

Creating Curricula and Learning Environments To
Most Effectively Teach Multicultural Students
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Introduction

According to the **Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education**, promoting literacy is the most essential component to consider when designing school services for a linguistically challenged and multicultural student population. Educational researchers have demonstrated that all those working with a diverse group of learners have the most success when they consider a number of elements as they design curriculum and instructional material. For the purpose of this discussion, curriculum will be defined as the broad decisions about policy, scheduling, funding, allocation of resources, the physical layout of the facilities and other factors that have a global effect. Curriculum design, also called curriculum organization is defined as the arrangements of the elements of the curriculum into a substantive entity (**Hunkins & Ornstein, 1998**). Instructional design will focus on specific activities, expected outcomes, worksheets, selected reading material, audio-visual material, assessments, evaluations, culminating projects, etc. Instructional design is concerned with the specific activities and materials created and used to teach and measure the goals and specified objectives articulated in the curriculum. It refers to the potential experiences for students. Instructional design determines what teaching methods and materials will best facilitate learning.

It is our mandate as educators to develop plans to address the needs of every student we service. Each of the students we work with has unique cognitive, linguistic,

emotional, and developmental skills and emotional issues of various kinds. To be successful in properly educating this diverse group of students, we need to equip ourselves with an assortment of pedagogical tools and delivery methods.

English Language Learners (ELL's) often present unique academic challenges for a variety of reasons. They are struggling not only with the same academic issues of their fluent English speaking peers, but they often face additional challenges, such as cultural differences, language barriers and racial prejudices.

Educators have a wealth of strategies available to them to effectively teach English Language Learners. Educators benefit their students when they become familiar with as many techniques as possible so that as they work with this diverse population, they can incorporate these methods or any part of them in to their lesson plans. This response will highlight some of the methods or best practices currently being used in classrooms around the world and offer suggestions for creating and implementing a dynamic literacy program designed to service today's diverse ELL population. In addition, current research will be cited that supports the development of a school environment that promotes literacy development in ELL's.

Creating an Environment for Teaching English Language Learners That
Reflects Respect and Understanding for Culture, Language,
Language Acquisition and Literacy

Knowing, understanding and embracing the students we teach are the first steps to creating an environment in which academic progress and achievement can occur. The

environment or climate in which students (and teachers) find themselves has a profound affect on attitudes toward learning (Cambourne, B. 1995, Holdaway, D. 2000), self and collective efficacy (Goddard, R. G., Hoy, W. K., & Hoy, W. A. (2000), social interaction (Trickett, E., & Moos, R. H. (1973), democratic values (Kahne, J., Rodriguez, M., Smith, B., and Thiede, K. (2000), Apple, M., & Beane, J. (1995), Dewey, J. (1916) and ultimately, academic achievement (Gruenert, S. 2005).

Vygotsky claimed that learning is a social endeavor (Vygotsky, L.S. 1978). A well-crafted learning environment (classroom, media center, etc.) capitalizes on this social nature of learning. An environment that is conducive to learning has specific characteristics. Educator, Brian Cambourne has identified 8 learning environment factors or characteristics that promote literacy and academic growth. These factors include: *immersion* – providing the learner with a wealth of literary experiences, *demonstration* - modeling literate actions and activity (formally and informally), *employment* – providing occasions to use and practice newly gained skills on an individual basis or with others, *responsibility* - learners choosing things they will explore intellectually or academically as they continue to be absorbed in displays of literate behaviors, *engagement* – learners actively participating in literacy experiences, *approximations* – learners attempt literacy behaviors at their own developmental levels without being expected to demonstrate total proficiency but using the skills they currently possess, *expectation* – learners are encouraged to believe that they can and will learn and *response* – formal and informal feedback (Cambourne, B. 1995).

Don Holdaway, identified 4 other conditions conducive to learning. He believed they were: *demonstration* - the extensive modeling of skills that results in the learners'

approximating the observed skill, *participation* – learners decide which demonstrations (responsibility) to approximate while the teacher responds in real time formally or informally, *role play or practice* – a style of self-correction and self-response designed to encourage “learning-to-learn,” and *performance* – seeking group acknowledgement not a competition with others (Holdaway, D. 2000).

Some ways to integrate Cambourne’s learning environment factors into the classroom or other programs throughout a school include providing massive amounts of books to ELLs, encouraging “buddy” or “partner” readers, providing books on tape or Podcasts and dual language books, reading to the students, modeling the proper care of books, teaching about fiction, nonfiction, reference material, biographies, etc., teaching the library language and the sections of the library, applying the Zone of Proximal Development theory by knowing students’ literacy levels and providing material just beyond that level and providing the help and encouragement to elevate beyond their current level, allowing for and encouraging students to make their own literature choices in addition to providing required media, encouraging the consumption of a wide range of materials, each student is working at their own pace, exhibiting their own skill level, continuing to model the desired behaviors, monitoring student progress, encouraging project based initiatives that allow for the creation of tangible products, allowing the students to express themselves in the ways that best represent their thinking (apply Multiple Intelligences theory by Gardener), giving specific quantitative and qualitative responses and feedback that inform and encourage the students and encouraging reading, writing, re-writing, performing and producing multimedia, etc. that is relevant to the students’ literacy development.

Strategies for developing an environment sensitive to ELL students:

- Offer special workshops on media center skills
- Create heterogeneous research groups (mix of ethnicity, linguistic and academic abilities)
- Create partnerships with parents, language facilitators, teachers, community members, etc.)
- Staff members work with the classroom teacher to help students access the specific material needed to complete or modify class assignments.
- Encourage ELL students to volunteer in the media center, with Fine Arts teachers, the administration, etc.

Integrating Best Practices and Policy For ELL and Multicultural Students into the Curriculum

There are many published studies and articles that spell out best practices and strategies for promoting literacy development in ELL's and help inform policy makers. Some of the policy makers may want to consider some of the following conclusions of researchers.

Policy Considerations

According to the TESOL Quarterly, well-developed teaching standards need to be linked to English as Second Language (ESL) standards. These standards specify the language competencies ELL students need to master to become proficient in English. These standards have been informed by the work of various national standards groups, such as the English language arts and foreign language standards. These language

standards emphasize the importance of: language as communication, language learning through meaningful and significant use, the individual and societal value of bi- and multilingualism, the role of ESOL students' native languages in their English language and general academic development, cultural, social, and cognitive processes in language and academic development and assessment that respects language and cultural diversity.

Policy makers may also consider the work published by The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE). They have created The Five Standards for Effective Teaching. According to CREDE, these Standards were developed with agreement across cultural, racial and linguistic groups, across age groups, and all subject areas. They reflect the principles of effective pedagogy for mainstream and ELL students. The Standards as articulated by CREDE are: Joint Productive Activity: Teacher and Students Producing Together, Language Development: Developing Language Across the Curriculum, Making Meaning: Connecting School to Students' Lives, Cognitive Challenge: Teaching Complex Thinking and Instructional Conversation: Teaching Through Conversation.

It should be noted that virtually every state either by mandate from The No Child Left Behind Act or as a matter of their own choice offer as policy, the special considerations and accommodations for ELL's and other special needs students.

Best Practices

Researchers at CREDE have studied four programs that meet the diverse and complex needs of ELLs: (1) newcomer programs, (2) transitional bilingual education, (3) developmental bilingual education, and (4) two-way immersion. These programs all have varying degrees of success, depending on how they are implemented and the situation in which they are used. Researchers maintain that successful programs need parental involvement and professional development for all staff members that interact with ELL

students. Proficiency in both first and second languages is encouraged for academic purposes, and the application of assessment methods tied to educational objectives should inform instructional design. Effective instructional design should consider developmentally appropriate curriculum and set high standards. The use of sheltered instruction (SI) is encouraged (Echevarria, J. & Short, D. 1999). SI integrates content instruction and language. Its purpose is to promote English language acquisition while making academic content accessible to ELL students.

There are two strategies considered best practices by some and worst practices by others. One involves the use of phonics or whole-language to teach reading and the other is the controversial use of dual language instruction. Each has strong advocates and detractors. First, let's consider the whole language – phonics debate. The basic difference is that the phonics approach looks at words in isolation, tears them apart to analyze their structure and examines the rules for pronunciation while the whole language approach looks at words in their entirety and in the context in which they are found. Whole language is more of a holistic approach to learning language whereas phonics looks at words as individual components of language (Larson-Freeman, D. (2000). There are factors to consider when looking at which approach is best for teaching ELLs. There are many scholars, educators, curriculum specialists and others that feel strongly that phonics instruction is superior to whole language or vice versa. There are others that advocate for a blend of the two methods. Readers do recognize familiar words as a whole. Many students learn to read by using the words they have learned. How would a student read unfamiliar words? Readers need strategies for deconstructing written words and need to comprehend their meaning in context to the text (Baer, T. & Dow, R. 2007).

Developmental bilingual education (DBE) is a teaching method that emphasizes academic instruction for ELLs using both English and their first language. It seeks full proficiency in the two languages. The goal is academic instruction in the first language, along with oral English language development, starting in kindergarten or first grade. Each year, one grade is added. Subjects are taught in English and L1 throughout the elementary level. Learners are instructed in English, while simultaneously working in their first language. Many feel students should be immersed in English only. Others argue that in the 3 to 5 years it takes to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), students will fall far behind academically (Cummins). We can be fooled by the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) that students more quickly obtain and think they are ready linguistically to perform to their academic best.

There are many strategies identified as effective and best practices for teaching ELLs. One example is the Audiolingual method. The Audiolingual method is rooted in the principles of behavioral psychology. It modified much of the ideology and actions of the Direct Method. This was a reaction to the lack of verbal communication skills of the Reading Approach. Content is presented as dialogue. The philosophy of this method is that language learning is rooted in forming natural linguistic habits. The method is dependent on mimicry, memorization of set phrases and emphasis on repetition and word substitutions within sentences. Sentence structures are sequenced and taught individually. Structural patterns are taught using repetitive drills. Minimal grammatical explanations are provided. The strategy is for grammar to be taught inductively.

Another method is The Silent Way. This method was developed by Caleb Gattegno. The “silence” refers to the teacher not the students. This method relies heavily

on speaking and using the language as a tool for conversational communication. The students are encouraged to speak and interact as much as possible. The strategies include the use of graphics, manipulatives, and other media. The designer of this method has a background in teaching math using hands-on material and incorporated their use in to this method.

Dr. Howard Gardner (1983), a professor of education at Harvard University developed the theory of multiple intelligences. He theorized that the traditional notion of intelligence, based on I.Q. testing was limited in its ability to give a complete picture of individuals. Dr. Gardner proposed that there are a number of different intelligences to account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults. Dr. Gardner believed that these intelligences could be enhanced through training and practice. This is quite a departure from other psychological theories that believe that intelligence (I.Q.) is set and fixed. A very important element of the theory of multiple intelligences (when applied to assessment) is that it helps mitigate cultural and other biases inherent in many standardized tests. This aspect is particularly important to the discussion of multiculturalism and the pedagogy of teaching English Language Learners (Richards, J., & Rogers, T., 2001). There are many other strategies such as The Lexical Approach, Suggestopedia and Community Language Learning.

Teacher Resources

Policies are in place to provide language facilitators and supplemental staff for working with ELL students. Teachers can partner with them to develop a plan that best addresses the needs of the student. Teachers may also receive additional training in the

form of professional development or college classes. It is also beneficial to partner with parents and others in the community that can provide insight in to the student's academic and cultural context. There is a wealth of written material produced on this subject. This is a well-researched subject. Educators can access research articles, journal articles, books and much more published material to develop an understanding of how to best educate ELL's. There are professional organizations and informative conferences that are available for anyone seeking to equip themselves for this task.

