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Preparación del aula de secundaria para estudiantes migrantes que aprenden inglés

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In United States schools, the rate of immigrant English language learners is rapidly rising, affecting the lives of both students and teachers. This article will discuss the best ways to facilitate the students' language learning in a school setting; the type of structure, goals, and standards that can be expected; as well as ways to change the preconceived notions of teachers. The implications of this work are significant. We are obligated to support our English language learners with up-to-date teaching approaches and modifications to harness their strengths and enable them to succeed as learners in an English-speaking setting.

Key words: Concept attainment model, English language learners (ELL), learning process, multimodal approach, schools, success.

En las escuelas de los Estados Unidos, el índice de estudiantes inmigrantes que están aprendiendo inglés crece rápidamente, lo cual afecta las vidas de estudiantes y maestros. En este artículo se analiza la mejor forma de ayudar a los estudiantes en su proceso de aprendizaje, mientras se encuentran en un ambiente de adquisición de lenguaje; incluyendo el tipo de estructura, metas y estándares que se pueden esperar, además de cambiar nociones preconcebidas por parte de los profesores. Las implicaciones de este trabajo son significativas. Se debe apoyar a los estudiantes que están aprendiendo inglés con estrategias de enseñanza actualizadas, en las cuales se tengan en cuenta sus fortalezas para permitirles tener éxito como aprendices de inglés.

Palabras clave: escuelas, estudiantes de inglés, éxito, método multimodal, modelo del concepto del logro, proceso de aprendizaje.

Introduction

A major change facing schools in the United States today is the rapid growth of the English language learner (ELL) population—students who immigrated to the U.S. from non-English speaking countries and have not yet mastered English sufficiently to enable them to fully succeed in their education. With the influx of ELL students into schools in the U.S., we must learn the best ways to accommodate them in the classroom. "Present demographic trends in the United States indicate that by the year 2026, one in every four children in our public schools will be an English language learner" (Garcia as cited in Smith, 2004, Introduction section, para. 1). Questions concerning how much language a student should acquire within a certain period of time, and what goals and standards an instructor should have for these students to enable them to succeed, are areas that need to be addressed. It is important to know the appropriate amount of progress to expect for each student, based on the language level with which they began studying in U.S. schools.

Early and Marshall (2008) emphasize the rapidly increasing ELL population in North America and the need to design approaches that will best help these students to learn and process both literature and language in the general education classroom. Teaching professionals should undergo professional development to help them better understand the needs of ELL students, the foundation upon which each of these students enters their new learning environment, and how we as teachers can best be prepared. Finally, teachers must know how to assist and develop an appropriate approach to facilitate the learning of ELL students.

Perceptions and Attitudes of ELLs, NCLB, and ELL Professional Development

Impediments to ELL learning include teacher attitudes towards ELL students, the misdiagnosis of ELL students as learning disabled, and the lack of professional development. Batt (2008) noted that a sizeable gap in achievement exists between the scores of those not in need of special language instruction and Hispanic students. Furthermore, he noted "a higher percentage of non-certified [English as a second language] teachers [in schools] than all other teaching areas" (p. 39). Batt designed that study to attempt to remedy this disproportion. No Child Left Behind, NCLB (2001), emphasized the importance of the closure of this gap to meet its mandate, which called for schools not only to account for the progress of English language learners but also to, "improv[e] instruction programs for limited English proficient children by acquiring and upgrading curricula and related instruction materials" as well as to "provid[e] training, aligned with State and local standards, to school personnel and participating community-based organization personnel to improve the instruction and assessment of limited English proficient children" (NCLB, 2001, p. 286).

General education teachers in that study also recognized the unsympathetic attitudes of some fellow teachers towards ELL students who claim that "teachers and administrators don't understand [their] needs and how to teach them . . . I have people in my building that refer to my kids as 'them' . . . We still have a high number of staff who say things like, 'They shouldn't be here'" (Batt, 2008, p. 40). It is important to strive for empathy and understanding of the struggles of ELL students, as "being unable to comprehend the language of instruction in school often lead to strong negative emotions" (Washburn, 2008, p. 247). By confronting these attitudes, ideas and obstacles, teachers can create meaningful and effective educational approaches and modifications for ELLs. This outcome is especially important considering "the enormous potential that teachers have to become significant adults in the lives of these immigrant adolescents" (Brittain, 2009, p. 108). As

ELL students make their transition into U.S. schools, teachers can have a strong impact not only on their academic achievement but also on their personal development.

An article by Spinelli (2008) elucidated another issue facing ELL students—the inaccurate labeling of these students as learning disabled—which can lead to placing them in an inappropriate classroom. Spinelli notes that "standardized procedures are invalid and unreliable for ELLs because they do not adequately distinguish between learning and/or communication disorders and the lack of language proficiency" (p. 103). Cultural and linguistic barriers may influence testing scores that appear to indicate a learning disability. In fact, the scores may be solely due to "the student's difficulty acquiring two languages simultaneously" (p.103). The consequences of students being labeled incorrectly can be detrimental to their education, including being "denied access to the general education curriculum; being placed in [programs] with more limited curriculum . . . and negatively impact[ing] [their] self-perception" (p. 104). The misrepresentation of students as learning disabled will create a negative ripple effect upon their educational endeavors.

Spinelli (2008) discusses evaluation measures that could be implemented to enable students to be placed where they can be best educated and evaluated. These measures include curriculum-based assessments to determine both the background knowledge of a student and performance-based assessments. Findings of a study by De Ramirez and Shapiro (2006) on the general population as well as for Spanish speaking students show that "curriculum-based measurement can be a viable methodology for evaluating the rate of progress of . . . ELLs" (p. 356). Spinelli (2008) also notes that classrooms should be examined to determine whether the environment is conducive to ELL learning in areas of "environmental style, interaction style, instructional strategies for cognitive style, instructional strategies for cognitive responsiveness, and assessment style" (p. 107). It is important that these students be comprehensively and accurately assessed so that they are placed in classrooms best suited to their needs.

Lenski, Ehlers-Zavala, Daniel, and Sun-Irminger (2006) note that, "many teachers have little experience with ELLs and may not understand the challenges faced by students in the process of acquiring English" (p. 25). Spinelli (2008) reports that, "according to a recent survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, just 27 percent of teachers report feeling well prepared to teach ELLs, and only 12.5 percent of teachers with ELLs in their classrooms have participated in ELL-related training during the past three years" (p. 102). This evidence indicates the lack of teacher preparedness with respect to ELL learning and recognition of the educational needs created by the presence of ELL students. Studies such as that by Batt (2008) were created to discern from current teachers what they feel needs to be improved within the realm of ELL education. The challenges and suggestions determined by Batt's study were then used to create meaningful professional development.

The Idaho board of directors for English as a second language (ESL) formed a focus group that designed the survey executed by Batt (2008), coded possible responses, and sent the survey to rural schools in Idaho with the largest numbers of ELL students. Teachers participating in the Idaho Association for Bilingual Education also took the survey, with a total of 131.5 surveys returned. The results of the survey indicated the need for more qualified teachers to work with ELL students both in ELL and in general school classrooms. Professional development in the realm of ELL education is necessary because ELL students "are disadvantaged if assessment, evaluation and curriculum do not make allowances for their distinctive differences" (Lenski et al., 2006, p. 24). The results of the survey indicate understaffing and added

duties placed on ELL instructors as stressors that have a negative impact on the programs, and that an overall restructuring of ELL is vital.

Batt (2008) concluded that professional development would enable both ELL and "mainstream" teachers to help ELL students acquire language proficiency. Brice, Miller, and Brice (2006) note that "students in ELL classrooms . . . and general education classrooms all benefit from more lesson planning and co-planning with other school professionals" (p. 242). Hiring of more specialists, when possible, would also be advantageous. Even though budgetary considerations may be a concern, Batt's recommendations that these results be used as an impetus for providing valuable services and professional development are appropriate.

The Multimodal Approach

Once a learning community recognizes the importance of focusing on ELL students, specific avenues for approaching these students within the classroom can be addressed. Perhaps the most important method was that of the "multimodal approach to integrating language and content teaching," (Early & Marshall, 2008, p. 377) into a high school English classroom for ESL students. As teaching professionals, it is important to know how to facilitate learning without insulting the intelligence and abilities of ELL students. The case study by Early and Marshall (2008) focuses on this need. The authors examined a single classroom of ESL students in Vancouver, Canada, where 200 of the 1,200 students were enrolled in the ESL class. The particular classroom was that of Sondra Marshall who taught two transitional English classes in the school. Twenty-eight students from both classes agreed to participate in the study. After completing this transitional class, students are moved into a regular classroom with native English speakers the following year; thus, it is necessary for these students to gain the necessary abilities to succeed in that setting. The aims of the study were to examine the approach and to measure its success. In addition, Early and Marshall hoped to show that "students can be supported to grow in their interpretation and appreciation of English literature" (p. 381).

After preliminary interviews and self-evaluations, which were transcribed and recorded, students who were enrolled in the study were observed for four weeks. Evaluations of students' writings were also collected. Students were then put into groups of three. They chose a short story and were given directions on using a mandala graphic organizer, a form of visual representation used by the teacher to depict what took place in each story with respect to characterization, style, and theme. Students were asked to engage in dialogue with one another to find symbols and visuals representing each category. Each student would then choose from one of the three categories to write an essay in class. Rance-Roney (2008) note that teachers not only need, "to support English language learners in their English acquisition, but also [need] to create a classroom culture that encourages shared experiences and a construction of knowledge that legitimizes all class members" (p. 19). Such an approach to classroom instruction accomplishes this aim by challenging the students and allowing them to make choices such as which group to join, which story to analyze, and which of the three areas to write their papers on. These choices allow them to take control of their English instruction and to feel that they have a stake and a voice in it.

The results gathered from exit interviews and self-evaluations from both teachers and students at the culmination of the study conclude that not only did students grow in their language skills and abilities to understand literary texts, but they also enjoyed the tasks. Students were encouraged, along with their classmates, to read and re-read a text until they understood it, and then move to the next level by interpreting said understanding symbols and entire essays. Twenty-six of the 28 students felt that the

activity was advantageous, and the scores of students' papers reached a level that had not previously been achieved (Early & Marshall 2008).

The Concept Attainment Model

Similar to this multi-modal model that engages students in creating symbols that represent a theme of a story is the use of the *concept attainment model* in which pictures are used to communicate an idea. This model "is an instructional technique proposed by Jerome Bruner that targets the 'big idea' or concept" (Bruner et al. as cited in Boulware & Crow, 2008, p. 491). By displaying examples and non-examples of an idea simultaneously, students construct the meaning of what a given concept may be through hypothesizing. This activity may be performed through the use of pictures or words.

> Because thinking and reasoning occur on multiple levels, learners benefit from the opportunity to examine concepts through examples and non-examples that highlight different aspects of the concept presented. Connecting what is known to what is unknown is the basis of developing concept attainment. The Concept Attainment Strategy can be used with students of all ages, ELLs, pupils with special needs, and gifted students. It can be applied in many contexts to develop comprehension using narrative or expository trade books, pictures, words or phrases, and concrete objects. (Boulware & Crow, 2008, p. 495)

Depending on the level of language fluency, the use of simplified examples together with pictures or simple words can communicate an idea to an ELL student. "Concept attainment emphasizes placing learners in active roles . . . and uses examples to develop understanding . . . store[d] in long term memory" (Eggen & Kauchak 2006, p. 196). Concept attainment allows an ELL student to think critically while the teacher decides how much and in what way English will be incorporated into the lesson. Students can then verbalize their hypotheses to the best of their ability.

Modification to Classroom Assignments and ELL Instructor Support

In personal communications with both general education teacher, T. Harper (June 23, 2009), and ELL instructor, A. Parrett (November 17, 2008), the importance of ELL support was emphasized. Harper notes that ELL instructors have a wealth of information and knowledge that can assist general education teachers in modifying assignments and instruction. Lewis-Moreno (2007) emphasizes that "collaboration between the ESL teacher and mainstream teachers in a school is crucial. The ESL teacher should be an on-site resource for content-area teachers [who is] able to share and model a wide repertoire of reading, writing, vocabulary, and note-taking strategies to scaffold instruction" (p. 774).

Dong (2004) indicates that modifications within general education courses are urgent with the rise in the number of ELL learners in the U.s. He proposed "three main instructional modifications . . . setting up language objectives along with content curricular objectives, anticipating ESL-related difficulties, and providing cultural background information" (p. 204). ELL students must not only understand the language of the assignments they are given, but also must understand the cultural setting to achieve full understanding.

Sheltered instruction is another modification of classroom instruction that many experts suggest. In this approach, ELL students "do not compete academically with native English speakers [but rather] teachers use physical activities, visual aids, and the environment to teach important new words for concept development" (National Clearinghouse on Bilingual Education as cited in Freeman & Freeman, 2000, "What is Sheltered English?," para. 1). Hansen-Thomas (2008) notes that, "sheltered instruction combines both tried-and-true instructional techniques that characterize what experienced educators know as good teaching practices and instruction specially designed to meet

the linguistic and educational needs of immigrant and nonimmigrant second-language learners in u.s. schools" (p. 165).

Assisting ELL During Assessments

A major concern within education is how to accommodate students during testing situations when students of all backgrounds and limitations are required to participate according to NCLB. "Title I of NCLB requires that ELLs attending public schools at levels K-12 should be assessed in the various language domains . . . and must be included in . . . standardized testing" (Lenski et al., 2006, p. 24). While very little research on this particular topic was found, one study focused on "test performance of English-Language Learners using an English dictionary," (Albus, Thurlow, Liu, & Beilinski, 2005, p. 245) in which 202 students were given two reading passages to interpret both with and without a dictionary. After this round of testing, students were given a post-test questionnaire in which they demonstrated their personal dictionary skills and were asked whether they utilized the dictionary during the testing.

The results showed that the presence of the dictionary did not have a significant impact on student scores but also found that, "intermediate-level . . . students in the Hmong ELL group who used the dictionary . . . performed better than did the control group" (Albus et al., 2005, p. 245). Students with advanced or low language capabilities rarely used the dictionaries. Albus et al. (2005) speculate that knowing that this test did not affect grades or graduation could have affected the testing outcome, as 95.8% of the students commented that dictionary availability during testing would be advantageous.

Even though the aim of the study did not provide any groundbreaking results in relation to this modification, it is a first step in finding ways to provide assistance and modifications for ELL students.

Conclusion

Every teacher must assume responsibility for his or her classroom as well as for the educational community in which the instruction and advancement of ELL take place. As these ELL students embark on their journey of learning a new language and navigate their way through secondary education, their learning needs, placement, and achievement must be understood by teachers, administration and governmental entities alike. Teacher training in all high school subjects is absolutely crucial to enable teachers to dispel misconceptions, to acquire knowledge of ELL strategies and modifications and to encourage cooperation in dealing with problems and success. The approaches discussed in this review article have been found to be the most valuable in recent ELL research. One approach is not better than another. However, a combination of approaches used in the classroom according to the specific needs of students will be most advantageous.

There is even a greater need than originally believed for a focus on the needs of ELL students particularly in providing assistance during state testing. This need is emphasized by the lack of resources available for this purpose. It is necessary to include this particular information, because not only was there only one study of this type, but even the results of that study did not prove to be advantageous to ELLs. Accordingly, more studies should be conducted to discover new ways of modifying state testing. Teachers should be encouraged to begin studies in their own classrooms to report on and share new techniques and strategies as they prepare their students for state exams and for classroom work in general. Furthermore, it is in the interest of all educators and entities involved to promote research and ELL teacher training in order to overcome stereotypes and to communicate specific information about the learning journey of ELLs. Overall, it is the responsibility of each instructor to know what approaches to use with his or her subject

matter and in the classroom environment to assure that students are not only learning but also reaching their full potential.

It is a far too common to witness ELL students slipping through the cracks of our educational system. These students may be labeled as lazy or as trouble makers because their teachers mistakenly believe that their lack of strong conversational English is an indication of their inability to handle classroom assignments or understand instructions. It is only through appropriate professional development that teachers can better understand how to modify and plan for ELL students' success both in learning and in integrating into a new cultural setting and educational system. Each instructor must be dedicated to his or her students and be willing to implement the appropriate approaches. All of the areas mentioned, including ELL professional development, the multimodal approach, the concept attainment model, modification of classroom assignments, ELL instructor support and assistance to ELLs during assessments, are merely the tip of the iceberg to enable us to meet the challenge facing U.S. schools today.

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