

Keys to Success for Bilingual Students with Limited Formal Schooling

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Abstract

As the number of immigrant students in U.S. public schools has grown, so has the number of English learners who arrive with little previous schooling. These are often the same students whose limited education has been interrupted. In 1993 an estimated 20% of those identified as limited English proficient (LEP) in high schools and 12% of those in middle school had missed two or more years of schooling. It is critical that teachers have some understanding of effective strategies for working with older English learners with limited and/or interrupted formal schooling.

When they start school, these students are already significantly behind. They have been labeled as overage, preliterate, or low literacy LEP, but whatever labels schools might use, these students have needs that are generally not met by the instructional designs of regular English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual programs in most school districts. This article describes how one bilingual teacher has successfully worked in a multi-age 4th, 5th, and 6th grade classroom to meet the academic needs of newcomer Spanish, Mixteco, and Triqui-speaking students with limited previous schooling. This teacher uses many different research-based strategies in the classroom to provide her students with the keys to succeed academically. By using these strategies, she gives her students a positive start as they move into secondary school taught entirely in English.

Sandra, a bilingual Spanish/English teacher, has taught fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in a rural farming community in California for three years. Her students, who are almost all newcomers to this country, speak Spanish, Mixteco,

or Triqui, languages of indigenous groups of southern Mexico. Most of Sandra's students arrived here with little to no previous schooling. Few are literate in their first language and most lack confidence in themselves as learners.

Since many of the children are from migrant families, once they start studying in the United States, their schooling is often interrupted. Work takes families to northern states from May to early October, and family obligations take them back to Mexico in November and December. Sandra's challenge, then, is to provide these students with the literacy skills and academic concepts they have missed so that they can succeed in junior high and high school classes.

The National Clearinghouse of Bilingual Education has projected there are more than 4 million Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in the United States for 1999–2000. In California, this population is presently more than 1.4 million, the largest in the country. California's student population, now with a plurality of 40% Hispanic, will grow more than 15% in the next 10 years (Ruenzel, 1998). The students that Sandra teaches are part of the growing number of English learners who come to school with little schooling that has often been interrupted. Fleischman and Hopstock (1993) estimated that 20% of those identified as LEP in high schools and 12% of those in middle schools had missed two or more years of schooling. With over a million more English learners in schools now than in 1993, it is clear that teachers like Sandra working with older English learners must have effective strategies for working with the large number of students with limited and/or interrupted formal schooling.

Who Are These Students?

Students with limited formal schooling have been called by different names and given different labels. They are sometimes referred to as "overage" because they need instruction usually given to younger students (Moran, Villamil Tinajero, Stobbe, & Tinajero 1993; Paiewonsky, 1997). They are also called "preliterates" because they struggle with reading and writing in both their native language and English (Schifini, 1996). Because some of these high and middle school students score as low as second- and third-grade level on standardized tests, these students have also been called low literacy LEP students or late emergent readers (Jiménez, 1997).

Whatever label schools might use, students like those in Sandra's classroom have needs that are generally not met by the instructional designs of regular English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual programs in most school districts (Short, 1997). When they start school, they are already significantly behind. Paiewonsky (1997) reported that in the state of New York students like these enroll in school with at least two years fewer schooling than their peers, or they are functioning at least two years below grade level in reading and mathematics. Sandra's students all struggle academically in both their first language and English. Two of the 24 students in Sandra's multi-age fourth-

through sixth-grade class this year had no previous formal schooling. Most of the others had only two or three years of education in Mexico. Those who can read and write in Spanish do so at a low level. Sandra has only a short time to help her students acquire the academic language they need for middle and high school content area classes (Cummins, 1996). When possible, Sandra tries to keep her students for at least two years so she can provide them with first language support as they develop academic English. In the next sections, we describe how she does this.

Expectations, Environment, and Routines

Sandra's classroom is a learning community. All of her students work cooperatively with her and with each other as they read, write, and learn together. This community did not just happen. Sandra created it by drawing on what she knew about second language acquisition, bilingual education, and literacy. Her expectations for her students are high and she does not allow them to make excuses for not doing their work or not participating in activities. She provides many opportunities for her students to be in charge of their own learning, and they respond with hard work (Moran et al., 1993). Sandra insists on this: "When my kids do not do what they are supposed to do, I let them know. They know by my voice and a look from me if they aren't doing what they are supposed to be doing." Students respond positively because they know that Sandra wants them to succeed academically. Both Sandra and her students know that success will only come if everyone is fully engaged in meaningful learning.

The physical environment of the classroom promotes literacy and learning (Schifini, 1997). Every portion of the small classroom and three adjoining alcoves are filled with professional- and teacher-made posters, class-made books, student artwork, song and poetry charts, a computer, a listening center, a board game, an activity corner, a math section, and a science corner. There are books everywhere, including many literature and content books in card racks and in large accessible, open boxes. The classroom belongs to students, and they all know where materials and books are kept. They also know that they all have the responsibility of taking care of what is there.

Students in Sandra's classroom understand how their classroom is set up and what routines to expect as they engage in learning. Since her students have had little previous schooling and suffer from various degrees of culture shock, Sandra has found that having classroom routines helps them adjust to school and concentrate on learning to read, write, and problem solve. Her students must not only develop literacy in their first language but also prepare themselves to survive academically in English. Therefore, the daily routine includes many opportunities for students to develop literacy in their first and second language while learning language through academic content (Freeman & Freeman, in press). Figure 1 shows Sandra's daily schedule.

Figure 1. Sandra's daily schedule.

8:10-8:30	News of the day Attendance Calendar Date Song of the Week
8:30-9:00	Writers Workshop
9:00-9:10	Writers Workshop Sharing Time
9:10-9:45	Read Aloud/ Shared Reading Phonemic Awareness (P.E. twice a week)
9:45-10:15	Recess
10:15-11:50	Centers (students spend 20 minutes per center) Math/ listening/ silent reading/ Computers/art/guided reading Comprehension strategies
11:50-12:50	Lunch
12:50-1:30	Complete centers
1:30-1:50	DEAR time/ Reader's Theatre
1:50-2:30	Math
2:30-3:00	Science
3:00-3:05	Dismissal

Sandra's students frequently work in heterogeneous groups so students with different talents can share their knowledge and help others. Sandra also includes many opportunities for her students to use different modalities as they learn (Moran et al., 1993). For example, her Mixteco students, who have had little schooling, shine when illustrating publications. When students work in centers, Sandra is also sure to pair them so that a strong student can help a student who needs more support.

Whenever possible, Sandra encourages students to take responsibility for leading activities. Students lead the review of the calendar, which includes writing pertinent information on the white board. Since her students are all English learners who need to develop literacy, Sandra has them sing daily as one student tracks the words of each song on a large poster.

Sandra also provides ample time daily for students to read and write. She reads to and with students several times during the day. Sandra has collected multiple copies of books so that during shared reading, she and her students can read together limited-text books, poetry, and chapter books. During guided reading Sandra works with different groups, supporting early readers with high interest limited-text books that have predictable patterns. She engages

her more proficient readers in literature studies with chapter books. As they discuss these books, Sandra models strategies for increasing comprehension. She encourages students to analyze texts and think critically.

Sandra helps her students focus on the graphophonic system as a source of cues for constructing meaning. One of her centers is a CD-ROM program that has many activities with a focus on letter patterns, sounds, and spellings. Sandra knows that phonics programs in English are difficult for her students because their pronunciation of English is not yet conventional (Freeman & Freeman, 1999). She worries that too much focus on phonics will cause her students to lose the emphasis on meaning they need. Students need to develop reading strategies beyond sounding out words in both their primary language and English. For students spend much of the day reading in Spanish and English during guided reading and shared reading. Sandra teaches mini lessons to help students become more proficient readers, and she uses other research-based techniques, such as the language experience approach (Jiménez, 1997; Moran et al., 1993; Schifini, 1997). She also provides ample time for students to choose books and engage in free voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993).

Organizing Around Themes: Plants and Seeds Unit

A daily routine helps students feel comfortable in school and focus on the academic content and concepts being taught. Sandra also believes that organizing around themes is important for her older emergent readers. She knows that these students do not come to school knowing what many mainstream students do, but they do bring with them world knowledge that can be the starting point of theme study (Moran et al., 1993). Organizing around themes is especially important for underschooled students because all areas of the curriculum are interrelated and vocabulary is repeated naturally in different content areas. When the content draws on students' background and they can make sense of it, students are more engaged and thus their experience leads to success (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

Sandra explains why she often begins her year with a unit on plants and seeds:

Since I receive mostly migrant students that have a strong agriculture and farming background, I decided to use what they bring to school and to include this unit in my curriculum. This unit has two clear purposes for me. First it helps me draw on students' prior knowledge and personal experiences. It is meaningful for them since it directly relates to their lives. Second, this topic presents concepts that they may have missed in previous years of limited schooling.

The plants and seeds theme is part of a broader theme that is developed in a time frame of 10 to 12 weeks and includes food, nutrition, and health. Sandra connects these topics to each other and to her students' lives: "Each

topic flows into the next, giving the students the opportunity to develop vocabulary in the target language while they are gaining the concepts in Spanish.” She begins with seeds, which naturally moves into plants, and explains that, “Because plants are the main source of our daily diet, I introduce the topic of food and nutrition.” She brings the cycle to completion by helping her students see that good nutrition depends on the plants and crops their families provide for everyone.

In fact, Sandra includes the contributions of the students’ families from the beginning. She introduces the theme by sending home an interview form about plant growth and care in California’s central valley. Some of the questions are: What seeds are planted in the valley? What time of year are they planted? How are the plants cared for? When are the plants harvested? The importance of this introductory activity cannot be underestimated. Sandra explains:

It is incredible the response that I have and the quality of information that the parents and students bring to the activity. The students are proud of their knowledge and that of their parents. The information they bring enriches me with knowledge that I don’t have.

Students participate in a variety of activities during the unit. They often do a KWL chart, listing what they *know*, what they *want* to know, and what they have *learned*. Art projects using seeds and dried plants help students express meaning through different modalities. Students develop vocabulary in Spanish and English as they classify seeds and plants and grow plants in various environments. For one science activity, students grow hanging gardens from root vegetables such as carrots and observe roots hanging around the room. During another science project students grow carrot tops by setting the top of a cut-off carrot in water and covering it with a plastic glass. Students also observe how plants grow in sand and make their own pocket gardens by planting seeds in wet paper towels in a plastic bag. They observe and record the gardens daily and then graph both stem and root growth. A plant absorption activity makes clear the concept of how stems provide plants with nutrients. These activities provide Sandra’s students with opportunities for increasing their vocabulary as they discuss, for improving their reading skills as they gather information, and for refining their writing as they record and explain what they have learned.

An ABC activity, which Sandra leads at some point during each new theme, is useful for developing both vocabulary and knowledge of letter-sound relationships. Students brainstorm words they know that are related to their unit of study and that begin with the different letters of the alphabet. As students call out words in Spanish or English, Sandra writes them on the overhead under the appropriate letter. This simple activity helps students focus on initial letters in words in both languages. For beginning readers, this connection between letters and sounds is an important first step.

When brainstorming alphabet words for the plants and seeds unit, students volunteered plant and seed words for each letter, and Sandra and the rest of the class helped them decide if those words fit. Sometimes students called out farm animals and were reminded by peers that those were not plants or seeds. Sometimes students were confused by first letter sounds. For example, one student offered *haba* (bean) for the letter “a.” This provided an opportunity for discussion of the silent “h” in Spanish. When the class arrived at the letter “e” one student suggested “egg,” another farm product that is not a seed or plant. However, Sandra pointed out there was an eggplant, *berenjena* in Spanish, and this could go on the list. Because students know about plants and seeds, they often have stories to tell during this activity. In the discussion of the letter “c,” students came up with “carrots” and “corn,” two words in English, and then someone suggested “cactus” in Spanish. This reminded one student of the maguey, and he enthusiastically described to the class the process of making mescal and tequila from that cactus plant. The word “cactus” can also be a word in English and this gave Sandra an opportunity to point out these cognates. Sandra uses this activity often because it helps her students come up with different names for the same concepts and thus they expand their vocabulary in Spanish and English.

Materials choice is critical for Sandra’s students. She chooses engaging literature and content books that have characteristics to support student reading (Freeman & Freeman, 1997; Schifini, 1997). Predictability is important, and books can be predictable in various ways. Sandra looks for books that develop key concepts and connect to students’ experiences. Books with repetitive patterns, rhyme, or rhythm also support struggling readers. Engaging books with pictures or art that clarify the text support readers. Appendix A lists the books that Sandra uses during her plant and seeds unit.

Conclusion

Sandra uses many different research-based strategies in her classroom. They are the keys that she hopes will help her students succeed academically. She creates a classroom community where all students are accepted and respected. She holds high expectations for every student. She increases their chance for success by following a daily routine and organizing around a theme that builds on her students’ background knowledge and experiences. She has found materials that are appropriate for her students and that relate to the themes. By using these strategies, Sandra gives her late emergent readers a positive start as they move into secondary school taught entirely in English. She recognizes that her students face real challenges, and she would like to see changes in the school system that would result in greater support for her students. However, she knows that she is doing all she can to give them the tools to compete academically as they advance in their schooling.

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Appendix A: Books Used in Sandra's Plant and Seeds Unit

- Ada, A. F. (1990). *Just one seed*. Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown Books.
- Ada, A. F. (1990). *Una semilla nada más*. Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown Books.
- Ada, A. F. (1997). *Gathering the sun*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Bunting, E. (1996). *Sunflower house*. New York: Trumpet.
- Cole, J. (1995). *El autobús mágico planta una semilla*. New York: Scholastic.
- Costa-Pau, R. (1993). *La vida de las plantas*. Bogotá: Editorial Norma.
- Cutting, B. & Cutting, J. (1995). *Semillas y más semillas*. Bothell, WA: Wright Group.
- Dorantes, R. (1997). *The mural of fruit*. Crystal Lake, IL: Rigby.
- Ehlert, L. (1987). *Growing vegetable soup*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Flores, G. S. (1985). *Pon una semilla a germinar*. México, DF: Editorial Trillas.
- Florian, D. (1991). *Vegetable garden*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co.
- Ford, M. (1995). *Sunflower*. Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown Books.
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- González-Jensen, M. (1997). *El maravilloso maíz de México*. Crystal Lake, IL: Rigby.
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- Jordan, H. J. (1996). *Cómo crece una semilla*. *Harper Arco Iris*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Kratky, L. (1995). *¿Qué sale de las semillas?* Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown Books.
- Kratky, L. (1997). *Seeds, Rise and Shine*. Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown Books.
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- Merrill, C. (1973). *A seed is a promise*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.
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- Noriega, L. (1983). *Yo soy el durazno*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.
- Paulsen, G. (1995). *La tortillería*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company.
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- Rhodes, D. (1993). *The corn grows ripe*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Sealey, L. (1979). *Plantas*. Barcelona: Editorial Juventud.
- Stevens, J. (1995). *Carlos and the cornfield: Carlos y la milpa de maíz*. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon.
- Titherington, J. (1996). *Pumpkin, pumpkin*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
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