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──────── **Abstract** ────────

This article addresses critical factors that impact learning for a growing population of students in American classrooms, the English Language Learner (ELL). Even in the smallest school districts, it is common for teachers to have one or more students with limited or no command of the English language in their classrooms. Many students in schools with specialized ELL programs spend the majority of their day in regular classrooms trying to fit in with their peers as they struggle to learn a new language. This article focuses on the five stages of language acquisition and proficiency along with corresponding research-based strategies teachers can use at each stage. Elements of an effective language program described in this article are based on an asset model of instruction where students' differences are valued, respected, and utilized. When cultural-linguistic differences are used as assets rather than problems, all students, native and non-native English speakers, benefit.

Introduction

Students in the United States do not speak with one voice; they come to school speaking more than 149 different languages (National Virtual Translation Center, 2007). Less visible than language and race are the differences in home cultures and prior experiences that shape the thoughts and language of each student. This individualized knowledge base provides the foundation for oral and written

language learning. Students' prior world knowledge, experiences, and fluency in their native language, when different from the mainstream, have translated into the infamous achievement gap that spurred major educational reforms and is at the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. According to the 2007 National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP), the mean achievement gap in reading between white and Hispanic students is 27 points; the gap between white and Native American students is 28 points. This is of particular concern because the NAEP assessment was based on three different contexts for reading comprehension: 1) reading for literary experience (story grammar, the structure of narrative text that includes setting, characters, and plot); 2) reading for information (nonfiction, real world learning); and 3) reading to perform a task.

To help close the reading gap, teachers must know how to bridge the differences between their students' native language and their acquisition of oral and written English. Research has shown that the teacher has a far greater impact on student learning than any one specific method or approach to teaching (Cheung & Slavin, 2005). Responsive teachers view nonnative speakers as an asset to their classroom where they use these students' knowledge to develop a richer and more authentic curriculum for all students.

The purpose of this article is to 1) describe the stages English Language Learners (ELL) go through as they learn a new language and 2) to provide strategies teachers can use to help their students successfully progress through these stages. The first part explores schema theory and the effects of cultural diversity on vocabulary and background knowledge essential for listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The second part describes five language acquisition and proficiency stages ELL students go through to learn a new language and provides effective instructional strategies matched to each level.

Part I: Culture, Language, and the Formation of Schema

Every student has unique cultural experiences, types and amounts of schooling, varied interests, and preferred ways of learning. As students learn, they approach each task with the beliefs, values, and information acquired through their respective backgrounds and knowledge of the world. Reading is a "socially constructed pursuit" based on the students' interactions with their world and the people in it (Koda & Zehler, 2008, p. 4) . Cognitively, the sum of students' experiences is stored in memory in individual categories (schema), "a collection of organized and interrelated ideas, concepts, and prior knowledge" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 468). A

person's schema is most useful when it is activated before exposure to new learning. Prior schema activation facilitates reading comprehension by enabling students to discriminate between important and unimportant information and make inferences to fill in non-explicit information with their own prior knowledge (Clark, 1990). Students read for a variety of reasons that are influenced by participation in their respective sociocultural groups, and, ultimately, the combination of schema formation and activation in social and academic settings influences and supports reading comprehension.

Topics have their own specialized background knowledge and vocabulary. Consider the topic of baseball with its specialized vocabulary. The words "steal," "plate," "out," "strike," and "foul," have multiple meanings and nuances that can lead the reader to misinterpret the text. For example, "stealing a base" does not mean that a thief is running away with a "base" and being hunted by the police, rather, "stealing a base" is cheered and celebrated by fans of the player who did the stealing.

In their meta-analysis of reading comprehension studies, the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) reported that students must be taught how to use their prior experiences to aid reading comprehension. Genesse (2008) extended the NRP's (2000) and the National Literacy Panel's (August & Shanahan, 2006) earlier findings on the importance of prior experience on reading comprehension. Genesse found that first and second language learners are fundamentally the same in that reading competence in the first or second language involves multiple abilities (phonological awareness, decoding skills, and comprehension). However, second language reading development is different because ELL learners draw on their first language experiences and competencies to inform and influence their reading in the second language. Therefore, students from diverse backgrounds may need even more encouragement and opportunities to apply their prior experiences to reading and language learning because they are so different from their school and neighborhood culture.

Barriers and Challenges to Schema Formation and Reading Comprehension

First and foremost, teachers must recognize that ELL students are fully capable of learning despite their lack of the English language. They bring a wealth of experiences, knowledge of vocabulary and concepts, and hopes and dreams to the classroom. What they lack is a way to express this knowledge and their aspirations in English. Teachers' perceptions of nonnative speakers significantly impact

their curriculum materials, pedagogy, assessment, and expectations for their ELL students. Scanlon (2007) states, "A fundamental barrier to conceptualizing linguistic diversity from an asset-based perspective is the capacity of teachers to teach students who are ELL" (p. 3). Teachers who hold to the Deficit Model (Scanlon, 2007) do not give ELL students credit for the language and academic skills they already have but are unable to communicate in English. Rather than capitalizing on their strengths and assets, teachers with a deficit view erect barriers to learning that fulfill their expectations of low student performance. Such barriers can include the lack of appropriate seating, visual cues, stimulating material, modified material, and the overuse of unfamiliar idiomatic expressions.

The flip side of the Deficit Model is the Asset Model in which teachers remove barriers to learning and replace them with sound pedagogical practices (Scanlon, 2007). Students' differences are viewed as assets and respected when planning quality instruction and ELL students have opportunities to make connections between prior knowledge and new learning, build on existing schema, be active participants in a community of learners, and have numerous opportunities to converse and interact with peers. Above all, in an asset-driven classroom, ELL students, like their English-speaking counterparts, are provided numerous opportunities to experience success.

Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones, and Whelan-Ariza (2007) found that ELL students face many challenges as they develop their ability to form relevant schema necessary for reading comprehension in the second language. The first challenge is acquiring proficiency in the second language in which students may lack relevant cultural knowledge. Second language learners may also be challenged by the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the new language, and therefore transfer their first language grammar and vocabulary knowledge incorrectly. Furthermore, Zainuddin, et al (2007) discuss how different spelling systems challenge word recognition and comprehension in the student's second language. Still another challenge second language learners have with reading is pragmatics, "the social contexts of literacy use in their first language" (Grabe, 1991, p. 388). Additional challenges facing ELL students in English speaking classrooms include being fearful of participating, unfamiliar regional dialects, and difficult imagery and symbolism within texts (Haynes, 2008).

ELL students must also accommodate differences between the written code of their native language and English. For example, Spanish speaking students are accustomed to a phonetically stable alphabetic spelling in which each letter represents a sound, whereas English readers use less consistent letter and word cues to

determine the meaning and the grammatical function of a word. During reading, they apply up to four cues or signals that help them glean meaning from the text: phonics, syntax (word order), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (the use of language in communication). Each cue unlocks words and may, individually or in combination, divulge their meaning if students have some advance knowledge of the words. The Chinese character system, on the other hand, has no link between speech sounds and the written symbol. Reading directionality also varies among languages. Languages such as English and Russian are read left to right, top to bottom, while Arabic is read right to left. Making inferences, where students challenge or reinterpret text, is a critical reading comprehension skill for American readers, but is considered inappropriate and even disrespectful, in other cultures. These differences in cultural expectations for literacy can have a profound impact on ELL students' ability to comprehend and use the English language.

Part II: Ways to Scaffold Reading Instruction for English Language Learners

Exemplary reading programs for both ELL and English-speaking students include developmentally appropriate instruction and materials that focus on intensive systematic phonological awareness, phonics, intensive vocabulary instruction, oral language instruction, and cooperative learning to increase comprehension (Cheung & Slavin, 2005). Teachers should make sure that the quality of the program they use and the quality of the instruction they deliver is excellent and based on current research. The following is a synthesis of key elements that provide an instructional framework to guide teachers when choosing a program:

- Help students make connections between their prior knowledge and new learning. Students must be encouraged to think about and use the wide range of experiences they possess, even if they cannot yet express them in their second language.

- Communicate clear, measurable, and attainable goals for students. Learning a new language is a complex and daunting task. Choose goals that break down this task into identifiable pieces where students can track and celebrate stages of their progress.

- Incorporate students' cultures into the curriculum. ELL students' cultural experiences can be used to highlight their areas of interest and strength. Provide visuals and artifacts from their own cultures that they

can use as a support for sharing information at their level of linguistic development. Including people from the students' countries that have contributed to the fields of math, science, history, literature, music, and art expands everyone's world knowledge.

- Create a community of learners to encourage ELL student participation and interaction with others. Include numerous opportunities to talk with peers, with a partner, or in small groups in informal and structured settings.

- Assess English language learners through formative assessments of phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading. All students should be assessed to determine these foundational skills.

- Plan intensive, systematic, and direct instruction interventions in small groups for ELL students who lack proficiency in any of the foundational reading skills. Based on assessment results, seek systematic ways to build on students' linguistic strengths rather than patch up their weaknesses.

- Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day. Essential words, taken from the core reading program, content area textbooks, and everyday words should be taught in depth with opportunities to explore the various nuances of meaning. (Levine, 2007; IES, 2007)

With the above elements in mind, students with limited English proficiency must be taught academic content and reading comprehension strategies that support both skills-based learning and higher level thinking. Students need opportunities to isolate aspects of their new language in order to analyze individual sound and symbol features as well as opportunities to hear, see, and use language in context, where pieces of the language puzzle come together into a coherent whole.

The following section describes the stages of language acquisition as well as effective learning strategies recommended by ELL researchers and classroom teachers for each stage.

Stages of Language Acquisition and Barrier Busting Strategies

Research indicates that academic literacy can take from four to seven years to acquire (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Consequently, the stages non-English speakers go through are important to consider when developing a reading/language arts

curriculum. These stages do not relate to age or grade level rather they are correlated to the students' previous linguistic and life experiences. Moving through each stage is a developmental process that varies in duration for each student. Levine (2007), Chen and Mora-Flores (2006), and Lightbown (2000) agree that ELL students go through predictable, linguistic stages as they become proficient in English. The Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Pre-K-12 Proficiency Standards (2006), Levine (2007), and the WIDA Consortium's (2008) "can do" descriptors shape and inform the stages and proficiency descriptors described below. These stages and strategies are listed in the order of second language acquisition to help teachers knock down barriers and promote language learning. It is important to note that strategies introduced at earlier stages of language development are building blocks for additional, more complex strategies used at the later stages of language development. Furthermore, carefully planned assessment provides data teachers can use to move ELL students through the stages of English language learning. Law and Eckes (1995) suggest that teacher-made checklists be used to monitor student progress as they can be created to document specific learning from each of the activities listed in this section.

Stage 1: Pre-Production

Students are active listeners during this stage where they take in the sounds, words, and nonverbal cues of those around them. These students rarely use English and rely heavily on pictorial and other nonverbal representations of the language. During this receptive stage students may be silent which may be mistaken for slowness, dullness, or shyness. As their oral language increases, these students tend to use memorized chunks of language such as "My name is..." Creating meaning from text is often incomplete because they may not have the vocabulary, syntax, and the cultural knowledge to interpret the assigned reading. In this stage, students need multiple opportunities to hear English being spoken, read, and written well.

Strategy: Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response (TPR), as described by Herrel and Jordan (2004), is an engaging way to help the least proficient ELL students actively and physically understand vocabulary and concepts. The idea is for the teacher to choose words or concepts that are easily demonstrated physically such as commands, movement directions, prepositions, and body parts. The teacher develops a list of words or concepts to teach, writes or draws them on cards, and then physically demonstrates what she needs understood such as "sit down" or "stand up." The objective is for

ELL students to learn commonly used English words and concepts. As the teacher observes students understanding what is demonstrated and asked, she is able to lessen the physical modeling. With TPR, teachers can gradually add more and more vocabulary and concepts for students to practice and demonstrate.

Strategy: Word and Concept Sorts

It is helpful for ELL students to see abstract words, concepts, and ideas represented through pictures. Through visual organizers students are involved in vocabulary development as they sort pictures into categories such as beginning, middle, and ending sounds, attributes of size or color, straight edges versus round edges, or topics such as mammals and reptiles, favorite and non-favorite foods. Begin with words students know, and build on these words. They should work with the teacher or a peer to name, in English, each of the pictures and the categories (Bear, Helman, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2007) to increase word learning and depth of meaning. Teachers should first model how to sort pictures into categories on graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams and T lists and then support students as they categorize pictures and use words to name or describe them.

Stage 2: Early Production

When students feel secure in the classroom they will "try their wings" by uttering a few words or short phrases. Their reading ability may depend on their literacy development in the native language as well as their alphabetic knowledge. Students at this stage can use simple memorized phrases correctly, but they may still make errors that impede understanding. They are able to locate and use predictable information and require lots of repetition. Oral questioning should initially require brief answers with the goal of moving students toward more complex answers as they become comfortable speaking in the classroom. Questions should help students recall their prior experiences related to the words they are learning. Ask more open ended questions like, "What do you understand?" versus yes/no questions such as, "Do you understand?" Asking a question with "what" allows the student to show, tell, or indicate in some way his understanding of the task. Many students from other cultures simply answer "yes" to avoid the embarrassment of not knowing and being unable to accomplish the classroom task.

Strategy: Interactive Word Wall

Teachers may create several word walls (Gunning, 2010) in addition to the traditional A,B,C... word wall as ELL students encounter words from a variety of oral and written sources that include the words of their peers, teacher, books, and

labeled pictures. To overcome information overload, word walls can be interactive, tailored to students' interests and academic needs, and include very specific labels that are easy to identify. For example, word walls or charts can contain collections of words with corresponding pictures related to various content area topics, parts of speech, figurative speech, synonyms, word families including onsets and rimes, and letter clusters such as "ology" and "ough." The key is to have students contribute to and interact with word walls frequently through speech and writing. To target each student's needs and interests, tailor the number and complexity of words to the individual student's level of learning by involving them in the word selection. Individual lists of words can be given to students to keep at their desks to study and use as a reference. This strategy enables ELL students to recognize, analyze, and utilize words necessary for academic content learning. The goal is to have ELL students actively involved with the word walls as they find, read, classify, and use the words easily in their daily tasks.

Strategy: Picture and Sentence Match

Herrell and Jordan (2007) emphasize the importance of visual scaffolding through the use of pictures to support word learning through conversation and written text. This strategy teaches vocabulary and sentence structure through pairing pictures that illustrate written sentences. Teachers can choose which elements of sentence structure to emphasize such as word order, nouns and pronouns, functions of verbs, and punctuation. Teachers should model how to read the sentence, identifying each word as it is read, and match the sentence to the corresponding picture. Students should then do this independently or with a partner. To promote academic language development and interaction, students should frequently work with the teacher, a peer or small groups of students to name, in English, the pictures and determine the sentence it matches.

Stage 3: Speech Emergence

As students gain confidence and language skills, the teacher can begin to ask open ended questions to stimulate language production. During this stage, while students may still have difficulty expressing themselves because of limited vocabulary and command of the language they may be able to understand and utilize stock phrases and academic language that is highly familiar to them. At this level, students are most successful in building meaning from text when they have extensive background knowledge. Students' reading proficiency may vary upon their experiences with the genres, themes, and concepts explored by the classroom teacher.

Strategy: Dual Language Alphabet or Concept Books

As ELL students gain word and language knowledge, it remains critical that they interact with others on planned tasks to further support language learning. Students rely on their experiences from their native country as they learn language and experiences unique to their new country. The creation of dual language books is one way to literally combine the best of both worlds (Schecter & Cummins, 2003). Planning and implementing the creation of these books require students to communicate with each other to facilitate learning in both languages on a variety of topics. For example, students can write books to describe themselves, their classrooms, an experience or hobby, as well as themed content area information related to the curriculum. See Figure 1 for an example of a student created dual language book. Simultaneous engagement in reading and writing helps students to not only learn the conventions of the second language, but gives them ownership of their new language. English speaking and non-native speaking students benefit as they learn literacy practices of other cultures, with each student having the opportunity to be the teacher. These books can be shared with their parents and caregivers to extend language learning to the home.
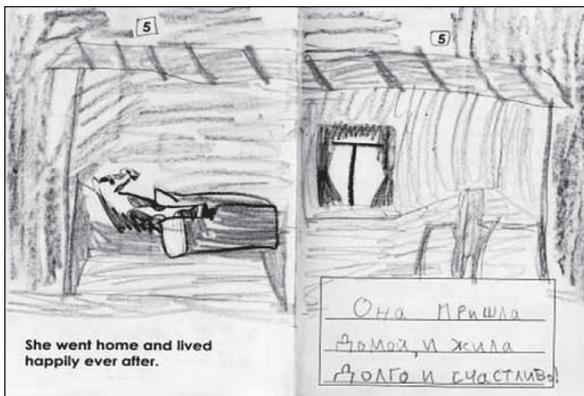

Figure 1. Example of an English and Chinese dual language book (Patricia Chow, Early Literacy English Language Learner Teacher, Clifton & Cosair Public Schools, Peel District School Board, Mississuuga, Ontario).

Strategy: Schema Stories

Schema stories enable ELL students to activate and use related schema in order to capitalize on the prior knowledge and experiences they bring to the classroom. Reutzel and Cooter (2007, citing Watson & Crowley, 1988, p. 263) describe

schema stories as, "...a reading strategy lesson that helps readers reconstruct the order of a text based on meaning and story grammar" (p. 336). The goal is to have students use their prior knowledge and experiences to comprehend meaning and develop an understanding of story grammar as they put chunks of a story into proper sequence according to the context of the book, i.e. beginning, middle, or end, and give a rationale for that decision. Teachers should repeatedly emphasize student understanding by having them explain how they identified their part and why they placed it where they did.

Stage 4: Intermediate Fluency

Intermediate students may be able to read with considerable fluency and will be able to locate specific facts within texts. Grade-level literacy may still pose challenges as reading comprehension may be hampered when information is presented in a decontextualized manner, vocabulary has multiple meanings, and the sentence structure is complex. However, their oral and written structures begin to approximate native speakers.

Strategy: Student Self-Monitoring

Student self-monitoring teaches metacognition and reading fluency, an essential goal for any student seeking to improve comprehension. Fluency cannot be achieved if a student's reading efficiency is impeded by continuing to read a passage which progressively eludes that student's grasp. This strategy, explicitly taught and modeled by the teacher, provides the student with a means to self-reflect, identify problems, and follow a course of correction when necessary. As she reads a book aloud the teacher frequently stops and thinks out loud, first modeling how to determine the purpose for reading (i.e. information, enjoyment, directions) and then verbally explaining her thinking as she seeks to understand the meaning of a passage. Students should then be given texts that match a self-chosen purpose for reading and encouraged to do the same by asking and answering questions such as "why" am I reading this, and "how" can this help me. ELL students will benefit greatly from this strategy, since they, more so than native English speakers, may find themselves losing touch with the ideas on the page.

Strategy: The K-W-L Chart

The KWL is an effective strategy for student self-monitoring (Carr & Ogle, 1987). When working with ELL students it is most effective with small groups of two to five children. With a partner, or in a small group, students list what they

Know about a topic, generate a list of questions about what they **W**ant to know, and finally discuss what they have **L**earned. An obvious benefit of this strategy is that the requisite group work calls for engagement in the four communication skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Although all learners stand to gain from an exercise which utilizes these inextricably connected facets of language, those students who are still engaged in learning the basic tenets of English will receive more practice, within an interactive context, in how each of these skills supports the other three. As an extension, students can do a K-W-L Plus (Ogle, 1987) in which they ask what they still want to know opening opportunities for further research and enrichment.

Stage 5: Advanced Fluency

It takes years for English learners to move beyond the Intermediate Stage to an Advanced Stage of fluency where they have learned a wide range of vocabulary and have a solid grasp of synonyms, inflections, and colloquialisms as well as academic content. Research indicates that academic literacy can take from four to seven years to acquire (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). At this level, ELL students demonstrate a complexity in their written and oral language comparable to their native English speaking peers. Strategies at this level capitalize on everything Stage 5 ELL learners already know and are capable of doing and are not different from strategies for native English speakers. This stage, which lasts a lifetime, is the ultimate goal, the culmination of years of carefully crafted lessons and language experiences.

Strategy: Closed–Captioning Television

Watching a movie using closed-captions offers a novel experience for students to interact with the spoken and printed word simultaneously as meaning is supported through the animation and movement, pictures, and sound effects in the movie. It is important to preview films and select ones that are suitable for the ages, interests, content, and language needs of ELL Students. Reutzel and Cooter (2007) suggest that teachers alert students to listen for, or read targeted speech sounds, letter patterns, or punctuation during the film. Teachers should also help students learn key words they will encounter in the captions. Before viewing the film, teachers must help students make connections between the plot of the film and their prior knowledge and background experiences. Before, during, and after the film, teachers have numerous opportunities to engage students in making and discussing predictions. Teachers can also give students cards with words printed from the

movie and ask them to watch for the words. As they see a word, they are to put it in a basket or stack. Teachers must review and reinforce the pronunciation, spelling patterns, and the meaning of the targeted words immediately after the film and throughout the school day and year.

Strategy: Foreign Films with English Subtitles

Watching subtitled movies is another way teachers can engage ELL students with print. Unless the film is in the students' native language, students must rely on the printed English subtitles and visuals for meaning. The voice modulation, action, and music all support the message conveyed through print (Holmes, 2005). As when watching closed-captioned films and programs, teachers should provide an overview of the film, introduce the characters, and pre-teach select vocabulary. In addition to words, teachers can write selected phrases or sentences on cards and instruct students to place them in stacks as they see them in subtitles. After viewing, teachers can use the cards to teach word meaning and structure, sentence structure, and cognates. As an extension, after watching the film, turn off the sound and have students follow the story, or parts of the story by reading the words with no auditory support. At this point the film should be familiar to them and the continuous action should sustain attention. Students can use their understanding of the plot to read and comprehend words at a deeper level. Foreign films offer numerous opportunities for students to explore geographical regions, cultures, historical events, ethics, and interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

Language and culture are an interactive and interwoven part of a child's life. According to Lue (2003), a child's patterns of communication are developed through multiple means such as family, socioeconomic status, dialect, and education. These language and cultural factors impact student learning. The growing population of ELL students in American classrooms makes it essential for the regular classroom teacher to know how they learn and use systematic, targeted strategies that lead to English proficiency. Instruction planned from an asset perspective acknowledges that English Language Learners are language experts. As an expert, non-native speakers are empowered as they share and teach their classmates their native language. Depending upon the level of the ELL students' English proficiency, they can simply point to objects and say the non-English word or translate oral and written words and phrases into their native language. As language experts, ELL students

are elevated to the status of teacher where they teach their native speaking classmates aspects of their language and knowledge about their country and culture.

The strategies introduced in this article can be adapted for use by the regular classroom teacher for different levels of language proficiency because they tap into the fundamental components of language: pragmatics, semantics, phonology, orthography, and morphology (Chen & Mora-Flores, 2006). An asset-based curriculum recognizes the students' interests and strengths, enables them to make connections between their life experiences and the new curriculum, and provides important language interactions with peers and teachers on a regular basis (Levine, 2007). To recognize and work through their students' strengths, all teachers must be informed, tenacious advocates for non-native speakers.

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