



## Effective Teaching Practices for English Language Learners

by

Hersholt C. Waxman, University of Houston; &  
Kip Tellez, University of California, Santa Cruz

U.S. schools enroll over 3.5 million English language learners (ELLs), students whose first language is not English. Their numbers have risen dramatically in recent decades. Many live in poverty and attend underfunded schools staffed by under-qualified teachers. These students face low achievement and high dropout rates. Hampering efforts to improve their education have been shortages of qualified teachers, teachers' low expectations for ELLs, and overreliance on direct instructional methods that hinder the development of verbal skills. Moreover, ELL teaching has often overlooked the culturally specific prior knowledge of ELLs.

Many educators maintain that the best way to help these students is to give them better classroom instruction that focuses on research-based instructional practices found effective for ELLs. Reviewed here is a synthesis of research on effective teaching for ELLs undertaken to identify best teaching practices.

### Method

Our synthesis focused on studies of teaching practices that account for the diversity of ELLs. We concentrated on recent (1990 to the present) research, which coincides with the rapid growth in ELLs in schools and reflects a shift to qualitative research addressing issues like culture and language. To be included in the synthesis, studies had to involve K–12 education, focus on effective instruction, be rigorously designed, and feature empirical data. Thirty studies fully met our criteria.

### Collaborative Learning Communities

Studies addressing the importance of collaborative learning communities considered group tasks as crucial for language learning. They maintained that interactional learning encouraged strong cooperation and discourse that *in turn drove language learning*. For instance, Goatley, Brock, and Raphael (1995) found that inviting ELLs to join native English-speaking book clubs improved ELLs' language skills and allowed them to share their culture. Such research suggests that student interaction promotes the growth of a community that encourages greater language use. Focusing on community-building strategies seems to enhance language learning even when all students in the group lack English proficiency (Joyce, 1997).

### Providing Multiple Representations

A second effective instructional strategy relies on providing multiple representations, for example, linking words to pictures or real objects, to aid learning. Other uses of multiple representations have become common. For instance, teachers use graphic organizers to represent visually the relationships among words and concepts in the second language (Tang, 1992). Astorga (1999) found that pictures illustrating written narrative facilitated the decoding process for children learning English. And many teachers have discovered that the multiple media of video are highly effective in promoting language learning.

### Building on Prior Knowledge

Several articles in the synthesis focused on building on prior knowledge. Most notably, Garcia (1991) found prior knowledge important for Latino ELLs taking literacy tests. Students' limited prior content knowledge correlated with poor performance. Because students used Spanish to understand English reading passages, Garcia suggested that Spanish literacy be used to improve English reading comprehension. In another study, Godina (1998) found that teachers who used ELLs' prior knowledge of Mexican culture were more successful than teachers who did not.

### Instructional Conversation

Instructional conversation gives students opportunities for extended, educational dialogue that encourages relation of school content to students' individual, community, and family knowledge. This strategy focuses on students' processes of forming, expressing, and sharing knowledge. The instruction is not direct but dialogic. Teachers construct lessons from students' experience and ideas, and the classroom becomes a learning community. Instructional conversation also involves teachers in promoting connected language and expression, responding to and using students' contributions, and creating a challenging yet nonthreatening atmosphere.

### Culturally Responsive Instruction

Culturally responsive instruction emphasizes students' cultural concerns,

including critical family and community issues, and incorporates them into the curriculum, textbooks, and learning activities. The approach also stresses social and academic responsibility as well as appreciation of diversity. One study (Darder, 1993) found that Latino teachers who engaged in such instruction were more likely than teachers who did not to recognize and address students' academic and social needs. This learner-centered practice works from students' existing knowledge base, improves self-confidence, and increases the transfer of school-taught knowledge to real-life situations.

### **Cognitively Guided Language Instruction**

Cognitively guided language instruction uses direct modeling of strategies to foster students' cognitive monitoring of their own learning. This practice encourages teachers to emphasize students' psychological processing as well as subject matter; it also shifts the responsibility of learning from teacher to student. Moreover, this perspective assumes that students differ in the types of strategies they bring to the learning context; students who use weak strategies need specific attention to cognitive needs. This approach can benefit the large number of ELLs struggling in school because once they learn to use effective cognitive strategies, some individual barriers to academic success may be removed. Further, the approach can benefit ELLs by motivating passive learners to become more active. Since English-monolingual students have been shown to use twice as many cognitive reading strategies as bilingual students (Padrón, Knight, & Waxman, 1986), this approach may help remove ELLs' reading deficits.

### **Technology-Enriched Instruction**

Classroom technology has been found to benefit ELLs. It is motivational and nonjudgmental, tailors instruction to students' rate of learning, allows for autonomy and prompt feedback, enriches students' linguistic environment, and diminishes teachers' authoritarian role. Writing and reading programs for ELLs develop story-writing ability and comfort with expressing ideas (Chavez, 1990). Multimedia technology is effective for ELLs, helping them connect images, sound, and symbols. Multimedia can also connect

classroom learning to authentic learning situations (Means & Olson, 1994). Digitized books allow ELLs to request pronunciations and translations of unknown words and ask substantive questions.

### **Implications**

Incorporating these instructional practices in schools serving ELLs has proven beneficial. Instructional conversation and culturally responsive instruction can contextualize the ELL classroom. In cognitively guided instruction, reciprocal teaching methods in which teachers read aloud enable ELLs to learn comprehension strategies before they learn to decode written language. Technology-enriched instruction can deepen classroom instruction by lessening reliance on direct instructional approaches and fostering independent thinking. Moreover, the practices should be implemented together. For example, principles of culturally responsive instruction like respect for diversity can be taught and applied through collaborative learning communities. Other aspects of collaborative learning communities like debate and compromise can be developed through aspects of instructional-conversation practice. Further, students' language development can be enhanced by having them collaborate while using technology.

Teacher education needs to include training in technology and nondirective approaches. It should also include training in cultural and linguistic differences that can affect expectations of students. Crucial, too, in teacher training is practice in assessing students' background knowledge and individual needs; greater knowledge of language development and acquisition can support that practice. And teachers must learn to raise expectations by challenging ELLs with complex academic tasks. Such teacher education must take place in both preservice and professional development. Support of professional development in high-poverty areas with high percentages of ELLs is urgently needed.

Finally, given the challenges our nation faces in serving ELLs, further research is needed to examine effects of these instructional practices on ELLs' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. These practices are not new, but they deserve new consideration in this context because they have not been widely used in teaching ELLs.

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