Book Review: Achieving Literacy Success with English Language Learners

Literacy Success Requires Deliberate Help

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On March 15, 2009, the Sunday New York Times began a series of articles on how American institutions are adjusting to “the greatest surge in immigration” since a century ago. The first article is on our nation’s schools. It is accompanied by a full page of charts and maps showing where these immigrants are and where they live:

- Half are Spanish-speaking Latin Americans, and the next four language groups are from Asia;
- During the last 20 years, they have spread around the country—to states like Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina—in search of jobs and housing;

And by law, schools must enroll all the children, without inquiring about their family’s legal status.

These hard facts explain the importance of Achieving Literacy Success with English Language Learners (RRCNA, 2009). It is especially important for classroom teachers who now find such students in their classes — even in high school. Especially in states relatively new to these newcomers, teachers are less apt to have systematic and ongoing support in meeting their needs. What this book offers is a set of 10 chapters; three introducing general themes and then seven describing in detail what helps “achieve success” in assessment and instruction. While some chapter authors are now based in universities, all have had K–12 experience.

The most basic theme is that successful instruction builds on student strengths. Even without information from individual assessments, teachers should realize that these students have demonstrated normal cognitive abilities. After all, they “come into our classrooms with two self-extending systems in place — making sense of the world and knowing how to learn language” (p. 105). And teachers can observe at close hand the students’ special interests that are also strengths to build on. Too often, immigrant students are shunted into dumbed-down remedial lessons, when what they need are programs designed for accelerated learning and catching up.

Second, throughout the book, the emphasis is on reading comprehension. Research cited here consistently shows that when literacy rates for English language learners (ELLs) are compared with their native-English peers, the largest gap is in text comprehension and not in the subskills of alphabetic correspondence between sounds and letters. Yet those subskills, instead of text comprehension, are the focus of too many remedial lessons. Of course, subskills are important; but as this book shows in various chapters, they can be embedded in text comprehension activities like the teacher’s orientation to a new book to be read by the children or a new book for a guided reading group.

Observation in a South African classroom convinced me that some of the suggestions in this book, while at the first reading applying most obviously to early literacy learners, can be adapted for students in older grades and even high school. I was in an independent school in Johannesburg in 1993, 6 months before the historic first national election. The South African teacher, Bernadette Mosala, had created this school some years earlier when education for black South African students in the townships had ceased to function. She created her own curriculum materials for the students who, she said, “could easily have been my grandchildren,” and for the other teachers on her staff. As she showed me one of her workbooks, I realized immediately that her introduction to the novels they would read was very reminiscent of the book orientation in Reading Recovery, but now focusing on the genre structure of narratives, and more academic and literary language.

Third, successful text comprehension depends on knowledge of words and the concepts they express. It also depends on student understanding of multiword phrases, clauses, and sentences — what we call grammatical structure. As English language users ourselves, we are much more apt to be aware of vocabulary items that may be unfamiliar to students, and professional development has probably given that special attention, too. But English grammatical structures are transparent to us; we read through them, like clean eyeglasses, to the author’s intended meaning.

For ELL instruction, however, we have to make those structures opaque, like smudges on our glasses.
have to find ways to bring those structures to the attention of our students. Professional development workshops are less apt to provide help here, perhaps for fear that if “grammar” is mentioned the results will be an unhelpful and frequently erroneous drill on parts of speech, and “rules” like never start a sentence with *but* or end it with a prepositional phrase. This wonderful book avoids these simplistic traps—for teachers and students alike—and throughout describes sounder alternatives.

Fourth is the reciprocal relation between learning to write and learning to read. For students as for us, learning in either one creates resources for the other. Readers familiar with the individualized Reading Recovery lessons for the hardest-to-teach young literacy learners will know that writing—composing an oral sentence as well as writing out the words—should be a daily activity. (It was in that South African classroom, too.) Classroom teachers can’t give such individualized time and support to a larger group. But several chapters offer suggestions for group teaching, and hopefully teachers will exchange additional ideas with their colleagues.

The fifth and last theme, inherent in all those above, is the importance of oral language development. That means valuing, in a word, discussion—talk between teachers and students, and among the students in pairs and small groups—about the ideas in the texts they have read and the compositions they will write. Such talking times provide what several of the chapter authors aptly call “front loading”—fixing in students’ minds not just ideas but their specific expression in words and sequential language structure, thereby creating contexts in the mind for the literacy tasks at hand.

It even helps this mental planting process to take time for students to practice saying the hitherto unfamiliar words and rehearsing the newly articulated sentences. Yes, repetition—often dismissed as a hangover from outdated “drill and kill” teaching methods—does have a contemporary constructivist value.

As self-reflection can help us realize from our own behavior as adults, satisfying and productive conversations both depend on and reinforce the social relationships being established in each community. Whether immigrant students are considered “one of us” or “outsiders” can be mightily influenced by how the teacher expresses her own implicit attitudes toward them. One chapter terms such behavior, whether inclusive or exclusive, “positioning” and argues convincingly that it affects how students talk with each other and how individual students develop their personal sense of agency in this new environment. Positioning theory is increasingly prominent in academic classroom research, but it is still rare, and all the more welcome, in a book on literacy development for teachers.

Now, at the end, for the paradox. I have been stressing, as does the book, the challenge of supporting the literacy development of students who are themselves immigrants, know little or no English, and will have had varied amounts of prior schooling in their home countries, from enriched to none. A front page story in the March 18, 2009, issue of *Education Week* reports a surprising but increasingly well-established fact. As the first paragraph summarizes:

> The academic success, tendency to stay out of trouble, and physical health of children of immigrants to the United States tend to decline significantly from the first to the third generation.

The implication for readers of this book is a further extension. Not only can the basic principles and many specific ideas be applied to older students than are mentioned here. They should also be kept in mind in working with all the students, even if they seem to be fluent in conversational English.

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