

Nine Quick and Beneficial Strategies for a Culturally Responsive Classroom

As class begins you welcome the students to a time of learning. The objective is announced, a quick review might include of yesterday's agenda and a reminder of upcoming assessments is reiterated. Instead of being able to hear a pin drop, you hear pencils being sharpened for note taking, papers rustling to the designated bin and pages being turned to the directed location. While students are attempting to get prepared before the beginning of your lesson, they continue to talk to each other while working on these tasks. You notice that Letrium is chatting with his classmate about the popular Nintendo DS game. By observation, you can see that he is passionate about this game and his success in winning. In the back of your mind, you can't help but wonder why Letrium can seem to hold conversations with his friends but when you, his teacher, asks questions about classroom content, he can't seem to answer. Becoming more overwhelmed, you notice a pair of Latina students speaking to each other in their home language. Marievla and Noheli's words sound fast, loud and seemingly not of content importance. It's common to think, if they are speaking in another language, it must not be academic gabbing. Ok... you have to sit down because you are at the breaking point. Fan walks into your classroom. She speaks no English. None. However as her content teacher, you are expected to provide linguistic accommodations while teaching her academic content. What about the other 28 students in your class? The students with learning disabilities? The gifted and talented students? The students who just need some attention? As their teacher, how will you teach the content, assist in language acquisition, and maintain a culturally responsive classroom?

This scenario and many others are playing out daily in many school classrooms throughout our nation. English Language Learners (ELLs) are becoming an integral component of discussion regarding campus culture and this is even more heightened with the influx of more ELL students predicted in the future. "The number of school-age children (ages 5–17) who spoke a language other than English at home rose from 4.7 to 11.2 million between 1980 and 2009" (Aud et al., 2011, p. 30). Administrators and faculty should ensure the implementation of equitable learning opportunities for these language learners. Mainstream teachers need to implement strategies to create a culturally responsive classroom. While improving these issues, preconceived calices can be softened with a culturally responsive climate and then removed with intercultural sensitivity and openness to diversity. Teachers need to be aware of students not interacting in class, being overlooked and not participating. There are valid reasons for such behaviors and developing an awareness of these behaviors and being able to address them adequately is paramount. The following strategies will assist in creating a culturally responsive classroom and they are (a) adapt non-traditional completion of sponge activities, (b) allow

questions in the home language, (c) encourage social and academic dialogues with a conversation partner, (d) preteach vocabulary using realia, (e) investigate possible cognates of content material, (f) provide wait time for thinking and translating, (g) implement constructing assignments, (h) play instructional games, and (i) include action-oriented songs. The aforementioned nine strategies are quick and beneficial for any teacher to utilize and these strategies will assist the language learning situations in the classroom.

“He talks to his friends outside of class, why can’t he talk to me in class?”

Letrim, a 6th grader, from Albania began school in America understanding very little English. His oral proficiency was at a minimum. He was very quiet in class; at times he would sit slumped in his chair, staring into space. More often than not, Letrim would skip assignments and fail to follow the teacher’s instructions. This student’s actions were opposite while hanging out with his friends. He actually smiled, attempted to talk with his friends and participated in social activities. His ESL teacher seemed to be pleased with his progress. She allowed alternative assessments that encouraged his language acquisition. His mainstream teachers assumed that Letrim understood more than he was admitting. Their assumption was that he was being deceptive and trying to “play” the educational system. Although Letrim didn’t speak much in his academic classes, he learned by observing his teachers and conversing with his friends.

Many times teachers have preconceived notions that second language learners are deceptive and dishonest about their oral fluency and comprehension ability. However, there is a distinction between social language and academic language. In his seminal research, Cummins (1981) coined the terms Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is considered to be more socially simple. Teachers can see this skill being implemented on a daily basis in the hallways, in the classroom, and especially in the cafeteria. Most of these occurrences are with friends and the discussions revolve around after-school activities, sports game, or favorite celebrities. ELLs acquire the basic skills of their target language by starting with high-frequency words. They tend to use common phrases repeatedly. Phrases said could be “Hi, how are you?”, “I need to go to my locker”, or “Can I go to the restroom?” Casanova (2002) pointed out that students who have advanced BICS skills tend to fool mainstream teachers because the teacher assumes the student is able to hang

out with his friends is choosing to be lazy in class because those communication skills are not transferred into the academic setting. Cummins (1981) posited, “that while many children develop native speaker fluency (i.e. BICS) within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between 5-7 years for a child to be working on a level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned” (p. 9). The more advanced proficiency, CALP, utilizes higher ordered thinking skills. It’s the academic language found in the classroom. Mainstream teachers need to realize that ELLs require time for acculturation and language acquisition. They have the responsibility not only to educate these students but also to be empathic in the awareness of the phenomena. It’s linguistically productive if ELLs gab to their friends in the hallway. It’s good if they have friends to converse with at lunch because they are being involved in language acquisition. After all, language learners have to start somewhere. Here are a few conversation techniques to assist educators with language acquisition.

a) Adapt non-traditional completion of sponge activities. Typically sponge activities are implemented at the beginning of class, without higher-order thinking skills and written for assessment. ELLs should be allowed to meditate on the sponge activity during class and complete with the linguistically appropriate method. If the student is more confident in completing the task orally then allow it. Villegas and Lucas (2007) suggested alternative accommodations for assessments such as drawing a picture, or having a conversation. These alternatives can provide a more accurate portrait of their understanding rather than a textbook assessment.

b) Allow questions in the home language. No matter if you can understand the student’s home language, allowing the student to ask the question in the home language provides connectivity and motivation (Swain, 2011). Once the question has been asked, have the ELL

attempt any words in English. Language learners can substitute words they have acquired in the target language. These small adaptations can make the language learner more comfortable. Also, have the student use a bilingual dictionary to attempt to translate the question or use a language translator from the Internet. Many are free and easily accessible for student implementation.

c) Encourage social and academic dialogues with a conversation partner.

Encouraging conversation partners to talk about a variety of subjects is important. As the dialogue of the ELL and conversation partner becomes more fluid, the academic dialogue strengthens. A good way to start would be to have the partners discuss families, hobbies, or favorite foods, etc. The social dialogue gives the language learner confidence in communicating with others. Dialogues about the home country and cultural differences can also promote language acquisition. Academically, the conversation partners can interact by discussing project topics or ideas from the lesson to provide a chance to converse with each other (Short & Echevarria, 2005).

These conversation techniques allow ELLs to strengthen the target language. This allows the academic language to be assessed more precisely. Not only are ELLs having to adjust to their new country, community, and school, they are also having to learn new academic concepts and acquire English simultaneously. Maintaining the home language allows building upon the social language to develop a more proficient academic language.

English as a “Second” Language? Shouldn’t it be their first?

Teachers assume in order to learn English that newly arrived immigrants should delete their home language to learn the target language. Marielva, an 8th grader, arrived from Mexico speaking no amount of English. Her smile reflected her willingness to learn and her big brown eyes solidified her strength in the new culture. While in Mexico, she studied meticulously and achieved excellent grades. She enjoyed learning any subject including English. Marielva had a strong foundation from her Mexican education. Her ESL teacher encouraged continuance of learning new concepts in her home language then attempting the same concept in her target language. Marielva’s ESL teacher provided Spanish books and supplemental materials in order to build the target language. Throughout the following years, her English comprehension became stronger while scaffolding

upon her home language. As Marielva's educational pursuit of English proficiency reached her bilingual target; scaffolds were removed in increments.

To prohibit the usage of the home language while scaffolding the target language would be detrimental to second language learners. Culture groups immigrating to the United States for equitable opportunities would benefit from this language building technique. In 2010, Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals accounted for 25.2 million, or 9 % of the US population over age 5 (Migration Policy Institute, 2011, p. 1). Mainstream teachers should use this temporary construct in the culturally responsive classroom. Social and academic support should be introduced along with carefully planned instruction. Bruner (1983) originally defined scaffolding as "a process of setting up the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it" (p. 60). As the target language strengthens the scaffolding support can be reduced. Teachers can use single words, phrases or pictures to check the comprehension level of the language learner (Washburn, 2008). Once the comprehension level is determined, linguistic activities should be scaffolded just beyond the reach of the ELL (Montgomery, 2001). Scaffolding can be with English only or concurrently with the home language and target language. "Scaffolds are thoughtful ways of assisting students in experiencing successful task completion" (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000, p. 261) and are extremely beneficial to the education process. Mainstream teachers can assist with language acquisition using these successful scaffolding techniques.

d) Pre-teach vocabulary using realia. When introducing new target words to the language learner, the teacher needs to provide real-life items to help ELLs make a connection. These items should be available for the language learner's manipulation. For example, when teaching classroom rules procedures to ELLS it is important to have the pencil sharpener

available, the tray for turning in assignments or even a backpack located in the approved location. Allow students to see, touch, and smell the realia as needed. Start collecting items for your classroom so your hands-on realia inventory will increase.

e) Investigate possible cognates of content material. Many words in the home often sound and look similar to the target language especially with English and Spanish languages. For example, the English word, “bank” and the Spanish word, “banco” are cognates. English/Spanish cognates are present in many content areas such as geometry and science. Content increased comprehension and reliable assessments can be products of using cognates (Fregeau & Leier, 2008). Teachers can invite language learners to find cognates in the content material and create an on-going list for the class.

f) Provide wait time for thinking and translating. Being able to remember the words spoken, decipher another language, and then attempt to comprehend it, takes considerable time and effort by the students. Be willing to repeat or write down information for ELLs to access. Don’t be afraid to wait for a response, as making eye contact, smiling and nodding at the ELL notes confidence in their abilities. Assist ELLs by granting more time to complete coursework (Reeves, 2006).

These scaffolding techniques allow language learners to continue with their home language while acquiring the target language. They should be temporary to assist with the transition into second language acquisition. As the language learner becomes a more proficient English speaker the support can be dismantled. Language learners of any language can benefit from scaffolding with careful instruction and diligent planning.

To teach English as a Second Language, don’t you have to speak Spanish fluently?

Fan Fu came to America at the beginning of her 6th grade year. It was unexpected to have a newly immigrated Chinese student at the campus. Her English skills were non-existent. She was timid, shy, and extremely silent. At her new American school, having a Spanish speaker is common but

not a Chinese speaker. According to the Migration Policy Institute, Chinese was reported to be the 2nd most frequently used language by ELLs in the nation (Batalova & Mc Hugh, 2010). Fan's parents moved to America to provide a better life for their two daughters. Considering that there wasn't a campus teacher familiar with the Chinese language, the ESL teacher had to be creative. Fan and her ESL teacher spent many hours together using actions and motions to acquire the target language. With a formula of willingness, unconformity and patience, Fan exceeded her mainstream teachers' expectations. She learned the English language in a unique and beneficial way.

Educators often generalize English as a Second Language (ESL) to only teaching Spanish-speaking students and having to be fluent in Spanish. Our nation is comprised of speakers of many languages. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) reported there were at least 381 individual languages used in the United States in 2007. Classrooms should be culturally responsive to all cultures. Educators need to be mentally and linguistically prepared for ELLs of any language heritage.

Teaching ESL doesn't require knowing the home language of the language learner. Instead it requires thinking beyond the norm, being creative and providing the effective strategies for ELLs (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Many teachers are misled in thinking that to teach ESL the ability to speak the target language must be present. In order to promote second language acquisition educators can implement action learning. One approach is Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR). In the 1960s, he started his research towards teaching language acquisition with the inclusion of action and movement. In the beginning stages, ELLs use auditory and visual skills to observe the target language. Second language learners mimic the language development stages similar to infants. Language learners, no matter age, are able to learn languages better and faster if they associate a physical act to a certain word (Asher, 1966). Mainstream teachers can start with simple words as "walk", "stop", and "sit". Then after repeated times, the words can be added with small commands. For example, "walk to the door", "sit down", and "stop walking". The language learners begin to acquire language by listening and then acting on what they hear. Asher (1988) suggested, "it may be that listening comprehension maps the blueprint for the

future acquisition of speaking” (p. 2-3). Mainstream teachers can implement action learning with a variety of culturally responsive strategies. Here are a few action-oriented activities to promote language acquisition.

g) Implement constructing assignments. Tasks that require language learners to follow instructions in order to construct are beneficial. The action of doing and building stimulates the student’s memory. Creating a paper doll with appropriate body parts and clothing allows the language learner to follow instructions. The learner can use high-frequency words to label in the home language and target language. After the construction, then the learner can connect the words with the actual parts and put into action.

h) Play instructional games. Games encourage students to use their English skills to follow commands. The language learner can partner with a classmate to learn terms used in the game. “Simons Says”, “Mother May I?”, “Charades” and “Bingo” are good games to implement in a cultural responsive classroom. Acting out words from a spelling list or vocabulary terms give extra opportunities for the language learner to acquire the target language.

i) Include action-oriented songs. Choose a song that uses rhythmic BICS words that are easy to remember. Songs can be acted out in motions, which help the language learner to remember the new words. There are songs created to learn all the States in America, and the colors of the rainbow. “Head, shoulders, knees and toes” is a good example of an action-oriented song.

Goldenberg (2008) stated “teachers should be aware of what students know and can do in their primary language so they can help them apply it to task in English” (p. 16). Each of these action-oriented activities encourages the language learners to participate and backpack these

techniques to their home. It's important that each is implemented in a culturally responsive classroom in order to benefit the ELL and all other learners.

Mainstream teachers are a vital part of the learning process for language learners. A culturally responsive classroom is the product of implementing these quick and beneficial strategies. Villegas and Lucas (2007) asserted "to continue to move toward greater cultural and linguistic responsiveness in schools, teachers must see themselves as part of a community of educators working to make schools more equitable for all students" (p. 32). Social and academic conversations provide opportunities for language learners to practice the target language. The use of scaffolding the target language gives support for the language learner as new concepts are being introduced. Action-oriented activities join body movements with language learning to connect the home language with the target language. Society is "increasingly characterized by diverse languages, ethnicities, religions, classes and cultures stemming from past and present immigration and economic and political influences" (Yee & Tursi, 2002, p. 5). These quick and beneficial strategies will promote language acquisition in the culturally sensitive diverse classroom.

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