Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners

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Helen, a graduate student in our university's Language, Literacy, and Culture Division, teaches middle school language arts. Many of Helen's students are struggling academically even though they appear to speak and understand English fairly well. Some of Helen's students speak Spanish at home; others speak different Southeast Asian languages. Helen wanted to know how to help these students, so she began graduate studies in literacy and second language acquisition. The knowledge she is gaining in her coursework and from her own classroom-based research is making a positive difference for her students. The following notes are from one of Helen's case studies:

> Magdalena is currently a 7th grade student in my language arts class. Her first language is Spanish, which is spoken at home with her parents and other family members. She has been in our district's schools from kindergarten, but she had not been able to acquire enough academic language (Cummins, 1996) in English to be successful in all of her middle school classes. She is also still struggling with reading and writing on grade level. I believe multiple factors (Cortés, 1986) contributed to Magdalena's success in my language arts class. She experienced a teacher using her primary language; she was presented with opportunities to use and read in her primary language; and she was continually encouraged whenever she made strides in her second language reading and writing development.

There are teachers all over the United States and Canada who, like Helen, have students who come to school speaking a language other than English. The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE) has projected over four million Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in U.S. schools in the 1999-2000 school year. The five states with the largest English learner populations are California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. However, between 1990 and 1997 the LEP population more than doubled in Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, and Washington (Loera, 2000). With numbers such as these, it is clear that teachers all over North America need to know how to work successfully with English learners.

For the past 15 years we have written about the importance of holistic language principles for multilingual students (Freeman and Freeman, 1992, 1994, 1998). However, good teaching that follows whole language principles is not enough. Teachers working with multilingual and multicultural students also need to be informed about second language acquisition theory and research and issues related to diversity. In addition, they need to learn about materials that support their students' first languages and are culturally relevant. Most important, they need to develop effective methods for teaching students whose backgrounds and experiences are different from their own.

Mary Ann, a veteran teacher, reflects on how the study of whole language and second language issues are changing her teaching:

> Ever since I started these classes, my old ways of thinking have been challenged. I had experimented with "whole language" activities in the past, but I really didn't understand that whole language is a philosophy, a way of looking at the world. Now, I'm being asked to reexamine my values, my beliefs about my diverse students, and my principles in order to be a better teacher and more effective person. I look at my students through a different lens now.

Well-informed teachers like Helen and Mary Ann follow sound principles that promote learning for all their students—including their second language learners—as they develop curriculum. Following are some key questions asked by teachers as they plan curriculum. These questions—and their comments that follow—reflect current research in first and second language acquisition and whole language principles (Freeman and Freeman, 1998). Teachers who can answer "yes" to these questions are probably already taking into consideration factors that will improve the chance of school success for all their students.

Key Questions

1. Is curriculum organized around "big" questions?

When teachers organize curriculum around big questions, they involve students in investigating issues relevant to their own lives. For example, students might study "How are we alike and how are we different?" As they explore this big question, they read pieces of rich, comprehensible literature such as *Whoever You Are* (Fox, 1997), *People* (Spier, 1980), *Faces* (Rotner & Kreisler, 1997) or any of several of the Ann Morris books, such as *Hats, Hats, Hats* (1989) or *On the Go* (Morris, 1996) that compare and contrast people and places all over the world.

Even when teachers do not speak their students' primary languages, they can still provide books in those languages. For example, for Spanish speaking students, Alma Flor Ada's book *Canción de Todos los Niños del Mundo* (1993) makes many of the same points as Mem Fox's *Whoever You Are. People*; *Faces*; *Hats, Hats, Hats*; and *On the Go* all have Spanish versions: *Gente* (Spier, 1993), *Rostros* (Rotner & Kreisler, 1997), *Sombreros, Gorras, y Cachuchas* (Morris, 1991), and *De Viaje* (Morris, 1997). Students want to read books like these because the books cover topics that the students have thought about or experienced. As they explore these topics, students develop higher levels of literacy and greater English language proficiency.

Other relevant literature brings up other big questions. For immigrant students, there is much to consider in stories like *Grandfather's Journey* (Say, 1993), in which the author explores whether bilingual and bicultural people can ever be truly happy living in either their native or their adopted country. Stories like *Amelia's Road* (Altman, 1993a)—also available in Spanish, *El Camino de Amelia* (Altman, 1993b)—or the bilingual book *Calling the Doves/ El Canto de las Palomas* (Herrera, 1995) bring up questions that many migrant children can relate to such as, "Where is my home?" or "What is my culture?"

Teachers who organize around big questions promote second language acquisition in a number of ways. Figure 1 lists reasons for organizing around themes.

2. Are students involved in authentic reading and writing experiences?

As students explore themes and investigate big questions, they need access to relevant fiction and nonfiction texts like those described above. For bilingual learners, predictable whole stories, novels, plays, and poems, as well as complete pieces of nonfiction, are more comprehensible than simplified texts or excerpts because the context is richer.

Teachers working with multilingual and multicultural students need to be informed about second language acquisition theory and research and issues related to diversity.

Reasons to Organize Curriculum around Themes Based on Big Questions

Students see the big picture so they can make sense of English language instruction.

Content areas (math, science, social studies, literature) are interrelated.

Vocabulary is repeated naturally as it appears in different content area studies.

Through themes based on big questions, teachers can connect curriculum to students' lives. This makes curriculum more interesting.

Because the curriculum makes sense, English language learners are more fully engaged and experience more success.

Since themes deal with universal human topics, all students can be involved, and lessons and activities can be adjusted to different levels of English language proficiency.

Figure 1. Organizing around Themes

One book which asks a big question and contains both fiction and nonfiction text is *Who Belongs Here?* (Knight, 1993). This book has two parts: the fictional story of an immigrant boy who feels rejected by classmates at school, and a series of fascinating historical facts related to the struggles and triumphs of immigrant groups who have come to the United States. English language learners can often relate to the story. At the same time, they learn important social studies information. Other authentic literature on similar topics includes books of poetry, such as *I Am of Two Places* (Carden and Cappellini, 1997; Spanish version: *Soy de Dos Lugares* [Carden and Cappellini, 1997]) and the biographical essays in *Voices from the Fields* (Atkin, 1993), written by migrant children.

As students read and research their big questions, they use different kinds of writing to increase their understandings and then present them to classmates or to a wider audience. Engagement with authentic literature promotes literacy as well as cognitive, academic, and language development for English language learners (Freeman and Freeman, 2000).

3. Is there an attempt to draw on student background knowledge and interests? Are students given choices?

Smith (1983) has explained that we do not learn if we are confused or bored. When school topics do not relate to students' lives, they may find themselves in one of those two states. Much of the standard school curriculum assumes that all students have similar life experiences. As a result, English language learners may find it difficult to make connections between what they are studying and what they already know. However, if teachers provide students with choices in the questions they investigate, they create greater possibilities of students' connecting their experiences with their studies in school. This approach allows all students to build on the knowledge and concepts they bring to school.

It is important for teachers to know how to pick reading materials that draw on students' background knowledge and interests. Sometimes, teachers choose folktales from students' cultures. However, a student from Mexico may not relate to an Aztec myth any more than an Anglo child would relate to the story of Johnny Appleseed. While folktales may be fine, there is much more to consider when choosing literature for a diverse group of students. Ann Freeman (2000) has developed a rubric teachers can

How closely do the people in the story represent you or your family?
Very close .... *Not close at all*
  5   4   3   2   1

Do you know of any places like those in the story?
Yes .... *No*
  5   4   3   2   1

Could you see this story taking place this year?
Yes .... *No*
  5   4   3   2   1

How close do you think the main character is to you in age?
Very close .... *Not close at all*
  5   4   3   2   1

Are there characters in the story that are the same gender as you?
Yes .... *No*
  5   4   3   2   1

How closely does the language used in the text represent the language you use?
Very close .... *Not close at all*
  5   4   3   2   1

How often do you read stories like these?
Very Often .... *Never*
  5   4   3   2   1

How closely does this story relate to your personal background?
Very close .... *Not close at all*
  5   4   3   2   1

Figure 2. Cultural Relevance Rubric (A. Freeman, 2000)

use with their students to determine whether a book is culturally relevant. (See Figure 2.)

4. Is the content meaningful? Does it serve a purpose for the learners?

Teachers know that their English language learners are capable students who need a challenging curriculum if they are to fully develop their academic potential. At the same time, they recognize that their students' limited English proficiency can make learning more difficult. For that reason, these teachers always embed language in a meaningful context. This helps ensure that even demanding concepts will be presented in a way that helps students

understand the lessons and develop the academic English they need to succeed in school.

Too often instruction for English learners is organized around a set of decontextualized skills. The goal of these exercises is to have students learn rules and practice language until it is automatic. However, these activities do not involve learners in real problem solving nor are they pleasurable. Skill building does not foster literacy or promote cognitive, academic, or language development. Such instruction is not meaningful to bilingual students, nor does it serve their immediate purposes.

In contrast, teachers who understand the needs of bilingual students recognize that language is best learned in the process of studying academic content (Brinton & Master, 1997; Brinton et al., 1989). There are three good reasons for this. First, students get both language and content. They can develop academic proficiency and English language proficiency at the same time. Second, language is kept in its natural context. As we study any subject, we learn the concepts and the vocabulary related to that subject. And third, when teachers use real content for teaching language, they provide students with genuine reasons to learn the language (Freeman & Freeman, 1998). This approach, rather than focusing on the language itself, creates situations where students can use language for authentic purposes.

When students engage with significant questions that they have helped to pose, they realize that knowledge from the different content areas—language arts, social studies, science, math, and the arts—is meaningful because it is the source for answers to their questions.

5. Do students have opportunities to work collaboratively?

Holt (1993) has shown clearly the benefits—both cognitive and affective—of collaboration for language minority students. Smith (1983) points out that language acquisition is a social activity. Students develop language in authentic social contexts as they help each other make sense of content and concepts. In the process of collaborating while reading and discussing authentic literature, writing responses, and authoring their own books, and investigating interesting questions and reporting their findings, students develop the academic language they need to expand their knowledge of academic content areas.

Teachers should take language proficiency into account when deciding how to group students. For example, for certain activities, it is good to put English learners in the same group with native English speakers. The English learners can often offer a wider perspective on problems to be solved because they have had more varied life experiences. In other cases, it is better to group students by native language. Often students with the same primary language are paired for activities like buddy reading (Samway et al., 1995). This allows the students to use their first language to explain difficult vocabulary or concepts.

6. Do students read and write as well as speak and listen during their learning experiences?

Second language learners acquire language through all four modes. They should be encouraged to read and write as well as to speak and listen from the beginning of their experiences with English. Research has shown that many second language learners may read or write before they speak and that comprehension is often enriched by literacy experiences (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Hakuta, 1986; Hudelson, 1984; Radford, 1981; Rigg & Hudelson, 1986). Development of literacy is crucial for academic success, and teachers shouldn't delay reading and writing for second-language students.

Students develop language in authentic social contexts as they help each other make sense of content and concepts.

Francisco, for example, involves his third-grade bilingual Spanish/English speakers in a variety of activities as he teaches language through meaningful content themes. His students do daily guided reading, paired reading, and/or shared reading. In addition, there is time for free voluntary reading, during which they can choose books of interest and read silently (Krashen, 1993). Most of the reading students do is related to the themes they study, themes that answer big questions such as "How does the ocean affect our lives?" or "Why is the solar system important to how we live on earth?" or "How can we save the rain forests?" Students write in journals and publish books about what they learn and then they share their findings with each other and with other classes.

Students who fully develop their primary language acquire a second language more quickly.

7. Are students' primary languages and cultures valued, supported, and developed?

Students who fully develop their primary language acquire a second language more quickly. When students come to school speaking a language other than English, they need cognitive, academic, and language development in their first and second languages (Collier, 1995). Cummins (1996) and Krashen (1996) explain that what students know in their first language transfers to their second. While it seems logical that more English instruction in school would equal more success in English, research shows that students educated in their first language do better academically in English than those submersed in English only. Both academic concepts and knowledge of literacy are most easily learned in the primary language. Students can then transfer this knowledge to English.

Francisco, the bilingual teacher described above, sees this when he works with his third graders. Those who can read and write well in Spanish do better in English. When students first develop concepts in Spanish, they only need to learn the corresponding vocabulary when they study the concepts in English. For that reason, Francisco uses a strategy called *preview-view-review* with his students. He introduces new concepts in Spanish, perhaps reading a book in Spanish or leading a discussion about the concept. Then the main part of the lesson is taught in English, using hands-on activities, visuals, or very comprehensible and predictable books. Then Francisco allows time for students to use their primary language to review the key ideas of the lesson. In this way, he is able to support both concept development and the acquisition of English.

Even when teachers are not able to provide instruction in all their students' primary languages, they can find ways to support those languages and can also involve students in activities to explore the cultures of all the students in the classroom (Freeman & Freeman, 1994). Bilingualism and biculturalism enrich the individual, the classroom, and the community, and we all have a responsibility to support it.

8. Are students involved in activities that build their self-esteem and provide them with opportunities to succeed?

When teachers have faith in their students and the students themselves believe they can learn, these high expectations lead to academic success (Collier, 1995; Goodman, 1991) . Teachers who have faith in their students organize curriculum around big questions, involve students in authentic, meaningful, and collaborative reading and writing activities, and support and value all their students' languages and cultures.

The questions we present here in the checklist are intended as a guide for assessing classroom practice. We believe that when teachers can answer "yes" to most of these questions as they reflect on lessons or units, they are meeting the needs of all their students, including their English language learners. ◐

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