

Supporting Content Learning for English Learners

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In each of our previous columns, Patrick and I have written about topics that we believe are relevant to classroom teachers and have provided suggestions based on our collective research and classroom experiences with teachers of English learners (ELs). In this column, we include another perspective by adding the voice of an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom teacher, Crystal Cook (third author). Specifically Patrick, Crystal, and I address (a) the difference between having language and content objectives, (b) using small-group work to maximize involvement, and (c) including beginning English speakers in the learning process.

Having Language and Content Objectives

To address language and content objectives in class, Crystal uses her experience teaching a unit on recycling and caring for the earth to engage all of her students regardless of their language ability. The need to engage all EL students in academic learning regardless of language skills is important, because the literature of the last two decades suggests that students who are in greater need of quality instruction are often offered vocabulary-controlled material, which limits the amount of engaging content they are exposed to. According to Stanovich (1986), this type of instructional structure reinforces the context where the “rich-get-richer” (p. 381) and the poor get poorer.

If the goal is to reduce the gap between native English speaker and ELs—according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, there is a 36-point gap between these students—it is important

to examine the nature of instruction provided to EL students. According to Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2008), a good starting point is to have clear content and language objectives. When asked how she addressed content and language objectives, Crystal offered the following:

As part of my recycling unit, a major content objective is to realize that certain materials can be recycled or conserved (according to the Tennessee state performance indicators in Life Science for third graders). This is communicated to the students in writing and through discussion in the classroom.

In addition to the content objectives, one of Crystal’s language goals is to have her students identify cause and effect relationships in text. To achieve that goal, she engages in language objectives such as identifying keywords in cause and effect texts (e.g., *this happened because* and *therefore*). Ideally, Crystal wants the language objectives explicitly taught to empower her students. Specifically, students are taught signal keywords, then they are asked to use the keywords in their writing, and finally students are asked to write a cause and effect piece. Throughout this process, Crystal and the students discuss the importance of recycling and identify positive effects of recycling on their environment as well as negative effects if people do not recycle.

Although the unit on recycling is more encompassing than the content and language objectives presented, Crystal ensures that there are content and language objectives that increase the students’ chances for not only learning the content but also developing the academic language that is necessary for success.

Using Small-Group Work to Maximize Involvement

At any point in the year, Crystal has students who are at the very beginning of learning English, those who have a good base, and those who are becoming more fluent. To meet all of her students' academic and language needs, Crystal encourages students to work in pairs and small groups.

As part of the recycling unit, students engage in as many recycling activities as possible. Students learn from the content objectives such as discovering the reason it is important to recycle and the process that is involved. As part of their learning, the EL students actively encourage the rest of the school to engage in recycling by using posters to communicate their message. A central goal of the unit is helping students become more aware of the small things that they do that can waste or save energy. Students work alone or in pairs to write journal entries that document ways in which their school could better recycle or save energy.

Crystal engages in an ongoing dialogue via writing with the students as the unit unfolds. As students write their entries, Crystal highlights grammatical elements that are relevant and specific to their needs, which makes the language itself a central point of discussion. For example, when writing in English, adjectives are placed before the noun (e.g., The big dog is cold.). In Spanish, however, the adjective is placed after the noun (e.g., El perro grande esta frío). Crystal remembered how she and a student worked on a letter the student had written to the city, asking for them to pick up the recycling from school:

During one of our interactions as she was composing, we talked about reasons the city should collect our recycling from school. I encouraged the student to think of legitimate reasons and add them to an idea web, which seemed to help her with what she was doing. The student maintained focus and generated details relevant to the topic. With the help of *Michael Recycle* by [Ellie] Bethel [2008, Worthwhile Books] and discussions held during time in EL, the student and I were able to complete a letter the student understood and felt proud of! Upon completing the letter, the student was excited because she saw herself as a writer with a voice!

Being explicit when the students need you to be is very important as an EL teacher. Timing is everything!

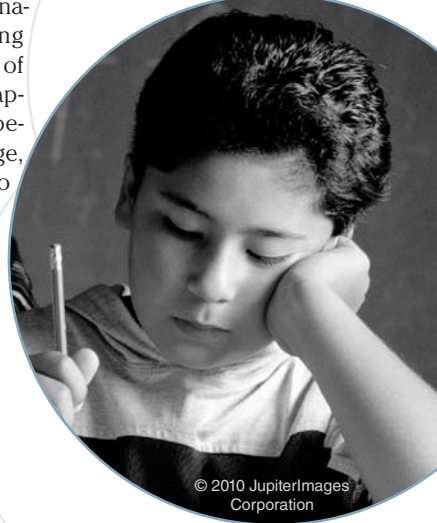
Including Beginning English Speakers in the Learning Process

When working with new ELs, Crystal focuses on a couple of important goals: engaging students in the lessons by making the student comfortable enough to participate and work with others, and on encouraging them to use their new language with her in the EL classroom, with their regular classroom teacher, and with peers at school. Crystal described her actions this way:

To work with students who are beginning English learners, I first learn about their culture. I do this by using books and the Internet, searching for info about their language, native foods and mannerisms. I also engage in constant communication with bilingual/bicultural mentors in the district that share the same cultures as my students. I attempt to learn about their language and use it with the students in a way to show I want to learn more about them. Each time I attempt to learn more about their culture, students seem more comfortable with me in the EL classroom. I encourage classroom teachers to do the same, and my experience at our school suggests that the teachers are generally excited about learning about their students' cultures.

With new English learners, I focus on vocabulary by using their language as a bridge. For example, as part of the unit on recycling we discussed the concept of taking care of our earth. Some students struggled with understanding of how to take care of the earth. However, after students discussed (sometimes using their native language) the topic among themselves, and created a list of ways that caring for the Earth applies in their own personal experiences in their native language, they then used their English to explain it to me. In this way, students see their language as an asset (or bridge) that can assist them as they are learning a new language.

Beyond the group activities, I also have the new English speakers meet with me in addition to their regular, daily EL class. In these individual sessions with the ELs, we work on specific skills, which are then communicated with the classroom teacher. One activity that I have found beneficial is to have them



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create picture dictionaries of the important words and ideas that we are studying as part of a particular unit. In the case of the recycling unit, words such as *recycling* can be shown pictorially as a series of steps that explain the concept of recycling. Other words such as *environment*, *Earth*, *protect*, *natural resources*, *reduce*, and *reuse* are also worthy of attention. I do some of this with students individually, because it gives me an opportunity to really understand and support their emerging English language skills. My experience is that the personal content dictionaries help students better understand new vocabulary.

At my school, another EL teacher, a bilingual/bicultural mentor and myself work with ELs in an after-school program. The last three years, I have participated in the after-school program that meets twice a week for an hour each day. During that time, we work with the students on vocabulary building and encourage students to interact with each other using the English language. All English learners in our school speak Spanish as their first language. The additional attention given to just 20 students in the after-school program is a way for us to assist students as they build their vocabulary among each other for social purposes and academic learning.

An advantage for many students at Crystal's school is that most EL teachers are bilingual in both

Spanish and English. All the EL students are Spanish speakers. Teachers use their Spanish when they sense that students do not understand the content presented to them. Crystal hopes that, by using her Spanish when students need it, the students learn that they too can use what they know in Spanish to assist them in learning English.

References

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