

Effective Teaching Strategies for English Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper provides effective strategies for early childhood teachers to use with children who are English language learners (ELLs). The strategies were compiled from interviews with 20 early childhood educators from two culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Massachusetts. Emphasis was placed on the strategies that the greatest number of teachers from both school districts identified as effective. These teaching strategies seek to help ELL students make connections between content and language, and support their communication and social interactions.

Introduction

In today's classrooms, academic and social success often hinges on a child's language abilities. Due to recent changes in bilingual education law, children who need extra support in second language acquisition have been mainstreamed into classrooms where the teachers do not necessarily have the resources or the support to meet their needs. Without this support, the children who are struggling to acquire even basic skills in their second language begin to fall behind academically, creating an achievement gap that only widens over time (Harris, 2003). Providing teachers with adequate tools and techniques to support these learners is essential. To that end, we interviewed early childhood teachers in two communities with large English language learner (ELL) populations to see what strategies they found to be effective in working with ELL students.

The Present Study

In April 2004, we contacted and interviewed early childhood educators from public school systems in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and Brookline, Massachusetts. We wanted to find out what strategies were being used by practitioners working with ELLs from two school districts with very different demographics, and which strategies they found to be most effective. We interviewed 10 teachers from each district and asked them two open-ended questions about their teaching practice. The first question asked what strategies they found to be effective in promoting language acquisition with their ELL students. The second question asked why they felt these strategies worked. In order to identify whether successful strategies had a developmental component, we spoke to teachers of different grades, from prekindergarten through second grade (see Tables 2, 3 & 4).

These school districts were selected because they are typical of American society in being culturally and linguistically diverse. For example, a kindergarten teacher from Chelsea stated that “in my classroom, at least 90% of the students have come from a different country and speak a first language other than English. I am constantly modifying my lessons to meet the needs of those students. I also create lessons that are meaningful to them by finding out about their culture and background.” Research indicates, “Language diversity is a fact in US schools. Approximately twenty percent of students speak a language other than English in the home” (Lira, Serpa, & Stokes, 1998). Massachusetts Department of Education (1996) statistics stated that in 1995, 66% of the Chelsea student population spoke a language other than English at home. In contrast, Brookline reported 31%. Another difference between the two districts is that in Chelsea 80.3% of its residents are indicated as low-income while Brookline consists of 9.6% low-income residents. For the 2002–2003 school year, the Chelsea public school district reported 15.4% of its students as limited English proficient. The city’s enrollment is 6.9% African American, 5.2% Asian, 72% Hispanic, 0.2% Native American, and 15.8% non-Hispanic White (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003b). Brookline, on the other hand, reported 8.7% of its students as limited English proficient, while its enrollment is 9.7% African American, 18.9% Asian, 5.7% Hispanic, 0.2% Native American, and 65.5% White (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003a). Both school systems are striving to meet the needs of their large populations of ELLs. Considering the diversity of these two districts, a common challenge for the teachers is finding ways to support the emerging language of the children in their classroom.

One way to support a child’s emergent language is to choose a strategy that is developmentally appropriate for the child’s language acquisition stage. It is necessary for teachers to have some knowledge as to how children typically acquire language. One teacher from Chelsea told us her view on language

acquisition. She said, “I have been teaching ELL students for 20 years. I previously taught kindergarten for many years but have now settled into prekindergarten. I notice that with the prekindergarten children who are just entering school for the first time, those who are coming from homes where English is never spoken are often silent for long periods of time. Some of them are quiet for a few days, while others go through a silent period for months. During these times, I do most of the talking. At the early level, their language skills are being acquired through mostly listening.” This is why understanding the stages of emergent language is crucial for today’s early childhood teachers. Regardless of the grade level they teach, educators often have students in different stages of language development. There are many strategies available to them, and by understanding what stage of second language acquisition each child is in, a teacher is able to choose the strategies he or she will use with students more effectively.

Although there are many different theories about second language acquisition, one theory, “the natural approach” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, as cited in Lake & Pappamihel, 2003), provides a practical structure for teachers juggling the needs of native speakers of English and multilevel ELLs. This is a framework for children who are ELLs. The natural approach divides the stages of second language acquisition into preproduction, early production, speech emergence, and intermediate fluency (see Table 1). Although learners move through these stages at different rates, they do so in essentially sequential order. By understanding learner characteristics and teaching strategies appropriate for each stage, teachers can easily integrate support and activities for ELLs into regular instruction.

The teachers interviewed used many of the strategies mentioned by Krashen and Terrell (1983, as cited in Lake & Pappamihel, 2003), as well as many they did not mention. In fact, the 20 teachers in the sample mentioned 28 different strategies that they found effective in working with the ELLs in their classrooms. On average, teachers mentioned approximately 10 strategies each during their interviews. Our data showed that some strategies were overwhelmingly used by all of the teachers, while others varied depending on the grade level, specific community, or individual practitioner. The teachers collectively pointed out that they found the most success in working with ELLs when they varied their strategies. Different strategies were used that would best meet the needs of each child as an individual. The strategies fell into three main categories: strategies for engaging learners emotionally (see Table 2), strategies for teaching language specifically (see Table 3), and strategies for teaching in general (see Table 4).

Four strategies were named by the majority of the teachers as being effective in general: gestures and visual cues; repetition and opportunities for practicing skills; use of objects, real props, and hands-on materials; and multisensory approaches. A Chelsea teacher talked about how she uses these

Table 1

Strategies of Second Language Acquisition

<p style="text-align: center;">A: Preproduction</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listening 2. Student responds nonverbally 3. Ten hours to 6 months of exposure to English <p>Teaching strategies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ninety percent teacher talk 2. Total Physical Response (TPR) 3. Modeling 4. Active student involvement 5. Yes/no questions 6. Use of pictures 7. Use of props and hands-on activities 	<p style="text-align: center;">B: Early production</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continued listening 2. Student responds with one or two words, and nonverbally 3. Three to 6 months to 1 year of exposure to English <p>Teaching strategies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fifty percent to 60% teacher talk 2. TPR with responses—verbal and nonverbal 3. Answering who, what, where, and either/or questions with one-word answers 4. Role-playing 5. Completing sentences 6. Questions to be answered with phrases (e.g., Where . . . ? In the house.) 7. Labeling (older learners)
<p style="text-align: center;">C: Speech emergence</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sight vocabulary (older learners) 2. Students speak in phrases and sentences 3. One to 3 years of exposure to English <p>Teaching strategies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forty percent teacher talk 2. Scaffolding and expansion 3. Poetry, songs, and chants 4. Predicting 5. Comparing 6. Describing 7. Social interaction (cooperative learning with information gaps) 8. How and why questions 9. Language experience approach 10. Problem solving 11. Group discussion 12. Labeling 13. Listing, charting, graphing 	<p style="text-align: center;">D: Intermediate fluency</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. May seem fluent, but needs to expand vocabulary and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency 2. Engages in dialogue 3. Three to 4 years of exposure to English <p>Teaching strategies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ten percent teacher talk 2. Essay writing 3. Analyzing charts and graphs 4. More complex problem solving and evaluating 5. Continuing with how and why questions; students must research and support their answers 6. Pre-writing activities—writing process, peer critiquing, etc. 7. Literacy analysis

Note. Adapted from Krashen and Terrell (1983) by Lake and Pappamihel (2003).

strategies with all of her students: “At the prekindergarten grade level, I find that having real concrete objects benefits all of the children. Some really good conversations have begun just by my bringing in something that the children recognize. The stories will begin! I encourage the students to talk and tell me stories about their lives. This usually opens the door for me to ask questions and keep the discussion going. And I always use multisensory approaches. All of the children love to get messy when I put out shaving cream or hair gel for them to practice drawing letters in. Even when we go outside, I’ll have the children form letters and numbers with their bodies. They always connect it to later lessons when I say, ‘Do you remember when we made the Number 5 outside with our bodies?’ In my experiences, the strategies I use with my ELL kids are beneficial to my English speakers as well.”

All of the teachers interviewed mentioned that gestures and visual cues were effective enough to mention. One prekindergarten teacher in Chelsea said, “When asking the children to line up to go to the playground, I find that pointing to a picture of the playground while saying the word reinforces that it is time to go outside.” This same teacher also praised the thumbs-up or thumbs-down gesture as a successful way to indicate to the child whether he or she was acting appropriately. One of the prekindergarten teachers from Brookline there said that she paired physical gestures with language through songs, poems, and chants to teach vocabulary, including body parts and positional concepts. She felt that this helped children “make the connection” between the language and the concrete actions or objects.

Research supports these teachers’ positive experiences with the incorporation of physical gestures:

Total physical response (TPR), a well-known technique in the field of teaching English as a Second Language, involves active participation of students who learn new action words by watching and imitating as the teacher says and physically demonstrates each word; this facilitates more rapid comprehension and better retention of vocabulary. Richards (1975) asserted that it is clearly better to use actions paired with pictures than merely to translate English words. (Schunk, 1999, p. 113)

With frequent use of movement and repetition of new words, children will be motivated and eventually begin to use the new language on their own.

Repetition gives children the opportunity to practice their skills and use new language often. Most of the teachers felt that they used repetition frequently and with great success. It helped students in adhering to routines, following schedules, and participating in activities. Often, repetition can be used to increase a child’s comfort level within the classroom, which opens the door for learning. In referring to Table 4, repetition and opportunity for practicing skills was a mentioned strategy by all of the Chelsea teachers from prekindergarten through Grade 2 and by seven out of ten teachers from Brookline.

Table 2
Strategies for Engaging English Language Learners Emotionally

Strategies	Brookline teachers								Chelsea teachers																
	PK	P	K	K	K	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	P	P	P	K	K	K	1	1	1	2	2	
Connect with parents															X										
Familiarity with native language to increase child's comfort level		X	X	X											X										
Positive reinforcement	X	X											X				X								
Personal conversations																									X

Note. P = prekindergarten; K = kindergarten; 1 = first grade; 2 = second grade.

Table 3
Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners Language Specifically

Strategies	Brookline teachers								Chelsea teachers												
	P	P	K	K	1	1	1	1	2	P	P	P	P	K	K	K	1	1	2	2	
Adding to language to build longer utterances	X		X																		
Encouraging kids to use words in context														X				X			
Target a few specific words within a story															X	X	X				
Opportunities to speak and listen		X	X	X							X	X	X							X	X
Preview books before reading		X											X								

Note. P = prekindergarten; K = kindergarten; 1 = first grade; 2 = second grade.

Table 4
Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners in General

Strategies	Brookline teachers								Chelsea teachers								
	P	P	K	K	1	1	2	2	P	P	P	K	K	1	1	2	2
Repetition/opportunities for practicing skills		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gestures/sign language/visual cues	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Music and movement					X				X								
Use of objects/real props/hands-on materials	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Adhere to routine	X	X	X						X								
Task breakdown/step-by-step directions	X	X	X						X	X			X				
Partners/role modeling/peer modeling	X		X		X							X		X	X	X	X
Appropriate wait time to allow for language processing	X	X					X	X							X		
Use of highly emotional language/dramatics	X	X			X											X	

Table 4, cont.,
Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners in General

Strategies	Brookline teachers						Chelsea teachers												
	P	P	K	K	1	1	1	1	2	2	P	P	K	K	1	1	2	2	
Direct teaching/skill-drill	X	X	X		X						X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Thematic units	X	X	X								X	X	X	X					
Multisensory approaches	X			X	X			X	X		X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Reflection/check back on children's learning											X								
Small groups	X	X	X	X	X				X						X	X	X	X	X
One-on-one support									X						X	X			
Questioning for clarification and comprehension					X					X									X
Build off children's past experiences and prior knowledge	X		X		X					X							X		
Technology/videos																	X	X	X
Engage learners emotionally															X				

Note. P = prekindergarten; K = kindergarten; 1 = first grade; 2 = second grade.

In analyzing our data, we noticed that only one out of twenty teachers interviewed mentioned connecting with parents or having personal conversations with their students to be an effective strategy (see Table 2). In addition, two out of twenty teachers mentioned previewing books before reading as an effective strategy (see Table 3). We wonder whether the teachers interviewed are in fact practicing these strategies in their teaching and just neglected to mention them because all the forementioned strategies are essential to all early childhood educators.

One resource center for early child educators recommends that teachers choose stories that have one repetitive phrase or sentence, and provide many opportunities for children to practice that phrase in art, dramatic play, and rereading a book many, many times. This allows children to participate and to build language, and the center states, "ALL children like repetition and knowing how to respond" (Tennessee Delta Child Care Resource Center, 2002, p. 2). This type of repetition often comes about naturally when teachers are taking a multisensory approach or doing a thematic unit. Eighty-five percent of teachers interviewed for our study mentioned repetition as a key strategy in their classroom. For example, a Brookline kindergarten teacher stated that "repetition of activities gave children the opportunities to practice skills so they can master them."

A teacher from Chelsea also shared her own experience using a book that contains repetitive terms. After reading the story *Short Train, Long Train* (Asch, 1992), the children in her prekindergarten classroom compared pictures of objects that were long and short, sorted objects into groups relating to their length, used tubes of different lengths at the sand table to make tunnels, used long and short blocks in building, cut ribbon and yarn of different lengths and compared them, and sorted themselves by long hair and short hair. The teacher explained that through the constant repetition of the terms *long* and *short*, the children began using the vocabulary on their own, therefore showing their mastery of the concept.

This teacher used a variety of props to help her children explore the concept of long and short. Many of the other teachers also found the use of objects, props, and hands-on materials to be another effective strategy. Seventy-five percent of teachers interviewed mentioned that the children were more engaged in the activities and lessons when they used objects and props that were authentic or real concrete objects. One of the prekindergarten teachers from Brookline had been extremely successful when she used puppets to teach language for social situations, such as greetings and sharing. Research explains that "hands-on experiences, such as the use of manipulatives, can help clarify meaning" (Kober, 2003). A second-grade teacher, also from Brookline, felt that using concrete objects was beneficial for teaching key vocabulary, and using hands-on materials for math activities helped the children learn specific concepts.

Concrete objects also play a key role in a multisensory approach to teaching. Although fewer teachers mentioned using a multisensory approach, 60% felt that it was effective enough to mention. One of the reasons a multisensory approach works for learners is the variety of experiences it provides, since no two students learn the same way: “The more diverse learning experiences we provide our students, the more robust their education will be, [and] the more ways they will learn each topic” (Kagan & Kagan, 1998, as cited in Haley, 2004, p. 165).

A Chelsea kindergarten teacher talked about her use of the story *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1994). After reading the story, she introduced the children to tiny caterpillars. Then, over the course of several weeks, the children watched the caterpillars grow bigger, spin their chrysalises, and emerge as butterflies. The students were encouraged to touch the caterpillars, draw pictures of them, crawl like caterpillars, taste the fruits the caterpillar ate in the story, and eventually go outdoors to release the butterflies. One of the Brookline kindergarten teachers felt it was important to use a multisensory approach because it “targets all learning styles, and the children are able to make connections faster.”

Some of the strategies varied by grade level. For instance, the use of thematic units was mentioned by every single prekindergarten teacher and most kindergarten teachers but was not mentioned by a single first- or second-grade teacher. Although none of the first- and second-grade teachers mentioned thematic units, it is an appropriate strategy to use with those grade levels, as one report states:

The incorporation of age- and language-appropriate thematic literature into the early childhood curriculum can stimulate content-based academic learning for English language learners (ELLs). The systematic approach is particularly beneficial to young ELLs ages 3 through 8 because it provides background knowledge and cultural information along with opportunities to hear, speak, and interact with carefully crafted language in thematic and story context. (Smallwood, 2002)

Often, thematic units will incorporate the strategies of repetition, hands-on learning experiences, gestures, and multisensory approach, because of the way the thematic unit content and vocabulary “[cross] all areas of the curriculum” (Brookline prekindergarten teacher). Thematic instruction creates a framework in which students can use both oral and written language for learning content. (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001, pp. 78–79). Thematic units give children more chances to connect to the information being taught.

Conclusion

Our research indicates that the teachers we interviewed were using a variety of strategies that they found to be effective when teaching their ELLs. Even more importantly, many of these strategies were deemed effective by teachers from both school systems who work with culturally and linguistically diverse populations. In classrooms where most of the students are native English speakers, teaching strategies may differ. Less time might be spent on teaching vocabulary concepts with the strategies discussed in our tables. The teachers mentioned that the main goals of using any of these strategies include helping children to make the connection between content and language, and providing children with the tools they need to use their acquired language to interact and communicate with others around them. Teachers must research the way ELLs acquire their second language and choose the appropriate strategies to support each child as an individual. Research on this subject is constantly emerging and changing. In reflecting on the information we compiled while writing this paper, we can conclude that the teachers interviewed used a variety of strategies while working with their ELL students. Many of the strategies they used were found to be effective with all of their students, even those whose native language is English. As we indicated earlier, we feel that any teacher working with ELL students should do research on their own to find out how all children acquire language. We hope that after reading this article, teachers will try some of the strategies used by the teachers we interviewed, and that they will find these strategies successful.

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