Promising Practices for Secondary English Language Learners

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&
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Abstract

The growth in secondary English language learners in the United States has continued at an alarming rate. The growth rate includes not only recent arrivals, and other immigrants but also secondary students that have been in U.S. schools for several years. The first step in the development of this article was an identification of studies conducted in secondary classrooms that used specific strategies that were effective in the education of English language learners. The strategy was deemed effective when it showed improvement in language development as defined by the particular study. There were thirteen studies including panel reports that identified effective strategies in instructing English language learners at the secondary level. Instructional similarities among the strategies led to four major categories. The four categories identified were vocabulary and language development strategies; teaching for meaning strategies; strategies involving the use of graphic organizers; and cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. Examples of how the strategy is applicable in a classroom are also given in the article.

Introduction

As the Hispanic/Latino population continues to grow in the United States, the education of this ethnic group must be addressed with urgency. Gibson, Campbell and Kay Jung in Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990 confirm that “By 2030, over 40 percent of the U.S. population is projected to be “minority,” with Hispanics comprising at least half of that share, or at least one in five U.S. residents.”

One of the challenges that teachers of ELLs face with regard to closing the achievement gap between these students and their native English-speaking peers is the development of academic language (Himmele & Himmele, 2009). Some come to school unable to read or write in their native language and many have had very little schooling or even access to education in their home countries (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Latino students are underachieving at high and consistent rates (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

“There is little dispute that successive generations of Latinos tend to outperform their parents, if those Parents are very undereducated. In twenty-first-century America, however, it is not sufficient for each Generation to advance from, say, a sixth grade education to an eighth grade education. Latinos for the most part are now stalled at the level of high school completion with dropout rates remaining very high across

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generations. Only one in ten Latinos has a college degree, compared to more than one in four white Americans and has not increased for more than two decades, while for all other groups the percentage of the population with degrees has increased substantially over that period.” (Gandara, 2009)

Gandara (2009) further reiterated that,

“If the Latino population were a small percentage of the overall population, this trend might be unfortunate, but not terribly consequential, for society as a whole. But because Latinos are the nation’s largest and fastest-growing ethnic minority group, it matters very much to everyone how well these students fare in school. The Center for Public Policy and Higher Education has projected that if California does not immediately begin preparing more underrepresented students for higher education, by 2020 the state will experience an 11 percent drop in per capita income, resulting in serious economic hardship for the state’s population. California is likely to experience the steepest drop because of its very large and undereducated Latino communities, but Arizona, Texas, and other states with high percentages of Latinos are also projected to see declines in per capita income over the period. To understand the effects of such a decline per capita earnings, it is useful to know that the present-day economy of California is in fact the result of a 30 percent increase in per capita per income since 1980. With no evidence of an imminent turnaround in the rate at which Latino students are either graduating from high school or obtaining college degrees, it appears that both a regional and national catastrophe are at hand.” (Gandara, p. 5)

Secondary school adolescents are the most diverse English language learners in our schools. Although some of these students are newcomers/new arrivals within five years, others have always called the U.S. their home (Rancy-Roney, 2009). Batalova, Fix, & Murray (2007) found that 57 percent of adolescent learners classified as limited English proficient were born within the U.S. borders and thus are second or third-generation residents. These students have often achieved oral proficiency but are lagging behind in their ability to use English for literacy and content learning for reasons that may be only partly related to their second language status (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Lucas (1997) found that life experiences and circumstances will influence the individual needs of these secondary learners. Among the factors cited were quality of prior educational experiences, level of native language development, level of acculturation and assimilation into the mainstream American culture, and expectation of re-entering the country of origin and/or expectation of permanent return to their country of origin. Adolescent secondary ELL’s benefit most from reforms that improve learning for all students, such as curriculum improvement, professional development, and school reorganization (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000).
Minicucci and Olsen (1992) studied 23 high schools and found that a majority of the immigrant students were underserved. They found that high schools with large numbers of immigrant English learners placed these students at risk of leaving school before graduation because there were few support systems and teachers were not prepared to teach English learners. As a result of the study, Minicucci and Olsen made four recommendations, which are applicable today as in 1992. The recommendations include:

(1) Establishment of state-supported, locally based networks to share information about what works in secondary schools for English learners,
(2) comprehensive staff development focused on the improvement of instruction for English learners, (3) increased state funding for improving programs for English; and (4) initiatives by the State Department of Education to bring practitioners together to promote effective programs and instruction at the secondary level. (Faltis & Coulter, 2008)

Because of these national and state statistics the urgency of providing a challenging and meaningful education to Hispanics/Latinos is crucial. In Texas and other borderland states a quality education program is especially needed since many of the students in our bilingual/ESL programs are Hispanic/Latino. The promising practices that follow were researched and gathered as part of the Texas Education Agency LEP Student Success Initiative. The Texas Education Agency has taken the lead in investing in professional development for bilingual and ESL teachers in order to improve the instruction for elementary and secondary English language learners. These specific strategies that can be implemented have shown to contribute to ELL academic and linguistic improvement. These practices were documented through a complete review of published research on secondary successful ELL strategies, visitation of secondary ESL programs, and teacher interviews.

Thirteen studies including panel reports that identified effective strategies in instructing English language learners at the secondary level were reviewed in the compilation of the document. The strategies compiled were deemed effective when they showed improvement in language development as defined by the particular study. Instructional similarities among the strategies led to four major categories. The four categories identified were vocabulary and language development strategies; teaching for meaning strategies; strategies involving the use of graphic organizers; and cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. Many of the strategies can be used to address a wide array of standards, depending on the particular situation in the classroom.

Achieving comprehension through setting reading goals, interacting with texts, and accessing background knowledge is especially challenging for ELL students. Unfamiliar cultural assumptions and academic demands in content courses place a tremendous burden on learners who are simultaneously developing their language skills and learning content information. The first category included strategies that enhanced academic comprehension through vocabulary and language development. ELL students continually encounter words in their readings that they may not fully understand. Examples of this include academic vocabulary in literature, science, history, social studies, and mathematics. This is vocabulary that is best developed through direct instruction, practice, and use in and appropriate contexts. Vocabulary development should be taught both directly and indirectly with activities that link and reinforce words and their meanings (Beck, McKown & Kucan, 2002; Hu & Nation, 2002).
Strategies that were deemed effective in the implementation of vocabulary and language instruction included activities for students involving word walls, cognate awareness, word analysis, concept definition maps, and semantic maps. Examples of how a teacher can utilize cognate awareness, word analysis and concept definition maps in the classroom are provided with an accompanying explanation of what the strategy may look like when incorporated into a content area classroom.

**Figure 1. Cognate awareness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted Proficiency Levels: Beginning to Advanced</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Description: Cognates are words that exist in different languages but share semantic and physical (orthographic) characteristics. Many students are timid or hesitant to guess at meanings of new words, even obvious cognates.  
Using texts that identify true cognates allows students to gain confidence in perceiving the meaning of the basic word. It further enables them to recognize related words when they appear. | Resources: Nagy & Garcia (1993)  
Genesee & Riches (2006) |

Using cognate awareness in Content Area Classrooms: What does it look like?  
Encourage students to find English words that have cognates in their native language. Geography and history texts include many words based on Latin and Greek that they may already be familiar with. The teacher may start the discussion by providing a list of some of the cognates that they will be encountering in the lesson. An activity that could be used for developing cognate awareness use is as follows:

1. Make word strips of identical cognates and others that include some differences in spelling between cognates.
2. Write enough words so that everyone in the class can be involved.
3. Distribute the words among the students.
4. Ask the students to find the classmate that has the corresponding cognate.
5. Ask students who have identical cognate words to raise their hand. Next, ask the students with similar but not identical cognates to stand up. Ask the students as a group to talk about differences in the pairs that are similar cognates, such as extra vowels, suffix tión/ción, and the ending y.

Examples of word strips:

1. identical: abdomen, animal, central, chocolate, horror, vision, idea, etc. (2 strips for each word)
2. similar: acid/ácido, absurd/absurdo, model/modelo, clinic/clinica, insect/insecto, credit/crédito, ambition/ambición, circulation/circulación, education/educación, petition/petición, agony/agonía, anatomy/anatomía, biology/biología, colony/colonia, democracy/democracia, history/historia, salary/salario, etc.

Another activity that could be used in your course is to identify the key words in each lesson and distribute them to the students.

1. Have the students review the list and provide a cognate for words that have one in their native language.
2. At the end of a unit or lesson, review their list to see how many cognates they have discovered.
Figure 2. Word analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted Proficiency Levels: Beginning to Advanced</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description: Word analysis, focused instruction on the parts of a word, improves spelling and aids in acquiring academic vocabulary. The ability to break down new words will allow students to decipher the meaning of new words they encounter throughout their academic careers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldenberg (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beck, McKeown &amp; Kucan (2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genesee &amp; Riches (2002)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Using Word analysis in Content Area Classrooms: What does it look like?

1. Before you start the activity, define the words prefix and suffix. Give examples on the board.
2. Provide students with a list of prefixes and suffixes and their meaning. Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anti-</td>
<td>against</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ex-</td>
<td>former</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>im-, in-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>non-</td>
<td>not</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>post-</td>
<td>after</td>
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<td>pre-</td>
<td>before</td>
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<td>re-</td>
<td>again</td>
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<td>re-</td>
<td>back</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>un-</td>
<td>not</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-able, -ible</td>
<td>is, can, be</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ar, -er, -or</td>
<td>one who</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ess</td>
<td>one who (female)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-est</td>
<td>most</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Have students think of words that contain each prefix or suffix. Ask them to write the words and their meaning on the sheet with the list of affixes.
4. Have the students share the words and their meanings with the class.
5. Ask the students if they know additional prefixes and suffixes. List them on the board.
6. Ask students to do a quick write on the importance of prefixes and suffixes and how knowing them would help them in analyzing a new word.
Figure 3. Concept definition maps

Description: A concept definition map is a visual organizer that enables students to process a concept, a term, or an idea. Concept maps begin with a single concept which is written in a square or circle. New concepts are represented by and included in new shapes and connected with lines to the other shapes, creating a web showing relationships among the ideas presented. A concept organizer can also be used for each new word. The organizer may include sentences, synonyms, definitions, examples, and antonyms.

Resources:
Goldenberg (2008)
Echevarria & Graves (2005)

Using Concept definition maps in Content Area Classrooms: What does it look like?

1. Have students fill in the concept map with words and phrases from a story, essay, or topic they are studying.
2. Next, ask individual students to share their ideas about the concept or topic with a partner.
3. Now, ask students to write an essay on a separate sheet of paper expressing their impressions of and reactions to the concept or topic. Have the students review the concept map “Poverty in the United States” that they have brainstormed on earlier.

Diagram:

- Where people live
- Identify people
- How people live
- Poverty in the United States
- Why people live this way
- Effects of poverty on people
Figure 5. Role-play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted Proficiency Levels: Intermediate to Advanced</th>
<th>Resources:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description: Role-play is a strategy used to enhance students' communicative language skills. Role-play offers a range of opportunities. Some role-plays are simple, based on prepared scripts or exchanges provided by the teacher. For advanced students, role-plays provide opportunities to assume another's persona, perspective, or set of beliefs.</td>
<td>Muth &amp; Alvermann (1999)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bongolen &amp; Moir (2005)</td>
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Using role-play in Content Area Classrooms: What does it look like?

Pre-task activities used in role-plays include brainstorming activities, question and answer techniques, vocabulary classification tasks, and creating the type of dialogue that is needed in the role-play.

In a social studies class that has completed a unit on cultural diversity in the United States, the teacher assigns students the task of developing a role-play dialogue between themselves and the Native American, African American, Latino American, Asian American, or any other member of an ethnic group. The teacher will be guiding the students at each point of the task.

1. Divide the class in five groups and have them choose the ethnic group they will dialogue with.
2. Have each group brainstorm a list and web on what they would want to talk about with the person of selected ethnic group.
3. Have them brainstorm a possible script for the dialogue.
4. Have each group practice their role-play dialogue, exchanging roles among their group.
5. Have each group select the best role-play presentation and explain their selection in their double-entry journal.
The final set of strategies was categorized into cognitive and metacognitive strategies. These strategies provide tools for learning that help students develop an awareness of tasks necessary in approaching academic content and how these tasks can be monitored to gauge effective
learning. As such they are important to consider in educating English language learners who are still in the process of developing proficiency in the English language. The strategies assist students by providing them the “know how” to approach academic tasks in a meaningful manner so goals of learning can be met (Jimenez, Garcia & Pearson, 1994; Wong, Fillmore & Snow, 2003; Vaughn & Klinger, 2004). The following strategies were among those that have been identified as beneficial in working with English language learners.

**Figure 9. Note-taking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted Proficiency Levels: Intermediate to Advanced</th>
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<tr>
<td>Description: Making materials accessible to students without watering down the content is a challenge for many. Teachers can teach and model taking notes throughout the lessons as pre-reading strategy, during reading strategy or post-reading strategy. During pre-reading, students can discuss the topic and take simple notes to demonstrate prior knowledge. During reading, students can use notes to organize the new information. As a post-reading strategy, student understanding of the new concept can be assessed. Students can take notes individually as well as in pairs or small groups.</td>
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</table>

**Note-taking in Content Area Classrooms: What does it look like?**

1. **T-chart and Double T-chart:** Students can fold their paper vertically to create a T-Chart. Two columns can be used for classification of information about a topic in two categories. Brainstorm what students know about a topic. List their ideas. Have them classify information in the two columns. Have them explain their rationale for classifying information about the topic in that particular category. Double T-charts can be created by folding the paper in a three-fold ("Accordion Style"). Information can be recorded in three categories in a similar manner.

2. **Two-column notes:** Used as a strategy during reading teachers may provide important vocabulary words or important phrases in the first column and students may fill the second column with definitions, explanations, or other pertinent information. Use the two columns for main ideas and details as a post-reading strategy.

3. **Concept webs:** Create a simple web with the target concept word in the middle. Students can extend the concept by writing words that correspond with the target word.
Figure 10. Reciprocal teaching

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Targeted Proficiency Levels: Beginning to Advanced</th>
<th>Resources: Muth &amp; Alvermann (1999)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description: This is a strategic approach to reading that is very effective with ELLs. Since this is done in small groups, it works especially well even with beginners and intermediates. Reciprocal teaching is a student-student interaction and collaboration which assists in the comprehension of text. The following strategies are used in this technique: cooperation, summarization, question generation, clarification, prediction, making inferences etc. Teacher modeling in the initial practices is a must.</td>
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Reciprocal Teaching in Content Area Classrooms: What does it look like?

Students work in small groups to read and discuss text. After reading a section, students take turns leading a discussion. The student leader first gives a short summary of the section read and then poses questions to the other group members. The teacher monitors the group discussions to assure that a mix of simple questions and higher order critical inferential questions are included in the discussions. Next the leader identifies any difficulties encountered in the text. The group cooperatively engages in a discussion and attempts to resolve those difficulties. Finally, the leader predicts what will happen in the text next and the group continues to read the next section. Following the same procedure, another member leads the discussion etc.

Initially this strategy may be adapted through using pictures, teacher-provided vocabulary, and teacher modeling of language to be used during the discussion.
**Figure 11. Pre-reading guides**

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<td>Description: Learning content is more than reading the assigned text and answering a set of questions. Prior to the reading of the assigned text, students need to be prepared to read the text and need teacher guidance in reading for specially targeted concepts. The challenge for the teacher lies in guiding to use of the students’ prior knowledge. Students need to be made aware that using prior knowledge and having a purpose behind the reading of text helps them understand the text. Integrating the new material and anchoring it to prior knowledge will be facilitated when the teacher acts as a role model. The teacher can use and encourage the use of pre-reading guides for this process. These guides can come various forms and can act as informal diagnostic tools.</td>
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**Using Pre-reading Guides in Content Area Classrooms: What does it look like?**

1. **Anticipation Guides**
   - This is a great way to activate students’ thoughts and opinions about a topic. They not only assist the teacher in gauging the students’ prior knowledge about a specific topic, but they can aid in rooting out misconceptions about the topic. The teacher can address the misconceptions through proper instruction. These guides can also act as springboards for small group or whole class discussions and work well with print as well as other media. The following steps can be taken to create an anticipation guide:
     - Identify the major concepts and important details.
     - Identify students’ experiences and beliefs that can be supported, and those that can be challenged by the learning material.
     - Create statements that will support or challenge those beliefs and experiences. Add statements that will be consistent with students’ backgrounds. For secondary ELLs, three to five statements usually work well.
     - Ask individual students to respond positively or negatively to these statements. Have them provide a brief justification for each response (a few words or phrases) in writing so they can use these as a reference point during the discussion that will follow.
     - Engage students in a pre-reading discussion encouraging justification for both positive and negative responses.
     - Remind students that these statements are a springboard for ideas and not true or false statements to be memorized!

2. **Text Preview**
   - The purpose of this strategy is to divide the text into chunks which can more easily be understood. Teacher prepared outlines of the assignment work well as a text preview. When students’ attention is directed to specific information they will be responsible for learning in the lesson, they can prepare for the information that is coming. The teacher builds interest by providing a brief introductory paragraph which highlights the important points or the key people or characters, etc. This introductory paragraph may consist of statements or questions. It may be a short poem on the main topic to be read. It may be involve calling attention to the title, pictures or the text structure (such as the use of boldface words, size of font, color of font, use of tables, graphs, etc.) in the main text to be read. The teacher should initially model the use of Text Preview and later guide their students to create their own Text Preview.

3. **KWL Chart**
   - This chart works well for all content areas well as a great diagnostic and quick assessment tool. The first two columns work as a pre-reading guide. The information in the third column reflects what has been learned. ELLs need to be specifically reminded that the objective in filling the chart needs to be on providing information, and not usage nor the mechanics of writing. Beginners and Intermediates also need to be assured that it is OK not to complete the entire chart. Students can make their own KWL charts easily by folding a horizontal piece of plain notebook paper “accordion style” in three columns.
This article presents research-based strategies found to be effective in teaching English language learners across the curriculum. The document identifies the specific strategy and defines the strategy as it applies to teaching and learning. The implementation of the strategy and a classroom example of the strategy is then described. The importance of integration of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is stressed throughout the examples to insure that all aspects of language development are enhanced. While it is true that many of these strategies are considered best practices for all learners, educators must be conscious of the language development level of the English language learners so classroom instruction can be tailored to the student’s linguistic ability level.

This article is meant to serve as a resource to all teachers as we continue to work together to improve the education of English language learners in the state of Texas.
References


