity for them to develop their native language, whenever possible, and most definitely become proficient in English and strong contributors of a future we will share.

Resources

Office for Civil Rights. *Programs for English Language Learners Resource Materials for Planning and Self-Assessments* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Education, November 30, 1999; rev March 28, 2000).

U.S. Department of Education. *English Learner Toolkit for State and Local Education Agencies* (SEAs and LEAs) (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Education, September 2015).

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IDRA SCCE Assists School Districts to Support Diverse English Learners in Oklahoma

The IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity is one of 10 federally-funded equity assistance centers that provides technical assistance and training to school districts and other local education agencies in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. As exemplified in the article on Page 5, the center helps schools and educators provide an equal opportunity to a quality education for students who by virtue of their race, ethnic background, sex or national origin face being deprived of their civil rights in education.

In another example, the SCCE is working with school district leaders in the two large urban areas of Tulsa and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. In Oklahoma City, where schools are serving students representing more than 70 language groups, the district has launched a districtwide emphasis on building consistency of translation and interpretation to help the district communicate more effectively with parents in their own language.

In Tulsa, through a contract, IDRA is building capacity among the district's English language development (ELD) coaches to sustain teacher training and support through dynamic coaching and instructional rounds in high-need schools. Additionally, we worked with the Tulsa Public Schools to adapt IDRA's *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English – A Guide* for use at the secondary level for Tulsa PS's current context. It will be piloted in selected secondary schools in Tulsa to build environments that improve English learner achievement.

WEBSITE

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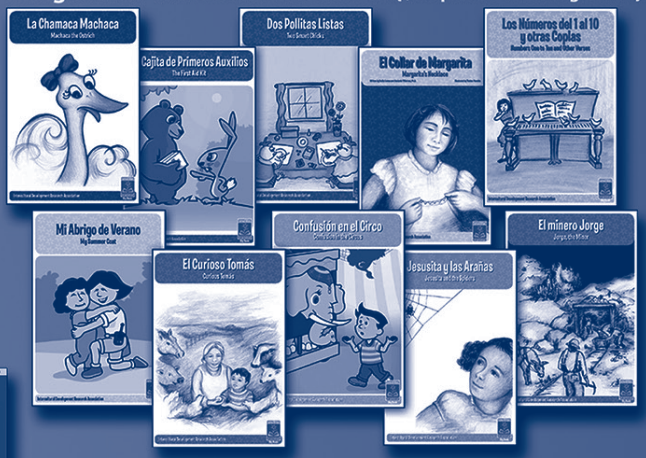

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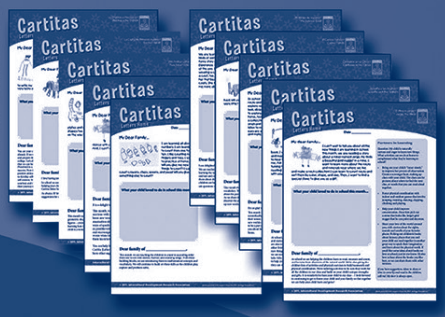

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