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Teaching Secondary Language Minority Students

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CREDE's Five Standards for Effective Teaching and Learning express the principles of effective pedagogy for all students. For mainstream students, the Standards describe the ideal; for at-risk students, the Standards are vital (Dalton, 1998). While the work contributing to the standards articulated in CREDE's projects comes from several theoretical systems, CREDE's Standards are stated in the language of sociocultural theory.

- I. Teacher and Students Producing Together (Joint Productive Activity)
- II. Developing Language Across the Curriculum (Language Development)
- III. Making Meaning: Connecting School to Students' Lives (Contextualization)
- IV. Teaching Complex Thinking (Cognitive Challenge)
- V. Teaching Through Interactive Discussions (Instructional Conversation)

In this research brief, we focus on language development as well as academic development for English language learners. Teachers are concerned about covering content and curriculum, and they often ignore students' language development, which is critical for academic success. For secondary school learners, regardless of program (e.g., early exit primary language, sheltered instruction), there are some features necessary for language development. Teachers should

- understand the language needs of students,
- explicitly plan to meet those needs,
- deliver instruction, and
- assess students' comprehension.

We discuss each feature, using a case study to illustrate what the teachers need to know, consider, and do.

Understand students' language needs

Tommy is a seventh grader, recently enrolled in his neighborhood middle school. He has been out of school since completing fifth grade in his native country and has been in the U.S. for 9 months. He and his family do not speak English at home, although Tommy hears it in his neighborhood and when watching sports or movies on TV. His parents and older siblings work long hours in service-oriented jobs. He has basic conversational abilities in English. For example, in school he can ask for a book or pencil; he can ask the attendance office for a note to get into class if he arrives late; he can, in a general way, converse with peers about what he did over the weekend. He can understand many classroom routines, procedures, and directions, particularly when they are written on the board or an overhead

transparency. In 9 months, he has developed rudimentary reading skills in English. Tommy's teacher realizes that despite his growing English competence, Tommy would have a very difficult time in a mainstream content classroom taught in English that did not provide accommodation for his limited academic English proficiency. Lectures, classroom discussions, independent reading of the textbook, and written assignments are very hard for him to accomplish without considerable instructional support. In addition, Tommy needs academic lessons that explicitly help enhance his English language skills (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000).

Plan lessons

Tommy is capable of completing many required academic tasks if his teachers consider his language needs. For example, in the lesson we will describe, students are asked to read about the armor knights wore in medieval times. When planning the lesson, Tommy's teacher sets a content objective and a language development objective for Tommy and the other students in his class with similar language abilities. By thinking through and writing down both content and language objectives, the teacher is more likely to embed language development activities into an otherwise strictly content-driven lesson. In this lesson, the content objective is to name, describe, and tell the function of a knight's armor and weaponry. Students will also be able to define key terms (parades, tournaments, quests) and describe how armor and weaponry differed for these purposes and occasions. The language objective is for students to locate information in a written text and use this information to complete sentences using standard English grammar and spelling.

To facilitate note taking and the final writing task, the teacher distributes a tree diagram graphic organizer with the trunk labeled "Armor." Each branch is numbered and labeled with a category ("Uses," "Events," "Characteristics"). Smaller branches attached to the main ones are used to write notes about each category. Using the information from the graphic organizer, students complete a worksheet, writing complete sentences.

Tommy's teacher makes the reading more accessible to students with limited English skills. She photocopied the material and identifies paragraphs containing the required information by numbering them to correspond with the numbers she put on the graphic organizer and worksheet. She modifies the worksheet so that instead of answering questions, as the fluent English speakers are expected to do (e.g., "Describe two situations in which the medieval knight

wore his armor and tell how the armor he wore was specifically suited to that situation.”), the English language learners (ELLs) are given sentence prompts to complete (e.g., “Medieval knights wore different armor for different situations. For parades, knights wore _____. This was good because _____. For tournaments, knights wore _____. This was good because _____.”) The concept is the same for all students, but language complexity is reduced for English learners.

Deliver instruction

Presentation: The teacher begins the lesson by reviewing previous lessons about the middle ages and refers to a posted list of key terms that students had generated. Using an overhead transparency, she draws students’ attention to the objectives, telling the students that in today’s lesson they will learn about armor worn by knights in the middle ages and they will answer questions in complete sentences about the different kinds of armor they wore. The teacher then opens a discussion about different types of clothing and their uses. She shows pictures from department store circulars depicting formal, casual, and work clothes. The teacher ties the topic to students’ personal experiences by prompting them to discuss the function of different types of clothes, including what they wear to school (e.g., clothes worn in gym class, to dances, and in the classroom).

After students have expressed an understanding of clothing’s various functions, she distributes the reading passage and reads the section aloud, paraphrasing as needed and drawing attention to information that may be used to complete the tree diagram. She checks for student comprehension by asking different kinds of questions, especially those that can generate elaborated answers. Students are given 10 minutes to complete the tree diagram, using information from the reading. When they finish, student pairs share their notes and several students report on their notes to the class.

Using another transparency, the teacher reviews the instructions, outlining the activity: 1) join your partner, 2) look in the reading for the number that matches the question, 3) read that paragraph, 4) find the answer to the question, 5) write the response, and 6) do the same for all the questions on the worksheet.

Modeling and guided practice: Before starting the pair work, the teacher calls on two students to model the assignment. She guides them through steps 1-5 as the other students watch. Then all the students pair up and follow the same procedures. The teacher circulates to ensure each pair understands the instructions and is working successfully.

Independent practice and application: Students complete the worksheet in pairs and the teacher provides assistance as needed. The students will have 15 minutes to complete their worksheet in pairs, after which they will be given another worksheet to complete independently. Their grade will be based upon the second worksheet.

Assess results

Throughout the lesson, the teacher informally checks the students’ comprehension and performance of the task. After students have had an opportunity to finish the pair work, the teacher has them sit at their individual desks and put away the first worksheet. She distributes the second worksheet that students are to complete independently. This worksheet, which is a variation of the first, serves two purposes: as an individual check for student understanding before moving on with the unit, and as data for grading. The ELLs complete a sheet showing pictures of specific pieces of armor. They are to identify the piece and tell its function, using key words such as parades, tournaments, and quests. They are to write in complete sentences.

Conclusion

The teacher in this scenario used a number of instructional practices that are effective for English language learners, and many reflect the CREDE Standards. These include

- Planning and incorporating language development objectives into a content lessons,
- Structuring lessons so that expectations for students are explicit,
- Providing opportunities for students to use academic language in meaningful ways,
- Using visuals (e.g., overhead transparencies, graphic organizer, pictures) to increase comprehension,
- Posting key terms for students’ reference,
- Providing opportunities for students to work together in completing academic tasks,
- Promoting interactive discussions among students and teacher,
- Maintaining cognitive challenge, and
- Connecting the lesson to students’ own experiences

References

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Additional Resources

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